

Experience and Identity in Recent South African Literature

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Margriet van der Waal

Helen Wilcox

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INTRODUCTION

“Who am I?” is the central question posed by Sam Raditlhalo in his PhD dissertation on South African autobiographical writing of the twentieth century (Groningen, 2003). This question underlies his wide-ranging inquiry into the construction of identity during a complex and difficult period of South African history. This history was marked at the end of the century by the transformation of a country oppressed by a racist, minority government into a democratic country where the equal human dignity of all its inhabitants is acknowledged. In celebration of – and in a spirit of inquiry into – this continuing transformation of South Africa, the Department of English at the University of Groningen held an international colloquium to coincide with the defense of Dr Raditlhalo’s thesis in January 2003. The theme under discussion was broadly defined as “Experience and Identity in Recent South African Literature”. The contributions to the colloquium provided the basis for the present publication.

Sam Raditlhalo’s research formed the doctoral “first-fruits” of the link between the University of Groningen (RUG) in The Netherlands and the University of the North (UNIN) in South Africa. This inter-university co-operation was established a decade ago, in order to encourage staff and student exchanges and the development of joint projects in teaching and research across a variety of disciplines and faculties. In its early stages the link was energetically promoted by the late Professor Herman Wekker of the English Department in Groningen, and co-operation between the two universities in the field of English Studies has been a marked feature of the partnership.

One of the first colleagues to participate in the staff exchange programme between the English Departments of UNIN and Groningen was Sam Raditlhalo, then a young lecturer at UNIN, who visited Groningen and subsequently won a PhD Fellowship at the RUG. This enabled him to visit The Netherlands for three months a year over a period of four years; during these visits he conducted his research and gave lectures on South African literature to Groningen students of English. By the end of 2002, he had finished the text of his dissertation, *who am i? The Construction of Identity in Twentieth-Century South African Autobiographical Writings in English*.

In this profound study of how identity is constructed in South Africa, Raditlhalo considers a number of autobiographies written during the twentieth century by South African authors. The growing academic interest in autobiographical writing makes the publication of this thesis a timely one, as well as an important contribution to the debate on identity construction and to academic research on

the genre of autobiography. Taking the issue of identity to be problematic (particularly questioning any idea that identity is stable), Raditlhalo considers the role of contextual factors, especially the socio-political context of South Africa during the twentieth century, in forming and changing identity. He thus shows how identity is not necessarily something that provides stability but can, under particular circumstances, become fractured and decentred, leading to a sense of doubt and insecurity.

Raditlhalo examines how autobiography is used to construct and give expression to the subject's sense of a self, and how such attempts are informed by the specific historical context in which the self is writing. In this project, Raditlhalo does not restrict his focus by dealing with either only black or only white autobiographers, but looks at a broad spread of both black and white writers, ranging from the early to the late twentieth century, and considering both female and male authors.

The approach chosen by Raditlhalo in order to carry out his study is one that is sensitive to the socio-historical context of production: "Without a consideration of the 'routes' by which we appraise the self in the present, our 'roots' are but metaphors constructed through time" (2003:15). In the first, largely theoretical, part of his thesis, Raditlhalo undertakes an examination of the issue of identity, the genesis of autobiography as genre, and some specific South African cultural practices that inform identity construction. In the second part of his work, he considers a number of autobiographical texts against the background of South African history, divided according to chronological sequence into particular periods of the century. Autobiographical writings are interpreted as specific reactions to these periods since, as Raditlhalo argues, "there ought to be a close link between the process of analysis and the actual historical conditions" (2003:21). However, Raditlhalo also examines how the process of writing autobiography can transform specific experience: "the 'singularity' of the South African experience is 'transformable' by the very act of writing and interpretation" (2003:21). This means that the contestedness of identity – a premise accepted by Raditlhalo in this study – could also have a positive side, and those who engage in textualising their own experiences often display a remarkable creative capacity. By interpreting their own experiences, and giving particular shape to them, autobiographical subjects ultimately display a sense of agency.

In the collective memory constituted by their different identities, South Africans discover "the right to hope' for a brighter future". This is the optimistic note on which Raditlhalo, speaking with Carl Niehaus, concludes his study (2003:241).¹

¹ The full text of the thesis is available online, at <http://www.ub.rug.nl/eldoc/dis/arts/s.i.raditlhalo/>.

The issues raised by Raditlhalo's work formed the starting point for the contributions to the colloquium and this collection of essays that emerged from it. In particular, the theme of the inter-relation of experience with issues of identity is addressed by all the contributors, albeit in different ways and with reference to a variety of literary genres and contexts.

Salomi Louw, for example, considers the case of current South African drama. Her paper examines how playwrights and theatrical productions in South Africa have dealt with the phenomenon of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The confrontation in the TRC with fundamental issues, such as what actually constitutes the truth, has been critically examined by a number of playwrights, to whose work Louw refers. She also looks at the ways in which key issues such as culpability, guilt, and the acceptance of identity have been raised in plays by, amongst others, André P. Brink and Jane Taylor, who have taken aspects of the TRC process as their inspiration.

The construction of truth – and, by implication, knowledge – is also the key theme addressed by Liesbeth Korthals Altes in her paper. She examines questions regarding our ethical responsibility towards the 'other', with reference to the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee. Korthals Altes refrains from proscribing a normative model of interpretation based on a fixed notion of what constitutes the truth and what we, therefore, can know about those around us. Instead, she suggests an open approach to the ethics of reading and judging identity, whereby the particularity of every situation should inform our decisions regarding ethical behaviour towards the 'other'.

The responsibility implied by such an understanding of ethics, and the specific function that literature can fulfil in this regard, depend very much on how literature is used and understood by its readers. It is not extreme to argue that such a position towards literature is very much dependent on factors such as how (and which) books are taught in schools. In her paper, Margriet van der Waal considers the function ascribed to literature in the South African educational context. She examines the selection process for the literary texts prescribed in South African schools, by critically contextualising one notable incident in relation to earlier practices regarding the choice of textbooks. In so doing, Van der Waal poses questions about the perceived function of literature in the context of the 'New South Africa'. An important concern here is: what are the possible relationships between the new education curriculum and the core values, subscribed to by the Department of Education, which aim to ensure the formation of a just society?

The issue of what constitutes a just society is often most prominently formulated in imaginative literature. Sam Raditlhalo's paper examines Zakes Mda's *Madonna of Excelsior*, a novel which explores problems of social justice and the recognition (or lack of recognition) of humanity in fellow men and

women. The community of Excelsior made headlines during the 1970s, when prominent members of the white community broke the “Immorality Act” which prohibited sexual relations between people of different races. Mda rewrites the history of this incident, turning it into a narrative told from the perspective of a group of its key players, thereby confronting issues of identity in South Africa before and after the political transformation of 1994. Through fictionalising history, as Mda does here, authors take up an important role in the identity politics of current South African society.

Adrian Roscoe’s paper concerns another literary genre – poetry – but makes a parallel argument for the contribution of the imaginative writer to the evolution of social consciousness. Roscoe focuses particularly on what is called ‘Coloured’ identity, and on the exploration of this issue in poetry. By recasting personal experience in poetic form, writers such as Dennis Brutus and Arthur Nortje make the process of identity construction visible to the reader. As Roscoe shows, the experience of being ascribed a ‘Coloured’ identity is revealed in the writings of authors who have dealt with this issue. Roscoe argues that the experience of being labelled ‘Coloured’ caused tremendous pain and suffering, expressed harrowingly at times. However, what Roscoe also points to is that ‘Coloured’ identity in literature also displays tenacity and power and resists tragic characterisation.

All of the papers in this collection, therefore, deal with the notion of identity, often questioning the extent to which identity is regarded as primarily an issue related to race. The papers as a group show that identity is profoundly connected with issues such as truth and fiction, ethics and morality, or politics and education. It becomes clear that identity should be considered as a shifting process, rather than a fixed essence, and that this process is profoundly influenced by individual experience, which itself is situated within a particular historical context.

In a country such as South Africa where, for a large part of the general population, basic human needs are not even met, one might understandably ask what the role and function of literature could possibly be. The answer to this question lies in the contributions to this collection: literature gives voice to social consciousness, vividly reconstructs historical processes and mediates possibilities of existence. In these ways it informs processes of transformation: of the self, and of the society in which the individual is situated. The profound and complex question, “who am I?”, is dealt with in a most explicit way in literature, thereby shaping our understanding of ourselves, others, and the contexts in which we live.

Margriet van der Waal
Helen Wilcox (editors)

SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRE AND THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

Salomi Louw

Introduction

After the advent of democracy (1994) there was a general feeling that purification was needed in South Africa. To this end the first democratically elected government decided to institute a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which would, first of all, hear testimonies of suffering and loss and then would hold amnesty hearings where applicants had to give full disclosure of their actions. The testimonies started in 1996, while the amnesty hearings started in 1997.

In her introduction to Jane Taylor's play, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, Helen Gilbert states:

Set up in 1995 with Archbishop Desmond Tutu as its chairman, the TRC was an independent body designed to facilitate a 'truth recovery process' by holding public hearings to determine the extent of gross human-rights violations in the three decades leading up to South Africa's first multiracial elections in 1994. As well as taking witness statements from victims and their families and friends, the Commission considered applications for amnesty by those admitting to politically motivated crimes. Its broader task was to lay foundations for the reconstruction of South African society by addressing, in ways that stressed reparation rather than retaliation, the legacies of hatred and violence undergirding the apartheid system. (2001:25)

Democracy also brought about other changes. To name but a few of the official changes: all public places were officially opened to all races; television and printed advertisements reflected a utopian vision of racial interaction and sociological well-being; cosmopolitan theatres staged plays by, with, and about black people and black and white interaction.

Without the bane of censorship, but also with the demise of state sponsored theatres, white playwrights now had an opportunity to depict national issues, but hardly any one took up this challenge. What was noticeable was the harking back to classic plays, or the reworking or extending of classic dramas, e.g. *Woza Albert!*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Boesman and Lena* and, with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as hypertext, we had *CeZaR*. A stalwart like Athol Fugard kept on writing his inimitable plays, as did Paul Slabolepszy and a few others. On the whole the first indigenous productions, liberated from former strictures, represented gender issues, homosexuality, Afrikanerdom, violence and AIDS, and were filled with obscenities (Hauptfleisch 1997:161). Gender issues were also brought to the stage, e.g. Luen Conning's *A Coloured Place* (Perkins 1999). Because of the shortage of funds one-handers were also on continuous offer (and still are).

The plays by and about black people concentrated on their lives and experiences (mainly under the National Party government), and entertainment, traditional culture, musical or educational theatre were the main offerings. See in this regard, amongst others, John Kani's collections of Market Plays and Zakes Mda's two play collections of 1996 and 1998.

In Mda's first collection is a play entitled *Member of Society* by Makwedini Mtsaka, of which Mda says:

It is an allegory that addresses pertinent issues in today's South Africa: liberation, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. It asserts that we have a lot to learn from African values, and espouses a humanistic philosophy known as ubuntu – 'I am because we are'. (1996:xxii)

The "forgiveness and reconciliation" he speaks about apply to the ethnic groups to which the characters belong and the plays do not reflect the TRC (which was only constituted in 1995) and its objectives.

Despite the intensive media coverage of the TRC, it seems that a fairly low number of viewers watched the proceedings on television as broadcast by the South African Broadcasting Company (SABC). Dodge, in a paper on "The Role of South African Television as an Agent of 'Truth and Reconciliation'," talks about

widespread political apathy - as witnessed in the low attendance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings, in particular those dealing with political issues of the past (the Soweto '76 hearings, held in Soweto in July 1996 being a case in point) [...] Whatever conclusions may be drawn with regard to

the general political climate, the view of South African television as a vehicle for 'truth and reconciliation' does not appear to be a position shared by SABC viewers. (1996:153)

This 'political apathy' might also be the reason why so few plays have been staged in which the TRC features either as a socio-ideological setting or as mimetic space - even if the *theatricality* of the hearings themselves is mentioned time and again.

Plays dealing with the TRC

In 1997 we witnessed the first and, as far as I can gather, to date the only plays about the TRC, its impact and objectives, or the information which was disseminated here. The first of these was André P. Brink's Afrikaans play, *Die Jogger* ('The Jogger'), on which very little has been written despite it subsequently winning the Hertzog Prize for Drama - the most prestigious prize for Afrikaans writing. This play was performed at the Little Karoo National Arts Festival in Oudtshoorn, South Africa, in April 1997, after the script had been approved by the management in 1996.

In 1997 there were also three musicals about Steve Biko: the Market Theatre's productions of *The Biko Project* and *Song for Biko*, and Mbongeni Ngema's *Maria-Maria* (Maree 1998a:27). This subject, however, does not involve the TRC, but is about the freedom fighter, Steve Biko, and his death by the hands of two white rightwing activists.

Another play which is seen as touching on the confessions at the TRC, is Paul Herzberg's *The Dead Wait* (Davis 1996:153), but it belongs more to what is known as Border Literature ('Grensliteratuur'), being literature about the fighting and experiences during South Africa's actions in Angola and on the Namibian border.

The second play about the TRC was *Indaba Engiziyixoxa/The Story I am About to Tell*, a workshopped play in which three witnesses from the Khulumani Support Group (Catherine Mlangeni, Thandi Shezi and Duma Khumalo, according to Marlin-Curiel, 2001) retell their TRC testimonies on stage. This was worked into a play with the help of three actors from the Market Theatre Laboratory, who added fictional episodes and shaped the whole as a story. The characters initially travel in a taxi and then give testimony, as they did during the TRC hearings, while taking centre stage. A white man is added as character. He served in the South African Defense Force when the violence towards black people took place and he is also looking for sympathy, claiming that he acted under orders, wishing his co-characters to exonerate him from guilt. Despite the fact

that the three witnesses give the same true testimony of their experiences, the play is static though the contents are moving.

Jane Taylor's *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, directed by William Kentridge and performed with the Handspring Puppet Company in May 1997, uses Jarry's text (*Ubu Roi*) as basis to illuminate the refusal of a member of the Security Services to admit his guilt, claiming that he is innocent, that others were responsible for the crimes of which we hear as a succession of sufferers tell about the violence they witnessed. Coetzee writes that,

[i]n the manipulation of the 'human' puppets a further evocation occurs: the puppeteers handle the human puppets in an infinitely gentle way, which evokes images of the real TRC hearings and the comforters who stand alongside the victims with the sole function of listening to them and comforting them. (1998:44)

This is all but a static presentation, as extensive use is made of puppets and of the visible puppeteers who speak on behalf of the puppets, animate them and stand as witnesses to the happenings on stage. Animation is used in screen projections, décor is utilized on multiple levels, and Ma Ubu (portrayed by a black woman, during some performances with her face painted white) also occasionally becomes a puppet. Maree (1998a:27) states that "*Ubu and the Truth Commission* is a spectacle which fuses theatre, film, cartoon animation, puppetry, comic and tragic genres".

William Kentridge, who worked with Taylor and the puppeteers to develop this play, is a well-known South African artist. He designed the projections, using animated cartoons interspersed with documentary sections of violence. About the use of film and animation, Davis writes:

The screen is able to represent different levels of consciousness, which would not be immediately apparent on stage. It can be used effectively to supplement or to contradict the words or actions of a puppet character, or [...] an actor. In *Ubu and the Truth Commission* Kentridge uses the screen specifically to document Ubu's guilt (images of detention, hanging, torture, parcel bombs), to evoke the fate of his victims (the recurring imagery of death: bones, skulls, skeletons, gravestones) and to suggest his fear of exposure (the watching eye, the camera). (2000:69)

Coetzee stresses the constructed character of our experience of reality, which is one of the themes explored in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*:

The audience is [...] not asked to believe in only one imposed reality, but is confronted with different realities that are juxtaposed with each other and exist alongside [each other]. The director was consciously experimenting with how many of these realities could exist alongside each other in the minds of the audience, and how quickly the switches could be made from one reality to another. (1998:42)

Both the above-mentioned plays have had international productions. This has not been the case with *Die Jogger*, possibly because it is mainly in Afrikaans.

Die Jogger

In both the foregoing plays (*Ubu* and *The Story I am About to Tell*) the reality of the atrocities are softened by testimonies, “without reenacting the violence it describes,” and, says Marlin-Curiel (2001:80), “(i)n a court, for example, testimony produces judgment. In a psychiatric setting testimony initiates healing”.

Brink’s play, *Die Jogger*, starts with a shocking scene of security police assaulting a prisoner. Centre downstage two masked agents push Vusi’s head into a sink bath filled with water while Kilian, the protagonist, looks on. When this repeated act does not have the required effect of making the black man speak up, Kilian cuts out his tongue. Vusi’s heart-rendering scream is heard during a black-out, then the lights brighten again to show Kilian lying in bed moaning.

The mimetic setting here is a psychiatric hospital where Kilian, an ex-colonel of the previous government's security services, is being cared for by a black nursing sister named Noni. Psycho-mimetic milieus constantly intrude into the physio-mimetic space, as Kilian relives moments and experiences of his former existence, such as his torture of a innocent prisoner (Vusi) resulting eventually in the latter’s death; his reliance on the Minister and the instructions he unquestioningly adheres to; his relationship with his daughter and son-in-law.¹

¹Actions on stage take place in the present and are mimetic (see appendix, p. 18). Actions are, however, not only ostension of present happenings (W_{D1}) but can represent psychological imaginings, memories, dreams, and other oneiric experiences (W_{D2}). Physio-mimetic actions (W_{D1}) are those actions which take place in the surroundings where the characters are present. Psycho-mimetic actions (W_{D2}) are those acted out on stage but which are ‘inside’ the characters, thus they are ostension of

We also see, through Kilian's eye - but invisible to Noni - a jogger striding past. These scenes are all presented in the 'here and now' of the play's setting, as are the oneiric episodes which, amongst others, he shares with the dead Vusi. The nurse does not see, hear or share knowledge of these episodes.

Other worlds are also created diegetically, including the characters' history - in which Kilian and Noni share similar experiences; the reality of his daughter's so-called treason in abandoning him and the involvement of Noni's son in anti-apartheid politics; the ideological framework in which the play resides; and a prospective diegesis indicating a future completely different to the world Kilian knows but hopefully informed by the 'power of forgiveness and acceptance after confession,' of which Desmond Tutu speaks in his book, *No Future without Forgiveness* (mentioned by Symington, 1991).²

Die Jogger is a play which shocked South African theatre-goers, due to the reality and believability of the actions and dialogue, with which they could identify, especially when the confessions at the TRC hearings became known. But the play also conveys a message of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Laetitia Pople, writing about the play (*Krit*, 4 April 1997, translation SL), says, "It is about silence, the 'muting' to death, and each person's need to be heard. [...] In such frank and timely work is the future of the Afrikaans theatre embedded". In his appraisal of this play P.C. van der Westhuizen (*Beeld*, 16 June 1997, translation SL) writes:

Probably the most important aspect of this work is that we have here a drama which succeeds excellently in reflecting the enormous complexity of this land's political realities. In the recent past we have had a number of important plays but not one of them condenses, as *Die Jogger* does, the multiple experiences of guilt and innocence, justice and injustice, and freedom and suppression into a single work. *Die Jogger* is a strong play in the strongest sense of the word. It is not politically biased and deserves all the accolades it has received.

What Marlin-Curiel says of *Ubu* and *The Story I am About to Tell* is equally applicable to *Die Jogger*:

his/her feelings, hallucinations, memories, etc. The latter 'showing' usually follows on diegetic information (Louw 1989).

² The verbal text can refer to both the mimetic and diegetic worlds. Verbal and non-verbal texts refer to the mimetic setting, whether physio- or psycho-mimetic. The diegetic world of the stage is, however, created only by the verbal text (Louw 1989).

In addition to playing upon an audience's potential sympathy toward the victim, both *The Story I am About to Tell* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* attempt to inspire an identification with the perpetrator, not in the moment of perpetration, but in moments of just being human. [...] The play(s) would seem to demand that the audience condemn and forgive at the same time. [...] While it is doubtful that South Africa will ever be 'free' of its past, a certain kind of closure is needed - one by which the performative acts of testimony and confession can 'succeed' through reciprocal actions of empathetic listening, absolution, and finally, transformation. The theatre presents opportunities to perform these actions, to some extent foreclosed by the TRC. (2001:86 - 98)

This also reflects on the theatre experience during the staging of *Die Jogger*. Coming from a background of censorship and dissimulation, of South Africans' hearing half told stories and their denials, eventually not believing anything conveyed via the media, this play had an enormous impact on the audiences at the Little Karoo National Arts Festival (Oudtshoorn, South Africa) during its first performance. Some staunch supporters of the former government walked out, upset by the 'lies' presented in the play, but most of us were shocked into a realization and acceptance of the atrocities which had only been whispered about; we were shattered by the stark and believable representation. During the performance, and by reading the playtext, we questioned the 'innocence' of the former political leaders (as the blame was constantly being shifted) and accepted the fact that the perpetrators of violence could also be sufferers; we empathized with the victims of apartheid. Noni's professional attitude to Kilian and the sympathetic care she gives to him made many audience members think again about the changing roles in the new South Africa and to hope for a future where reconciliation could be a reality.

The characters in *Die Jogger* do not, as is the case of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, 'sail happily into the sunset' but Kilian, the main character, has to face the consequences of his actions. "Kilian's descent into madness could provide an audience with the dubious satisfaction of a just punishment" (Maree 1998b:311). This is borne out in the play with the jogger, as (mimetic) metaphor of Kilian's guilt: an attempt to escape the consequences of his actions, jogging past from time to time and even at the close of the play. Davis says,

The story of Pa Ubu suggests that the TRC is, in fact, a flawed process because Ubu, true to Jarry's original, escapes the

consequences of his deeds, not through confession and repentance but through concealment and artifice [...]. The end of the play brings neither truth nor reconciliation. There is, as Kentridge said, ‘no correct epiphany’. (2000:70)

Die Jogger does not remove blame or dissolve guilt. We are confronted by questions about our ignorance or non-acceptance of historical facts, questions about our beliefs, the question of who we really are and the decision that we, as a collective body of white South Africans, are culpable and guilty. We experienced a catharsis and returned from the production with changed attitudes and open minds - never to allow similar things to happen in South Africa, never to be blind again. In considering who we are, we decided not to be what we had been before, but to become true South Africans.

David Kerr of the University of Botswana worked with students in creating a theatre performance, *A Vision in a Dance*. I would like to quote him and stress the applicability of this statement to the South African situation and, in particular, to *Die Jogger*:

The experience of helping to create *A Vision in a Dance*, made me, and I believe the rest of the [...] group, realize that the ‘truth’ of historical drama is a normative, complex construct between both source and ideology, past and present, not to mention between the players and audience. As such, it can never be identical to the densely footnoted, ‘truth’ of the history books, ever striving for objectivity. Drama should not lose sight of that objective truth, but its real fires are stoked by moral passion and the urge to create aesthetic sense out of history’s chaotic contingency. (2000:172-173)

Conclusion

In closing I would like to make use of Cathy Maree’s words:

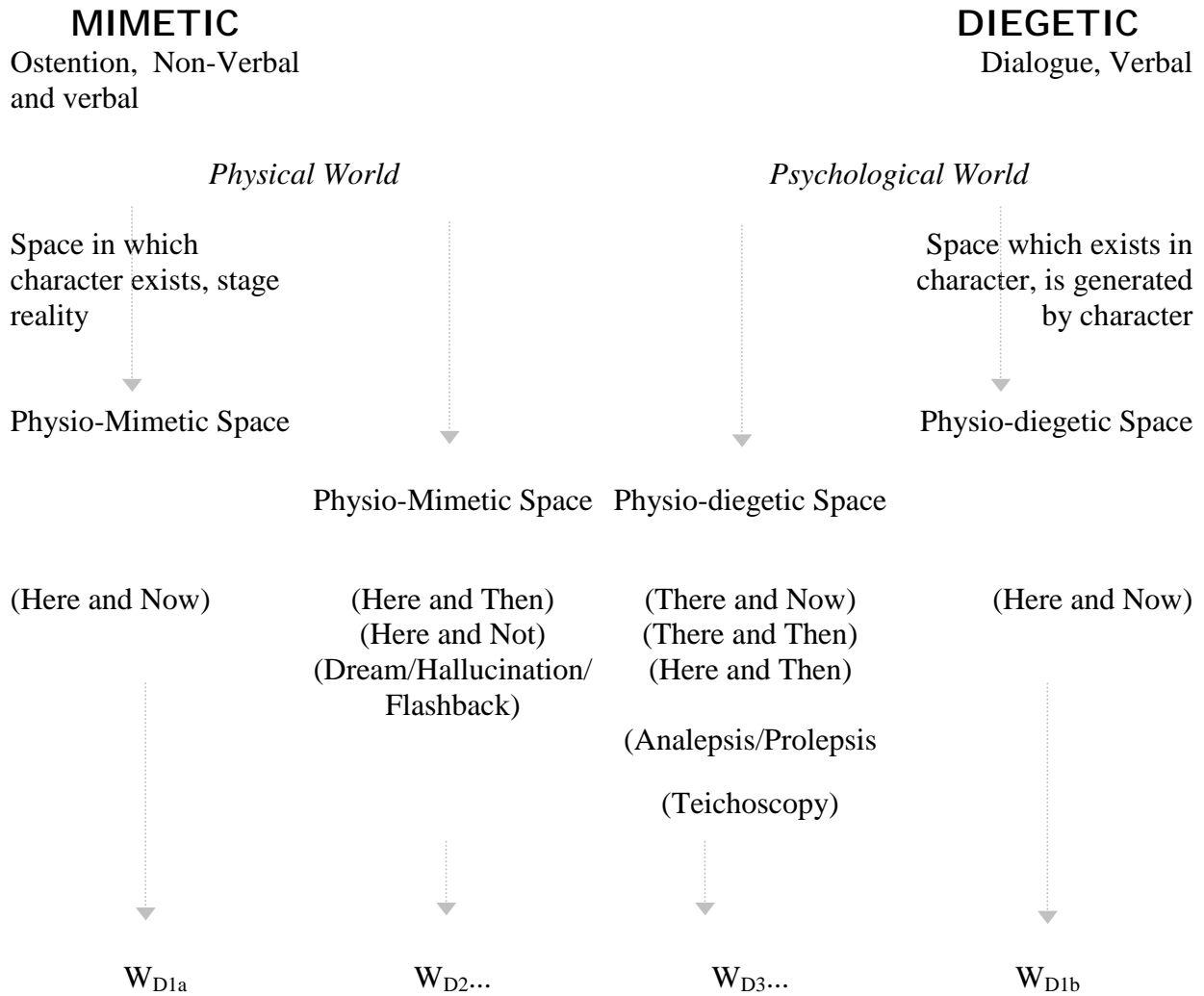
the plays [...] show that the reality of human atrocity for political ends does not destroy the possibility of its aestheticisation (sic), but rather that the literary dramatic representation of atrocity constitutes an important form of transmission, of entering into the consciousness of the public. In ‘writing back’ - in seeking to engage with the past horrors of their compatriots, both those who perpetrated them as well as those who suffered them - the [...]

playwrights under discussion have further demonstrated that they also 'write to the future', helping to heal their nation [...] *and to rebuild broken lives and communities. (1998b:318)*

The three plays, *The Story I am About to Tell*, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and *Die Jogger*, appeal to our sense of outrage at what has been happening in South Africa because we investigate, through experiencing these plays, who we are and with whom we align ourselves. These three plays on the TRC present us with a mirror and confront us with our chosen identities.

Appendix

WORLDS ON STAGE



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J. M. COETZEE, ETHICS AND THE NOVEL: SOME REFLECTIONS ON *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

Liesbeth Korthals Altes

Introduction

In his latest book, which seems to be a curious hybrid between essay and fiction, Coetzee has his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, an elderly writer, look back on her own life and achievement as a writer, and on writing itself. In a core chapter she reflects on the ethical limits of literary imagination and the representation of evil. Her thoughts are triggered by her own unexpectedly violent reaction to Paul West's novel, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, in which West imagines the execution of the plotters of Hitler's (unsuccessful) assassination in 1944. "I do not think one can come away unscathed, as a writer, from conjuring up such scenes. I think writing like that can harm one", she tells the writer, whom she meets at a congress on evil in Amsterdam (*Elizabeth Costello*, 172).¹ And she states to her audience, that evening:

I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places [...], because I take seriously the forbiddenness of forbidden places [such as the cellar where the plotters were humiliated, tortured and hanged]. [...] What arrogance, to lay claim to the suffering and death of those pitiful men! Their last hours belong to them alone, they are not ours to enter and possess. (*EC*: 172 - 174)

If Coetzee had consistently followed the line his character seems to set out here: respect for the victim, *pudeur* at the threshold of imagining what should remain unthinkable - the violation of one human body by another - his work may not have held the fascination it exerts. His writing does precisely what Elizabeth Costello here ardently rejects: it goes "into the dark chamber", trying, through

¹ It is perhaps interesting to know that this chapter in *Elizabeth Costello* is the reworking of a lecture Coetzee gave in Tilburg, The Netherlands, at a conference on the theme of Evil. With this oblique presentation, he certainly upset the audience's expectations of an authorial/authoritative standpoint, keeping the ambiguity of 'his' statement open to a maximum.

the imagination, to feel and see with the torturer's, as well as the victim's, body and eyes, and asking his readers to follow him, "step by step".² Coetzee's novels inescapably raise ethical issues. His work is about evil and its often pallid opposite, goodness, and it shares this fascination for evil with many (South-African) writers.³ Coetzee's work is about crime and punishment, purity and impurity. In his writing, he develops these ethically explosive themes with a very effective rhetoric, making sure they keep their explosiveness right until the end of our reading. Of all Coetzee's novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (WB) (1980/2000) seems to enter most interestingly into dialogue with Costello's views. But before presenting a reading of that novel, a short recall of two distinct positions about ethics and literature should extend this dialogic space.

Ethics and literature

Coetzee stands in a venerable Aristotelian tradition, which considers literature to be intimately related to ethics. In literary theory and criticism, this concern with ethics was considered taboo during the heyday of Formalism and Structuralism, although it never disappeared from actual criticism nor, of course, from reading and writing. More recently, against so-called formalistic and objectifying approaches, the 'ethical turn' in criticism has put an explicit concern with ethical issues back on the agenda, together with the critic's personal engagement with the text (s)he reads. An important representative of this movement, which links up with the humanist tradition of reading for wisdom, is the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Reviving an Aristotelian, pragmatic, and flexible notion of ethics, Nussbaum argues that reading fiction offers an invaluable complement to moral philosophy: it provides a kind of experiential learning, it suggests alternatives for 'how to live the good life', and exercises the reader's moral awareness and flexibility. Thus literature can contribute to the moral and civic education of readers, and provide 'moral guidance'.

This neo-humanistic approach stands in opposition to the second position about ethics and literature, which has been labelled deconstructivist ethics. Referring to Derrida, Levinas and Blanchot, 'deconstructivists' such as Hillis Miller, Andrew Gibson, or Geoffrey Harpham locate the ethical insight literature has to offer in the experience of the radical strangeness of the other, the self, and the

² "Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa" is the title of an important essay Coetzee published in *The New York Times*, 12 January 1986.

³ See, for instance, Breyten Breytenbach's "Brief uit die vreemde aan slagter" (1972), expressing a very similar horrified wonder and desire to understand torture.

world, and in the final undecidability of meaning and values in verbal representation. Alluding to Lyotard and Blanchot, Gibson argues, for instance, that literature does not represent the real, but “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Gibson, 1990:70); ethical reading amounts to “tending the empty centre” (ibid:76).⁴ From this viewpoint, morality is on the side of deontology and thus displays the coerciveness of the norm. On the other hand, ethics instead “operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open, hopes to restrain it from violence or the will to domination, subjects it to a kind of autodeconstruction” (ibid:15). In the same perspective, reading is not the appropriation of a work experienced as a totality (an ‘oeuvre’), but a ‘désœuvrement’, an ‘un-doing’ both of the literary work, and of the reader:⁵ instead of reflecting to the reader the wholeness and unity of a self, modern art offers the experience of the dissemination and the weakness of the self (ibid:88). The ‘negative’ or resisting conception of representation is extended to a distrust of the quest for knowledge, which is considered to be just another avatar of possessiveness. This echoes Levinas’s critique of possessiveness in relation to the other.⁶ According to this second position, therefore, literature cannot provide any ‘moral guidance’, but can only raise questions regarding our ethical responsibilities towards the ‘other’.

Waiting for the Barbarians

Waiting for the Barbarians, published in 1980, is narrated by an elderly magistrate, posted somewhere at the frontiers of ‘the empire’. The location of this empire remains indeterminate; it is an allegorical space rather than a specific geographic location. Connections can be made, though, with apartheid South Africa, but also with any empire beset with border wars (also in a metaphorical sense, for instance: the empire of the Self). The Magistrate lives, he believes, in relative peace and harmony with the dominated local population, and with the ‘barbarians’. These are nomads who roam beyond the frontiers of the empire, in a sense symbolically reinforcing these borders, precisely by transgressing them.

⁴ Gibson (1999) refers mainly to Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne* (1979), *Moralités postmodernes* (1993), and *Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime* (1991); as for Blanchot, among the many works he refers to, *The Unavowable Community* (1988) plays an important role.

⁵ *Dés-œuvrement* is taken literally, shifting its meaning from *idleness* to a word designating a process of un-doing.

⁶ For an excellent exposition of Levinas’s ethics of ‘otherness’, especially in relation to Derrida, see Simon Critchley (1992), *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, or Gibson, *op. cit.*

This almost sleepy equilibrium is shattered when an over-zealous officer arrives on the scene. This colonel, named Joll, is intent on affirming the central power he represents. His task is to make sure that the laws and the frontiers of the empire are respected, and to keep the barbarians in their place through military force. With his soldiers, Joll sets out against the nomads as well as against the local 'natives', bringing hoards of prisoners back to the camp to be ruthlessly tortured and killed. The Magistrate expresses his horror privately in his writing, and more publicly, not without risk, in conversations with Joll. He takes one of the women prisoners into his service: she has been tortured like the others, her feet and eyes are maimed, and her own father was tortured to death under her eyes. In the Magistrate's writing, his relations to the Colonel and to this woman occupy a central space.

What fascinates the Magistrate about Colonel Joll is his cruelty, which seems to come so easily and is almost 'natural': no explosions of anger, no rage, no crisis of legitimisation. He only methodically and cleanly administers suffering in the name of the law, the same law the Magistrate is supposed to serve. Joll refers icily to torture as 'standard procedures'. Through the Magistrate, Coetzee explores how far one can descend into imagining evil.

In reflecting on his own and other characters' deeds, the Magistrate initially plays the familiar role of the witness, an outsider to the depicted violence: he incarnates the moral viewpoint in a world which seems prey to bureaucratised evil, of which it is not difficult to imagine examples. Thus his writing creates another scene than the depicted daily reality, an alternative inner space, where the notions of good and evil are still relevant. The consolation of such an ultimately decent and moral space – the space of morality itself – is, however, to a certain extent denied to the reader, as appears in the analysis of the second relationship, namely that with the woman.

To describe the Magistrate's relation with the woman, one is inclined to use words like humbleness, or humility. He begins by washing her feet, in a striking gesture, which many readers will probably associate with the figure of Christ. It is tempting to see his conduct as a convincing illustration of ethics according to the Jewish philosopher Levinas: he appears to make her – the Other – into his primary Law, over all other (moral, ideological, egoistic) concerns. His healing and respectful conduct towards her soon becomes more erotic and he sleeps with her, regularly. The text then explores, through the Magistrate's growing insight, the uncomfortable parallel between erotic love and torture, two apparently radically opposed relations to the otherness of the other. The Magistrate's own writing stresses how, with increasing passion and despair, he attempts to get at the woman's 'self' or 'soul' through her body. He insists on hearing her story, which she does not relinquish to him; he wants her to

respond, so that he can relate to her. Thus, in a very Levinasian way, by looking at the Magistrate, she would ‘recognise’ him as her *vis à vis*, and give him his place and right to be.

However, she yields nothing to him but her body. The Magistrate realises that the woman remains a stranger, impenetrable, no matter how intimate their relation:

Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry. [...] But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! (WB:45 – 46)

This disquieting insight links sex and ‘love’ to torture, an insight from which the Magistrate shies away in horror, but which the text powerfully suggests:

How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman’s body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (WB:48)

Coetzee implacably highlights the undercurrent of violence in sexual ‘possession’, which makes it partake of the same darkness as torture. Not only the depth of love is highlighted thus, but also that of torture, which we come to understand to be a similar fascination for the otherness of the other.

The way Coetzee takes his reader along into this insight includes of course our imaginary involvement – emotionally, morally – with the Magistrate, and through him, with Colonel Joll (an important aspect I will not explore any further here).

At a crucial point in the narrative, the Magistrate’s moral revolt turns into action, and the somewhat passive witness becomes a rebel. He literally and figuratively flaunts all laws stipulating the strict barriers between barbarians and rulers, which also, of course, forbid spatial transgressions of frontiers: he brings the woman back to her tribe. Thus, he in fact abandons his privileges and the power over her that his position gave him, expecting, as the text suggests, a reciprocity for which he now has set the conditions: she has been re-installed by

him in her sovereignty and dignity as a subject, and could now choose to address herself to him.

The reader may already have sensed the doubleness in the Magistrate's attitude: his lucid self-scrutiny and his courageous conduct in risking his life to set the woman free, may characterise him as morally outstanding; but how moral is his conduct, if he hopes to win something by it, if his 'disinterestedness', as Kant would have it, and his self-sacrifice appear in fact to be disguised personal interest? He lucidly skins his own motives, in a characteristic Coetzee-like fashion (c.f. p.70 and further). There is no moral superiority in this novel, no purity, which could assert itself triumphantly against the surrounding evil. The fact that, of course, the woman does not offer him anything in return reads like a confirmation of the verdict:

with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time [to] offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me.
(WB:47)

The exceptional thing is, however, that a fundamental change has occurred: by his transgression of the law and the (literal and symbolic) frontiers, the Magistrate has lost his position in the dominant order. He himself becomes a victim, experiencing humiliation and torture with his own body, exactly that which so fascinated him earlier. At a certain point he hangs upside down from a tree, in a grotesque inversion of his former superiority, obviously intended as symbol of his newly acquired, upside down view of the world. Typical Coetzee scenes follow, in which the humiliation the character suffers, utterly naked and vulnerable, form the necessary prelude to what appears as purification. It is as if Coetzee suggests that what dignifies the human being does not reside in any 'high' principles or morals (although the text strongly evokes a desire for morality in the reader), but in the lucid acceptance of absolute debasement.

This reversal, however, is not the last one. The barbarians suddenly reappear, more threatening and more powerful, and the forces of the empire beat a hasty retreat. The Magistrate is restored into his former position of power, but at the head of a much less stable world: the chaos and hidden vulnerability of the empire, to which he willy-nilly belongs, have come to the surface almost obscenely.

Any conclusion about morality that the reader might want to draw will have to be revised: this novel does not tell us an edifying story of conversion, self-sacrifice, humiliation, and the resignation of power. Undoubtedly, the Magistrate has gone far in his identification with the victim, but he reintegrates

his former role of the ruler, now almost mechanically, like a puppet: he accomplishes the same gestures against a revealed horizon of meaninglessness. The events, the violent rule of Colonel Joll, may seem to have been erased, but they have voided the whole structure of its apparent meaning. It is ironical that the Magistrate, who challenged the legitimacy of the law, when back in power sentences a deserter in the name of that same law he has learned to distrust, and of which he understood the violent secret.

This novel can, if one wants to, be interpreted allegorically as somehow pertaining to the position and identity of white rulers in apartheid South Africa. But Coetzee's theme is more general. His exploration of moral consciousness leads into the ambivalence of morality, and into the near impossibility of ethics. Not only does the Magistrate observe the ambivalence of his own 'noble' aspirations (to set the woman free, to stop injustice), inviting the reader to distrust that kind of impressive moral conduct. It also seems as if the novel requires the reader to conclude that an ethical relation to, and with, the other is impossible in a setting where ideological and political cleavages deepen the ontological gap already existing between self and other (and between the sexes). The woman belongs to the barbarians, and there seems to be no bridge between the two worlds, unless through total abdication of whatever cultural values make up one's self.

What remains with the reader (I should say: with me as a reader...) is in a way a longing for morality, in the full realisation of its ineffectiveness and impossibility. It is significant that the Magistrate, towards the end of his narrative, almost ironically remembers that he used to see his de-centred outpost as an oasis, outside of all ideological and military power relations, which characterised the 'centre', and the essence, of the empire:

'No one who paid a visit to this oasis', I write, 'failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of the seasons, of the harvests, of the migrations of the waterbirds. [...] This was paradise on earth. [...] I think: 'I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes upon its subjects, even its lost subjects. [...] I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have a history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?'
(*WB*:169)

These sentences display a significant shift of verbal tense: the past tense is used for the oasis, the experience of 'paradise'; the present tense for the effect of 'Empire', shame. The image of the oasis ("nothing between us and the stars")

belongs to the myth of naturalness, to the naturalising power of myth. It amounts to the illusory representation of a *natural* relation to the geographical and social space one, and one's culture, occupies; the lushness of nature almost seems to prove this naturalness. However, the Magistrate discovers that there is no outside of history, no outside of 'Empire', and therefore no uncontaminated rapport with the other. Even to seek utter debasement, to relinquish all attributes of power, is no guarantee that there could be something like a 'pure' relationship, on an ethical basis.

Interestingly, in the essay "Into the Dark Chamber", Coetzee evokes the 'negative illumination' from which one of Nadine Gordimer's characters flees. This 'illumination' is the insight

that there exists another world parallel to hers [i.e. the Gordimer character, Rosa Burger], no farther away than a half-hour's drive, a world of blind force and mute suffering, debased, beneath good and evil. (Coetzee, 1986)

This parallel world is a place where morality holds no stake. His own work constructs not only the tension between two scenes: the scene of 'humanity', where morality at least officially defines relationships, and that 'beneath', where humans behave like 'beasts'. There seems to be a third space, completely outside the social, human sphere. Quite a number of his characters find rare moments of consolation (most clearly in *Life and Times of Michael K*) in communion with nature, certainly not of the richly nourishing 'oasis' sort, but an oxymoronic space: desert, dirt, nothingness, in which some water, some life is found, just enough to survive, not enough for corrupting luxury. And otherwise, death is clement, if one accepts that dust turns to dust. This vision of a nature deeply familiar to the individual, the opposite of the cosy a-historical oasis the Magistrate had dreamt of, accommodates well with the radical mortification, but again: it is a space without (outside of) social exchange.

Conclusion

Like Paul West in the section of *Elizabeth Costello* quoted at the beginning of this paper, Coetzee, in spite of his female alter ego, descends as deep as he can into the darkness of human behaviour. His Magistrate is a guide: decent enough to invite the reader to sympathise with him, lucid enough to invite us to distrust his too convincing morality. Coetzee's novel eloquently accomplishes what Nussbaum sees as the moral function of literature: to ask the question, "how to live?" But unlike Nussbaum's 'good' literature, this novel moves on to question

quite radically the grounds of morality itself. Although its rhetoric instils in the reader a longing for justice, love, and simple decency, at the same time it questions their very possibility. Love is revealed to be uncannily close to the violence of torture, as two ways of exorcising the other's otherness. But any attempt to domesticate and control this otherness seals the impossibility of a *rappport* with the other. This obviously has very important implications for investigating within the South African context the limits of experiencing real understanding of each other: experience of the other is no automatic guarantee for understanding or knowing the other. The insight this novel yields comes closer to what Derrida or, after him, Andrew Gibson, describes as literature's 'ethics of the negative'. The ethical significance of the novel lies precisely in its "function, as form which [...] dissolves any given set of cognitive horizons", in its "dissolution of the sphere of the common" (Gibson, 1999:76).

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“DEEPLY RACIST, SUPERIOR AND PATRONISING”

The Story of the Stories Children Were Supposed to Read at School

Margriet van der Waal

Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of men and women who could change the world.

Herbert Marcuse (1979:32 – 33)

Introduction¹

In April 2001, a report about the literature selection process for prescribed reading lists for secondary schools initiated by a provincial Department of Education appeared in a Sunday newspaper in South Africa. This report sparked off quite a debate about the issue of literature selection for education in South Africa. Newspapers in Europe and the USA also reported on this incident, a petition signed by figures such as Paul Theroux, J.M. Coetzee and Edward Said was sent to the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), and eventually this particular process of book selection was called off by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal. In the weeks following the making public of a selection report compiled by the GDE, particular phrases from this report were picked out and recycled by journalists and commentators writing on the issue. This report contained the most important remarks of the individual members of a selection team consisting of teachers who were asked to read the submitted books. Phrases such as “(d)eeply racist, superior and patronising,” “(t)he characters do not appeal to modern learners as royalty is no longer in fashion,” “(this book is) not acceptable as it does not encourage good grammatical practices,” “an anachronism that projects a South African future that did not happen,” and “it contains an element of subversive rebellion against the state, which is perhaps

¹ I am most grateful to the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), Nicolaas Mulerius Fonds, and the University of Groningen for having granted me subsidies that enabled me to conduct research for this article in South Africa.

no longer relevant,” were picked out by the media and became the hallmark of a selection process that received much public criticism.

The members of the selection committee were asked to evaluate books to be prescribed for grade 12 school children from 2002.² The main reason for starting this selection process was said to be the fact that in the province of Gauteng the same literature has been taught since at least 1995, and teachers and the GDE felt it was time to change the networks list. In the past, up to 1994, the networks were changed more or less every two years, but because of various structural, policy and political reasons, it seems that changes other than the networks lists took priority in the period directly after the dramatic political changes of 1994. Literature education in South Africa is organised according to a set list of prescribed books for grade 12, and assessment takes place through an external provincial exam. These texts are prescribed by the provincial department of education (the GDE in this case), and the syllabus requirements demand that four texts be examined by the end of the year. These four texts represent four genres: a novel, a drama, a collection of short stories and some poems, and are to be analysed in class during the course of the final school year.³ A first and second language subject are compulsory and English as a language subject should be taken, either as a first or second language. The remarks cited above were published in the printed media during April and May 2001 and caused a furore in South Africa and elsewhere, resulting in much debate, and the immediate suspension of the selection process after personal intervention of the Minister of Education.

I would like to consider this incidence of book selection as a case study of literature education in South Africa during a period of political change and transformation.⁴ There are a number of questions one could pose regarding the aims and goals of the new curriculum and other policy documents. These questions concern issues such as: what underlying assumptions about literature are revealed by this specific case study? What are the stated and underlying principles and goals of the new education curriculum? What could one say regarding the role of literature within this new curriculum, and what role does

² Grade 12 is the final secondary school year in South Africa, and passing the grade 12 exam gives entrance to tertiary education. Before 1994 this last school year was called standard 10. Learners in grade 12 are usually around the age of 18.

³ Cf. Department of Education *Syllabus for English First Language Higher Grade* [no date, 1995?].

⁴ This discussion forms part of a larger project for a PhD dissertation currently being researched at the University of Groningen on literature education in South Africa during a period of political change and transformation. For the purpose of this present discussion I will focus mainly on the issue of the 2001 book selection debate.

the commotion of 2001 play in this whole issue? My aim here is to place the discussion of book selection in a historical perspective, look at one or two examples of incidents in the past and at some explicit and implicit selection criteria operative in these cases. I will then move on to the “selection process of 2001 debate” and look at some of the more obvious contradictions and problems that one may discern between the explicitly formulated policy goals and the case itself.

The issues I will be addressing should all be seen in context of the political change that has taken place since the end of the 1980s and which culminated in the establishment of a democratic government in 1994. Before turning the attention to the issue of the book selection in 2001, I will briefly consider some relevant historical aspects that form the background to this issue.

Literature education before 1994

The first democratic elections in South Africa were held in 1994, and a majority elected ANC government came to power. A new Ministry of Education was established which set out to radically change the system of Apartheid Education, which was characterised by notions such as Christian Nationalist education and Bantu Education: an education system notorious for its privileging of whites and repression of blacks.⁵ Very bluntly stated, one could argue that this system was driven by racism and an ideology of white superiority and black subservience.

Within this system of segregated education, careful scrutiny was exercised on what children read in class. Selection criteria guidelines were developed by the education authorities in an attempt to maintain ideological control. During the 1980s, the selection practices and criteria at times caused some debate among education specialists and literature experts. These debates sometimes pointed accurately at the underlying racism and ideology of white superiority of the education authorities (and, by extension, the government and white power in the country).

⁵ Statements such as the following, made in a speech during the 1960s by Hendrik Verwoerd, Minister of African education, and later Prime Minister, give an idea of the dimensions of this system: “Native education should be controlled in such a way that it should be in accord with the policy of the state....If the native in South Africa today in any kind of school in existence is being taught to expect that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake...There is no place for him in the European [i.e. white, ed.] community above the level of certain forms of labour.” (Cited by Thompson, 2001:196)

During the 1980s a number of academic studies were undertaken to analyse the selection process and criteria. In 1982, for example, J.M. du Preez undertook research resulting in a thesis on Afrikaans master symbols guiding Afrikaner ideology, found in history and geography textbooks and Afrikaans and English literature texts prescribed by the Transvaal Education Department.⁶ Master symbols identified by Du Preez include such ones as: whites are superior and blacks are inferior, the Afrikaner has a special relation with God, South Africa is a ravaged country, the Afrikaner is threatened, and the Afrikaner has a God-given duty to fulfil in South Africa (cited by Esterhuyse, 1986:44 – 45).

In 1983 a ‘racism in textbooks’ committee met in the Cape Province to discuss the issue of racism and racist references in prescribed schoolbooks and mentioned in their statement that they found many examples of racism, sexism and inaccuracies in history and geography books and also in Afrikaans literature (*Cape Herald*, 24 November 1983). Incidents such as these often lead to the discussion about whether or not to ‘purge’ textbooks, novels and other texts of their pejorative terms. On the one hand, one finds the argument that it is painful for a group of people obviously discriminated against by the use of these words to be confronted with such texts. On the other hand, one finds that the act of purging leads to a misrepresentation of historical situation and plays along with the whim of what is accepted or not by a specific group of people at a specific period of time. Hein Willemsse (*Die Burger*, 12 October 1984) argues that the literary text is a product of a particular social context and that this product represents this context to a certain degree. He therefore suggests that the use of books in which such racist representations or terms are used does not automatically mean the whitewashing of such points of view, but that it is imperative to deal with such notions critically.

In her study on Afrikaans literature prescribed by the education authorities since the 1960s until the early 1980s, Renske Bornman found that no award winning fiction was prescribed and that almost no new publications were on the setworks lists. One could argue that if older texts were exclusively prescribed (by the early 1980s), then it would imply that a particular traditional Afrikaans ideological point of view seems to be represented in the literature used in schools: in any case a point of view only from the white experience, and a point

⁶ The Transvaal Education Department (TED) was one of four provincial education authorities for white learners before 1994. Separate education departments existed for Coloured, Indian and black students, as well as education departments for each of the ‘independent’ homelands. All these departments were replaced by non-racial provincial departments of education, amongst whom the Gauteng Department of Education (after 1994, the Transvaal province and the ‘homelands’ within this province were split into four provinces: Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West).

of view parallel to political aspirations of nationalism and white domination in South Africa.

The debates around the issue of politics and power and racism did not, however, always manifest themselves on such an obvious level. Sometimes other arguments were used to keep certain texts out of the education system, but if one carefully looks at how such arguments are constructed, it seems rather plausible that perhaps the stated complaint functions as a smokescreen for something else.

One such argument is that of language and use of language. This argument was usually used to keep those books off the list that are written in examples of the non-standard variation of a language (this also includes the use of swear words: the underlying argument is perhaps that formal education has as one of its goals the development of a certain level of civilisation, civilised people do not swear and use foul language, therefore no examples of such language should be used in class, where the main purpose is, after all, to educate students into civilized people). In the case of Afrikaans and English the ‘non-standard’ versions are often deemed to be spoken by non-whites, whereas the ‘standard’ version is taken to be that spoken by the elite, the elite being white. The argument for language, and for upholding a certain standard regarding the language in a book, is often nothing more than an attempt at keeping ‘other voices’ or the perspective of the ‘other’ out. A good example of this would be the case of the play *Boesman and Lena* prescribed during the early 1980s by the Cape Education Department (CED). The play is about a Coloured couple living in precarious conditions on a rubbish dump, “making their way across the cruel landscape of the apartheid-era” (*New York Times*, 23 September 2000). However, parents complained about foul language in the text and the CED decided to withdraw the text and copies of it were eventually burned, causing yet more tumult about the whole incident. In the printed media it was mentioned that the argument about the use of foul language (by ‘uncivilised’ people, for sure) in the text must have been the ideal motivation for the education authorities to withdraw this contentious text. Commentator Robert Kirby said in his newspaper column that,

For a work like *Boesman and Lena* to be prescribed in the first place as a set-work must have been an act of near madness on the part of the CED. The play is a severe indictment of just about everything that the Nationalist Government holds sacred. And you have to be very naïve to believe that the CED doesn’t subscribe to NP [National Party] principles [...]. The complaints levelled by the parents at the ‘foul language’ in the play must have fallen like manna on to the desks of CED officials probably

already embarrassed by the play's political content [...]. If the play had been banned because of its political message the flames of indignation would have been even hotter than those the book might have raised. (*The Argus*, 6 July 1984)

Other examples of veiled arguments are the complaints against the use of blasphemous statements, or the portrayal of sexual activities. An interesting illustration is a letter written to a newspaper by a concerned mother who relates the story that her daughter came home crying after being asked by a teacher to explain a passage in *Mafeking Road*, by Herman Charles Bosman, mentioning sexual intercourse between two characters. To illustrate how one issue is used to mask another, I cite a passage from this letter,

'n Hele hoofstuk 'Marico Scandal' word gewy aan 'n grepie gemors uit die sondige lewe van een of ander denkbeeldige geval. 'n Suid-Afrikaanse meisie wat verwagting raak van 'n Kleurling. My dogter kom vandag in tranes tuis en sê sy het haar morsdood geskaam toe die onderwyseres vra wat het met die dogter gebeur! Sy was te skaam om te antwoord. Dit is wreed en kommunisties. (*Die Transvaler*, 8 September 1982)⁷

The striking aspect of this anecdote is the telling way in which people are categorised in this report: the South African girl is, from the distinctions made in this text, 'white', and stands in opposition to the other category, in this case 'Coloured'. The issue of sex is used as reason for lodging the complaint, but the real issue is not that of sex, but specifically of sex across the 'colour-line', a particular concern and fear in the consciousness of white South Africans, extensively described by J.M. Coetzee in *White Writing* (1988).⁸

From these brief examples it should be clear that political issues and a particular ideology certainly formed a reference frame (either in an explicit or implicit way) for the selection of books and that these political issues were informed by the relations between the different groups identified according to principles of race and/or ethnicity. However, one would expect that, within a system of democracy and the recognition of the equality of all citizens before the

⁷ "A whole chapter 'Marico Scandal' deals with a little snatch of rubbish from the sinful life of some or other imaginary case. A South African girl who is pregnant from a Coloured. My daughter came home in tears today, saying that she was mortally shamed when the teacher asked what had happened to the girl. She was too ashamed to answer. This is cruel and communistic." [translation MvdW]

⁸ See also the contribution of Sam Raditlhalo on this issue of miscegenation in this collection, ed.

Constitution, drastic changes would be necessary if the education system were in any way to reflect the political changes that had taken place after 1994.⁹

Educational reform after 1994

After 1994 a new national Department of Education (DoE) was established which in turn accepted some radical framework policies (see Christie, 2001). A policy paper on education was published in 1995 and contains the basic principles for policy formation of the new department. Whereas the previous regime had to deal with resistance to its education system, expressed through slogans such as “Liberation before Education,” the new education department (under Minister Bengu) took as its slogan “Excellence in education for all,” (Department of Education, 1995:7), and under the second Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, “Tirisano,” meaning “working together,” has become the hallmark of the DoE. Emphasis on the inclusive approach of the new education system, where no discrimination on whatever grounds is to be tolerated, forms in essence the foundation of the new education ideology. The goal of education in South Africa, according to the DoE’s curriculum framework policy document, is the creation of

a prosperous, truly united, democratic and internationally competitive country with literate, creative and critical citizens leading productive, self-fulfilled lives in a country free of violence, discrimination and prejudice. (DoE, 1997, Internet)

This vision informs the new outcomes based education programme, *Curriculum 2005*, an ambitious attempt at curriculum reform in order to base the education system on the principles set out by the new Constitution and education policies formulated after 1994.¹⁰ Remarks such as the following by Asmal can be read as

⁹ Cf. Christie, 2001.

¹⁰ This new curriculum (1997) was received with mixed reaction in South Africa. Whereas the principles of education were teacher based before, the new trend was for learner-based education, with integrated learning areas and clearly specified outcomes. In 2000 a review report of the curriculum was published, suggesting some changes to the basic programme, which led to the *Revised Curriculum Statement* (2002). The daunting task of implementing such curricular changes are complicated by the challenges posed by the specific conditions of teaching in South Africa. The starkly disparate material conditions between schools in South Africa pose great challenges to the successful implementation of the new curriculum. Alluding to this problem and referring to the considerable arrears in education in rural and ‘township’ schools, a journalist scoffingly remarked in a discussion about the new curriculum that “Curriculum 2005 is like a hypermodern lunar module: clever and reliable and planned up to the most exact detail, designed and built - ready for its departure

support of this undertaking by those involved in policy formation within the DoE. In the *Overview* document of the revised curriculum statement for grades R – 9,¹¹ released in May 2002, the Minister reaffirmed the democratic commitment undertaken by the DoE in 1995, saying,

This curriculum is written by South Africans for South Africans who hold dear the principles and practices of democracy. It encapsulates our vision of teachers and learners who are knowledgeable and multi-faceted, sensitive to environmental issues and able to respond to and act upon the many challenges that will still confront South Africa in this twenty first century. (DoE, 2002c:1)

All the different specific, critical, cross-field and general outcomes defined by the first curriculum and the revised *Curriculum Statement* could be interpreted in the light of the DoE's initiative "Values in Education" and described in its *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2001).¹² This moral guideline sets out strategies for familiarising young South Africans with the values of the constitution. The *Manifesto* identifies six qualities that the South African schooling system should actively promote. These are: equity, tolerance, multilingualism, openness, accountability and social honour (2001:iii). The *Manifesto* further explores the following concepts as ways through which the ideals of the constitution can be taught: democracy, social justice, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, *ubuntu* (human dignity), an open society, accountability (responsibility), the rule of law, respect and reconciliation. (ibid.:iii). The emphasis on accountability, openness and non-discrimination stands in contrast to the 'make-believe' approach of the apartheid-era, when it was suggested that the ideology of apartheid was intended as an attempt at 'good neighbourliness' rather than acknowledging it as being an insidious attempt at control and domination.

In October 2002, the DoE published a *Curriculum Statement* for the last three secondary school years (grades 10 to 12), building on the principles of its

to the moon. But the only thing that South African education has to get this thing on the moon is an old wheelbarrow" (*Insig*, June, 1997, translation MvdW).

¹¹ Grade R (Reception Year) is the first (non compulsory) school year for learners in South Africa, and children are between five and six when they enroll for Grade R. Compulsory education is from Grade One, when children are seven years of age.

¹² This initiative and document of the DoE is supported by grants from the Royal Netherlands Embassy among others. In his foreword to the document, Asmal explains the text as being "a call to all to embrace the spirit of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa." (ii)

curriculum document *Curriculum 2005* (which in fact only covered the first 9 school years). In line with the vision driving the curriculum statement for grades R to 9, the statement for grades 10 to 12 reflects the same sense of optimism and energy displayed in Asmal’s introduction to the curriculum for the junior levels:

The *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10 – 12 (Schools)* gives expression to what we as South Africans regard as worthwhile knowledge, skills and values. It is based on an assumption that knowledge in itself is not neutral, but underpinned by the collective vision, mission, values and principles of *a people*. (2002a:1, emphasis added, MvdW).

Here, too, the principles of the constitution and the *Manifesto* are cited as guides for the development of this curriculum document.

Despite the optimistic sound of the Asmal comments, I would like to express a few hesitations on my side. In a time when discussions about cultural identity and identification no longer form only an academic debate, but have become part of a wider popular discourse, a formulation such as “a people” jumps to the eye, especially if one keeps in mind that part of the celebrated power of the South African society after 1994 seems to have been its diversity aspect: the country was called “the rainbow nation”, and slogans such as “unity through diversity” was often used by politicians in the early days of the New South Africa. On the other side, though, one finds a strong movement towards nation building, and the success of such an attempt lies in the acceptance of the idea of unity and coherence. This process seems to be the underlying idea behind the use of formulations such as: “the *collective* vision, mission, values and principles” (emphasis added, MvdW). This terminology is problematic since these formulations seem to suggest that hard and fast entities do in fact exist – values and principles that are valid for all people at all times – while the South African past is itself testimony to the contrary.

Transformation and literature education

Although these examples are taken from the level of general policy formulation, I would like to look briefly at how these issues relate to literature education and the selection process of 2001, as I think it would not be incorrect to assume that the goal and aims of literature education are informed by the general aims and goals for education.

The first misgiving is related to the issue of having networks lists in the first place. The Minister ensures in the foreword to the *Curriculum Statement Grades 10 - 12* that the curriculum will “be interpreted and enacted differently in diverse contexts” (2002a:1). Such a statement seems to keep in mind that there are different contexts in the South African situation. In the case of literature education, every province has the right to select its own books to place on their networks list. Delegating the right to select books to the provincial education authorities recognises the existence of different contexts on a provincial level, but does not sufficiently take into consideration that even within a province enormous differences in context are to be found: within this system of having one networks list per subject for all schools within that province, inadequate recognition is given to differences in contexts to do justice to the Minister’s promise.

Many of the differences, such as disparities in infrastructure, are legacies of the apartheid regime, while other differences relate to language diversity, cultural heterogeneity, regional differences, etc. Although these differences were exploited within the system of apartheid to keep people apart from each other, differences still exist to some extent, at least on the level of material living conditions and contexts of experience. The problem is that there is only one networks list for all the grade 12 learners who take English First Language; the same goes for Afrikaans, and for all the other languages. For English, for example, this would mean that a school would have to make a choice for a particular novel from a list of only four novels (prescribed by the department), either one of two prescribed Shakespeare plays, a handful of short stories (the individual stories to be done in class are specified) from a choice of two collections and two hands full of poetry (specified for the section ‘the tradition of English poetry from Shakespeare to the mid twentieth century,’ but left open for the section South African poetry) for the grade 12 year. The problematic aspect of the Minister’s promise should be evident within such a system of a fixed networks lists. The answer lies perhaps in the way that context sensitivity is understood and interpreted: learners should have the opportunity not only to read the literature in which they can recognise their own experiences and context, but should also (gradually) read literature that acts as a window to other contexts and experiences. The underlying principle, it seems, is that there should be a fair distribution of these experiences for all groups. However, if some readers never recognise their own experience in the literature they get to read, there is, one could argue, a problem.

With some knowledge about the harsh reality of how literature is taught in some South African schools (with extreme examples such as one textbook being

available for a class of forty students),¹³ it seems as if the literature lesson often amounts to being not much more than a line-by-line explication of sections of texts, or the mindless cramming of plots in order to pass an exam of which the only purpose seems to be to establish whether a student has in fact read a text, judging from the amount of contextual questions in the final exam papers relating to plot (cf. Walters and England, 1990). Keeping these rather fragmentary (and at this moment provisionally outlined) aspects of the reality of literature teaching in mind, let us then turn to the nicely formulated ideals of the DoE, with their expressed desire to make model citizens of learners: citizens who will not discriminate, who can make critical and informed decisions and analyse situations according to specific contextual factors, the problem becomes apparent.

Selection process 2001

Although the new syllabus is not yet in place for grade 12,¹⁴ the need to reconsider the books on the networks list could perhaps be seen as one of the first steps in the process of initiating the new system.¹⁵ The events preceding the making public of the selection committee report in April, 2001, entailed a process set up by the GDE which included the compilation of a committee consisting of grade 12 language teachers. The GDE, via advertisements published in the local and national papers, asked publishers to submit texts to the committee which would then be evaluated. Participation in this committee was voluntary and teachers who were involved received a small remuneration for their efforts in reviewing a number of texts and writing down their recommendations.¹⁶

Texts in all eleven languages were considered by language teachers, and the deal between the GDE and the publishers was that the publishers would be

¹³ See in this regard Mokwena (2003), especially Chapter 5, where she describes the situation regarding literature teaching in the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

¹⁴ It is to be implemented by 2006, provisionally.

¹⁵ The decision to change the current texts could be read as part of the process of transformation of the GDE, as can the decision to include teachers in the first step of the selection process, a step described by the GDE as a very necessary step in the process of converting the decision making process into a more transparent process. (*Sunday Independent*, 29 April 2001)

¹⁶ Asking publishers to submit texts means that they decide which texts they would like teachers to consider and therefore they themselves already perform a selection, creating a rather powerful position for themselves within this whole process. When asking some publishers about the criteria they used when deciding which texts to send to the GDE, they told me that they send as many texts in their collection as possible, but could not tell me exactly why they chose certain texts and others not.

supplied with a copy of the comments made by the teachers.¹⁷ Step two in the process was for a selection panel to consider the recommendations made by the teachers and draw up a short-list which was sent to academics to decide on the final networks lists. Books on this list would then be the possible texts to be taught to South African school children in that particular province. The selection panel confirmed the selection made by the academics, and had sent the lists to the head of the GDE for his final approval. The list would have been set for two or three years, starting 18 months later, giving publishers, printers, examiners and schools enough time to prepare for the new syllabus.

When the publishers were supplied with the recommendations made by the teachers (presented in one report, presumably a synthesis made by the GDE of the individual reports), the bomb dropped. Outraged by the “abysmally low level of any ability to judge literary qualities” (as Nadine Gordimer herself was quoted on the issue in one paper, *Business Day*, 17 April 2001), the report was leaked to the press and started the big scandal. The teachers, however, were just doing their job, if one looks at the criteria supplied to the teachers by the GDE and which they had to use in their evaluation of the texts. In the guideline document of the GDE, some of the criteria teachers had to keep in mind were formulated as follows,

- Is the type of story, or the topic, likely to interest learners? [...]
- Does the story have a satisfactory ending? [...]
- Is the language of an acceptable quality? [...]
- Is the tone of the story essentially optimistic, with emphasis on the positive? [...]
- Is the content non-sexist, non-racist? [...]
- Does the content promote democratic values? (*Setworks Review Form*, no date)

What emerges from the above formulation is a rather peculiar understanding of literature, and also a troublesome understanding of the notions of critical thinking, notions of tolerance, etc. If these criteria in any way indicate how the GDE envisages the use of literature within their programme of education to form responsible young South Africans, some cautionary remarks, posed here as questions, should be made. One could ask, for example, why, if the aim is to help shape learners who have the ability to critically and individually express

¹⁷ In reaction to the newspaper furore around the issue, the GDE explained the move to supply the publishers with the report in the spirit of “collaboration and partnership which had been struck between the Gauteng Department of Education and the publishers” (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2001).

themselves as young South Africans, does the GDE formulate some of the criteria as to suggest that only texts that describe some kind of ideal world where only recognisable events take place texts should be used? How does this fit in with the other uses of literature that allow readers to examine possibilities in ethics and choice that in the real world would be rather difficult? Why formulate such a criterion as “does the content promote democratic values” but also the criterion about “acceptable language” if, by doing this, one excludes a significant portion of a language community?

One could certainly make a point of this in the case of Afrikaans and modern isiZulu. For Afrikaans the sustained use of only ‘standaard’ Afrikaans (i.e. the ‘white’ version of Afrikaans) means that many Coloured writers who also write in Afrikaans will not be allowed into the system.

This also holds for isiZulu. In conversations with subject advisors and academics during a research period in South Africa in 2002, I was told by some teachers that learners in urban schools doing isiZulu for example, have a hard time identifying with the rather traditional and conservative texts that are prescribed for them, written in a formal and ‘pure’ version of isiZulu. These texts are usually written for the sole purpose of being prescribed. One could argue that behind such attempts of maintaining language purity lurk other cultural and ethical motives: these motives could be explained as attempts at keeping a sense of ‘tradition’ alive and a particular moralistic understanding of values that supposedly accompany such a traditional lifestyle. It is not my aim to argue against such moralistic motives, but rather to point out that it is problematic not to consider on an aesthetic level the everyday experiences of teenagers, especially if one keeps in mind that some of them are in situations where they have a particularly rough time dealing with such issues as teenage pregnancies, HIV infection, rape, violence and poverty.

Conclusion

A commotion such as this provides newspapers with a story to run for a couple of days, and then the interest of readers moves on to other issues. However, such an incident can be regarded as a moment of crisis and used heuristically to show where the fault lines within a society and within the system lie. One of the most popular phrases used in the media coverage of the incident, was the fact that the selection report referred to Nadine Gordimer’s text *July’s People* as “deeply racist, superior and patronising.” At times it seemed as if the whole issue was an attack on Gordimer herself, and much attention was paid to her reaction to the issue, and the Minister’s subsequent phone-call to Gordimer to apologize for all of this happening. The multiple references to the phrase

“deeply racist, superior and patronising” in the newspaper reports show that concerns of race and political transformation are still very serious issues to South Africans: these are topics that get them talking in emotional ways.

However, the incident also shows that conceptions of literature, the function of literature within society, and the role of culture and cultural expression, are subjects about which many different opinions exist. Subsequently, questions such as how literature should be used in education, and how these issues of racism, transformation, culture, etc. come together in aesthetic representation, can be read not only in the statements made by the teachers, but also in the ensuing media discourse (in this discourse not only the interpretation of journalists and columnists of this issue can be heard, but also the statements made by academics, writers, and officials of the GDE).

These fault lines are not only evident in this selection incident, but in discussions with teachers during my fieldwork in 2002, I have come across very different opinions about the function and goal of literature education.

“Please, just keep any political issue out of literature teaching, we are sick and tired of political issues,” was a statement I heard over and over again from white teachers. “Please, if we were just given the freedom to interpret these text according to our understanding of the historical context we experienced, we would really know things have changed in South Africa,” a Coloured teacher lamented to me. “Please, if we were just given stories where the children could recognise their own reality of teenage pregnancies, violence, poverty, rather than insipid poems of daffodils blowing in the wind, we might attract the attention of the pupils and awaken some sense of interest in literature.” “Please, if we could just teach some of the great canonical texts, we might be able to teach some kind of literature that actually means something.” These are just some of the impassioned but contradictory remarks that I heard from various teachers during my fieldwork in South Africa.

Comments such as these show that serious deliberation, discussion and reflection is necessary in order to come to some understanding about the use of literature as a medium through which the aspired ideals of a democratic South Africa with ethically moral citizens could be realised. As some commentators of the incident have also argued, a meaningful use of literature can only be ensured if literature teaching will allow for the employment of literature in a non-restricted sense. Such a sense of non-restriction should make allowance for the experimental nature of fiction that enables one to look at issues of discrimination (only possible in texts where discrimination is in fact dealt with, in all possible ways), other possibilities of living (in other words, where the recognition of one’s own personal experience is not the primary concern, also the possibility of reflecting on different outcomes of historical events), other ways of using a language, different from the way that I may use it myself, but

which is part of the living reality of fellow language group members, indicating differences in our social contexts.

And perhaps the education authorities would then even be able to restore to the lives of South African learners some of the pleasure of reading and dealing with literature which, to my mind, is perhaps the first task of literature.

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ASPECTS OF IDENTITY IN RECENT SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION

Sam Raditlhalo

Introduction

Identity in recent South African fiction, much like the transformation of every aspect of the country's social, cultural, political and economic spheres, is under scrutiny. Ten years after the seminal year of 1994, South Africa is a country *re-imagining* and *re-making* itself. This constant scrutiny as to what the possible futures of South Africa could be, with what possible moral values and mores, is a field ripe for the creative writer to exploit, to chart possible ways in which three hundred and fifty years of contestations can be re-made. Part of this re-making involves the people themselves, for it is to them of vital importance to understand the routes by which contemporary South Africa, and thus *themselves*, came into being. To have a polity and a state to which one belongs is, in modern history, to be able to assert aspects of (cultural) identity that go beyond the tenuous bonds of 'race'.

The South African contestations with race, history and power have almost always determined the limits and limitations of much of its literary responses. South Africa's tumultuous history, however recorded, provides the imaginative writer with a treasure trove of material history, and the material seems almost endless. One of the most constantly re-visited themes of South African literature is miscegenation, whose roots lie precisely at the interface between the erstwhile colonisers and the local inhabitants they found at the southern-most tip of Africa. Writers such as J.M. Coetzee, Alan Paton, André P. Brink and quite recently Zakes Mda have mined this theme, which resonates with power and its abuse insofar as it pertains to the treatment of 'natives'. These writers attempt, with varying degrees of success, to point out the diseased aspect of South Africa with regard to two dominant races being able to accommodate and live harmoniously with one another. It is this theme that I highlight in this essay with specific reference to Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (ME)(2002).

The politics of 'Coloured' identity

A significant number of studies on the way in which South African academia theorised aspects of identity have come to light since the 1980s. The period between the beginning of the 1970s and the end of the 1980s was one in which theorisation about the nation-to-be was at the mercy of academic confusion and driven by the political discourses of the time. Imbued with a Marxist-Leninist understanding, theorisation of aspects of identity, during the volatile period of transition to constitutional talks around 1991 about the future of the country, was regarded in academia as an indication of a 'bourgeois' mentality. Ran Greenstein, writing about this period, observes that:

The common wisdom of Marxism used to be that identity was no more than a form of false consciousness, a disguise for relations of exploitation that allowed the dominant class to entrench its rule over gullible subjects. Despite its crudity this view resonated well with the realities of apartheid [...]. The manipulations of race and ethnicity, backed up by a massive repressive apparatus, and the use of notions of culture, self-determination and national homelands in the service of reprehensible policies of dispossession and violation of human rights, gave credibility to the case against identity as a positive force of analysis. Ultimately, however, the value of this approach proved limited as it failed to grant any role to people's own sense of self and collective being beyond colonial manipulations. (1998:4)

Greenstein's observations point to the manner in which, during the decade before political negotiations, scholarship in the country was still hamstrung by theorisations that had very little to do with how people felt. The nomenclature and theorisations of ethnicity subsumed by the generic term 'black' (for Africans, Afro-Indians and 'Coloureds') were crucial as it was impossible to think beyond 'white' as composed of multitudinous nationalities. Marxist theorisation placed academia in a cul-de-sac: the common view was then that 'identity' was divisive and therefore not fertile ground ripe for debunking, in as much as ethnicity was shunned. The liberalisation of the country freed academia from these shackles, but also showed the contradictory impulses academics display in a society whose very constitution was based on the politics of difference.

And yet, observing trends from the literary field, it is apparent that writers were prodding and probing aspects of identity and miscegenation for a considerable period, as witnessed in André P. Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (1982). *A Chain of*

Voices (CV) addresses and interrogates aspects of identity as far back as 18th century South Africa, when the slave trade was still normative in economic relations between settlers and the natives, together with those imported from Asia and Mozambique. The text looks retrospectively at the history of white-black confrontations on the farms that produced much of the wealth of the English Empire without the rights that had to go with such production of wealth. It is a precursor of Mda's *Madonna* in the manner in which it keenly observes the often excruciating white-black relationships at a time when the liberal Cape Colony's laws on slavery and the behaviour expected of the slave-owners were nothing but window-dressing. As Brink observes, most of his writings have been an attempt to accept responsibility for his society and his time (1983:29). For Brink, the slave period remains crucial in our apprehension of contemporary issues of black-white relationships on the farms. Much has been made of attempts to ameliorate the lot of the slaves, but it proved to be a case of trying to make do with the bad business rather than eradicating the evil it engendered (ibid.:155). Thus in his text Brink writes about a shameful period of South African history where local inhabitants, their progeny and foreigners had to bend to the will of the coloniser, often dying in the process of making the livelihood of the master-race a reality. But far from pamphleteering, Brink observes in minute detail the excesses visited on the colonised. In this instance, slave women were not the preserve of male slaves as they were shared between masters and the slaves, and the children so produced could not be claimed by the mother, but were the property of the master and future employees. Slave women, in particular, bore the brunt of miscegenation and illegitimate children whose paternity remained clouded in mystery, and created Coloured identity in the Cape. In *A Chain of Voices* Galant, the main character, remains fatherless because of the numerous visitations his mother, a young girl of fifteen, had to endure before his conception: "But he might have been anyone else's too, anyone of the many who'd come from far and wide to lie with Lys, some of them faceless in the night and gone before daybreak. Galant had many fathers. No one is his father and everybody is." (CV:2) It is with such misgivings about his paternity, therefore, that Galant's identity is controversial. His own mother disowns him while her sexual abuse continues unabated with the 'master' in the lead:

Lys refused to take him (Galant). She was all set against the child, refusing even to look at him, lay there crying day and night. She remained ill for a long time. One night Piet came in demanding: 'How's the slave girl? It's getting time.' Lys turned her back, drawing her knees to her chest and started whimpering,

not like a woman but like a dog. Piet forced his way to her (CV:28).

Galant grows up with a warped sense of identity, resentful of the master class and yet aware that they are no better than he is. Crucially, he grows up interacting with the next generation of the master class, Hester, Barend and Nicolaas. *Oubaas* Piet parcels him out to *Baas* Nicolaas, the same son with whom he grew up and whom he outsmarted (CV: 126). His relationship with Hester, Piet's stepdaughter, creates further tension in the text whose resolution is left to a future we are not privy to, since, when they copulate, we are made to understand that she might be with child. And yet it would seem as though he and Hester perpetuate miscegenation even as he dies for having led the rebellion against her brother-in-law, Nicolaas. His is the ultimate revenge for a life of being deemed a 'nothing'.

The novel is permeated by violence in all forms, and Rosemary Jolly's observations concerning this part of the text are well-founded:

[O]ne of the most disturbing aspects of *A Chain of Voices* for its most observant of reviewers is its portrayal of violence as intimate, and therefore, in some sense, desirable. The depiction of violent relationships as intimate is particularly evident in the beating scenes. (1996:36)

The observation by Jolly can be explained by the fact that Brink has been writing for a long time as an Afrikaner dissident with first-hand experience of farm life; he grew up on a farm, and therefore has intimate knowledge of such relationships. Thus he would not wish to subtract from the narrative aspects of excruciating South African material history. His novel, *A Dry White Season*, looks more at the visitations of a son's activism on his family and how his father's employer's involvement draws the mildly apolitical Afrikaner to a tragic confrontation with the state. Thus the 'disturbing aspects' that reviewers struggle with are not because of the veracity of Brink's imagination but rather with their own injured senses.

From the examples cited above, it is clear that the issue of 'Coloured' identity is an important historical concern, a part of South African history that is reflected in South African literature. Historically, 'Coloured' people were almost always concentrated in the Western Cape region, where Africans in general were in the minority. It cannot come as a surprise that for the then National Party, 'Coloureds' were seen as kith and kin from the beginning of the twentieth-century. The close need to identify with whites has played a significant political

role in how 'Coloured' identity was constituted and understood. As Afrikaner identity was created and manipulated through language, so the 'Coloured' constituency came to play a major role as this community was seen as 'brown' Afrikaners (cf. Hofmeyer, 1987:95 – 123). The term 'Coloureds' was used to refer to all inhabitants of the Cape Colony who were designated 'non-Europeans', and only changed after the Anglo-Boer War as the country was being re-made to accommodate the Afrikaners in the new dispensation leading up to the Union of South Africa. Ian Goldin observes how the term kept changing over time:

The term 'Coloured', until the turn of the twentieth century, generally referred to all non-European people. The use of the term was thus not unlike that in current use in North America. The official Cape census of 1875 included in the category of 'Coloured' all 'non-European' people, including 'Kafir proper'. The 1891 census maintained the same distinctions, declaring that the Cape population 'falls naturally into two main classes, the European or White and Coloured' ... In the latter half of the nineteenth century the term 'Coloured' referred chiefly to all 'non-European people'. Yet, by 1904 this wide definition was no longer acceptable. In marked contrast to the census of 1890, the Cape census of 1904 distinguished between three 'clearly defined race groups in this colony: White, Bantu and Coloured'. Included in the last category were 'all intermediate shades between the first two'. (1987:158)

Goldin's observations thus give the lie to the accepted fact that 'Coloured' identity was used initially for people of 'mixed race'. With identity being such an area of contestation, it is clear that the term was progressively used to include and exclude. Significantly, by 1904 a new term is brought to bear on 'Kafirs', and from then on the term 'Bantu' is used. Such reconstitution of 'Coloured' identity gave a keen sense of identity that was tenaciously held on to. This hold on an identity was given political weight and entrenchment, in its formative stage of development, by pronouncements such as that given by Lord Selborne, High Commissioner of South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, who felt that,

Our objective should be to teach the Coloured people to give their loyalty to the White population. It seems to me sheer folly to classify them with the Natives, and by treating them as

Natives to force them away from their natural allegiance to the Whites and making common cause with the Natives. (Ibid.:164)

From such beginnings, 'Coloured' identity was always going to be putty in the hands of politicians. As early as 1924, the then Prime Minister of South Africa, Barry Hertzog, sought to entrench 'Coloured' identity and privilege by enfranchising 'Coloured' men through his 'Coloured Persons' Bill, which failed to secure the necessary two-thirds majority in Parliament. The Bill sought to enfranchise the 'Coloured' males and totally disenfranchise and segregate Africans (ibid.:165). Therefore, when the Nationalist Party (NP) came to power in 1948 and needed to divide and rule, the 'Coloured' constituency was still a germane political ploy. The notion of *volk* woven by language and race made it impossible for the 'Coloured' community to be included in its folds. Nor could the Party agree on the necessity of a 'Coloured' homeland, then a central plan of the NP. To forestall 'Coloured' people from 'passing as white', the Population Registration Act, the Immorality Amendment Act, The Mixed Marriages Act and the Group Areas Act closed the minor avenues open for those 'Coloureds' wishing to exploit these fissures in the apartheid edifice. To placate sections of the 'Coloured' community, the Coloured Labour Preference Policy was implemented in 1949. This policy sought to achieve two objectives: enforce apartheid through the denial of African residence and employment rights in the Western Cape, and incorporate 'Coloureds' through giving them labour preference. The initial concerns made by Lord Selborne, it may be observed, were partially fulfilled by such an employment policy. The architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, recognised the dilemma that the 'Coloured' community faced in South Africa. He acknowledged the 'impracticality of a Coloured homeland', but explained that the labour preference should be seen in these terms:

If the minority group becomes the tail that wags the dog [...] surely it is much better to give such a minority limited opportunities [...] ensuring at the same time by means of an entrenched section in the constitution that the white man retains absolute supremacy. (Cited in Goldin, 1987:175)

The Madonna of Excelsior

Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* converges and diverges significantly with the concerns of *A Chain of Voices*. The central concern remains white-black (sexual) relationships in the hinterland. The other ways in which both

texts are intricately linked is the manner in which the material history of South Africa is seen as fertile ground for literary production: Brink uses court proceedings of an actual 18th century slave insurrection to portray a vivid account of the episode (much like the narrative of *Nat Turner* by Styron), while Mda revisits the scandal of the early 1970s in the Free State involving a case of miscegenation in a small rural town. In both texts we are confronted with the brutalities, the absurdities and the incomprehensible limitations of racial identities. One difference remains – the periods depicted by each text – yet it would seem that, while Mda depicts contemporary issues, he wonders as to how much has necessarily changed for farm workers and farming communities linked by blood, history and locality. Of course, not much has really changed for farming communities in South Africa, and it is still possible to find white farmers brutally raping African women, with seeming impunity.¹

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the central concern is with the miscegenation that resulted from the copulation of African women and Afrikaner farmers and members of the community of Excelsior. Given that apartheid based itself on the separation of the races, this case came as a major embarrassment for the ruling Nationalist Party, for whom miscegenation was an anathema. The survival of the white race, or so the Nationalists insisted, was threatened by the smallest trace of non-white blood, and thus Coloureds were singled out for particular attention (Goldin, 1987:170).

In the text we are introduced to the lives of three main female characters, Niki, Mmampe and Maria, who live in a shantytown outside the main town of Excelsior. While they are all in their late teens, Mmampe and Maria are more knowledgeable of the ways of the world than Niki. One Sunday afternoon, while foraging for dry cow dung to use as fuel for cooking and warming their homes, they come across Johannes Smit, the quintessential stereotype of the

¹ The *Sowetan Sunday World* (20 April 2003) carried a report whose lead reads as follows: “A Limpopo farmer appeared in court last week in connection with raping and pistol-whipping two women after he offered them a lift”. And yet a member of the *Blanke Bevrydingsbeweging*, interviewed on television, had the following to say about people living in South Africa:

There are basically two groups of people in South Africa: the white race and the non-white mud races. In order to protect its purity, the white race should have no contact with the mud races. God created the[m] superior to the mud races and it is consequently the white race’s duty to avoid being contaminated by the mud races. For this reason, whites should not send their children to schools where there are African, Indian and Coloured children. Whites should guard against intimate relations with the lesser races. To sleep with a black is like sleeping with an animal; and we know that it is against God’s law. It is God’s will that the superior race should never mix with the inferior mud races. (cited by Norman Duncan, 2002:135)

white farmer ('boer') with the characteristic whip (called 'sjambok' in South Africa) in hand. He offers the girls money as an incentive to 'play a game' with them. Niki's naivety is apparent when she recognises the outlines of the game without knowing its intricacies,

Niki only knew of the game from fireside stories. She was not looking forward to it. She had heard of white farmers whose great sport was to waylay black girls in the fields. They chased them around and played harrowing games with them. She had never experienced the games herself. And now it seemed it was her turn. Hairy Buttocks was standing in front of her brandishing a whip. (ME:15)

Thus, as Mda records, "from the sins of our mothers all these things flow." Not only is Smit infatuated with Niki, but he also feels an irresistible urge to dominate, subdue and conquer her. The scene of her initial rape makes for grim reading:

Deep in the sunflower field, Johannes Smit pulled off Niki's Terylene skirt. She tried to hold on to it, but he had the strength of ten demons. He threw her on the damp ground. Then he pulled down her panties and took them off ... he slapped her and ordered her to shut up. Her screams were now muffled with his hand on her mouth. (ME:16)

Niki is thus marked with a spot that, like her *chubabas* (painful caked growth on the face marred by hydroquinone used in skin-lightening creams) later on, she cannot erase, cure or administer. Smit exerts a relentless pressure on her until she gives in, only to stop later after multiple copulations with him when she realises the folly of her ways. But the stage is set for her seeming destiny in life. Mda's charting of Niki's brief experience of inter-racial sex reveals the extent to which small towns and their inhabitants are held hostage by their close proximity to one another. There is little offered, in such an environment, by way of escape. As soon as she is able to, Niki has to start working in the town of Excelsior as, either a domestic worker, or unskilled labourer, and it is thus that we later find her working in a local butchery owned by the town's major. The shantytown's name itself is instructive in its lack of originality: Mahlatswetsa means 'place of washing', implying the largely domestic vocation needed by whites from Excelsior and the surrounding farms, and foisted on the shantytown's inhabitants. As beautiful as she is, Niki is seen and framed as a temptress, even when she marries Pule, a man from the same shantytown of

Mahlatswetsa who works in the gold fields of Welkom and is thus away for long stretches of time. Smit cries himself silly on Niki's wedding day and nurses a grudge against Niki. His rage makes of him a constant irritant.

At this stage of her married life, with a young son named Viliki, Niki works for Stephanus Cronje who, we read, is the secretary of the local branch of the ruling National Party and the mayor of Excelsior (*ME:22*). Her marriage to Pule is tumultuous since he is very insecure because of his periodic absences. Pule decides to deprive Niki of his company though continuing to support his family financially. Smit, for his part, still pursues Niki, whose working relationship with Cronje's wife is fraught with difficulties laced by Cornelia Cronje's deep-seated racism. One fateful day Cornelia forces Niki to undress in full view of all the co-workers in her butchery on suspicion of having stolen meat, and thereby plants seeds of revenge in Niki:

She stood there like the day she was born. Except that when she was born, there was no shame in her. No hurt. No embarrassment. She raised her eyes and saw among the oglers Stephanus Cronje in his khaki suit and brown sandals. And little Tjaart. Little Tjaart in his neat school uniform of grey shorts, white shirt, green tie and grey blazer with green stripes. (*ME:41*)

Cornelia's humiliation of Niki is particularly striking, but not unimaginable as she cannot conceive of the workers as being exactly human. She makes light of the incident, while, for Niki, the incident provides "dark motives of vengeance" (*ME:42*). From such an unreflected, crass act Cornelia makes it easy for Niki to accept Stephanus's overtures after Smit blurts out the secret they share: that at some point Niki was his 'padkos' (*ME:49*).² As they copulate in some field that night of the disclosure, for Niki the wheel has turned full circle:

She did not see Stephanus Cronje owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She saw Madam Cornelia's husband. And he was inside her. She was gobbling up Madam Cornelia's husband, with the emphasis on *Madam*. And she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces [...]. Ag shame, Madam Cornelia's husband. She had the power of life and death over her. (*ME:50*)

Thus the opening sentence, "All these things flow from the sins of our mothers", assumes resonance, incorporating Cornelia's stupidity, Niki's vengeful spirit and loneliness and Pule's desertion. Having been marked as an

² Padkos is an Afrikaans word for (food) provisions for a journey, ed.

irredeemable temptress by Smit's lust, Niki willingly uses her sexuality to inflict a more humiliating hurt on Cornelia Cronje, even once boasting of their lovemaking on Cornelia's metal antique bed: "Niki's greatest triumph!" (ME:53) Afrikaner nationalism, built as it was on racial purity, had also framed Afrikaner women as the epitome of sexual desire and correct values. It would therefore not do for Cornelia and Niki to be equal as sexual beings.

Having started this trend of illicit sex, the party is expanded to include Mmampe and Maria. For their part, Smit and Cronje enlarge their circle to include Reverend François Bornman and Groot-Jan Lombard, pillars of Excelsior's civic community. The Reverend, as the representative of the Dutch Reformed Church, was the spiritual leader of the community while Lombard had taken part in the centennial anniversary enactment of the 1838 Great Trek, itself a powerful myth feeding Afrikaner nationalism.³ This august group copulates in Smit's barn, and from this 'Coloured' children are born who plunge the town in a scandal that threatens to topple the National Party government (ME:100 – 103). Niki and Cronje's porcelain-like daughter, Popi, is born with blue eyes and flowing locks of hair showing her to be of 'mixed' race. Pertinently, she is a female version of Tjaart, Cronje's son with Cornelia.

Mda's intricate text begins to question the morality of the Immorality Act itself. As the case of the Excelsior adulterers – now expanded to nineteen suspects – explodes, it soon becomes apparent that all over the *platteland* one can find living symbols of the absurdities of the act, and by extension, apartheid itself. In one scene, just before she is arrested, Niki attempts to 'brown' Popi over a brazier, a truly bizarre act of desperation. In this manner, Niki does produce "a truly coloured baby [...] with red and blue blotches all over":

She held a naked Popi above the fire, smoking the pinkness out of her. Both heat and smoke would surely brown her and no one would say she was a light-skinned child again. The baby whooped, then yelled, as the heat of the brazier roasted her little body and the smoke stung her nose and nostrils. Cow-dung is gentle in reasonable doses. But this was an overdose. (ME:66)

For the participants, the case of miscegenation brings with it mixed results. Cronje kills himself in disgrace (confirming Niki's power of death and life over Cornelia). Reverend Bornman attempts to do the same while all he accomplishes is to lose one of his eyes (surely a gesture at the wilful self-blinding of his great church teachings), and Niki and Pule's marriage falls apart.

³ The Great Trek took place when (Dutch) Cape free burghers migrated from the then Cape Colony under British control to escape what they saw as British oppression.

Only Mmampe, Smit and Maria, as the original and incorrigible indulgers, find the whole episode hilarious. The society mocks the black women for being temptresses, while the white males come across as ‘innocents’ who were lured into a trap. For Reverend Bornman, the easiest way out is to seek solace in the Good Book, arguing that:

It was the work of the devil, he said. The devil sent black women to tempt him and move him away from the path of righteousness. The devil had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner. It was the battle that was raging within individual Afrikaner men. A battle between lust and loathing. The devil made the Afrikaner to covertly covet the black woman while publicly detesting her. It was his fault that he had not been strong enough to resist the temptation. The devil made him do it. (ME:87)

In this exculpation of guilt, Mda makes it patently clear that the mythology of the above-average sexuality of the black woman is now used for casting blame. And it is in this way that this constant theme of South African inter-sexuality becomes stereotypical, for then it is used to frame (black) women in ahistorical and utterly ignoble terms; there are shades of Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope*, where the black ‘temptress’ is given no voice at all, in a novel replete with church, state functionaries and the police.

The future and its challenges thus belong to the products of these sexual unions.

Confronting ‘race’ and identity

When *The Madonna of Excelsior* opens we meet Popi as a very young child whose mesmerising presence in this small town serves as a reminder of what had transpired previously between those then dubbed the ‘Excelsior 19’. With Pule having abandoned his family, Niki is reduced to the status of forager at the gates of white people’s garden parties (ME: 5-10). Though most of the white inhabitants know her, the animus between herself and Cornelia Cronje is still very strong:

She was face-to-face with Cornelia Cronje, Tjaart’s mother. Five years had changed her. She looked old and tired. Cornelia recognised Niki too. And glared at her. Niki did not cringe. She did not cast her eyes down as was expected of her. Cornelia laughed. It was hollow and crude. (ME:9)

Popi, in this episode, also meets with Tjaart for the first time, who accuses Niki of having stolen Popi since she could not possibly be her daughter, being, as he puts it, a 'boesman' (a derogatory term for 'Coloured' people taken from the Dutch 'bosjesman'). Reduced to this level, Niki has no choice but to pose naked for Father Frans Claerhout of the Roman Catholic Church and thus manages to place food on the table.⁴ Popi thus grows up with Viliki in Niki's shack, knowing very little of the details surrounding her coming into being. She accepts, for want of any other knowledge basis, the fact that she is Popi Pule, though the taunts of children her own age set her apart even as she wonders at her own features, particularly her hair. One can imagine the confusion the child feels as she is rejected by other children her own age. Moving from Niki's own observations, we learn that Popi never really laughs:

It was good to hear Popi laugh. Just as she rarely cried, she rarely laughed. Very few things made her laugh. Yet she was the source of other people's laughter. When other children saw her in the street, they shouted, "Boesman! Boesman!" And then they ran away laughing. At first she used to cry. Then she decided that she would not play in the street again. She would play alone in her mother's yard. She was only good for her mother's ash yard. She did not deserve to play with other children in the street.
(*ME*:110 – 111)

Popi thus experiences social ostracism at a very young age, hating her hair that is an instant marker of who she is. In such a small community, there are no avenues of escape, and she grows up in near isolation. Her mother compounds her isolation; Niki withdraws almost totally from the community of Mahlatswetsa (*ME*:119). Mda plots the events surrounding the children's growing up and shows the divergent lives they lead. This situation would soon culminate in a new confrontation with unexpected results. Viliki, when not at home and protecting his sister, joins the underground movement that seeks political change and emancipation. While Popi stays at home, Tjaart joins the army as conscript to fight for, and protect, white rule in South Africa, being the older one of the two. From this tiny hamlet the broader strokes of the South African polity are expertly drawn out, and all the children react to the massive societal changes in their different ways.

⁴ Frans Claerhout, Belgian born artist (1919), and residing in South Africa since 1946. It is interesting that Mda, in this text, based on real events, uses fictive names for his characters, except in the case of the reference to Father Claerhout [ed.].

With political freedom for all definitely about to happen, the last throes of apartheid begin to claim many victims as the defenders of the system doggedly fight on. Even in small hamlets such as Excelsior, Viliki's Movement makes its presence felt, and is able to draw in more recruits. An unlikely recruit is Popi, who is injured during a demonstration that has a national profile – the demand for the release of all political prisoners – but little to do with the essential day-to-day life of Excelsior and Mahlatswetsa (*ME*:158). She becomes an enthusiastic recruit, campaigning for the Movement amongst farm-workers shortly before the first democratic elections, and her just reward is to be elected as councillor, while her brother, Viliki, becomes the first black major of Excelsior. Tjaart has, in the meantime, been elected as the representative for the Freedom Front, “an alliance of right-wing groupings who had decided to fight for the homeland for the Afrikaner within the system” (*ME*:166). Tjaart's embitterment at the resolution of the South African conundrum, together with Popi's enthusiasm for politics of the downtrodden, set up the battle lines for what the newly constituted council will fight about. While Tjaart may suspect who she is, Popi at this point has no inkling as to who he is in relation to herself, and their vicious fights are Mda's laboratory experiment of those whose umbilical cords are buried in the country. From the very onset, and with the issue about which language would be used to record the minutes of the council's deliberations, Popi and Tjaart serve to epitomise a sibling rivalry that bespeaks the greater South Africa (*ME*:188). The Mahlatswetsa community had long accepted Popi, together with the children of Mmampe and Maria, as outright Basotho and has forgotten the epithet of 'boesman'. Tjaart, while he never calls her 'boesman' again, manages to inflict on Popi serious psychological blows at her physiognomy, beginning with her 'unshaven' legs (*ME*:194), a sensitive point to Popi, who grew up hiding her hair and never knew what depilation was. Popi in this instance confronts her body and what it means to her, what her identity is, and how to resolve it. She is given advice and succour by Lizette de Vries, the representative of the New National Party who entreats her to love herself and be proud of her beauty.

De Vries gradually draws Popi out of her identity shell, out of her social isolation; as De Vries does so, Popi blossoms. She immerses herself in community development issues, and educates herself in the local library. She realises the shallowness of political involvement in a situation where rapaciousness and greed become the norm. Most importantly, she realises that her anger at Tjaart is because they are so alike in the fact that their anger is deflected anger (*ME*:231). Popi is able to say about herself that, “My shame went away with my anger” (*ME*:260) and liberates herself from the confines of race and identity crises. The same cannot be said of Tjaart, whose bitterness wells up in him; he becomes bedridden and requests Popi to visit him. A

reconciliation of sorts is worked out between them as they acknowledge Stephanus Cronje as ‘their father’. As Tjaart offers her shaving cream, it is Popi who articulates her identity and (new) persona: “I’ll take the cream, Tjaart, because in my culture they say it is rude to refuse a present. But I will never use it. I love my body the way it is” (*ME*:263)

I believe what Mda seeks to do is to break the ingrained lack of ‘Coloured’ identity with its ‘black half’. Yet it is a rather irritating aspect of the text that the character, Popi, remains so unconcerned with her genealogy until the very last moments in the text. She is also trapped in an unlikely asexuality that is slightly overdone, for at the close of the novel she is thirty years old and a neophyte. It may be that Mda does not wish to paint Popi with the ‘temptress’ brush of her mother and her friends, but her hermit-like approach to life borders on the unbelievable. It is only at the very close that she is seen in mini-skirts, with her hair down and looking gloriously beautiful. But these are minor criticisms of a novel of lyrical beauty that hints at the possibilities of the future South Africa. It is a significant addition to the literature of race and identity from one of the country’s most impressive writers.

Conclusion

The on-going engagements with identity in South Africa point to the multiple ways in which further interrogations of the concept can be undertaken. South African identities are interlaced with ethnicity, regionalism, religion, tribalism and ‘race’. For creative writers, who should be the conscience of their society, this represents a major challenge to speak ‘the truth’ of the locality, showing its unique features while never succumbing to triumphalism, nihilism and despair. While there remain many unsettled issues, it is promising, at least, that the society is attempting to look for ways towards possible futures that do not point to the past (Cf. Duncan et al, 2002). ‘Coloured’ persons’ senses of identity form an ongoing discourse that cannot be wished away by the politics of ‘non-racialism’.

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THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE: FURTHER THOUGHTS ON ASPECTS OF IDENTITY AND POETRY

Adrian Roscoe

Introduction

In this paper, celebrating Dr Sam Raditlhalo's completion of his doctoral research on South African identity and autobiography, I hope to carry out two brief tasks. First, I want to suggest an expansion of the complex inquiry Dr Raditlhalo has pursued. And second I would like to discuss two South African poets to illustrate my argument.

Further research on identity: some suggestions

I will begin, then, by positing, in a frankly simplistic way, a virtual anti-thesis to Dr Raditlhalo's work – an argument that just might generate further doctoral study, for which he of course would be the ideal supervisor.

The argument would proceed like this. Given the sustained and damaging assault on individual and group identities that Dr Raditlhalo describes in his thesis, is it not remarkable that Black African identities have survived so well? Indeed, could it not be argued that a robust sense of identity manifest across African society, wherein basic self-worth has been preserved, is precisely what has fuelled the collective will to defeat an enemy seeking in part to destroy someone else's identity as a way of preserving its own?

This thesis, like Dr Raditlhalo's, would marshal its evidence from biographical and autobiographical writing (prose or verse) and then extend its inquiry to the fine and performing arts, for here too, amidst the bombed site rubble of apartheid's operations, there is evidence of the human spirit transcending the onslaught of gun, whip and boot. Happily, the researcher could also use Dr Raditlhalo's own findings and material. Because the life writings he examined, in their very conception and parturition, signal that identities had not been totally destroyed, that imagination, patience, and inspiring creativity were sufficient to prevent their fatal subversion.

The study might then ask what social mechanisms, traditional or modern, have contributed to this exercise in survival, so that victims of lavishly resourced and sophisticated abuse can rebound with energy, humour, and even a readiness to forgive.

Our busy scholar would find clues in Dr Raditlhalo's illuminating third chapter, where he examines the fine detail of group and individual identity-making. For example, he stresses the significance of names in African communities, and how these and praise poems work for the conceptualisation of individuation and for the extension and reinforcement of selfhood. In societies where key stages in human growth are ritually marked, initiation rites to announce the transition from childhood to adulthood (that phase seen in Western society merely as a period of temporary insanity) are pivotal. If evidence is needed, the rituals' widespread survival across Southern Africa and beyond provides it. And this despite the manifold efforts of missionary and modernizer. People who belong to some of the world's oldest societies know the identity-shaping value of these rites too well to abandon them lightly. And significantly, a doctoral thesis recently submitted to the University of Venda sees the initiation camps for youths as one of the few truly promising sites for radical intervention against the AIDS pandemic (Maluleke, 2001).

Of particular interest is literature's central role in these ceremonies. In effect, candidates crossing the bridge into the country of adult rights and duties must first pause to be asked who they are. The answer is to be found in their ancestry and lineage. The next question would be how one would be able to recognize them (the ancestors). Answer: through their skills and talents. And in a luminous demonstration of belief in the affirming influence of art on the human personality, they must describe and praise themselves in poetry, either declaimed or sung. As students of literature, we should find it easy to appreciate the value of such a creative answer to the question: "Who am I?" On the other hand, it would be hard to imagine, after this dramatically ritualized statement before your community leaders, that adult life, even with all its problems, could readily cause an onset of identity amnesia. And once again evidence emerges from Dr Raditlhalo's third chapter. For can one imagine a stronger sense of identity than the old man shows who is asked to introduce himself to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – itself an examination of the very processes employed to destroy identity in the other?

King Thembu begat Bomoyi; and Bomoyi begat Ceduma; and Ceduma begat Mngutu; and Mngutu begat Nxego; and Nxego begat Dloma; and Dlomo begat Hala; and Hala begat Madiba; and Madiba begat Thato; and Thato begat Zondwa; and Zondwa begat Ndaba; and Ndaba begat Mtikara; (this is the house where

Mtanzima comes from, the right-hand house); and Mtara begat Gangeliswe; and Gangeliswe begat Dalidyebo; and Dalidyebo begat Jongiliswe; and Jongiliswe begat Sabata; and Sabata begat Buyelek; and this is where I begin. (Raditlhalo, 2003:72)

His reply is a memorable example of orality and traditional procedure. But what more can one make of this? First, at an obvious level, and granted that Dr Raditlhalo shows identity to be a phenomenon of awesome complexity, this man is hardly a candidate for identity loss. In his case, apartheid's high priests in Pretoria or Stellenbosch have achieved less than startling results. And since we must assume that his echoing sense of personhood comes with no help from South Africa's shameful Bantu Education and its 17 ministries, or from the Oxford and Cambridge Overseas Examinations Board, traditional mechanisms of tribe and clan have clearly been at work.

'Cape Coloured' identity

Dr Raditlhalo mentions the plight of the novelist Peter Abrahams in his thesis, and I want to expand a little on the plight of the so-called Cape Coloured community to which Abrahams belonged. Being a mixed race group, they knew painfully shifting fortunes in the racist mosaic of the apartheid republic – now favourable because they are not black, now unfavourable because they are not white; the franchise given, and the franchise is taken away. One recalls, too, that their urban identity suffered grievously with the destruction of the iconic District Six, much as Black urban identity suffered through the destruction of Sophiatown – both consequent on powers arising from the Group Areas Act. Hostility to this community arose not only from all points of the South African racial and political compass but even from nations north of the Limpopo. In Dede Kamkondo's novella *Children of the Lake*, a Cape Coloured widow struggles to fit into Malawian society which, finding her identity confusing, tidies her away as Asian, causing her to scream at one point, "Can't you see that I've nowhere to go? I'm not black; I'm not white; I'm not Asian. I'm me...Coloured me. I don't know my father; I don't know my grandfather. Leave me alone, you people." And Hopewell Seyaseya, a Zimbabwean poet of strong feminist sympathies, laments in "Changing Times" the plight of a Coloured woman reduced to the misery of prostitution in Harare:

Emilda of the flats
Neither black nor white
A woman to all those

Who tour her primitive parts,
Lives lonely not alone. (1984:18)

Facing omnilateral prejudice, the distinguished Coloured writer Alex La Guma (whose death in Cuba recalls the status of black South African writing as a literature of exile) sought to solve hate-sown divisiveness with a solidarity of the oppressed. As Paul Scanlon suggests, La Guma's background as a communist and journalist who explored every level of Cape Town life equipped him well for depicting how all the races were in varying degrees "dehumanized and impoverished" by the system. "The Gladiators," one of La Guma's 16 short stories, shows Kenny, an almost white boxer, complaining because the race laws allow him to fight only Coloureds and blacks, and never whites. The narrator describes him wryly, in what Lewis Nkosi has called Englikaans:

He's a good juba awright. Build like a bear if you ever see one, with sloping shoulders and a big chest, and arms and thighs like polish teak. Not exactly like teak, because he's lighter, just miss being white which was what made him so full of crap. He was sorry he wasn't white and glad he wasn't black. He got a nice face, too, except for the nose that's a little flat from being hit on it a lot, almost like a black boy's nose, but not exactly. (1968:114)

Kenny harbours less than divine love for a black opponent he is obliged to fight: "I feel first class [...] I'll muck that black bastard. But what the hell I got to fight black boys and coloured all the time? [...] You see me floor that blerry tsotsi [...] That black piece of crap [...] The hell with him." (1968:115 – 119)

La Guma's solution, then, comic comeuppance apart, is to urge group identity. A central motif of his work is that, in Pretoria's fascist mind, all non-whites share a common inferiority. Or, as Kenny's manager puts it, "We all get kicked in the arse the same." (1968:115)

"Coffee for the Road" repeats the point. A weary Asian woman stopping in a small town for a drink, ignores the foot-square hole where non-whites are served, only to hear the proprietress scream, "Coffee? My Lord Jesus Christ! ... A bedamned coolie girl in here! ... Coolies, Kaffirs and Hottentots outside [...] Don't you bloody well know?" (1964:90)

Coloured tribulations emerge further in work by Dennis Brutus, poet and political activist, and his protégé Arthur Nortje, who at 28 committed suicide while in exile in Oxford. Proscribed at home, both writers were dismayed to see

their work only coolly received in West Africa, where, apart from the Nigerian Mbari-club editor, the German Ulli Beier, who praised its cutting-edge freshness, it was described as maudlin and self-indulgent. Brutus, though often driven to the limit, rebounded from such treatment less damaged, certainly with a grittier will to survive than Nortje. A much older and psychologically stronger man, he reveals in verse that (to cite one example) his Robben Island incarceration and experience of forced labour were more of a threat to his moral and spiritual self than to his basic identity:

In the greyness of isolated time
Which shafts down into the echoing mind,
Wraiths appear, and whispers of horrors
That people the labyrinth of self.

Coprohilism; necrophilism; fellatio;
Penis-amputation;
And in this gibbering society
Hooting for recognition as one's other selves
Suicide, self-damnation, walks
If not a companionable ghost
Then a familiar familiar,
A doppelganger
Not to be shaken off. (1973:56 – 57)

Despite the incarceration on Robben Island, then house arrest and a bullet in the back while trying to flee South Africa, he went on to have a successful family life and a distinguished academic career in the United States, where he still lives today. By contrast, the lonely and less robust Nortje suffered chronic insecurity that led him, like many other exiles, into drug and alcohol abuse, and an early death. According to Annie Gagiano, Nortje, born in 1942 to an unmarried mother and a Jewish father he never met, buckled beneath the abuse apartheid routinely heaped on his ever-shrivelling sense of self worth (“Bastaards”, “hotnots”, “kaffirs”). He frequently reflected the pain of this experience in his poems, and went to the grave unrelieved of it. In his major volume *Dead Roots*, a poem called “Hangover” gives what Gagiano calls a negative identity, where parentheses reinforce and emphasise its impersonality:

In case of foul play, imprisonment, death
By drinking (identity is
268430: KLEURLING
Pretoria register, male 1960) (1973:10)

Cumulative psychic battering finally drove Nortje to believe that the freedom struggle would never be won. Robben Island's prisoners gave no cause for optimism and he himself was simply lost to despair:

They are dead igneous,
Breaking rock
On Robben Eiland,
And I myself have lost
Sight of the long night fire. (1970 [2000]:392)

Nor could literature's liberating powers inspire him. His ironically titled "Autopsy" exudes disillusion:

In the towns I've acquired
Arrive the broken guerillas, gaunt and cautious, exit visas in their
rifled pockets
And no more making like Marx
For the British Museum
[...]
The luminous tongue in the black world
Has infinite possibilities no longer. (1973:52 – 54)

Brutus, however, not only found the inner resources to survive, but went on to retaliate, landing blows close to the very heart of the oppressors' identity. His proud achievement in getting Pretoria dismissed from the Olympic Movement sorely wounded Afrikaner pride in its identity as a society that with "bared ferocity of teeth" and "chest thumping challenge and defiance" made a god of sport. There would be no more Olympic competition, no more epic rugby or cricket battles with England, New Zealand and Australia. For this he might never be forgiven.

Conclusion

A final irony, however, is that when freedom in 1994 brought a wholesale flight from the study of Afrikaans in schools and colleges, the oppressors who had inflicted such horrors on their Coloured victims, but who were now reeling at the terrifying prospect of linguistic identity loss, could find happy relief only in the certainty that the despised Cape Coloured community, with its multi-million membership, could be relied on to keep the Afrikaans language alive and well.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Liesbeth Korthals Altes is professor of General Literature and Modern French Literature at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. She wrote her PhD on the work of Michel Tournier (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam). Her field of expertise is narratology and the relation between ethics and literature.

Department of General Literature, University of Groningen
P.O. Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands
e.j.korthals.altes@let.rug.nl

Salomi Louw is Director of the School of Languages and Communication Studies at the University of the North, South Africa. She has been teaching there for 22 years, mainly Afrikaans Literature with emphasis on Drama, but for the last three years she has also facilitated learning and supervised mini-dissertations in the Coursework Master's degree in African Languages in the field of Mass Communication and Visual Literacy.

School of Languages and Communication Studies, University of the North
Private Bag X 1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa
louws@unorth.ac.za

Sam Raditlhalo is a lecturer at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, at the Department of English. He lectures mainly on South African Literature, with interests in Southern African cultural history, contemporary poetry, photography and the critical arts. He was a recipient of a University of Groningen Research Fellowship. He successfully defended his PhD dissertation at the University of Groningen in January 2003.

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Cape Town
Private Bag, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa
sam@humanities.uct.ac.za

Adrian Roscoe is currently teaching at the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Until 2000 he was Professor and Head of English at the University of the North,

having previously held chairs in Malawi and New Zealand, and a visiting professorship in the United States. His publications include *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature*; *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South*; *The Quiet Chameleon: Modern Poetry from Central Africa* (with H. Msiska), *Keep My Words: Luo Oral Literature* (with O. Ogutu); and *Land of Fire: Malawian Oral Literature* (with M. Schoffeleers). He is currently working on a study of Central African writing for Columbia University Press.

English Department, Sultan Qaboos University
Box 42 Al-Khoud, P.C. 123 Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
roscoe@squ.edu.om

Margriet van der Waal is currently busy with a PhD in comparative literature at the University of Groningen. She is conducting research on the influence of political change on literature education (secondary school level) in South Africa. She completed her Masters Thesis in 2001 on cultural identity and the novel *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee at the University of Groningen.

Department of General Literature, University of Groningen
P.O. Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands
m.c.van.der.waal@let.rug.nl

Helen Wilcox is professor of English Literature at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Her research is largely focused on the literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, but as she works on issues of autobiography, gender and identity (and supervised Sam Raditlhalo's doctoral research), she is increasingly fascinated by contemporary South African writing.

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Groningen
P.O. Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands
h.e.wilcox@let.rug.nl

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