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The Shadow of the Past Hangs Over Post-Apartheid South African Fiction in English

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Abstract **Review Article**

This paper sets out to rake stock of how the demons of apartheid-era South Africa impact the new dispensation over twenty-five years after the first democratic elections ever held in South Africa. Also, through a methodological approach predicated upon an fictional opus made up of different novelists, and upon perspectives drawn the social sciences, not least philosophy, history, sociology, the paper seeks to highlight the invaluable contribution of South African writers-black and white alike- to the demise of was later known as institutionalized racism. The article argues that protest literature's unyielding resolve to grittily spotlight the materiality of the black condition in South Africa from 1948-when the National Party came to power with a racist agenda-to 1990 was crucial to raising international awareness about the horrors of apartheid, and, accordingly, the overarching need to call time on it. For all that, the paper explains, the racial chickens are coming home to roost since the downtrodden of yesteryear are perceived by their former oppressors as being driven by a vengeful agenda. With the end of institutionalized racism, the paper contends, Postapartheid South African novelists tend to move away from racial determinism that hallmarked apartheid-era writing to embrace novelistic themes appertaining to the concerns and challenges that plague modern-day South Africa.

Keywords: Apartheid, art, Afrikanerdom, censorship, forgetting, history.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research paper is two-pronged. For one thing, it highlights the contribution of protest literature to the advent of democratic-era South Africa. Secondly, it underscores how the demons of the past feed into the social and political woes bedeviling the new south Africa. Prior to getting at the core issues, it might no bad thing to sort of lay the spadework thought a brief review of the meaning of "Apartheid." This egregious form of racial oppression means ("separate development" in Afrikaans). It stands to this day as one of the most egregious system of segregation that has ever existed. It was officially established as a system of governance in 1948 when the National Party, driven by the Afrikaner people, came to power. Its key hallmark was the institution of racist policies against people of colour, not least the Blacks who represent over 90 per cent of South African population. Apartheid exponents divided South Africa along racial lines with harsh segregationist policies being enacted to forfend any mix amongst the different racial groups that make up South Africa. The inhumanity of apartheid which was later branded "institutionalized racism" found expression in awful legislation designed to discriminate against non-white people. Christopher Merrett's definition of apartheid captures its inhumanity: "*Apartheid was an ideology of division and exploitation, an authoritarian doctrine which through law, administrative process and brute force governed people's lives on the basis of race and, latterly, class*" (4). Faced with the human toll exacted by a race-based ideology, South African fiction writers couldn't help but mull over ways and means of dismantling the system of racial segregation that incidentally had outlawed the country and its racist government from the international community.

When we talk about South African literature in English, we have in mind novelists of white and black extraction. Not to mention those of Asian origin. Much

'This article is an offshoot of a paper that I presented at an international conference at Cheikh Anta Diop Universsity of Dakar in 2018. Owing to its topicality, I saw fit to expand it into an article.'

of their writing from the inception of racial oppression to its abrogation revolved around the materiality of the black condition. Actually, apartheid-era novelistic discourses bore the hallmark of an utter rejection and indictment of the oppression of black people anchored in an ideology that posited the supremacy of white South Africans over blackness. This ideology was known as Afrikanerdom into which Mackinnon expands as follows:

Driven by the somewhat secretive broederbond (brotherhood), Christian nationalists under Malan's leadership embraced the concept of the Afikaner volk (people) as a special group with distinct political, cultural, and spiritual values. Implicit in this special status was the "winning" back of "their" country from the African majority. (293)

The thrust of the resistance literature sought to highlight the human ravages of institutionalized racism and raise awareness about the moral necessity to call time on it. The markers of apartheid-South African prose fiction from both sides of the racial divide were mostly revolt-style writing, to wit, the location of 'otherness' as a site of suffering, the meanness of the trope of race, family dislocation, the unremitting quest for freedom from bondage, a strenuous human response to oppression in the backwash of colonialism-you name it. Protest literature, as john Stauffer argues, has a redemptive value:

I define protest literature broadly to mean the uses of language to transform the self and change society. By language, I refer not only to words, but to visual art, music, and film. Protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspect of society but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society's ills. (xiii)

Protest literature is a reproach to the crying shame of injustice. Similarly, it foregrounds a certain vision of art as an effective tool to effect wholesome change. The point needs making that during the apartheid-era protest literature was mainly driven, from white perspective, by André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, and J.M. Coetzee. The significance of their anti-oppression stance lay, inter alia, in the fact they were associated with the oppressive side because of the colour of their skin. Little wonder that all of them went through the gauntlet of state-sponsored censorship. A measure of the drag of censorship on their works finds expression in their scathing essays on the phenomenon of censorship under apartheid. André Brink's "Censorship and Literature", Gordimer's "Censored, Banned, Gagged" and "Censorship and Unconfessed", not to mention "Coetzee's Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship" are telling examples. In Gordimer's view, censorship and police are two repressive tools in the service of authoritarianism. The former acts on the mind whilst the latter does on the body, so to speak: "*Censorship is the arm of mind-control and as necessary to maintain a racist regime as that of other arm of repression the secret police*" (252). As regards Brink, he highlights the pernicious edge of censorship, and sets it against the meaning of literature: "*While literature involves the whole territory of values and creativity both in private and communal experience, which implies that it is intrinsically non-violent (a pen, not a sword), censorship represents institutional violence at its most insidious*" (248). In Coetzee's theory, "*The institution of censorship puts power into the hands of persons with a judgmental, bureaucratic cast of mind that is bad for the community and even the spiritual life of the community*" (10). J.M Coetzee questions, indeed, the nefarious nature of censorship.

The function of literature as a vehicle for change is encapsulated in Nadine Gordimer's submission that "*art is on the side of the oppressed*" (Gordimer 106). Gordimer and Brink strove in their apartheid-era opus to debunk the notion that the activity of the novelist is irrelevant to political ends. If anything, they fell back on the narrative technique known as Realism to ram home their point; whereas, J.M.Coetzee tapped into the narrative technique of allegory to combat the ideology of apartheid. Speaking of the redemptive value of art, André Brink, in Reinventing a Continent, says that '*all art can do really is to help us formulate those questions on which our true survival as human beings depends. Only through questions can one hope to gain access to truth*' (58). While these white South African novelists may have differed in terms of their approach to fighting oppression-based racism, they had a commonality, that is, their no-nonsense move to draw on art in order to expose the crass human ravages of institutionalized racism as opposed to resort to violence.

With the demise of apartheid, it was hoped that the racial marker would no longer be the distinctive feature of South African literature, given how the trope of race wreaked untold havoc in the country. The first democratic elections ever held in South Africa took place in 1994. They represented a watershed moment in the history of the country in that they set the seal on decades of race-based oppression, and ushered in a new era officially hallmarked by respect for human rights, absence of discriminatory practices, black empowerment effort, the protection of South African multiculturalism, and what not. The racial and ethnic diversity of the new South Africa is encapsulated in what Rev. Desmond Tutu calls the "rainbow nation": "*After the apartheid storm, the rainbow is the multi-colored people of South Africa: blacks, whites, colored, Indians, and others, who are the manifestations of peace, prosperity and justice and hope*" (Tshawane 56).

The end of racial discrimination in South Africa did not herald an egalitarian society as was expected by those who fought tooth and nail against the government to the point of paying the ultimate price.

More to the point, new challenges have emerged or are compounded with the advent of democracy in South Africa (Jolly and Attridge 4). Such scourges as corruption, graft and bribery, the rising tide of crime, rape, homosexuality, xenophobia, joblessness-or what not -nourish novelistic themes in modern-day South Africa. There is a new crop of novelists that perceives the issue of race as subservient to the new social and political woes that bedevil post-liberation South Africa. Amongst them one can mention the late Phaswane Mpe and Sello Duiker, Achmat Dangor, Damon Galgut, Angela Makholwa- you name it. These authors as well as those white novelists who pulled their weight in terms of resistance to apartheid-Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, J.M.Coetzee- work on themes that resonate with post-racial South Africa. Their move away from the past to the present reflects an understanding of art rooted in the writer's duty to steep himself in the consciousness of his time. Put another way, they explore in their post liberation opus what South African critic Elleke Boehmer calls "gestative mystery". Actually, Boehmer contends that post-apartheid South African novelists-whether they be black or white-are left with a stark choice to make:

Some writers will continue to respond to the demands of realism, seeking to give a full and faithful account, as they have done. Others may take the parabolic loop away from historical testimony already forged by J.M.Coetzee in order to make sense of a changed polity. But whatever route writers take, it would be encouraging to see in South African fiction the return of endings that allow for new beginnings, for gestative mystery, the moments and movements following apocalypse, also the dramatization of different kinds of generation and continuity. (51)

Portraying the transformations occurring within society is part of what Fisher calls the "indirect function" (47) of the artist. The body of prose fiction produced by South African novelists in English from the early nineties to the present reflects the multifaceted metamorphoses that South African Society has underdone since the end of racial separation. Snatches, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* [[1]] exemplifies a scathing indictment of post-apartheid South African society. The novelist broaches, indeed, such themes as xenophobia of which African migrants are the butt at the hands of the natives; the post-colonial issue of the preponderance of European languages in African literature; the ravages of AIDS; censorship and love betrayal. Phaswane Mpe castigates censorship and makes a great play for the use of African languages as a way of defusing the vanishing of indigenous languages. The unflattering place of local languages in democratic-era South Africa is front and center in the lead character's bad rap for writing in her own language:

She did not know that writing in an African language in South Africa could be a curse. She had not anticipated that the publishers' reviewers would brand her novel vulgar. Calling shit and genitalia by their correct names in Sepedi was apparently regarded as vulgar by these reviewers, who had for a long time been reviewing works of fiction for educational publishers...(56)

Another instance is *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* by Sello Duiker, which spotlights, among other things, black homosexuality. The lead character, Tshepo (meaning 'hope' in Sotho) is a student at Rhodes University. But he has difficulty in finding his feet in the new South Africa because of the lingering effects of the trauma of the past and the multifaceted woes of the present. His experience of back-to-back gruesome losses (he lost both his parents in one night) exacts such a psychological toll that he wraps up in a mental facility. Tshepo reaches the ultimate in humiliation when he is subjected to homosexual intercourse by his co-tenant, Chris along with Vigil and Brendan. Here's how Chris unabashedly describes what has happened:

"Hei jou, naai. Take off your clothes." Brendan says and klaps him.

"No, no," he begins to say but Vigil grabs him rough and tears off his T-shirt.

Every time he opens his mouth to scream they klap him in the stomach. "Don't moer him in the face. I don't want him getting funny ideas about calling the cops," I tell them. (…)

Vigil stands back and gives me the signal. I take off my pants. Vigil and Brendan pin him down and spread his kegs. I get an erection and put lots of Vaseline on my piel. (212*)*

The three young men took turns in raping Tshepo. The rest of the scene beggars description. But Tshepo's statement that "*I fell as though my mother died again*" (214) betokens the searing trauma represented by both the gang rape and the nature of the sexual act. Arguably, Duiker encapsulates in Tshepo's plight a rejection of any normative sexualities, and, rather, makes a plea for the respect of all of them. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is, in no small measure, a ground-breaking novel in post liberation South African thanks to the taboo subjects that it broaches. It's noteworthy that the issue of xenophobia is also present in Duiker's novel.

South African white literature in English does not buck the trend. It foregrounds, inter alia, white South Africans' dogged quest for identity in the rainbow nation. Two post-apartheid novels by white South African novelists caught my attention, viz., J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*. In his 1995 novel Disgrace, Coetzee concerns

[1]For more insight into Welcome to Our Hillbrow, I refer the reader to my article 'A Bleak Representation in Post-apartheid South Africa in Welcome to Our Hillbrow by Phaswane Mpe' published in *Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*, Volume 2, Number3, November 2013.

himself with the weight of history. Through his lead characters Pr. David Lurie, and his daughter Lucie Lurie, the 2003 Nobel Prize awardee for literature shines the spotlight on the dysphoric angst facing white South Africans who regard their black counterparts as a spiteful bunch determined to avenge their past of oppressed subjects under apartheid. When Lucie Lurie is raped by three young blacks led by her houseboy Petrus, her father urges her to go to Holland as a way of registering her anger at the new order. Lucie, however, refuses point-blank. To answer her father's astonishment that she is willing to stay put despite what has happened to her, Lucy says:

"But isn't there another way of looking at it, David? … What if that is the price one has to pay to stay on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves." (D, 158)

Here Lucy emphasizes the vengeful bent of victims of yesteryear. The weight of history hangs heavily on Lucy's thinking. Her comeback casts black people now at the helm in South Africa as hardline bunch sickeningly conspicuous by their inability to draw a line under the past. This standpoint carries, to be sure, racial undertones. By the same token, the weight of history factors into David's perspective when he plays on his daughter's sense of dignity as follows: "*…You wish to humble yourself before history. But the road you are following is the wrong one. It will strip you of all honour*" (D, 160). History, from Lucy's vantage point, is viewed through the lens of racial oppression that black South Africans underwent at the hands of white minority for decades whereas, from her David's perspective, history boils down to the supposed white racial supremacy. Lucy is clearly out for reconciliation while her Dad is still stuck in a kind of time warp. The past intertwines with their identity as white South Africans. Teressa-Morris Susuki's reading speaks volumes about Lucy and David Lury's postapartheid identiy. She writes that '*any encounter with the past involves feeling and imagination as well as pure knowledge. Since our knowledge of the past is something from which we derive personal identity, it also helps to determine how we act in the world*' (24). David and Lucy are more inclined to what Susuki calls the '*affective dimensions of history*' which points to the recognition of '*the way that our knowledge of the past engages with our emotions and identity-and influences and is influenced by our actions*' (25). White South Africans' quest for identity in the new dispensation is for real, and bears testimony.

Ruben Olivier is the mirror image of Lucie and David Lurie in *The Rights of Desire*. In Brink's novel, the lead character is Ruben Olivier. He has a chip over the shoulder on being put out grass prematurely as a seasoned librarian. What is even more unpalatable for Ruben is that he is replaced by a young black South African with no experience whatsoever in librarianship. His disingenuous early retrenchment is grist to his sons' mill, who feel the new South Africa is a hellhole for the Whites, and that the best course of action is to leave the country. Actually, Louis has settled in Australia and Johann lives in Jo'burg but contemplates migrating to Canada. They wish him to join either of them out of concern for his own health but also to make sure that he spends "*his last years in comfort and ease and peace of mind*" (4). Nonetheless, Ruben isn't having any of it, arguing that he "*can look after* [him] *self*" (4). Ruben's, and Lucy Lurie's refusals to shake the dust off their country out of dissatisfaction with the new order betokens an upbeat mindset about the future of the country. *Disgrace* and *The Rights of Desire* have a commonality in that they both feature the sense of disenchantment gripping white South Africans over the new dispensation in democratic era South Africa [[2]].

Another post-apartheid novel of J. M. Coetzee's is *Elizabeth Costello*, whose eponymous character is an Australian writer who delivers public lectures on diverse issues that range the gamut from inter-human relationships to animal rights. If *Elizabeth Costello* is anything to go by, it's safe to assume that J. M. Coetee has elected, in some of his post-apartheid opus, to address ethical issues that are more topical nowadays than ever. Through his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, he blames downright lack of human sympathy for the Holocaust. Elizabeth Costello makes the case that if Jews were treated like animals, it's because their killers did not have it in them to put themselves in the skin of their victims (79). In the same breath, she strikes a blow for human relationships stamped with ethics:

The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the 'another'…There are people who have the capacity to think themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths, and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to. (79)

Elizabeth Costello acts a public intellectual. Her public talks on a variegated array of subjects is steeped in the consciousness of the intellectual as an awareness raiser, so to speak, one whose genuine calling points to the betterment of his society. Elizabeth Costello's no-nonsense approach to intellectual practice, and her refusal to be cowed by the strictures of censorship or conventions mean that she does not flinch from broaching controversial issues which might her at odds with a section of society that thrives on falsehood

[2]For more on this disenchantment, I refer the reader to my article 'André Brink's Sense of Anticlimax over the New Dispensation in South Africa : An Examination of *The Rights of Desire*' published in Research of English Language and Literature, Vol.5. Issue 4. 2017

and malpractice as a way of safeguarding their vested interests. Thus, she fits into Edward Said's description of the true intellectual:

Every human being is held in by a society; no matter how free and open the society, no matter how bohemian the individual. In any case, the intellectual is supposed to be heard from, and in practice ought to be stirring up debate and if possible controversy. But the alternatives are not total quiescence or total rebelliousness. (69)

Little wonder that the protagonist blasts the misbegotten call to stand silently and watch while humans meet pain and suffering to other human beings. In the name of a shared humanity, anything that affects my brother should also bruise me. The only effective way through which the 'self' can enact its ethical responsibility towards the 'other' is through Compassion. This virtue enables me to put myself in the skin of a fellow being who is upon the rack and, accordingly, feel imaginatively his suffering. Nineteenth-century German thinker, Arthur Schopenhauer, regards Compassion as the source of all "voluntary justice and loving-kindness." He takes Compassion to mean:

The direct participation, independent of all ulterior considerations, in the suffering of another, leading to sympathetic assistance in the effort to prevent or remove them. … When once Compassion is stirred within me, by another's pain, then his weal and woe go straight to my heart, exactly in the same way, if not always to the same degree, as otherwise I feel only my own. Consequently the difference between myself and him is no longer an absolute one. (170)

Sympathy or Compassion is a, to all intents and purposes, a humanism as it shows humanity's best. Thinking oneself into the other can be a bulwark against the manifestation of man's most bestial instincts.

What all is said and done, post-liberation South African fiction in English sort of moves with the tide of the socio-political and economic realities of the rainbow nation. The demise of the old order has given rise to a compulsive drive to get to grips with the challenges that the new South Africa is faced with. That paradigm shift does not, though, mean that the demons of race-based inequalities are gone. White South Africans perceive the Black empowerment policy as carrying racist undertones.

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