

# **FAMILY FICTIONS**

## **The Family in Contemporary Postcolonial Literatures in English**

Proceeds of an international conference, hosted by the Department of English,  
University of Groningen, the Netherlands  
17-19 November 2004

**Irene Visser**

**Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler**

**(Editors)**

August 2005  
CDS Research Report No. 23  
ISSN 1385-9218

# The *CDS Research Report* series

## COLOFON:

The *CDS Research Report* series publishes research papers, interesting working papers and pre-prints, as well as CDS seminar reports. The series includes papers of University of Groningen staff as well as of overseas partners who have participated in CDS workshops or who have studied or conducted research at the University of Groningen. The series has an active policy in arranging co-publications with partner institutes as a means of supporting North – South research collaboration. *CDS Research Reports* cover a broad range of development related subjects and discuss these from various disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives. All texts are peer-reviewed. Reports are published in the English or in the French language.

The *CDS Research Reports* are distributed to a large number of libraries; they are available in both paper and digital form – to be downloaded from the CDS website (<http://www.eco.rug.nl/cds>). Papers may be published later in academic journals. Relevant *CDS Research Reports* are indexed and digitally available in the key databases, such as the international IDEAS/RePEc database (<http://ideas.uqam.ca/>) and in DEGREE (<http://cxis.kub.nl/~dbi/degree/>).

Reactions to *CDS Research Reports* are welcome and can be directed to the authors or to the CDS office ([E-mail: CDS@eco.rug.nl](mailto:CDS@eco.rug.nl)).

### *Editor:*

Dr. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek

### *Editorial Advisory Board:*

Prof. Jelte van Andel

Prof. Catrinus Jepma

Dr. Menno Kamminga

Prof. Max van der Kamp

Prof. Caspar Schweigman

Prof. Rien Segers

Prof. Ton Schoot Uiterkamp

Prof. Jacques Zeelen

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction <i>Irene Visser</i>	5
<i>Nervous Conditions</i> as Hybrid Family Romance: Dangarembga's Appropriation of a Colonial <i>Topos</i> <i>Christine van Boheemen-Saaf</i>	15
The South Pacific Family Centre-Stage: Kinship and Nation in Short Fiction by Patricia Grace and Sia Figiel <i>Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler</i>	27
Offspring Fictions: The Family Romances of Salman Rushdie's <i>Midnight's Children</i> and <i>The Moor's Last Sigh</i> <i>Matt Kimmich</i>	41
Skeletons In Caribbean Closets: Family Secrets and Silences in Austin Clarke's <i>The Polished Hoe</i> and Denise Harris's <i>Web of Secrets</i> <i>Judith Misrahi-Barak</i>	53
"A Victory of Sorts": All <i>Thirteen Cents</i> and <i>Bitter, Too</i> <i>Sam Raditlhalo</i>	65
Ways Ahead: Family and Transformation in Mda's <i>Ways of Dying</i> and Taylor's <i>He Tangi Aroha</i> <i>Irene Visser</i>	81
The Universe Is Made of Stories, Not Atoms: Narrative Constructions of Identity in Post-Apartheid Fiction <i>Margriet van der Waal</i>	93
The Family and Change: Contemporary Second-Generation British-Asian Fiction <i>Janet Wilson</i>	109
Abandoning Family and Tradition for a Career: An Analysis of Texts from and on Liberia <i>Ritske Zuidema</i>	121
Notes on the Contributors	133



## INTRODUCTION

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.  
Leon Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

We sat down to play the dreadful game of “Happy Families.”  
Witi Ihimaera, *The Uncle’s Story*

The family – whether happy or dreadful – is a vital institution. It is the primary social unit in any community; the individual’s opening into the wider social network. As the first locus of development, the family provides nourishment to the individual and sets the conditions of growth. Confronted with the individual’s desire for independence and growth, the family may be metaphorically seen as a closed door or an open door; as a prison or a gateway to freedom.

As the custodian of tradition and memory, the family fulfils an important function, transmitting and mediating the memories, mores, and myths of the preceding generations and the community. Rituals, customs, spirituality, morality and religion all have their place within the family structure, themselves forming family fictions of a unique and, most often, communal nature. The family and its fictions thus form the links in the chain between the past and the present and the future, in an ongoing narrative of both individualistic concerns and pursuits, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the larger interests of the community and social environment (e.g. the extended family, clan, or tribe).

As a literary theme, therefore, the family offers a fascinating and complex area of research. In contemporary postcolonial literatures in English the theme of the family is particularly rich and diversified. As the locus of tradition, the family in these literatures may be explored as the place where the core values of the preceding generations and the ancestors are transmitted and lived, so that continuity and growth are ensured. At the same time, the family, as reflector and indicator of social change, offers a wide area of research for themes of conflict and reconciliation. The essays in this collection reflect this diversity of issues: the multiple problems of disrupted family lives, of enforced family separations, of political and personal violence within the domestic environment, but also of the symbolic value of family as a bulwark against the socio-political and moral ambiguities of contemporary society.

The significance of the family in postcolonial nations is perhaps insufficiently recognized. Zimbabwean writer J. Nozipo Maraire sees the family as one of the core values and achievements of what is often still called The Third World:

The powerful northern countries ... measure us by the balance of trade, the gross national product, the per capita income, and the infant mortality rate. Our indicators of health care equity, education for all, *the family*, the drug-free schools, expenditure on services for the disabled and handicapped – these have no place in their economic ledgers. Yet these reflect our values and our achievements. (77, my italics)

The awareness of the family as an intrinsic, often underrated value and social constellation in the former colonies infuses the essays of this collection. The essays were first presented as papers at the conference on Postcolonial Literatures in English, hosted by the English Department of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands in November 2004. The conference focus was primarily on family fictions in work by indigenous authors, to ensure at least one common denominator in this dazzling range of literatures. In the course of the conference discussions, it became clear that the literary representation of the family in postcolonial literatures offers an immense, and as yet little theorized area of study. It also became clear that a unified, overarching theory of the family in postcolonial literature does not exist, nor will in all probability ever be constructed, considering the extreme diversification of this theme. While the question of the use of theory is a topic of some discussion in the postcolonial field (a field that is notoriously caught up in critical debates and constant self-examination), at the Groningen conference there appeared to be a common consensus to the effect that our traditional Western literary and cultural theories must be used with caution, out of respect for the contemporary non-Western literary texts.<sup>1</sup> We found that Freudian psychoanalytic theory on “the family romance,” for instance, while offering illuminating insights, does not suffice as the main or primary theory.

This sense of respect for the postcolonial text, expressed in many of our conference presentations, has, I think, been made explicit in the present collection of articles. The nine essays position their analyses of primary literary texts in their relevant socio-historic, cultural and political-geographic contexts. In analyzing, questioning, undermining or celebrating the family and its changes, they explore the contemporary postcolonial literary texts with reference to concepts developed by major theorists in the field of postcolonial studies such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Achille Mbembe. Priority, then, is given to the literary texts and their respective contexts, rather than to particular theorists or theories. In this, we answer the call so often expressed in postcolonial studies today, to re-value fiction as the

---

<sup>1</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek presents an interesting overview of the present-day resistance against theory in postcolonial studies in her essay “Postcolonial Criticism at the Crossroads” (2004).

primary cultural expression, and thus to reject the use of fictional analysis as a means to a (theoretical) end.<sup>2</sup>

At the conference, the delegates (who represented academic institutions from all over the world) all felt that the theme of the family invites, and perhaps necessitates such an approach: of exploration rather than demarcation; of a focus on the particular and distinctive literary expressions of this theme rather than on the pursuit of a theoretical line of argument. In following this line of approach, this book hopes to initiate further questions and explorations of the family, of literary as well as theoretical interest.

The literatures of what Ben Okri has named “the newly ascendant nations” help us read the world, opening up to us the specific expressions and experiences of human lives and their wider contexts in many nations of the world. In this respect, postcolonial literatures are primary cultural indicators, representing an immense variety of lived realities.

This book explores the theme of the family from major postcolonial literatures: British-Asian or migrant literature; Caribbean and Maori literature; and African literatures from Zimbabwe, Liberia and South Africa. The texts under discussion are novels and short stories, published, for the greater part, in the 1990s and ranging from 1970 to 2003, all part of the rich and diversified body of postcolonial literatures.

We have chosen the term “postcolonial literatures” rather than an alternative from the many variants that exist, but which are all debatable in their way (e.g. new literatures, anglophone literatures, world literature). “Postcolonial literatures” is perhaps the least debatable term at present, and, at any rate, it is still used most often in international academic exchange. It is important to note, however, that what we understand by the term today may differ from earlier descriptions, even from a description given roughly ten years ago, as, for instance, by Elleke Boehmer in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures* (1995): “Postcolonial literature is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonial perspectives” (3). Our understanding of the term “postcolonial literatures” may now more closely resemble the two-fold definition tentatively offered by Dennis Walder in *Post-colonial Literatures in English* (1998):

“post-colonial” in relation to literature ... carries with it the intention to promote, even celebrate the “new literatures” which have emerged over this century from the former colonized territories; and on the other, it asserts the need to analyze and resist continuing colonial attitudes. (6)

---

<sup>2</sup> This aligns us with what Maes-Jelinek has termed the “emerging movement towards the rehabilitation of literature” (7).

While the appreciation, or even “celebration” of the postcolonial text underlies the discussions of this volume (as it energized the conference seminars), the definition of “postcolonial” that perhaps best expresses our stance is offered in the book *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) by John McLeod, one of the conference delegates: “‘postcolonial’ identifies recent writings in English which have come into being as part of the processes of decolonization” (xii).

The definition of “postcolonial literatures” has been fluid from the start, and what the future holds for the use and understanding of the term is uncertain. Perhaps, much like the term “feminist” in feminist studies, “postcolonial” will at some point in the future have served its purpose and be replaced by a new, more inclusive term. In post apartheid South African literature, for instance, how long will the term postcolonial, or for that matter, post apartheid continue to be appropriate? While the resisting and protesting stance towards colonialism and its many manifestations will continue to find expression, new criticisms of contemporary political and social situations have emerged. These views may be seen as standing at a remove from the colonial past, and may have a closer causal connection with globalization, transcultural influences and world politics.

Contemporary postcolonial literatures bear witness to many manifestations of change and transition. This transition is, as Frank Schulze-Engler rightly states, not the move from “tradition” into “modernity,” but “a transition *within* modernity that has been greatly accelerated by globalization processes and that has led to the emergence of “reflexive” or “late” forms of modernity. Schulze-Engler quotes Rushdie’s view of the novel as “the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted,” since the novel “has always been *about* the way in which different languages, values and narratives quarrel, and about the shifting relations between them, which are relations of power” (61). This tumultuous interrelatedness is explored in Matt Kimmich’s essay on Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and what he terms “its revisionist quasi-sequel” *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. Kimmich argues that the emancipatory efforts of children (or offspring characters) in these novels to free themselves from actual and symbolic parents and their dominant discourse prove most successful (if ambivalently so) when the children endeavour to co-author their own lives and identities and at the same time inscribe their parents in a complex metafictional dialogue. Using and expanding Edward Said’s concepts of filiation and affiliation, this essay reads Rushdie’s two novels in tandem, as providing similar themes and motifs yet also divergent perspectives on postcolonial India.

Family structures, beliefs and practices vary from culture to culture. In Western nations, well-known contemporary social trends are rising divorce rates, (along with high rates of re-marriages) and still growing numbers of single-parent families. Scientific developments, such as *in vitro* fertilization and genetic engineering, have had significant impact on the family, as well as the



increase of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. Overall, the institutions of marriage and family in Europe and North America may well be, as Stephen C. Barton argues, in a state of crisis.<sup>3</sup> In the formerly colonized nations, the institutions of the family are also subject to various influences: to the tenets of the traditional cultural heritage, to the political and economic factors that in their turn are influenced by processes of decolonization, and increasingly by modern-day Western trends due to the influences of globalization and transculturalism. Inevitably, the migrant or diasporic literature by contemporary British-Asian writers reflects many conflicting influences on the family. Often the cultural heritage of the postcolonial nation is in disharmony with the pressures of modern-day Western society, sometimes reinforcing the image of the nuclear family, but also challenging and reevaluating it.

This process of fictionally formulating new modalities of being between the culture of origin and the current British culture is explored in Janet Wilson's discussion of family narratives by the second-generation British-Asian writers Hanef Kureishi (*The Buddha of Suburbia*, 1990), Meera Syal (*Anita and Me*, 1996) and Monica Ali (*Brick Lane*, 2003). Wilson's discussion demonstrates that problems of social marginalization (such as racial discrimination, dispossession and reduced communication) contribute to the complexity and instability of the migrant family structure. Perhaps even more disruptive are the challenges and criticisms of the traditional cultural heritage expressed by the youthful protagonists/narrators, the hybrid subjects that carry the processes of adjustment and intercultural development outward in society and inward into the domestic sphere.

Western influences on postcolonial literatures have always been profound, not only *via* the actual processes of intercommunication, but also expressed through literary aspects such as genre and style. Often seen as primary role models during colonial times, Western genres and literary styles have been imitated as well as altered and subverted by colonial and postcolonial authors. Christine van Boheemen discusses a case-study of African appropriation of European models of narrative in her essay on Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). This first novel by a Black Zimbabwean female novelist constitutes an important contribution to the development of a specifically African use of European literary models, as Van Boheemen demonstrates. Adapting the Western topos of the "family romance" to the Shona family system, Dangarembga designs a specifically local vehicle to render the complexity and ambiguity of the "nervous condition" of African womanhood. Her use of the family romance as the integration of African tradition and values with Western plot structure results in a fascinating hybrid family romance, which may be seen as part of the ongoing process of translation and negotiation

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barton's overview essay on the family in Western societies in *the Family in Theological Perspective*, in particular p. xiii.

between the literary, the socio-cultural and the familial in postcolonial literatures.

Ritske Zuidema's essay on a number of Liberian novels from the period 1970 - 2000 also discusses processes of hybridity, translation and negotiation, in the context of the social and economic problems specific to the situation in Liberia. Throughout Liberia's recent history, the country's Americo-Liberian elite regarded the traditional family and its environment as obstacles to civilization and social advancement. To safeguard their future careers, children were therefore often separated from their families, and sent to missionary boarding schools or to Americo-Liberian families. Some of these children left their families to "advance" in society by joining the rebel army. Zuidema traces this theme of family abandonment and its various consequences through a number of texts, framing his findings with journalistic and academic analyses of the current Liberian crisis.

In exploring the intimate discords of family life in contemporary Caribbean literature, Judith Misrahi-Barak addresses the same theme of the burden of the past. In this literature, it is in particular the heritage of slavery, the influence of which has endured well into the twentieth century that permeates human relationships in various physical and verbal exchanges. Misrahi-Barak's essay notes that in Caribbean literature since the mid-twentieth century the family has been a central and harrowing concern. In her analysis of Denise Harris's *Web of Secrets* (1996) and Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* (2003) Misrahi-Barak points out the insidious ways in which the burden of the colonial past hampers specifically the women of the family, and silences their voices. Both novels have what Misrahi-Barak calls "the brutalization of the subaltern woman," as their central subject, and both explore the female strategy of silence as well as the breaking of that silence to lay to rest the spectres of rape and incest from the family past. In her analysis Misrahi-Barak poses that the novels offer an "indirect but shrewd" response to Spivak's well-known and incisive question, "Can the subaltern speak?"

What emerges as a distinct literary theme throughout this collection of essays is the concern with the preservation of traditional family structures and of related aspects, such as cultural values, spirituality and gender roles. This preservation is by no means uncontroversial. As Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler argues, it is particularly the patriarchal repression inherent in traditional societies, which was upheld and reinforced by the colonial systems, for instance the Christian church in Samoa, that has impeded emancipation and that continues to damage families, in particular women's lives within the family. Van den Heuvel-Disler states the short fiction by Samoan writer Sia Figiel and Maori writer Patricia Grace may be read as cultural reference points for indigenous readers. Through their use of orality, and negotiating integration between tradition and modernity, both authors have significantly contributed to the rise of their respective national literatures. The differences in their depiction

of family life may be attributed to the differences in social cohesion between their respective nations. In Figiel's fiction, the family, as the basic social unit of the struggling, young and independent state of Samoa is depicted through the eyes of obstinate and critical teenagers. In Grace's short fiction the New Zealand setting, where co-existence between Maori and Pakeha is a prerequisite, the Maori family is described in terms of wisdom, community and experience.

In a similar comparative essay bringing together works from two different literatures, Irene Visser discusses Maori writer Apirana Taylor's *He Tangi Aroha* (1993) and South African writer Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995). Set in times of social turmoil and historical indeterminacy, these novels share a common perspective on political and social injustice, which is to be addressed and redressed through the recuperative forces of creativity, community, love and charity. The traditional family is expressly not the locus of such healing forces; both novels make it unequivocally clear that it is particularly the patriarchal repression inherent in traditional family structures that enables domestic violence, hampers progress and so continues to damage families from within. In their final pages, the novels both pose a new, transformed family constellation, which, Visser claims, forms the gateway to a more hopeful future, in answer to the urgent call for change that permeates both novels.

While, indeed, after the early 1990s significant change has come in both nations, its impact on the family, as it is reflected in literature, has often been ambivalent. South Africa, in particular, has seen a massive change heralded by the first democratic elections in 1994.<sup>4</sup> The transformation of South Africa has found expression in a national literature that provides fascinating accounts of family life and socio-political change. Margriet van der Waal presents a brief overview of the diverse works of fiction that have appeared in South Africa recently and which have the family as their central theme. Her essay considers some of the meanings of the notion of "family", and investigates how, as a construct, it plays an important role in the process of identity formation, both on an individual level and on a national and cultural level. Analyzing major literary narrative processes and mechanisms that establish and negotiate the relation between the family and identity, Van der Waal discusses the novel *David's Story* by Zoë Wicomb (2000) as an example of a fictive account that challenges and undermines simplistic constructions of racial identity, through a reconstruction of a family history. Her essay argues that this novel, like many of its contemporaries, places emphasis on the process of reflecting on family history and family relationships rather than on attempts to establish a factual truth about these issues.

Sam Raditlhalo's essay supports and further problematizes this view. He concurs that the thawing of grand apartheid and its impact on literary production

---

<sup>4</sup> During the time of the conference, South Africa was celebrating its first decade of democracy (1994-2004).

has produced startling works of fiction that inscribe the liberated nation with ambiguity. Having been spared a bitter “race” war in the interregnum period leading to 1994, Raditlhalo states, the country has since faced the scourge of internecine social ills located within the family – communal conflicts and crises of identity that show the lingering effects of the past. Using Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (2001) as a theoretical basis, Raditlhalo’s analysis of K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001) explores the disturbing issues of family disintegration, violence, and the results of unresolved social and political identities.

As this collection of essays shows, literary families – sometimes happy, often unhappy – constitute fascinating areas of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, of their conflicts and reconciliations, played out against the backdrop of wider social and communal change. Not only in literary studies, but also in sociological and psychological research, family development patterns are a major area of interest.<sup>5</sup>

There is at present an overall acknowledgement of the need to broaden our theoretical and empirical understanding of the family, and to explore its beliefs and practices across a wide range of cultural settings and ethnic groups. This book, then, takes its place in the growing body of academic research related to family development patterns, beliefs and practices in diverse cultures throughout the world. We hope that it may be a useful contribution.

*Irene Visser*

---

<sup>5</sup> cf. interesting studies by Michaela Robila, G.L Fox and Karl Pillemer, published in *The Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research Series*, 2003-2005.

## Works Cited

- Barton, Stephen C. *The Family in Theological Perspective*. Edinburgh: Clark, 1996.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Bogle, J. *Families for Tomorrow*. Leominster: Fowler Wright, 1991.
- Davis, Geoffrey V., Peter H. Marsden, Bénédicte Ledent and Marc Delrez, eds. *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a "Post"-Colonial World*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004.
- Maes-Jelinek, Hena. "Postcolonial Criticism at the Crossroads: Subjective Questionings of an Old-Timer." Davis et al, *Towards a Transcultural Future* 1–19.
- Maraire, J. Nozipo Nkosana. *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1996.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Schulze-Engler, Frank. "From Postcolonial to Preglobal: Transnational Culture." Davis et al., *Towards a Transcultural Future* 49-64.
- Walder, Dennis. *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.



# ***NERVOUS CONDITIONS AS HYBRID FAMILY ROMANCE***

## **Dangarembga's Appropriation of a Colonial *Topos***

Christine van Boheemen-Saaf

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), set in Rhodesia just before independence, sketches the trajectory of a young girl, Tambu, from peasant-culture illiteracy to the exclusive white boarding school which guarantees her future status as provider for the family. The genre of *Nervous Conditions* is familiar: it traces the *Bildung* of the protagonist and shows how she gains the knowledge and position necessary to become the author of the narrative of her life. Such a narrative of access to writerly subjectivity is familiar in the Anglophone tradition. It goes back to the beginnings of the English novel, and is closely related to the Hegelian dialectic of imperialist thought.<sup>1</sup> Dangarembga's work, however, belongs to a new generation of postcolonial African writing which attempts to revise the colonial models of narrative to make them suitable to represent the difficult process of decolonization (Said 30; Wright 108-125). Thus the title of her novel is not *Tambudzai* (cf. *Jane Eyre*), or even *Great Expectations*. As the epigraph indicates, the title *Nervous Conditions* is taken from Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The condition of native is a nervous condition." The question which criticism ought to address then, is how Dangarembga takes a structure of representation which is closely allied with the colonial mission of English education, and, nevertheless, manages to turn it into a vehicle for the expression of the anxiety, hybridity, in short, the nervousness of postcolonial resistance. Literary criticism has hitherto neglected the narrative technique of *Nervous Conditions*. As I hope to demonstrate, such neglect fails to do justice to the importance of the author's contribution to the development of a specifically African use of European models of narrative. Adapting the Western topos of the "family romance" to the Shona family system, Dangarembga designs a specifically local vehicle to render the complexity and ambiguity of the "nervous condition" of African womanhood.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Gregory Castle, "Colonial Discourse and the Subject of Empire" for a long and detailed discussion of the structural similarity between the dialectic of *Bildung* and that of colonialism. Castle also discusses the "pluralistic discursive universe" of female novels of education, in relation to the resistance of the subject of decolonization ( 130-35).

As the first novel in English published by a female Zimbabwean writer, *Nervous Conditions* has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Much of the criticism is, of course, feminist-womanist, because the author clearly demonstrates that the aftermath of colonization brings sexist oppression while reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. Several critics note that Dangarembga's protagonist owes her liberation to female solidarity and womanist loyalty. However, as I will argue, Dangarembga's dialogic womanism (highlighted by Aegerter), is itself predicated upon, and made possible by an internal dialectic between different branches of the family, the paternal and the maternal sides. Thus the hybridity of *Nervous Conditions* is woven into the very texture of the narrative structure, and ties in with its use of the plot of *Bildung*. I propose, therefore, that what needs investigation first of all is the relationship between its use of the family and the *topos* of *Bildung*.<sup>2</sup>

The site of resistance which allows representation of the ambivalence, doubleness, and hybridity which exert pressure on the subjectivist ideology and the Hegelian synthesis of self-consciousness and history of the *Bildungsroman*, as exemplified by Dickens's *Great Expectations*, for instance, is Dangarembga's recourse to the collectivity and complexity of Shona family practice. This is the structure which provides the tools with which to build her counter-representation. Family relations, complex, and as we shall see, also always ambiguous, double, and multi-interpretable in Dangarembga's rendering of them, provide the representational building blocks (the "tools to think with" in Claude Lévi-Strauss terms), which allow externalization and conceptualization. The family structure makes it possible to give a concrete shape to the state of ambiguity and cultural contradiction of female adolescence in the Rhodesia of the 1950s-1980s. It is the peculiar family plot underlying the narrative itself, which allows Dangarembga to entitle her novel *Nervous Conditions*.

Let us listen to Tambudzai:

I had a special task. I had to carry the water-dish in which people would wash their hands. I did not like doing this because you had to be very sure of the relative status of everybody present or else it was easy to make mistakes, especially when there were so many people. Today it was doubly tricky because although Babamukuru was the

---

<sup>2</sup> While many critics mention education or *Bildung*, I have found only one essay which specifically addresses Dangarembga's revision of the prototypical Western plot structure, turning it from a platform for the shaping realization of transcendent subjectivity into a frame for the psychological contradictions which make up the "nervousness" of the postcolonial text. Mary Jane Androne writes: "*Nervous Conditions* deconstructs the female novel of development as it records a young girl's growing disillusionment with the compromises she is forced into at a colonial mission school and her despair over her position as woman in prerevolutionary Zimbabwe.... [It] is a text which destabilizes the idea of progress and individual achievement in such societies, in demonstrating the deformation and truncation of women's lives" (323).



guest of honour, there were male relative present of higher status than he. Making a considered and perhaps biased decision, I knelt first in front of Babamukuru, which was a mistake because he wanted me to let his uncle Isaiah, our eldest surviving grandfather, wash first. I knelt and rose and knelt and rose in front of my male relatives in descending order of seniority, and lastly in front of my grandmothers and aunts, offering them the water-dish and towel. The situation deteriorated after my grandfathers and Babmukuru had washed because after that the hierarchy was not clear. This uncle was that uncle's *tezvara* by virtue of his marriage to that one's sister, but also because their mothers were sisters, albeit not of the womb...It was very complicated and confusing. I made more mistakes, which made people laugh and ask why I did not know the ways in which we were all related. (40-41)

The patrilinear Shona family structure is many things at once. It is a framework for identity-construction: the placement of the individual in a hierarchy. It is a prescription for procedure. Its patrilocality prescribes where to live, how to behave and forms of address. It provides structures of authority and participation. Moreover, owing to its complexity, it is an intellectual challenge and a test. The family provides a network of relations which support and maintain individual identity, which, in turn, can only be understood in terms of that grammar of relatedness. Tambudzai is not an individual young protagonist cut off from her family like the orphaned Jane Eyre or Pip. From the beginning she is part of a network of relations which shape her selfhood, determine her place of residence, and install an obligation of which Tambu is very conscious: "If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself" (188). Although Tambu dislikes her brother whose education leads him to despise the poverty of his parents, Tambu realizes that "as he was our brother, he ought to be liked" (11). Nhamo, who thinks his education has lifted him above his siblings, is told that "You will still be our father's son. You will still be my brother. And Netsai's. Even if you don't like it. So you better stop being proud for nothing ..." (49).

Although family structure provides identity-structure, that identity is different from western identity. It is not a discrete "character" which marks the content of the entity, but a multi-tasking function in the service of the survival of the group. Thus, should Tambu's mother fail to provide Tambu's father with sons, her unmarried sister, Tambu's maternal aunt would have to help out and serve as "second childbearer" for Tambu's father's children. Indeed, family obligation demands loyalty which violates what a Westerner would see as the discrete parameters of individual identity. Sisterhood is more than the placement in a hierarchy: it entails the obligation, regardless of personal preference, to put one's life and fertility on line for one's sibling. Similarly, because Tambu's

father is lazy and shiftless, and cannot provide money for education, his eldest brother, Babamukuru, educated in South Africa and England and head of the mission school, takes over the role of provider.

Indeed, in the text the uncle is literally and repeatedly spoken of as Tambu's and Nhamo's "father": Nhamo is no longer Jeremiah's son since Babamukuru has taken him to the mission to be educated (46). Even Tambu's own father addresses his brother as "our father" (36). An additional indication that paternity is considered not just as biological but in terms of function, is the following: Tambu's father complains that her schoolteacher, who helped her acquire the fees for next year's tuition, is irresponsibly arrogating the role of father. "Does he think he is your father?" he enquired. 'He thinks that because he has chewed more letters than I have, he can take over my children. And you, you think he is better than me'" (24). In short, fatherhood and motherhood can be biology *and/or* function. The biological father can cease to be the parent, while the father's elder brother may take over the role of father-figure. Since Tambu addresses both her biological father and mother, and her fosterparents Babamukuru and his wife Maiguru as "father" and "mother", the hybridization, ambiguity, and redoubling of plotlines and multiple notions of identity which critics note in the text, begins with Dangarembga's representation of the Shona family structure.

What we must do then, is trace how the ambiguity and redoubling of Shona culture facilitates Dangarembga's reinscription of the plot of *Bildung*. Note that in writing the epigraph, the author left out the second half of Sartre's sentence. Dangarembga writes: "The condition of native is a nervous condition" while Sartre had added: "introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*" (20). The crucial words, italicized by Sartre, are "with their own consent." In her retrospective narrative, Tambu, weaving back and forth between two different perspectives and attitudes, traces two opposite trajectories: 1) the process of her own collusion with the ideal of *Bildung* and its temptations of transcendent subjectivity – which she narrowly escapes; 2) the realization that the manner in which Babamukuru has identified with the role of the "token" successfully westernized African is something which she must avoid if she is to keep her sanity. Each trajectory itself involves a dialectic between her biological and actual family, the homestead and the mission, the patrilinear Shona system and her mother's family.

On the one hand, education is depicted as a process of achievement and access to control and transcendent subjectivity:

Everything was coming together. All the things that I wanted were tying themselves into a neat package which presented itself to me with a flourish. There should have been trumpets, truly there should have been. For was I – I Tambudzai, lately of the mission and before that of the homestead – was I Tambudzai, so recently a peasant, was

I not entering, as I had promised myself I would, a world where burdens lightened with every step, soon to disappear altogether? I had an idea that this would happen as I passed through the school gates, those gates that would declare me a young lady, a member of the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart. (191)

Thus the girl who once had thought that “[e]xclusion held dreadful horrors for me ... because it suggested superfluity” (39), has changed to the point that she keeps repeating “I Tambudzai” and is willing to leave behind family and race to partake of the status of the white institution. Having been examined by the nuns in general knowledge, e.g. Louisa May Alcott’s female *Bildungsroman* *Little Women*, Tambudzai has been selected with only one other of her race to enter the gates of this exclusive educational heaven. Of course, Dangarembga is pointing to the profound effect which white Christian education has already had on Tambu’s mind. She feels: “I was in danger of becoming an angel, or at the very least a saint” (70). She has read everything from Enid Blyton to the Brontë sisters (93). The scene is an apotheosis, a moment of revelation. The school gates are the gates of heaven, and Tambu’s repetition of the personal pronoun “I” is a parodic reminder of the nefarious effect of Western *Bildung* on African collective consciousness. At an earlier stage, her removal from the homestead to her father’s brother’s mission, she had already spoken of the change as her “reincarnation”:

Thus began the period of my reincarnation. I like to think of my transfer to the mission as my reincarnation. With the egotistical faith of fourteen short years, during which my life had progressed very much according to plan, I expected this era to be significantly profound and broadening in terms of adding wisdom to my nature, clarity to my vision, glamour to my person. In short, I expected my sojourn to fulfil all my fourteen-year-old fantasies, and on the whole I was not disappointed. (92-93)

Even then education had already alienated Tambu from her family, as it had alienated her brother. She relates: “[My] father, as affably, shallowly agreeable as ever, was insignificant. My mother, my anxious mother, was no more than another piece of surplus scenery to be maintained, but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the path of my departure” (58).

Although the reader, alerted by Dangarembga’s sprinkling of religious metaphors, may perceive Tambu’s progress as an individualist betrayal of the communal ethic of her tribe, we must not forget that it is her own father who has given up his daughter to his brother. It is the father himself who worships and adores Tambu’s new father as a Godlike figure. Thus, in seemingly betraying the ancient values, Tambu is also, and *at the same time*, a dutiful daughter who

observes Shona family tradition. The transition from “peasant” (58) to student at an elite boarding school could not have happened with paternal approval. It may be presented as an apotheosis of individual selfhood and individual achievement, yet it is *also* the product of Shona family traditions which oblige the eldest sibling to care for the rest of the family. Thus Dangarembga introduces ambiguity/ambivalence/hybridity into the heart of her plot of education. She unweaves its individualism, implicating individual achievement in communal family practice.

The process of disenchantment with westernization, Tambu’s postcolonial awakening, is equally hybrid and predicated upon family structure. Whereas Tambu’s collusion with white education appeared fostered by her paternal family, it is especially her maternal family which offers a counterpoint to full indoctrination. From the first, Tambu’s aspirations to education are attended by a whiteness which is presented as a form of disease. “I did not like the way they looked, with their skin hanging in papery folds from their bones, malignant-looking brown spots on their hands, a musty, dusty, sweetish odour clinging around the woman like a haze” (27). It is Tambu’s mother who relates “Englishness” to death, who fears that it will “kill them all” (202), just as she feels it has killed her son who had died at the mission. She accuses Babamukuru’s educated wife Maiguru of being a witch who steals her children, and retreats in the lethargy of profound depression. Seconding Tambu’s mother, Nyasha, Tambu’s foster-sister, fully enraged, exclaims: “Do you see what they have done? They’ve taken us away.... All of us. They’ve deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other....They’ve trapped us. They have trapped us. But I won’t be trapped. I’m not a good girl. I won’t be trapped.” (200-201). Thus the fully Anglicized Nyasha, Tambu’s “sister” and *alter ego* in the story, shares Tambu’s mother’s suspicions about “Englishness”, although for different reasons. She is unable to bear the contradiction of subscribing to English notions of individualism and equality while being forced to witness the racism and oppression which turns her father into a slave. She finally succumbs to bulimia – symbolical in that she vomits up what her father makes her ingest. While Tambu enters the white boarding school run by American nuns, Nyasha’s fate rests in the balance.

If the text traces Tambu’s collusion with the process of education, then, it also wants to depict a process of disillusionment which will make it impossible for her to fully identify with the angelic role her uncle has cut out for her. Her skepticism and rebellion against English ways evolve at a moment of crisis when the loyalty to her mother’s traditional notions conflicts with her step-father’s authoritarian commands. Babamukuru meets with his siblings to address family problems (shiftlessness; sexual irregularity). Instead of sanctioning the traditional Shona solution of a cleansing ritual, he insists on sponsoring the wedding of Tambu’s parents which had never taken place. Thus he hopes to expiate the “sin” clinging to the family. It is to be a lavish and formal affair:

white satin dress and full veil. The idea of the wedding, especially the proposal that the adolescent Tambu be her mother's bridesmaid, creates passionate conflict in her mind. Her mother, too, objects to the ceremony:

“Tell me Tambudzai, does that man want to kill me, to kill me with his kindness, fattening my children only to take them away, like cattle are fattened for slaughter? Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time. He-e, Mummy this, he-e, Mummy that. Like that cousin of yours. I have seen it happen – we saw it happen here in our home. Truly that man is calling down a curse of bad luck on my head. ....To wear a veil, at my age, to wear a veil! Just imagine – to wear a veil.” (184)

Although Tambu has come to endorse Babamukuru's view that her parents are living in sin, she is still close enough to the traditional family ways to see the absurdity of his commands. Shona practice holds that women first prove their fertility by getting pregnant before getting married. The whiteness of the veil of Christian ritual, on the other hand, symbolizes the bride's virginity. Puritanical Babamukuru, who is terrified of his daughter's sexuality which might threaten to subvert the image of perfection he is trying to uphold, wants to harness sexuality in Christian prescriptions and ritual. He is blind to the unnaturalness of his decrees. Ordering the daughter to be the bridesmaid of her own mother is a violation of the generational difference so important in the Shona family structure. In addition it is a farcical proclamation of the absurdity of the unexamined importation of Western notions.

Unable to stand up to the authority of the divine and all-powerful Babamukuru, yet also unable to serve as her mother's bridesmaid, Tambu, whose motto had been “endure and obey” begins to realize the nefarious effect of Babamukuru's colonized mind --“we were not of a kind” (65)-- and her own collusion: “My mother had been right: I was unnatural; I would not listen to my own parents, but I would listen to [him] even when he told me to laugh at my parents. There was something unnatural about me” (165). Again we note a situation of a double-bind. Although Babamukuru is her “father” he reveals himself as “not of a kind.” In fact, he shows himself an egotistical westernized individualist who does not educate Tambu out of family obligation or loyalty, but to impress them with his whiteness, difference and superior importance. If Tambu is to honor her respect for her biological mother, she must risk a confrontation with Babamukuru, thus imperiling the education which might open up the opportunity to take care of her mother herself. The double bind leads to a scene of dissociation in which Tambu lies motionless on her bed, unable to get up, while her floating mind watches herself and others from afar. Thus her previously half colluding and half avoiding “self” is split in internal

contradiction: “my mind had raced and spun and ended up splitting into two disconnected entities that had long, frightening arguments with each other ...” (167). Although Tambu now belongs to the category of Fanon’s wretched split subjects whose mind is internally divided, her “double consciousness” (to use W.E.B. Du Bois’s term) also offers the self-consciousness which allows her to speak up and be counted. Progressing to a perspective in which neither tribal Shona-culture *nor* Babamukuru’s colonial mind offer a strategy of emotional or social survival, Tambu enters a “long and painful” trajectory of “expansion” as she calls it, which allows her to “escape” her mother’s, foster-mother’s and Nyasha’s “entrapment” in the colonial system, while still taking advantage of its education. As we see then, Dangarembga uses the extended family structure, and the effect of colonization on different family members to articulate Tambu’s gradual awakening to the predicament of the postcolonial condition. It is the paternal uncle (her father’s brother) who represents the danger of colluding with colonization, whereas her maternal aunt (her mother’s sister; the exact opposite in terms of relatedness) represents the sanity and courage of uneducated, traditional unmarried womanhood. Thus both Tambu’s increasing involvement with white education, as well as her growing consciousness of the divisive effect it has on the family and herself are rendered as family romance. In fact, a double family romance.

The term “family romance” derives from Freud (1909), who argued that children, to defend themselves against the narcissistic wounds of experience, invent a narrative in which their real parents are replaced with parents of a more exalted (or unknown) social position. The child deems itself a bastard or a foundling to enable escape from the limitations which reality imposes. Thus the family romance is a self-styled fantasy of the revision of origin, hence of identity. For Freud this is a normal, universal childhood phenomenon, an expedient to resolve Oedipal crisis. In her study of the novel in Western Europe, *Origins of the Novel*, Marthe Robert points out that the novel, which she labels an imperialist genre owing to its colonization of other genres to establish its own predominance, stereotypically resorts to the family romance to stage its narrative of achievement and success. We may think of Joseph Andrews, Tom Jones, Stephen Dedalus and so forth. One of the texts she analyzes in detail is *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel which has become the blueprint of Western individualism and its drive for expansion. Robert’s study may be placed next to Edward Said’s claim in *Culture and Imperialism* that

[w]ithout empire...there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see far from accidental convergences between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism. (69-70)

One of the locations of such a convergence of narrative authority and ideological configuration, I would argue, is the family romance, which, if understood as a collective Western fantasy, betrays the (unconscious) Western dream of individualist entitlement. More pertinent than her use of the plot of *Bildung* is Dangarembga's framing it as family romance. Owing to her use of the extended Shona family structure, which makes her alternative father also a "real" father, the author defuses the element of fantasy in Western family romance. Moreover, in splitting the family plot and pairing the process of collusion with a process of awakening, she counters the individualist drive of the Western archetype. If Western narrative example was inescapable for the aspiring Zimbabwean female author whose only hope for publication came from a Western feminist press (The Women's Press in London), she nevertheless reinscribed Western structures in a narrative plot of decolonization. Turning family romance against the ideological operations which it performs in Western writing, Dangarembga has integrated African tradition and values with Western plot structure, staging in the heart of the family romance the anxiety and the ongoing process of translation that iteratively crosses the border between external/internal, psychic/somatic (Bhabha 441-42), as well as the borders between collusion/rejection, paternal/avuncular. Edward Said praises the Kenian Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Sudanese Tayeh Salib who "appropriate for their fiction such great *topoi* as the quest and the voyage into the unknown, claiming them for their own, post-colonial purposes" (30). I hope my reading of *Nervous Conditions* has convinced my reader that Zimbabwe's Tsitsi Dangarembga, who appropriates the family romance, might well have been included in Said's list.

## Works Cited

- Aegerter, Lindsay Pentolfe. "A Dialectic of Autonomy and Community: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15: 2 (Autumn 1996): 231-40.
- Androne, Mary Jane. "Tsi Tsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* : An African Woman's Revisionist Narrative" in: Charles Cantaluop, ed. *Ngugi wa Thiongo, Texts and Contexts*: 323-32.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Editor's Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations." *Critical Inquiry* Vol 23:3 (Spring 1997), 431-59.
- Cantaluop, Charles, ed. *Ngugi na Thiongo, Texts and Contexts*. Trenton, N.J.: African World Press, 1995.
- Castle, Gregory. "Colonial Discourse and the Subject of Empire in Joyce's 'Nausicaa'", in *Joyce: Feminism/Post/Colonialism*. Ed. Ellen Carol Jones. *European Joyce Studies* 8. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998. pp. 115-45.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. New York: Seal Press, 1989.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Preface Jean-Paul Sartre. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Family Romances." *Standard Edition* Vol. IX, 238-39.
- Lazarus, Neil. *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Okwonko, Christopher. "Form and Narrative in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*." *Research in African Literatures* 34 (2003): 53-74.
- Robert, Marthe. *Roman des Origins et Origins du Roman*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1972.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
- Schipper, Mineke. *Beyond the Boundaries: African Literature and Literary Theory*. London: Allison & Busby, 1989.



Wright, Derek. *New Directions in African Fiction*. Twayne's World Authors Series, No 869. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.



# **THE SOUTH PACIFIC FAMILY CENTRE-STAGE Kinship and Nation in Short Fiction by Patricia Grace and Sia Figiel<sup>8</sup>**

Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler

*Now the work of our leading writers is influencing the writing of our younger ones. It is also shaping how we see ourselves and our cultures and how we are seen by others, and destroying some of the stereotypes and myths created about us by outsiders.*

Albert Wendt (*Nuanua* 7)

## *Introduction*

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961) Frantz Fanon expressed his views on how native intellectuals should proceed, when leading the way to de-colonising their indigenous culture by means of literature. Through their writing they could provide a crucial contribution towards an independent nation. Initially, they had to aim at the rehabilitation of the indigenous pre-colonial culture; this could be achieved by delving deep into oral genres – stories, epics, and songs of the people – and reviving them. This would bring to light once more the “dignity, glory, and solemnity” of pre-colonial times, necessary in the therapeutic process of dealing with the traumatic experience of colonisation (210). Once the indigenous culture was liberated from the shame and ridicule imposed on it by the coloniser, only then could imagination and creativity start to develop. Assisted by their audiences, storytellers would be able to arrive at new patterns based on the old. Finally, such innovations would help to create new national works of art. Fanon believed that from the moment native intellectuals took on the habit of interacting with their own people again, a “national literature” would come into being (225-241). In keeping with this process, traditional forms and themes of storytelling, once shared by families and tribes, could become part of the foundation for a postcolonial nation.

---

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank the Stout Research Centre (Victoria University in Wellington, NZ) for offering me their excellent facilities during my last research period in New Zealand.

Fanon's visionary guidelines for the de-colonising process by means of literature leave a lot unsaid: for instance, he does not mention how to deal with the language and the Western literary genres that were once introduced by the colonisers. However, although the ingredients have proven to be more complex than Fanon had envisaged, his basic recipe still stands, and has been incorporated in the writings of many postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Traces of it can also be found in the literary and critical work of indigenous writers in the South Pacific region such as Albert Wendt and Witi Ihimaera (Sharrad 9, Ellis 174). Wendt - poet, short story writer, novelist, and critic - has refined the process as described by Fanon. He states that aboriginal South Pacific literature has indigenised the language of the coloniser in several ways. By acquiring a flavour of its own, it now illustrates the culture's independence and uniqueness; it has become a suitable tool to analyse colonialism and its effects upon those colonised; and its imaginative powers have proven strong enough to free the people of the stereotypes created in colonial literature. Wendt provides a concrete example of what he considers a successful struggle towards a national literature and identity that has developed along the lines as described by Fanon: the so-called Maori Renaissance in New Zealand, which took form in the early 1970s. This movement restores the Maori people to their former dignity, with their "accents, dress, good and evil, dreams and visions," their history and their sociology (Wendt 2-5). At the centre of this renaissance of indigenous culture a literature crystallises. Aside from obvious Western characteristics (after all, it is *written*, and not in Maori) it draws on Maori oral techniques and traditional themes.<sup>9</sup>

### *Grace and Figiel*

This paper examines how the family features in some of the short fictional work by New Zealand author Patricia Grace, and in that by Sia Figiel from Samoa.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> This paper is part of a larger research project that looks at possible tensions, differences, and similarities between oral literature on the one hand, and modern and postmodern literature on the other. The analysis of the work of Maori and Samoan novelists is used as a case study. Fanon's idea that the process of decolonisation can be strengthened by means of literature is one of many approaches used. In this paper the approach is thematic.

<sup>10</sup> Grace (born in 1937) is of Maori ancestry. The collection *Waiariki* (1975) made her the first female Maori author to have a book published. Subsequently she brought out *The Dream Sleeper* (1980) and *Electric City* (1987). Grace alternated the writing of short fiction with that of children's books, non-fiction, and novels. Her most recent collection is *The Sky People* (1994). As part of a younger generation Figiel (born in 1967) made her prose debut with *Where We Once Belonged* (published in 1996), soon followed by *The Girl in the Moon Circle* (1996); both collections are composed like a Samoan flower necklace, threading one colourful piece onto another, until the circle is completed (*TGitMC* 126). Apart from her prose writing Figiel is also known as a painter and a performance poet.

A number of these texts ignore the boundaries between dramatic dialogue, poetry, and the short story; I will therefore leave them uncategorised, and refer to them simply as “stories.” In interviews both women have stated that they write primarily for and about their own people. Consequently, the majority of these stories describe the indigenous “self.” People once colonised are now subjects or protagonists, instead of objects or exotic props. Most stories deal with everyday life; they contain oral themes and techniques; and they make use of *english*.<sup>11</sup>

Grace and Figiel represent closely related indigenous Polynesian cultures, in which the social structure is very much alike.<sup>12</sup> This structure consists of the family, the clan, and the tribe – the *whanau* or ‘*aiga* being the fundamental social entity. *Whanau* (Maori) and ‘*aiga* (Samoan) can be translated as “the extended family” – a term which stresses the difference with the Western “nuclear family.” An extended family is a household that consists of more than just parents and children. It may also include cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, foster children and so on. “The extended family is the foundation of the traditional way of life... Particularly strong in the rural areas and at village level, it functions as a safety net in providing social and financial security” (WHO). Given the similarities between ‘*aiga* and *whanau*, it is all the more interesting to see that Grace and Figiel present us with very different descriptions of family life in their work. Despite their dissimilarities, however, both portrayals of the extended family can be interpreted as metaphors for what Fanon describes as the postcolonial indigenous “nation” from which they derive.

#### *‘Aiga and whanau*

In contemporary Samoa, self-image and identity are still heavily dependent on factors that are directly or indirectly related to the colonial period. Both family and public life adhere to the standards set by the local Christian churches; for financial support families rely on their relatives living abroad; a corrupt patriarchal system rules families as well as national politics; and – at an international level – foreign (often Christian) institutional donors keep Samoa’s economy going, even after its political independence in 1962. According to the *CIA World Factbook* 99.7% of the population is Christian. In its economic overview the same source states, “The economy of Samoa has traditionally been

---

<sup>11</sup> A de-colonised variety of Standard English, re-formed around syntax and vocabulary from the native language. Through this process of appropriation the language is made suitable for the indigenous culture.

<sup>12</sup> Some 3000 years ago Samoa was inhabited by seafaring people coming from the west. These people later travelled as far north as Hawaii, and as far south as Aotearoa New Zealand, which was inhabited by them between 1000 and 1200 AD (Crocombe 46-47).

dependent on development aid, family remittances from overseas, and agriculture and fishing.”

If the amount of external support hinges on the beneficiary’s moral standing, then keeping up appearances and face-saving become vital. Such mechanisms result in the subservience of the individual to the family’s (material) interests. The family in turn submits to the community as a whole. Consequently, any threat to the collective reputation is nipped in the bud by severe corporal punishment carried out in public. In Figiel’s story “Ivoga” Samoana – who is the protagonist all through the cycle - describes how mother Lafi usually reacts when she finds her daughters stepping out of line. First she yells and screams. Then she will “beat us both up for not knowing our place and wanting to be fiakagaka. And that we should always strive for humility. Be humble she would say. That’s what this whole family is founded on. Humility” (*The Girl* 86). In *The South Pacific* Ron Crocombe calls the rate of domestic violence and sexual abuse of women and children alarming, and states that families are being “bashed apart.” Lifting, what he calls, “the veil of silence” about abuse within families has helped expose “a disturbing, and possibly growing, amount of such crime. The myth of the natural happy families in the South Seas has tarnished.” Crocombe provides examples of locally produced literature that helps reveal and de-mystify domestic violence. He acknowledges that “Sia Figiel does the same for Samoa” (119).

Indeed, Figiel has turned these – often bleak – elements of everyday life into fictional themes, exposing them and making them one of the subjects of criticism and debate between her adolescent (central and marginal) characters. The habit of criticising the establishment can be said to come naturally to people in this age group. However, here the protagonists’ censure exceeds that of basic hormone-driven puberty. Both Samoana (10) and Alofa (13) are victims of domestic violence by male as well as female members of the ‘aiga.<sup>13</sup> They crave love and appreciation from their families, and at the same time search for an identity of their own. In an attempt to come to grips with the contradictions and conflicts of modern village life they turn to ancient Samoan lore– to which I will come back later. Samoa, a developing country struggling to define itself independently from its patrons, can be said to go through a similar stage (Wendt 7). Like Samoana and Alofa the country makes an effort to stand on its own feet, without having struck a balance yet.

Figiel writes primarily for a Samoan audience and brings into play cultural features her people can identify with and recognise. Since people of non-Polynesian blood make up less than 0.5% of the nation’s population, Figiel’s second aim is to transcend the national boundaries. She hopes her work is also appealing to a regional and more universal audience (*The Girl* 125).<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Samoana is the protagonist in *The Girl in the Moon Circle*; Alofa in *Where We Once Belonged*.

<sup>14</sup> “Samoans 92.6%, Euronians 7%..., Europeans 0.4%” (*CIA World Factbook*).

*Aotearoa* New Zealand is part of the Western world. Its economic position is comparable to that of Europe (*CIA World Factbook*). Wendt goes so far as to state that from an indigenous point of view *Aotearoa* is still a colony (3). Colonisation – from the 1840s onward – turned the Maori into a minority in their own country, which they still are. They were forced into a marginal role for over a century, not only politically, but also economically, socially, and culturally. The changes that came about in the wake of the Maori Renaissance, however, have brought this to a halt. The fact that the Maori were (and still are) forced to compete against a dominant Western culture – unlike the Samoan situation since 1962 - has strengthened their perception of cultural heritage. Although the Maori language had suffered extensively, other parts of the cultural tradition were kept alive underground, or could be revived. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the emerging literature celebrates cultural “otherness.”

Contemporary family life, described from the viewpoint of ancient and lived through *whanau* standards, is what can be found in Grace’s writing: an adult and wise perspective. In many of Grace’s stories examples of social and ethical Maori values are set and affirmed; they help restore Maori self-esteem and their sense of identity. Secondly, Grace’s writing aims at bridging the gap of ethnic binary positions within New Zealand by creating understanding for the Maori perspective (McRae 287-295).

In New Zealand, 150 years of unsettling and destabilising land alienations, followed by massive urbanisation in the 1960s that caused the disruption of many close-knit rural communities, have taken their toll. Even if Grace’s stories describe the harmonious family so often and in such detail, it is not hard to understand that in reality the *whanau* is under threat.

During the 1990s ... parents both working in couple-based households, high rates of solo parenthood and the damaging effects of poverty and unemployment resulted in a weakening of kin-based support systems already under threat because of urbanisation.

Many Maori no longer live in their traditional *hapu* (clan) areas and are more likely to live in nuclear families with lesser ties to *whanau* than once existed. For many, *hapu* involvement has declined and much cultural knowledge and wisdom has been lost. (Pakura 116)

Therefore, Grace’s stories should not be regarded as the representation of a pastoral and harmonious *reality*; they contain the ancient messages of wisdom and experience for a society that is struggling. Grace’s stories that focus on the stable Maori family are what Hayden White calls “the creative narrativisation of the present,” the mix of memory and desire applied to a real situation, by which they become a *feasible alternative* to reality. Taking into account the oral storytelling techniques that can be found in much of Grace’s work, I believe

these stories to be the result of a storyteller's translation process. Grace translates fragments of reality into stories that are in harmony with Maori experience and wisdom. Because of this, most Maori families are depicted as a safe place, in which all are respected in their own right. Their emphasis lies with love, support, and continuity under changed circumstances.

In Grace's fictional writing gender roles are usually non-problematic. Having stated this, I must emphasise that Grace does not avoid the darker and destructive sides of family life, such as domestic violence and incest. By exposing these issues, Grace breaks the *tapu* (taboo); she opens ways to make violent behaviour identifiable and subject of discussion. Her female characters are seldom violent, although an exception can be found in "The Sky People"<sup>15</sup>. The one abusive woman in this body of fifty-five short stories is a mother who seemingly sets out to kill her daughter, because she believes the girl is possessed by evil. This evil supposedly manifests itself through the girl's strong Maori features, which stand out from those of her siblings, who resemble their father, who is *Pakeha* (of European descent). The mother (who is Maori herself) probably suffers from schizophrenia (66-69).

Grace's stories provide three examples of men committing domestic violence and incest. Firstly, through the elaborate description of the mental and physical conditions of the five daughters at the *tangi* (funeral) of their incestuous father, "Flower Girls" offers insight in the devastating results of such family secrets.<sup>16</sup> The narrative voice informs and educates its audience on the long-term effects of incest. It supports the victims without becoming accusative of the mother, who knew but remained silent until her husband's death. In the last paragraph it is *her* interior monologue that reveals the incest to the audience: "She was the only one who knew what good girls her daughters really were. They were good girls, (...) who had kept the secret of themselves and the big man – kept the secret, kept the secret, kept the secret" (24).

Secondly, the narrative voice in "Valley" exposes the abusive husband/father through a different technique.<sup>17</sup> Just for one short paragraph it makes use of *skaz* [pronounce *skas*].<sup>18</sup> The term *skaz* (which we can also see applied in Figiel's work below) refers to a narrative voice that includes the irregular sentence structures of a spoken text; it reads like a transcription of an indigenous voice that applies the informal sociolinguistic register according to the syntactical rules of speech, with full stops as breathing space. "Different, the father. Unsmiling. Heavy in build and mood. Blunt fingered hands gripping the

---

<sup>15</sup> Another example of a mother beating her daughters can be found in "Going for the Bread" from *Electric City* in *Collected Stories* (222-6), but since this concerns a non-Maori family, it is not brought up here.

<sup>16</sup> In *The Sky People and Other Stories*. 17-24.

<sup>17</sup> "Valley: Autumn." from *Waiariki* in *Collected Stories*. 64-70.

<sup>18</sup> The word *skaz* derives from the Russian word *skazat* (speaking); the term was coined by the literary critic Boris Ejchenbaum commenting on some of Gogol's work.



slim-handled axe” (69). The tone of this paragraph stands out so much from the narrator’s use of language throughout the rest of the text (being Standard English) that it immediately distances itself from the learning environment of the village school.<sup>19</sup> It appears later that the father has the habit of molesting his wife and son. Not only do their bruises show that, but also the destructive attitude of the little boy against his own creative work at school. As in “Flower Girls,” “Valley” describes the signs of domestic violence for instructive reasons (one of oral storytelling’s basic principles), but on a pragmatic level it also offers the woman and her young son a way out: in my opinion they are returning to her extended family. The narrative signals a Maori context, which implies that Hiriwa and his mother have such a safe place to go to. The suggestion of such a context is created by the use of oral markers (additive phrases, discourse markers, and pauses) and of metaphors, similes, and Maori words (without glossing) in the narrative voice, as well as a proportionally large quantity of direct speech throughout the text.<sup>20</sup>

Compared to “Valley,” the third example of domestic violence in Grace’s short stories is more problematic: “The Geranium” does not signal a traditional Maori context at all through its narrative.<sup>21</sup> I interpret that as if Marney, the protagonist who suffers from her husband’s physical and mental abuse, does not have an extended family to return to. She is confined to the house; contacts with the outside world are superficial and fragmentary. In this post-modern narrative the wife is obviously trapped inside the husband’s violent sphere.

Thematically these stories seem exceptions in Grace’s corpus, but I believe they can also be interpreted along the line of the *whanau*’s responsibility for those who need protection. After all, the story focuses on the victim, and ignores the abusive parent.

In most of Grace’s stories families live together across three generations. Grandparents and grandchildren take time to communicate and interact. There are also many descriptions of contact between peers (that is to say, siblings, cousins, and friends); these contacts seem of greater importance than those between parents and their children. Twenty percent of the stories explicitly state that children do not live with both parents: some describe single-parent families, others show that children are brought up by extended family members. Living apart from parents is never problematic. This representation is in accordance with Pakura’s statement that children belong to their *whanau*, and not just to their parents (113). It also corresponds with the fact that in the Maori language the word for biological father or mother also means aunt and uncle.

---

<sup>19</sup> The fact that my PC’s grammar check suggests that I revise quotes like these supports my hypothesis.

<sup>20</sup> Otto Heim, an expert on Maori literature, has given an in-depth analysis of this and other stories by Grace in his book *Writing along Broken Lines* (28-30). I believe that my interpretation of the “Valley” text as indicating a family “safety net” adds to Heim’s reading.

<sup>21</sup> “The Geranium” from *Electric City* in *Collected Stories*. 196-205.

Subsequently, in many stories all people of that generation are referred to as “aunties and uncles,” and no clues are given about which cousins “belong to” whom. On the whole, Grace’s stories illustrate the necessity of strong and caring families, which offer unconditional support for those who are in need of it.

In Samoa Christianity has been very much supportive of the existing patriarchal system, fortifying it to rigidity<sup>22</sup>. In exchange for its support the church was allowed to position itself above the ‘*aiga*, adding another dimension to the idea of “family”: the church community, with the *faifeau* [pastor] and his wife as its super-parents. Figiel describes patriarchs as extremely selfish and rarely willing to control themselves in favour of the family interest. The only relative allowed to overrule the head of the ‘*aiga* is his own mother; the only “outsider” to do so is the *faifeau*, who has enough authority to supersede parental power, even inside the family home. In *Where We Once Belonged* as well as in *The Girl in the Moon Circle* the pastor saves the lives of various women and children, who have been almost beaten to death by their husband or father for undermining his authority.

In our household Lafi dealt with misdemeanours. Pili dealt with the big F. All the felonies that occurred in our household. Like when Oko had a fight with the pulenuu’s son Lalomauga. And even so it was Lalomauga who started it. Causing Oko to break his nose and give him both black eyes. He was still the pulenuu’s son. And it would have been disrespectful to that *va*. Between our family and the pulenuu’s family. Had Pili not done the right thing. Which meant beating Oko up until he was nearly paralysed. ...And ended only when Samuelu the *faifeau* was alarmed.... Who entered our house for the first time without the Bible. Telling Pili to stop the madness. In his most diplomatic of ways. (*The Girl* 99)<sup>23</sup>

Such interventions render the role of the church problematic in the young protagonists’ eyes: it consolidates the arbitrariness of moral standards, and simultaneously overrules those standards; it demands severe punishment of what is considered inappropriate behaviour and disobedience, and protects against that punishment.

The women and girls in these stories are made responsible for satisfying the needs of male family members. In addition, they also must obey the women and girls higher up the hierarchical family ladder. Since these various groups often have contrasting interests, frustration surfaces easily. “And I wanted so

---

<sup>22</sup> Crocombe states that Christian values and beliefs have dominated Samoan culture from 1830 onward (205-236).

<sup>23</sup> Lafi is the mother; Pili is the father; Oko is the brother. A *polenuu* is the village mayor. Here *va* means hierarchical difference.

much to hug and hug and hug my papa. And clean the piss off his clothes. And scream to the top of my lungs I Love You! But we just didn't do that sort of thing. We just didn't" (*The Girl* 64). Contrasting interests are best illustrated by the imperative that girls – the members of the girls' circle are roughly between 10 and 13 years old – are accountable for their own chastity, and that the village does not take action against known seducers or rapists. Families primarily protect masculine interests, so daughters are warned not to go near girls who take liberties with men, as if pregnancy is a contagious disease (*The Girl* 87). This implies that girls themselves must fend off a constant stream of promiscuous boys and men, family members and outsiders, married and unmarried.

In *Where We Once Belonged* the character Siniva is ostracised for breaking the rule of female dependence and submission. Just before her suicide she defines Christianity *and* materialism as her people's prison warders:

We are not living in Lightness ... We are not. Lightness is dead. Lightness died that first day in 1830 when the breakers of the sky [missionaries] entered those shores, forcing us all to forget ... to forget ... to burn our gods ... to kill our gods ...to re-define everything, everything, recording history in reverse. 'Now,' says Siniva. 'Is our turn to re-evaluate, re-define, re-member ... if we dare. For this is Darkness. Everyone is living in Darkness and they don't see it. Everyone is blinded... blinded by too many Bibles. Blinded by too many cathedrals ... too many cars ... too much bullshit. (233-4; ellipses are authorial)

The character Siniva not only mobilises her niece Samoana to look critically at what can be described as alien and alienating colonial influences; she also shows that for Samoans the process of de-colonisation has yet to begin.

This "coming of age" is reinforced by an ancient tale which contains the cosmology, mythology, and genealogy of the village (which is the clan), whispered by the leaves of the *pulu* tree.<sup>24</sup> The almost five pages long tale

---

<sup>24</sup> The phrase "coming of age" refers to another type of Samoan Family Fiction: *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) by the anthropologist Margaret Mead. This bestseller was based on fieldwork carried out in American Samoa in 1926. Mead turned her interviews with adolescent girls into a case study, which described a carefree pace of life, in which children were free to go and live with any relative they preferred. Jealousy and revenge hardly ever occurred, and suicide was virtually unheard of. Harsh punishments were rare, and the personal choices of children were respected. Adultery was not a serious offence, for sex was seen as everyone's hobby. Rape only occurred in interactions with non-Samoans. In the 1980s the former informants revealed that they had provided Mead with "broad stories," since Mead has shown more interest in these fantasies than in true accounts of Samoan teenage life.

occurs almost identically in both story collections, which emphasizes its key position in Figiel's work (*Where We* 139-144 and *The Girl* 67-72). It contains an ancient account of how the mythological family once functioned, before Christianity imported a new moral regime: brothers took care of a sister, and men were taught to respect a woman, despite their burning sexual desires. This, according to the ancient lore, was the way to self-confidence and domestic harmony. The tale – in combination with other themes in both narrative cycles – advocates the reinstatement of the ancient social order of respect, of common sense, and of taking a stance against abusive male supremacy. To achieve this liberation, characters must mentally - and on the long run physically - remove themselves from the family standards.

Alofa and Samoana contemplate rebellion. But the questioning of set rules automatically turns a family member into an *individual* who no longer *belongs*, which is an unfamiliar position. “Alone. For the first time I am alone. I am alone. I am ‘I’ in its totality – ‘I’ without ‘we’... without Moa, Lili, girls, boys.... I am” (*Where We* 236). Figiel's writing links this position of the rebel to isolation, possibly leading to suicide, as in the case of Siniva. On the other hand, she describes moments of unconditional familial bondage and the community feasts as absolute highlights in the lives of these Samoan girls. Obviously their experiences of ‘*aiga*’ ties are both suffocating and heart-warming, leaving the protagonists with an ambiguity almost too large to deal with.

### *Conclusion*

The stories by Grace and Figiel give ample cause for discussion because of the ways these authors bring the South Pacific family to life. There are similarities. Firstly, by incorporating unglossed vocabulary from the indigenous language, both authors primarily address their own people. Secondly, they do away with the noble-savage, care-free, naive, lazy, uncivilised, superstitious, illiterate, not-refined stereotypes that were once constructed about these peoples by outsiders. Thirdly, they apply oral techniques and themes to establish and strengthen the links with the social values of pre-contact times. These values are presented as appropriate and valuable points of reference for the family's contemporary situation.

However, there are also substantial differences. As I have tried to make clear in this paper, the stories by Figiel and Grace give two different representations of the indigenous “self,” either that of adolescence in the midst of struggle for independence and identity, or that of wisdom and experience. Figiel – through her teenager protagonists – makes an appeal to break open Samoan petrified and suffocating patriarchal family structures, and to

concentrate on what really matters: *Samoana* and *Alofa*, Samoa and love.<sup>25</sup> Her strings of stories focus on power structures, and their effects on the 'aiga. Grace's stories sketch the open structure of the archetypical *whanau*, which cares and provides flexible solutions in difficult times. Her protagonists are never accusative. They creatively apply tribal wisdom to the complexity of a rapidly changing domestic environment.

Taking all this into account, one can state that Patricia Grace and Sia Figiel have contributed to the rise of their national literatures, as anticipated by Frantz Fanon. They have added to a cultural rehabilitation process through the revival of oral techniques, and the restoration of ancient values. Both draw from their cultural heritage as well as from their own imagination to establish a dialogue between the storyteller and the people. According to Fanon such literature can help build the independent postcolonial nation. In this paper I have demonstrated that the fictional accounts of the Samoan and Maori family can be seen as metaphors of the respective nations. The central theme of the family, therefore, not only allows an inward look without apology; it also carries the process of de-colonisation full circle.

---

<sup>25</sup> Apart from being given names, the word *alofa* is Samoan for love; *Samoana* is the earliest reference to Samoa by its inhabitants.

## Works Cited

- CIA-*The World Factbook-Samoa*. 10 February 2005. 1 March 2005  
<<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ws.html>>.
- Crocombe, Ron. *The South Pacific*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific, 2001.
- Drichel, Simone. "From Sameness to Difference: Reclaiming Maori Identity in Patricia Grace's *Mutuwhenua*." *anti Thesis – in SIGHTS and out POSTS* vol. 10, 1999.
- Ellis, Juniper. "The Singing Word: Witi Ihimaera Interviewed." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 34.1 (1999): 169-182.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Pluto Press, 1986.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- Figiel, Sia. *The Girl in the Moon Circle*. Suva: Mana Publications, 1996.
- . *Where We Once Belonged* (1994). Auckland: Pacifica Press, 1996.
- Grace, Patricia. *Collected Stories*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 2001.
- . *The Sky People and Other Stories*. Auckland: Penguin Books 1994.
- Heim, Otto. *Writing Along Broken Lines; Violence and Ethnicity in Contemporary Maori Fiction*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1998.
- U.S. Department of State. *International Religious Freedom Report 2002*. 12 March 2005 <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13904.htm>>.
- McRae, Jane. "Patricia Grace." *In the Same Room*. Eds. Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992.
- Pakura, Shannon. Paper presented at the American Humane Association's Family Group Decision Making: "The Family Group Conference 14-Year Journey: Celebrating the Successes, Learning the Lessons, Embracing the

- Challenges.” 6-9 June 2004, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. 5 April 2005  
<[http://www.familypower.org/library/au05\\_pakura.html](http://www.familypower.org/library/au05_pakura.html)>.
- Pearson, Bill. “The Maori and Literature, 1938-65.” *Essays on New Zealand Literature*. Ed. A. Curnow. Auckland: Heinemann, 1973. 99-138.
- Sherrad, Paul. *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature; Circling the Void*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Van den Heuvel-Disler, Heidi. “Breaking the Silence; Maori Perspective in Inter-Racial Conflict in the Writing of Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera.” MA-thesis U. of Groningen: 2000.
- Wendt, Albert (ed). *Nuanua; Pacific Writing in English Since 1980*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995.
- White, Hayden. “The Future of Utopia in History.” Speech delivered at Groningen University: March 17, 2005.
- WHO. 12 March 2005 <<http://www.wpro.who.int/countries>>.





## OFFSPRING FICTIONS

### The Family Romances of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*<sup>26</sup>

Matt Kimmich

For better or for worse, Salman Rushdie has often been discussed as one of the pre-eminent postcolonial writers in English, to the point where Sabina and Simona Sawhney can ask: "Isn't there too much already written about Rushdie, for Rushdie, against Rushdie? Can't postcolonial critics talk about someone else for a change?" (431).<sup>27</sup> Following the success of his second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie has come to be seen by some (especially Western) critics as the literary representative of post-Independence India. Indeed, the novel's sprawling depiction of the subcontinent may give some credence to this claim, even though its self-awarely unreliable narrator Saleem Sinai keeps insisting that his tale is representative only in its multiplicity, its idiosyncrasy and individuality. Middle-class Saleem is no Indian Everyman, and neither is his creator; arguably the expatriate author and his cosmopolitan concerns may be more accurately linked to migrant writing than seen in terms of more traditionally postcolonial fiction, as he has been living away from his native country in England and America for years. Rushdie can be said to occupy a Bhabhaesque "third space" in between the indigenous and the Westernised more than to represent postcolonial India – which has prompted critics such as Timothy Brennan (1989) to describe him, somewhat deprecatingly, as "janus-faced."

Nevertheless, the postcolonial project that is independent India has been at the heart of much of Rushdie's writing, even if his emphasis arguably lies on the *post* rather than the *colonial*. First and foremost, *Midnight's Children* provides a fairly ambivalent perspective on the subcontinent after Independence, yet it also expresses a tentative hope rooted in the multiplicity of cultures and talents India has to offer. Its revisionist quasi-sequel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) makes use of similar themes and motifs, and the later work's narrative structure is remarkably close to that of the author's Booker Prize-winning novel.

---

<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Heidi van den Heuvel, Philipp Schweighauser and Lucy Kacina for their valuable comments and criticism.

<sup>27</sup> The questions are obviously ironic, as they preface the Winter 2001 issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, dedicated entirely to Rushdie's oeuvre. Indeed, the last few years have seen something of a renaissance of Rushdie criticism.

Yet the similarities also serve to highlight the considerable differences in tone and especially outlook – the tentative optimism of *Midnight's Children* that is reinforced by its lack of closure, emphasising that the story (both of Saleem and of postcolonial India) will go on, is countered by the more pronounced hopelessness of *The Moor's Last Sigh* and its protagonist's death wish. Both novels play on the Scheherazade topos, yet the Moor's tale strives towards his death and must be finished to that end, whereas Saleem's narrative resists coming to the point where story and protagonist must end. The different dynamics also are reflected in the protagonists/narrators' attitudes towards filiation. It is the different treatment, on various levels, of filiation and affiliation in the novels which I will discuss in the following pages.

My point of reference for this discussion is a variation on Edward Said's concept of filiation/affiliation as presented in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983). Other than Said, however, I extend filiation to all (purportedly) deterministic and firmly hierarchical relationships between individuals as well as within societies. Filiation in my understanding is *exclusive* as much as *inclusive*, imposing a notion of belonging; affiliation, on the other hand, also generates a sense of belonging, but it both is chosen and foregoes strict, naturalised hierarchy (e.g. of parent/child). It can thus be seen as a prerequisite for democracy.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Saleem, a man of several amazing talents, writes at one point in his fantastic tale: "My inheritance includes this gift, the gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary. The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers" (9). Moraes Zogoiby, Saleem's textual descendant and the protagonist/narrator of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, however, makes the following implicit comments on his forebear's tale: "Children make fictions of their fathers, re-inventing them according to their childish needs. The reality of a father is a weight few sons can bear" (331), and later: "No point trying to rewrite one's parents' lives. It's hard enough to try and set them down; to say nothing of my own" (224). Apart from numerous other parallels, the protagonists of both works have problematic relationships with their parents – not to mention a problematic parentage to begin with –, and they are both in a position to rewrite their own lives, not least by rewriting their progenitors. Nevertheless, the two characters address the issue very differently.

From the beginning of his tale, Saleem Sinai defines himself through family, even if he later redefines "family." Early in his narrative he writes: "I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began" (10), which he follows with the story of how Aadam Aziz, his purported grandfather, lost his faith. This claim of origin, combined with the insistent emphasis on ancestors and precursors throughout the novel, would seem to suggest that for Saleem, identity is a matter of blood, meaning that it is inherited, communicated uni-directionally from ancestors to progeny. However, this impression soon proves to be mistaken. *Midnight's Children* undermines the

notion of identity as (genetic) heritage, and it does so most emphatically by presenting a multitude of parents and parent figures, resulting in a scenario where firstly, the son “giv[es] birth to fathers and mothers” by means of choosing and narrating them, and secondly, Saleem’s biological parents are not necessarily seen as his “real” parents, neither by Saleem nor by his audience. On the whole, Saleem’s fiction is given priority over narrowly determined filiation. As Baker writes: “The telling of stories [...] is tied inextricably in Rushdie’s novels to the construction of a self” (48), which means that the latter in effect is at everyone’s disposal. Constructing oneself becomes a democratic endeavour, as authorship is not restricted to figures of (quasi-)parental authority.

To illustrate this, we need to examine the multiple parentage Saleem invokes. In the first eight chapters of the novel, the reader is presented with a guessing game as to who the narrator’s actual father and mother are, and all of the possible candidates in some form “leak” into the protagonist, to use Saleem’s recurring metaphor; he incorporates elements of these potential parents into his own identity. Before Saleem’s biological father is revealed, he suggests five other potential fathers and four possible mothers, not to mention the numerous symbolic or surrogate parents populating the novel as well as the narrator’s literary, cultural and religious forebears. The result of this is that his actual parents do not have absolute creative authority over him; this authority is spread over more than a dozen characters. Even more, it is therefore not so much the parents who author their child, giving him an identity and meaning as one might (try to) impose on a text, but the son who co-authors his parents as well as vice versa. The relationship is more intertextual, so to speak, in that there is no clear-cut hierarchy of who has authority (or authorship) over whom, as characters and texts leak into one another. In a sense, Saleem’s notion of family is thus more affiliative than filiative, as it is based on choice rather than on the problematic concept of biological determinism. Belonging and identity are active, ongoing processes the individual participates in, not attributes imposed from above.

This move away from literal filiation is underlined by Saleem’s likely biological parents, the Englishman William Methwold (one of the last departing colonial officials in India), and Vanita, the wife of the poor entertainer Wee Willie Winkie. They have been given much attention especially in early critical writing on *Midnight’s Children*, as they support the reading of the novel as an obvious postcolonial allegory, yet they account for very little of the actual narrative. In the end they are the least important, least “true” parents the protagonist has and leave least of a trace on him – added to which in the end we only have his word that they are his real parents; the word of a confessed liar and unreliable narrator. Not only do his adoptive parents (who for most of the novel believe him to be their child) have a much stronger influence on him, Saleem indeed insists on claiming them throughout as his true mother and father and himself as their true son. At one point he writes about Amina, his

(step)mother: “[T]he baby she was carrying did not turn out to be her son” (77), indicating that ties other than the biological or genetic will prove important. Likewise, the (probably fraudulent) seer Ramram Seth’s prophecy for Amina’s child foresees not her biological offspring Shiva, although it also alludes to him, but first and foremost Saleem.

However, we need to distinguish between Saleem’s different functions within the novel. As the protagonist he is mostly at the mercy of his tale and of others – including his step-parents Amina and Ahmed Sinai – and thus his retroactive rewriting of his life and family could be seen as the postcolonial fantasy of the subaltern and disenfranchised providing the illusion of empowerment only. In his function as character, Saleem is determined by others from the very beginning, when his future nurse Mary Pereira, working at the hospital where he is born, in a misguided act of social rebellion switches the two babies – one born to a poor mother, the other to a well-off, bourgeois family – and thereby determines the vastly different worlds the symbolic twins are brought up in. Saleem is the perennial victim, the one to whom things are done. He is kept in the (actual and metaphorical) position of child, by parent figures and historical events, unable as a character to transcend his role as exclusively offspring and text. As Wilson writes: “The image of the writer as both master and victim of public and private material, which he has been formed by in the past and is himself attempting to form in the present, dominates *Midnight’s Children*” (56). Saleem as protagonist remains largely victim.

This is underlined by a number of symbolic and finally actual castrations that take from him (at least in biological terms) the ability to become a parent himself and thus transcend his role as child. The most important metaphorical castration is forced on him by the Sinais, his chosen parents, when they have his continually leaking nose drained at the hospital. Not only is the nose a common (indeed stereotypical) phallic symbol, it also appears to be the seat of Saleem’s fantastic talent. Being one of a thousand and one children born on the midnight that brought Indian independence, he is endowed with a magical gift, in his case the ability to read minds and emotions as well as transmit them. It is this gift that allows him to form the M.C.C. (the *Midnight’s Children’s Conference*), a Nehruvian forum for all of the magical children, which his “twin” Shiva, Amina and Ahmed’s biological son raised by Willie Winkie, is also a part of. Saleem’s gift prefigures his talent of authorship in that it opens up to him the voices of thousands of characters, which in his retelling he effectively creates for the reader; yet the nasal drainage he is subjected to strips him of this power. It also anticipates the forced sterilisation all the Children undergo at the orders of the Widow, Indira Gandhi’s fictional counterpart. As a result of the sterilisation they all lose their fantastic talents in addition to their generative abilities.

The Widow too is presented as a parent figure – Mother India – but she is clearly a monological, monstrous parent in the novel. Whereas Saleem endeavours to give the offspring characters a voice and co-authorship, the

Widow does not wish to share authority with anyone. In this, she is the opposite of the polyphonic, initially democratic M.C.C. as the protagonist envisages it, which one of her cohorts states very clearly while Saleem is in captivity (anticipating some of the central religious issues raised later in *The Satanic Verses*): “Basically, you see, it is all a question of God,” she says. “The people of India [...] worship our lady like a God. Indians are only capable of worshipping one God” (438). The monotheistic simile makes it clear that the Widow’s ideal India is organised hierarchically, her voice being the only one controlling the nation. She wishes to swallow the entire Hindu pantheon – which makes her a distorted mirror image of Saleem, a self-proclaimed “swallower of lives” (9). Unlike her, though, he gives voice to the lives he swallows in his attempt to contain multitudes; he does not devour so much as incorporate. He represents an affiliative pluralism that would counter the Widow’s monologue with a Bakhtinian dialogue. In this, he and the Children finally appear to fail, vanquished by the devouring, anti-democratic mother figure. Saleem himself acknowledges this failure: “Who am I? Who were we? We were are shall be the gods you never had” (438).<sup>28</sup>

So does Saleem also fail in his quest to become more than only progeny? Does he remain in the position of offspring/text? In biological terms, this is obviously the case. The Widow’s attentions render him and the other Children incapable of becoming parents. However, as was true for Saleem and his father and mother, the novel presents parentage as more than simply a biological issue. By means of narrating his text, undermining both Amina and Ahmed and the other parent figures as well as himself, Saleem writes his parents as they write him. He takes Freud’s family romance, with its son reinventing and subverting his parents in order to emancipate himself from them, to a playful, postmodern extreme. His identity and familial role are finally defined in the terms his fiction creates. Accordingly, he manages to make himself the father of Aadam, the biological great-grandchild of Dr. Aziz, begotten by Shiva, the narrator’s midnight twin. Not only does Saleem claim Aadam as his son, the child likewise claims him as his father, as his first word suggests: “‘Abba...’ Father. He is calling me father. [...] ‘...cadabba’” (459). I would suggest that Aadam’s additional three syllables, completing the magic word “Abracadabra”, do not undo his claiming Saleem as his father. Rather the word is an encapsulation of Saleem’s family fiction, writing parents and accordingly one’s sense of self in an act of imagination and narrative magic. Hierarchies are finally not deterministic, they do not remain fixed; as Saleem democratises his family structures, there is hope too for a successfully democratic, polyphonic India. His stories and India’s history as well as its future would appear to be intertwined.

---

<sup>28</sup> The present and future tense Saleem uses already hint that there may not be closure in the M.C.C.’s failure.

As I have already indicated, *The Moor's Last Sigh* in many ways parallels the earlier novel in terms of characters, plot, motifs and structure. Indeed, critics have referred to it as *Midnight's Children's* "sequel" (Goonetilleke) and "parody" (Moss). Its narrator, Moraes "Moor" Zogoiby, at first appears to be a spiritual descendant of Saleem. However, the Moor's attitude to his family is remarkably different in many ways. Whereas Saleem both subverts and claims his (step-)parents, progressing beyond adolescent rebellion, Moraes fails to do so. Accordingly his relationship to his father and especially his mother remains neurotic, not least because they both die before the rift between them and himself can be bridged. Moraes' family story is rife with antagonism and murder, and he appears to bring its curse, pronounced against his mother Aurora by her grandmother Epifania ("may your house be forever partitioned, may its foundations turn to dust, may your children rise up against you, and may your fall be hard" (99)) to an end only by dying, his siblings having died before him. There lies little hope with offspring characters in the novel, and there is no insistent affiliative counterdiscourse to disrupt filiative hierarchies.

While Saleem's tale is one of emancipation through narration, the Moor's only reinforces his role as offspring/text, as he does not even choose to write his life of his own volition, as Saleem did, but is forced at gunpoint to do so by his erstwhile ersatz-father figure Vasco Miranda. Almost without exception he remains determined by others, which suggests that the tentative optimism of *Midnight's Children* is a naïve illusion – the offspring cannot assume authorship. Most of all Moraes presents himself as authored by his parents Aurora and Abraham. Even though his mother dies at roughly two thirds into the novel, arguably she rather than her author son is its dominant character. Aurora is a highly ambivalent figure, and she celebrates her own ambivalence. This is apparent not only in her art, but especially in her relationship to her family, and she appears to her children at times as an ogress – "Her children were shown no mercy. '[...] No special privileges for flesh-and-blood relations! Darlings, we munch on flesh, and blood is our tippie of choice'" (5) – and as the scorpion of fable, stinging the frog that is carrying it across the river: "I couldn't help it [...] It's in my nature" (170). She unapologetically puts her own personality and needs before her family's. This is already apparent in her sly naming of her children – Ina, Minnie, Mynah and Moor, in a variation on the nursery rhyme – where any thoughts of her offspring come second to her need to be witty and frivolous. However, her egocentrism becomes even more evident in the way she uses her family, and especially Moraes, in her creations. As a painter she incorporates her son into her often erotically charged art,<sup>29</sup> thus interpreting and rewriting him as she sees fit. She dies while he is in exile, having been banished by his parents after a disastrous affair with a rival of Aurora's, which for him means that she remains the monolithical, overbearing mother figure, and indeed

---

<sup>29</sup> Beck is not the only critic commenting on the "element of incest" (21).

he calls her “my immortal mother, my Nemesis, my foe beyond the grave” (405).

Abraham, the protagonist’s father, likewise bears monolithical qualities, although they only emerge fully after Aurora’s death. As was the case in *Midnight’s Children*, the Moor like Saleem throws doubt over his parentage, yet his hinting at a possible affair between Aurora and Prime Minister Nehru nine months before his birth seems half-hearted compared to the earlier novel’s sustained multiple family romances, and it has little influence on the narrative.<sup>30</sup> Later in the Moor’s life, Abraham (a parent willing to sacrifice his son to his ambitions) is revealed to be the godfather figure of the Bombay underworld, a figure both godlike and satanic: “Recalcitrant, unregenerate, paramount: the Over World’s cackling overlord in his hanging garden in the sky” (317), reads one description. He too dies before Moraes can perceive him as a human-sized figure rather than the larger-than-life movie villain, and when the protagonist is later told that his father was culpable of Aurora’s death, Abraham remains forever fixed in his unhuman, satanic role in his son’s eyes. Like Aurora, he cannot be rewritten and humanised by a son who proves unequal to the task of authorship.

However, the novel does more than merely suggest that the Moor fails where Saleem succeeded. In fact, it retroactively undoes Saleem’s tentative hope, represented by his impossible affiliative son Aadam Sinai, reintroducing an adult Aadam into the plot. Whereas Saleem suggested that the generation after the Children of Midnight embodied a renewed pluralist promise for India, the rechristened Adam Braganza does not stand for pluralism or democracy but for capitalism and corruption. He is in some ways a parody of his father, turning Saleem’s emancipation through self-invention into a hollow postmodern sham. Adam has fashioned himself anew, but while his father did so by bringing narrative continuity to the discontinuities of self, he lacks this coherence with the past and the world he inhabits. While his big ears in *Midnight’s Children* made him an avatar of Ganesh, the patron deity of scribes and letters, in the later novel he is compared to the cartoonish Dumbo, ridiculing the earlier novel as well. He is presented as a simulacrum, a copy of a copy of a copy, and as such he presents a bitter comment on the end of *Midnight’s Children*. The pluralism the earlier novel invoked is falling apart into corruption and communalism in the Moor’s Bombay, which is underlined when Abraham adopts young Adam, making him his business heir.

Thus, whereas Saleem claims a family as his own by means of his narrative, Moraes is disinherited by his own family without having the ability to create something new for himself. Even though he does choose a number of surrogate parents throughout the tale (though not to the extent that Saleem does), this is

---

<sup>30</sup> Together with the statement about “rewriting one’s parents’ lives” (*TMLS* 224) quoted earlier, the short shrift the affair (and its possible implications on Moraes’ parentage) receives can be read as a critique of Saleem’s family romances.

always in reaction to perceived parental injustice and force, and thus still inscribed in a filiative system, determined by parents. It does not have the effect of destabilising Aurora or Abraham as authority figures. The Moor does not bring about a dialogue between his parents, parent figures and himself; he alternates instead between binary positions, such as for instance Abraham and his fundamentalist, racist opponent Raman “Mainduck” Fielding. He seems effectively unable (and perhaps unwilling) to negotiate between them, and neither filiation nor affiliation seem viable options to provide cohesion for him or the nation. He does not endeavour to represent a productive third position as the one Saleem claims for himself and his M.C.C. or as the position that Homi Bhabha theorises in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha’s “Third Space” (37) straddles the two apparent binary opposites to form a hybridised third option, yet Moraes opts out of such an active role. As a result, he remains in the position of offspring, and of text, exclusively.

As *Midnight’s Children* is the dominant intertext for *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, it is easy to be disappointed in the latter, as it can be read as a bitter, resigned retread of the earlier work. Saleem’s tale celebrates the power of storytelling; the Moor seems disillusioned about it. Where Saleem, starting with his parents, freely interprets and reinvents, albeit always showing the strings of his puppetry, the Moor never revels in his storytelling. Saleem leaves a last pickle jar empty so his story can continue; Moraes sits down after his captor’s death, although there no longer is any existential necessity to write, in order to bring his tale – and his life – to an end. While Rushdie’s 1981 novel is ambivalent about its narrator and the democratising efficacy of fiction, it is clearly a celebration of the imagination. The Moor at least seems to mistrust the imagination, or perhaps more aptly, he evades the responsibility of the storyteller and creator. In this especially he remains a child – his tale is an accusation of his parents who in his version have determined his life and identity throughout. Only very rarely does he acknowledge that he has been anything else than at the mercy of others. Most of all, he suggests that everything is his mother’s fault, as Aurora remains his nemesis and (apparent) author throughout. Saleem’s polyphonic tale offered the opposite, in that its narrator at times claimed responsibility over everything, taking the author’s power to an ironic extreme, yet the Moor rejects all culpability, as is perhaps illustrated best when he is led to believe that his mother was murdered at Abraham’s behest: “How, when the past is gone, when all’s exploded and in rags, may one apportion blame? How to find meanings in the ruins of a life? – One thing was certain; I was fortune’s, and my parents’, fool” (418). For Moraes, finding meaning is closely linked to apportioning blame. As author he tries to avoid his own responsibility by resisting his power over the tale.

However, it is the contradiction between the narrator’s function and his self-presentation that may render a productive dynamic of meaning in the text similar to the dialogue evoked by the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*. The Moor



is at the mercy of his tale, yet his tale exists in its form grace to him only. Similarly, he is determined by his parents – yet he creates them for his audience by narrating them. Most of all, his mother may be his “Nemesis, [his] foe beyond the grave” (405), yet he resurrects her in his story to the extent that she becomes the central, if covert, author figure of the novel. She, more than her son, is an ambivalent but finally positive figure in the novel, as she suggests an alternative to the Moor’s resignation.

Differently from Moraes’ story, his mother’s paintings (described and thus recreated by him) provide more space for interpretation. They offer more ambivalence than her son’s tale suggests; even though she authors him, it would be wrong to see her painterly discourse as fully determining the Moor’s identity. In fact, what her paintings provide him with is the promise of potential and of meaning, rather than meaning itself, and thus he may be her text but as such still needs to be read, to be interpreted. As he writes, Aurora “present[ed] me to myself as well as to the world as someone special, someone with a meaning” (220). More specifically, she evokes an utopia of multicultural, multireligious coexistence rooted in the past reminiscent of Saleem’s dream that has as its central representative the Moor:

Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains crowded into her paint-Boabdil’s fancy-dress balls, and the Sultan himself was represented [...] as a masked, particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world. (227)

In Aurora’s paintings (as in Saleem’s tale), it is polyphony, not homogeneity, that has the potential to provide social cohesion; unity must be found in multiplicity, not in ossified myths of purity which foster fundamentalism and communalist violence. Yet such unity is not a state so much as a process; it is ongoing and dynamic – and thus difficult to achieve.

Like the Children before him, and like Saleem’s son Aadam at the end of *Midnight’s Children*, Moraes embodies a promise in his mother’s art. However, this pluralist promise was actualised only in the ideal past of the original Moor’s Granada and becomes increasingly fictional, finally expressed solely through art in the novel’s modern-day Bombay. Thus, arguably, the novel represents a swansong to post-Independence India and its democratic potential, where affiliation lacks the power to act as a cohesive social and cultural force, and where democracy always proves weaker than corruption and communalism.

Nonetheless, the Moor’s tale implicitly returns the favour inherent in Aurora’s art, presenting his mother as someone who can also have meaning: “I made a kind of portrait of her, too” (219), he writes, and like her “last, unfinished, unsigned masterpiece” (218), a painting bearing the same title as the

novel we are reading, his text too finally resists closure as far as Aurora is concerned. The Moor's story ends, yet in Aurora's case we have a number of different narratives of her – her son's, her husband's, and most of all her own paintings – and we need to bring meaning to these texts ourselves. As Keith Wilson's article from 1984 already suggests with regard to *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's novels require reader responsibility, *The Moor's Last Sigh* perhaps even more so than its predecessor. Aurora and Moraes, almost in spite of the latter, enter into a rivalry of meaning that is finally productive. Maes-Jelinek (2002) writes that “[t]he symbiosis and reciprocity between Moor's writing and his mother's painting seem at least partly due to his being, in a sense, her creation” (175), the central word for the present discussion being *reciprocity*. Perhaps the central ambivalence of *The Moor's Last Sigh* is that neither Aurora nor the Moor could exist without the other. In this at least, the novel evokes a parent-child dialogue that may not be as explicit, and as sustained, as in the earlier work, yet is still productive of meaning and makes the Moor's narrative more than a retread of the parent novel.

**Works Cited**

- Baker, Stephen. "‘You Must Remember This’: Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.1 (2000): 43-54.
- Beck, Rudolf. "‘The Re-discovery of India’: Palimpsest, Multiplicity and Melodrama in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*." *New Worlds. Discovering and Constructing the Unknown in Anglophone Literature*. Ed. Martin Kuester, Gabriele Christ and Rudolf Beck. München: Verlag Ernst Vögel, 2000. 17-33.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Brennan, Timothy. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World. Myths of the Nation*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. *Salman Rushdie*. London: Macmillan, 1998.
- Maes-Jelinek, Hena. "A Note on Painting in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*." *Crabtracks. Progress and Process in Teaching the New Literatures in English*. Ed. Gordon Collier and Frank Schulze-Engler. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. 171-180.
- Moss, Laura. "‘Forget those damnfool realists!’ Salman Rushdie’s Self-Parody as the Magic Realist’s ‘Last Sigh’." *Ariel* 29.1 (1998): 121-139.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight’s Children*. London: Vintage, 1981.
- . *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. London: Vintage, 1995.
- Said, Edward. *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Sawhney, Sabina and Simona Sawhney. "Reading Rushdie after September 11, 2001." In: *Twentieth-Century Literature* 47 (4). New York: 2001. 431-443.
- Wilson, Keith. "‘Midnight’s Children and Reader Responsibility’ (1984)." *Reading Rushdie. Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*. Ed. M.D. Fletcher. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 55-68.



## **SKELETONS IN CARIBBEAN CLOSETS**

### **Family Secrets and Silences in Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* and Denise Harris's *Web of Secrets***

Judith Misrahi-Barak

The general theme of the conference could have been chosen for Caribbean literature only, so much have the family and family fictions been one of its harrowing concerns. From Vic Reid's Jamaican novel *New Day* (1949), offering a perspective on the historical events of Morant Bay rising in Jamaica in 1865 through the eyes of Johnny Campbell and his family, to Lawrence Scott's *Night Calypso* (2004), there has been an unending stream of novels foregrounding the family as a prime concern.

<sup>1</sup> We may wonder why the flow has been so continuous over half a century. The family may have functioned first and foremost on a metaphorical and allegorical level in the independence period and to this day; it still provides a privileged articulation between the individual and the community, a vantage point on the outside world, as well as most certainly a passage between historical times and present times; above all, it has always been a sign of the burden of genealogy, ancestry and history.

Two books have recently been added to the list of Caribbean novels revolving around the axis of the family, bringing additional evidence that the family is something that tells us about the present through its concern with the past. Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, the bigger of the two, was published in 2003, and Denise Harris's *Web of Secrets* in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Both books are novels, and both may cast a new light on the phrase "family fictions," close to "family romance" – not so much novels taking the family as the axle of its progression,

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953), *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959) and other novels by Paule Marshall, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970), Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will soon come Home* (1980), Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* (1982), novels by Jamaica Kincaid and Joan Riley, Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Harriet's Daughter* (1988), Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Austin Clarke's autobiography *Growing up Stupid under the Union Jack* (1998), and Fred D'Aguiar's *Dear Future* (1997) and *Bethany Bettany* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> *The Polished Hoe* obtained Canada's top literary award, the Giller Prize, in addition to the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2003.

but novels examining the fictions, lies and myths, fabricated by families and their members.

Both novels are geared towards the painful formulation of the secrets and hidden truths that are constitutive of the two families involved, foregrounding “the articulation of secrets, perhaps (...) the creation of hitherto unrealized truth” (Brooks 35). Both have incest, rape, and brutalization of subaltern women at the bottom of that tomb of silence. The backdrop of both novels is slavery and the plantation system even though they are staged in the 1950s and 1960s. In that respect, they take their natural place in a long list of books, fiction or theory, devoted to the uncovering of narratives not previously formulated nor listened to. This association of the two notions of subalternity and silence brings to mind the work of Gayatri Spivak and other critics who have responded to her since the late eighties, when the many versions of her now well-known study were published. So, after presenting simultaneously the two novels in a comparative perspective, and positioning them within the context of recent developments in the postcolonial field, I will emphasize the narrative strategies and choric devices each writer has chosen to counterbalance the weight of silence and burden of History, attempting to reclaim the past and lay it to rest through the telling of the family stories. I will endeavour to demonstrate that Clarke’s and Harris’s fiction offer an indirect but shrewd response to Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern speak?,” adding the originality of their voice to the ongoing debate about subaltern silence.

Although *The Polished Hoe*’s background is the 1950s Caribbean – on the fictitious island of Bimshire, fashioned after Clarke’s native Barbados – it still reeks of plantation days, as for instance in the description that Mary-Mathilda makes of the estate at the beginning of her narrative:

Now, where we are in this Great House is the extremity of the Plantation Houses, meaning the furthest away from the Main House, with six other houses, intervening. These consist of the house the Bookkeeper occupies; one for the Overseer [...]; one for the Assistant Manager, a Englishman, which is the third biggest after the Main House; and then there is a lil hut for the watchman, Watchie; and there is this Great House where we are. The Main House have three floors, to look over the entire estate of the Plantation, like a tower in a castle. To spy on everybody. (4)

The description could have come out of a slave narrative, so much is the plantation replete with all the grim elements pertaining to slavery and its legacy, with Mr Bellfeels at the center of a terrorizing power wielded over the estate, embodying the whole system. Similarly, in a way that bears on the great-great-great grandchildren of slaves, the background of *Web of Secrets* is still impregnated with all the suffering of slavery times. The following passage is

repeated word for word at the end of the book, in a kind of echo borne across generations:

(...) from the very moment their great great great grand-parents were ambushed and violently shackled and collared and dumped together like heaps of blind coal, all chain-bound, all slave-bound, but some also fear-bound, hate-bound, suicide-bound, slaughter-bound, sullen-bound, survive-at-all-costs-bound, blank-look-bound, blank-out-bound, despair-bound, amnesia-bound, tractable-bound, black-out-bound, run-amok-bound, word-bound, hope-bound, maroon-bound, spirit-bound, god-bound but all chain-bound, all slave-bound, bound to the point of no return on ships steered by men who lacked colour and by that very lack were given the means to be members of the human race while they, because of their stained skins, were made more visible and so sold and designated as human beasts of burden at a place that no one could ever put a name to. (21)

In *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mathilda brings into her narrative several characters through whom special attention is granted to all those who suffered at the hands of the slave owners, particularly enslaved women. Mary-Mathilda's mother is one of them, whose promotion from field hand to kitchen staff also involves submitting to the plantation owner's sexual demands, until her "wrinkle-up body" no longer appeals to him and he turns to someone else. Who this someone else is, and what the consequences are, is precisely the object of Mary-Mathilda's statement-*cum*-confession: after a few hundred pages, the reader is gradually and painstakingly told that she is that someone else. Mary-Mathilda discovers quite late in her life that her mother was, before her, the "outside" woman of Mr Bellfeels, and so, Mr Bellfeels, the father of her (Mary-Mathilda's) children, is also her own father, and her children also her own brothers and sisters. Her consequent murder of him lies at the core of her narrative although constantly pushed to the back of the text, silenced yet voiced at the same time.

The novel begins with Mary-Mathilda delivering a statement to a Constable (later replaced by a Sergeant, a former childhood sweetheart of the confessant herself), but it is only much later that the reader understands what the statement is really about – Mary-Mathilda admitting she has killed, in revenge and disgust, the plantation owner and father of her children. She will lead the Sergeant to the maimed body of Mr Bellfeels only after more than four hundred pages of a circuitous, apparently verbose and digressive confession, walking a tightrope between the Legal and Judiciary (it is a statement), and the Intimate (it is a confession), a problematic field that has been brought to light by Peter

Brooks in his study *Troubling Confessions*, cross-cutting as he does between “confession according to the law and confession according to literature” (4).<sup>3</sup>

Mary-Mathilda’s confession appears haunted by the traumatic moment in her girlhood when she is passed onto Mr Bellfeels by her own mother:

“The sun was bright that Sunday morning, of Easter Even. And it was in my face. So, *I couldn’t see his eyes*. Mr Bellfeels *looked* so tall, like the pulpit or the water tower, that I had to hold my head back, back, back, to look in his face. And still, *I couldn’t see his face*, clear. This man who *looked* so tall, and me, a little girl, *in pain* from wearing *his own daughter’s shoes* that was *killing* me.

“The sun was playing tricks in his face, too. So, neither of the two of we could see the other person too clear. But *he could see my face*, because *he was looking down*.

“Then Mr. Bellfeels put *his riding-crop* under my chin, and raise my face to meet his face, using the riding-crop; and when his eyes and my eyes made four, he passed *the riding-crop down my neck, right down in front of my dress*, until it reach my waist. And then he move the riding-crop right back up, as if my *drawing something on my body*.

“And Ma, stanning-up beside me, with *her two eyes looking down* at the loose marl in the Church Yard, *looking at the graves* covered by slabs of marble, looking at the ground. My mother. Not on me, her own daughter. (...)

“That Sunday morning, in the bright shining sun, with Ma stanning-up there, *voiceless*, as if the riding-crop was Mr. Bellfeels finger *clapsed to her lips, clamped to her mouth to strike her dumb to keep her silence, to keep her peace*. From that Sunday morning, the meaning of poverty was driven into my head. The sickening power of poverty.

“So, *this is lil Mary!*” Mr. Bellfeels say.

“Yes,” Ma told Mr. Bellfeels, “*This is my little Mary.*”

“Good,” Mr. Bellfeels say. (11-12)<sup>4</sup>

The excerpt needs to be given in all its length because it highlights one of the central aspects in the novel which is the incestuous relationship between Mr Bellfeels and the two women, mother and daughter. It is indeed a highly traumatic moment in so far as trauma can be defined as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelmingly violent event or events that are not fully grasped

---

<sup>3</sup> For a study in depth of the constant postponing of revelation, the deferred confession and the digressions, the constant meandering being the only path to truth and the constitution of a renewed self, see: Judith Misrahi-Barak, “Tilling the Caribbean Narrative Field with Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe*,” a paper delivered at the colloquium “Confessions,” LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, May 2004, to be published in 2005.

<sup>4</sup> All emphases mine.



as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth 91). Clarke’s, and Harris’s definition of trauma seems to “work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 61). Trauma appears indeed as an event which, in all its violence, is not comprehensible immediately and whose impact can only be felt belatedly. Mary-Mathilda as a child does not yet know all the consequences of the scene quoted above but she will need all her life to heal the wound inflicted on her at that precise moment.

The novel shows forcefully how relationships inherited from slavery times have endured well into the 20th century, shaping family structure and permeating all the physical and verbal exchanges. The physical exchange is first and foremost established through the gaze; the girl looking up, Mr Bellfeels looking down at the girl, the mother looking down and away, to the ground, as well as through the use of the riding-crop, a phallic object metonymic of male strength. As for the verbal exchange, it is mostly silence that predominates: the silence of the girl who does not say anything, the very few words uttered by Mr. Bellfeels over Mary-Mathilda’s head and body to the mother of the girl, and the girl’s mother, voiceless, dumbstruck by the treachery she is committing in her desire to protect her daughter from poverty and want while handing her over to the same fate as her own.<sup>5</sup>

One can read into Mary-Mathilda’s reminiscing all the pain passed on within the same family, from one generation to the next, through gesture and the absence of gesture, words and the absence of words. The different ways in which the family history is transmitted, or rather, not transmitted, form the backbone of Austin Clarke’s novel, quite in keeping with Spivak’s words for whom “[if], in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...” (28). The associated powers of patriarchy and colonialism appear as so repressive and absolute in the text quoted above that only violence and silence can be felt brushing past. And yet, Mary-Mathilda’s narrative is that very attempt to put into words what has so far remained silent: “I was telling you of a narrative told to me by Ma, which she heard from her mother, Gran, who I am sure, heard it told by my great-great-gran, and finally handed down to me. These narratives are the only inheritances that poor people can hand down to their offsprings” (Clarke 355). Whereas Spivak has often been accused of “deliberate deafness to the native voice where it can be heard” (Parry 39), Clarke’s and Harris’s novels tend precisely to throw light on female agency and the sense of

---

<sup>5</sup> In one of the last sentences of the passage quoted above, Clarke’s art of writing is made palpable. Even dead metaphors and colloquial phrases, like *to strike somebody dumb*, speak the truth of violence combined with silence, a silence that seeps through so many words in that sentence and becomes so loud. Not surprisingly, the word *dumbstruck* is also used in *Web of Secrets*: “I told [Kathleen Harriot] about Arabella. I told her how dumbstruck Arabella had been after she was sent here without choice to this house” (167).

self-empowerment through the choice of one's own words, via the confessional mode. One can also note how, in the excerpt given above, that key moment in the narration is represented through a dialogue within the main dialogue taking place between Percy and Mary-Mathilda, as if the foregrounding of a vocal expression had to be performed twice, in order to counter the alienation and erasure of self. And indeed, bearing in mind one of the questions repeatedly brought up by Spivak, is not direct speech also a symbolic way chosen by the writers to enable the oppressed subjects to speak for themselves instead of being spoken for, an attempt at recovering the "irretrievable consciousness" of the oppressed (28)?

Among the many critics who have been concerned with the female voice, the representation and the erasure of the female body, and the status of the self, bell hooks has a particularly interesting way of formulating the necessity to reconstruct black female subjectivity through a renewed emphasis on dialogue and confession. For her the confessional moment is viewed as "a moment of performance where you might step out of the fixed identity in which you were seen, and reveal other aspects of the self (...) as part of an overall project of more fully becoming who you are" (Hooks 6). This performance, this revelation of self, beyond the repeated trauma and through words said to an Other, is precisely what is at stake in the two novels dealt with here.

If the elderly Mary-Mathilda is at the centre of the narrative web, spinning her own reminiscing, it is fourteen-year old Margaret who is the narrative consciousness of *Web of Secrets*, entangled within her own family's secrets and silences, with nobody telling her anything openly and directly:

'Hello... I am Margaret Saunders, the eavesdropper, sister of Adrienne and Guy Saunders, daughter of Stephanie Sheila Saunders and Charles Armenius Saunders, niece of Eileen Henrietta Gomez (...), once married to the late Stephen Herman Gomez, grandniece of Irma Augusta Chase once married to the late Frank William Chase, and also grandniece of the late Iris Ethel Robertson, the late Stanley Ian Robertson... Christopher Michael Robertson now residing in America... and Percival Matthew Robertson also residing in America, granddaughter of Kathleen Maud Harriot and the late John Albert Harriot, great granddaughter of the late Albert Fred Robertson and Hope Amelia Robertson, great great granddaughter of the faded-out Robert Gerald Hinckson and Cecilia Margaret Hinckson....' (Harris 40)

1960s Guyana, just like 1950s Bimshire, still smells of slavery and toils under the silence shrouding it. The first thirty pages of *Web of Secrets* are told from what seems to be an external focalizing perspective, through an apparently heterodiegetic voice, telling us about the difficult situation in which the

Saunders find themselves — Margaret’s grand-mother, Kathleen Harriot, sees cracks everywhere in her house, and speaks to people long dead, while Margaret has such an “overblown imagination” that her parents have considered sending her away. Then, at the end of chapter two, Margaret actually reveals herself: “I moved my eye away from the crack in the wall and quietly replaced the picture over it. My sister Adrienne was still asleep. I could hear my brother Guy tossing about in his bed. My mother was getting up. I could hear her. I am Margaret Saunders... Call me the eavesdropper” (30). The reader realises then that the perspective adopted in chapter two is that of the narrator-focalizer, Margaret herself, who then switches to an overt homodiegetic narration and internal focalisation, now and then delegating her narrative responsibilities to other characters.

The symptom of the discomfort, to use a euphemism, experienced by the Saunders family, is described by the first apparent narrator, a neighbour and family friend, Gladys – who is, as the reader understands later, overheard by Margaret: “(...) as I see it, Kathleen Harriot imagining she was seeing cracks was in fact ambushed by memories that were thought to be dead and buried and in fact were only lying low, so they resurfaced and then things started happening...” (7). The same word “ambushed” is also used later on in the novel to refer to enslaved Africans, “ambushed by white men,” thus making obvious the link between past and present troubles. Diegetically speaking, that coming to the surface is in fact prompted by the return of Margaret, Kathleen Harriot’s granddaughter, twenty years after her going to America.

After the first introductory chapter, the rest of the narrative is the consequent analepsis, starting off Margaret’s investigation and prying, launching into the spiral back into the past that will enable all the other family members to “see something else” – but everybody has yet to become convinced that “[a] place without a name can’t come to terms with itself” (15; 14).

Climbing down the spiral, hanging off the web, that is what the reader is in for when reading *Web of Secrets*. This is the same as in *The Polished Hoe*, when the revelation that Wilberforce is at the same time the brother and the son of Mary-Mathilda comes only at the end. The central secret of Denise Harris’s amazing novel is formulated by Kathleen Harriot only on the penultimate page: “Yes, I am not ashamed to confess that Compton whom I cherished... cherished... had been an incestuous child... the child of my sister... Iris... and my brother... Stan” (174). This is not the only secret that Margaret’s eavesdropping and Kathleen’s seeing of cracks will bring up to the surface: Margaret was never told about her father emigrating to America, nor about him being killed in Brooklyn by one of his jealous lovers, nor about her mother dying of cancer. Only hiding under beds and in cupboards (literally searching for the skeletons there); only eavesdropping will take Margaret closer to the truth, and force the other members of the family to accept to come closer to the truth as well and be free from the ghosts of the past. As Margaret puts it: “Now

if [my mother] told us more it might help her and us and it would also save me a lot of trouble, for then I wouldn't have to snoop around the way I do, trying to pick up the crumbs of their conversations. The crumbs only whet the appetite, I would like to tell you" (46). That metaphor of the incomplete meal, of the crumbs of conversation, of the "little bits and pieces they leave scattered here or there," is to be found throughout the novel as a leitmotif (60). Be it for her father's departure, her father's death or her mother's cancer, Margaret is always left to her own devices, never being told anything directly, always having to eavesdrop on and interpret the adults' conversations. But only she will be able to understand why her grand-mother sees cracks in the walls and why nobody believes her: "Out of the blue Grand-mother claimed she saw a crack and each morning she claims she sees another one and no one believes or listens... she's now telling my dead grand-father that the cracks are beginning to spill out all kinds of things..." (74).

What lurks in the cracks are all the untold family secrets and accumulated lies, and the house is finally throwing up all that its walls have absorbed, particularly the archetypal great-great-grand-parents' secret – Cecilia Margaret Hinckson was probably raped by a white planter, which is the reason why Margaret's great grand-mother, Hope Amelia Robertson, could pass for white. It is because of slavery's legacy and the internalized colour hierarchy that Hope Amelia's parents Robert Gerald Hinckson and Cecilia Margaret Hinckson did everything they thought was best for their daughter, including erasing themselves:

(...) for were they not proof of her history and was not this proof to be blanked out at all costs? And so for the sake of their daughter's future marriage, for the sake of future generations, they, from that moment, gradually began to erase themselves from her memory slate, leaving her in the hands of an old servant woman. They must have faded fast, she told her children later, for in a short while they became so inconspicuous that one could bump into them anywhere and not realise. (21-22)

Since Margaret, our diegetic narrator-focalizer, was named after that great great grand-mother, Cecilia Margaret Hinckson, uncovering secrets is a question of self-protection and survival. This is also an aspect of trauma that Caruth focuses on in her study, in a very interesting way: if the incomprehensibility of the ordeal one went through marks an event as traumatic, it is also one's survival to the ordeal that appears incomprehensible. In order to establish her survival process, reclaim the past and lay it to rest through the telling of her family's stories and history, Margaret is given the power to listen, just as Kathleen is.

Indeed, in *The Polished Hoe* and *Web of Secrets*, listening is as vital as speaking out, and both novels rely on a dialogic definition of self, along lines

defined by Mikhail Bakhtin when he speaks of the “interdependence of consciousness that is revealed during confession. I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another”(Problems 287).<sup>6</sup> Both narratives are indeed confessions, and strive towards the emergence of more confessions. In *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mathilda delivers her confession in the shape of a police statement, but her confession is multi-levelled – she has murdered Mr Bellfeels, admits to the murder, but it is also a plea for self-defence: she is the victim turned murderer who fought on behalf of the thousands before her.

In *Web of Secrets*, Margaret confesses her thoughts to the mysterious Arabella, a good part of the narrative being addressed to her. Arabella’s identity is unclear at first. Most of what Margaret discovers is narrated through this interpolated listener, who never interrupts the girl’s monologue, so much so that the reader wonders who or what Arabella is. The ambiguity is artistically maintained as late as possible, almost as late as the revelation of the central secret, until the reader is finally made to realise Arabella is neither a doll nor a mute child: she is a bird, a parrot or a macaw, brought back from South America, a place that Margaret refers to as El Dorado, a transparent allusion to Denise Harris’s father.<sup>7</sup> Instead of repeating the words people try to teach her, Arabella only remains mute, echoing the silence that is the Saunders’ mother tongue, and Margaret’s words to her are left to reverberate on her muteness.

Arabella plays a determining role in the novel: first, she is the only living being, apart from Kathleen Harriot, who listens to what Margaret has to say. Second, she is Margaret’s alter ego on two levels: Arabella has been wrenched away from her native environment, probably “ambushed” like the enslaved African peoples, and she has not been told or even consulted about anything. Margaret establishes the comparison in a striking way:

Do you know, Arabella, my mother never told me about my father, my own father, that he was leaving for good? Were you told that you would be sent into town, to Kathleen Harriot’s house, a place you never knew or dreamt of, not in your wildest dreams ? Did they tell you or were you just sent without much notice ? (58)

---

<sup>6</sup> One can also of course refer to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), and particularly the chapter “Discourse in the Novel” for a detailed analysis of dialogism and heteroglossia.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Hena Maes-Jelinek for having emphasized the numerous similarities between Wilson Harris’s and his daughter’s works, among which would be the relationships between human beings and animals, particularly birds (*The Dark Jester*), or the bringing back of the dead and the on-going dialogue that ensues (*Jonestown; The Four Banks of the River of Space, Carnival Trilogy*). H. Maes-Jelinek also mentioned that the passage when Margaret strikes Arabella and “she seemed to spurt into a flame of colours” is reminiscent of W. Harris’s “incandescent bird” in *The Dark Jester* (private email correspondence, November 23, 2004).

At the end of the novel, when Margaret is sent to America, the link not only with enslaved Africans but also with herself is quite clear: “I thought how you came here without any choice, the same way I am being sent without any choice (...) but perhaps I’ll meet someone in America who’ll talk to me the same way I’ve talked to you. Who knows? Someone to help me come to some kind of understanding...” (162). Transported beings understand each other.

The second level is when Arabella keeps quiet, Margaret asks her: “... or perhaps you’ve been hushed up...that’s it... Perhaps someone slapped you whoosh right across your mouth and told you to hush up... It’s either one or the other... tongue-tied or hushed up... right” (38)?<sup>8</sup> Arabella’s silence is of course symbolical of all the family’s silence, ironically underlined by the fact that Aunt Eileen brings back a parrot as a present for Margaret... What is the parrot exactly supposed to repeat when nothing ever gets said?

Dialogically speaking, it is quite amazing Denise Harris succeeds in characterizing Margaret through and against Arabella, a tongue-tied character who is not even human but still exists as a character nonetheless; Margaret is made to define herself against the linguistic absence of that other character. As Mary-Mathilda would not exist without Percy when turning her confession into a locus of control, Margaret does not exist without Arabella. The silence of the listener only makes the words of the speaker more resonant; both are closely interdependent, each validates the other – the construction of both narratives can be said to function along dialogical lines.

The apparently secondary characters also play an active part in the way the main protagonists are perceived by others and define themselves. For instance, *Web of Secrets* opens with Kathleen’s friend, Gladys, speaking to a friend of hers. Other chapters are composed of the neighbours’ or friends’ voices talking about the Saunders, raising the volume of surrounding voices but paradoxically making the overall silence better heard, and all the more resonant. Absent people are out there somewhere too, and sometimes come back; Gladys’s husband who spent five years in England, finally comes back. Dead people talk, and are talked to: whole chapters are made up of dialogues between Kathleen and John Harriot, her late husband; Iris haunts the nights of her sister Kathleen, obsessing her about the incestuous and seemingly adopted child. In *The Polished Hoe*, other voices are brought in, mingling with the three dominant voices of Mary-Mathilda, Percy and the narrator, the voices of characters who all played their parts however insignificantly. The text uses the whole range of narratological possibilities, direct speech, reported speech, free indirect speech, stream of consciousness; even the singing voices of Ella Fitzgerald or Paul

---

<sup>8</sup> That *whoosh* used here by Margaret when speaking to Arabella is echoed elsewhere in the novel through other onomatopoeias – *slap slap* when her mother is struck by her second husband; or when Kathleen is slapped across her face because she is believed to be hysterical; *slap slap* again when Margaret tries to bring her mother back to life, a moment that is reactivated later on when she strikes Arabella into freedom, forcing her out of her cage.

Robeson are overheard. Each in their own ways, both novels weave webs of secrets into webs of voices.

Thus, the very construction of both novels functions through patterns of echoes and resonances. We have just seen how the silences of one character help define the linguistic, psychological and mental constitution of another character – both novels are based on the interplay between silences and voices. Through Mary-Mathilda's and Margaret's homodiegetic voices, it is all the unheard voices of enslaved, transported, displaced and abused people that are being heard – all those unspeakable things unspoken to borrow Toni Morrison's words, which sound "like a sea of voice" as Kathleen Harriot says (Harris 164). It is also all the words that have not been spoken out to the generations of the victims' descendants that are here given the opportunity to be heard; Percy never heard about slaves on the island of Bimshire; nobody told Margaret about her great grand-mother's story, nor about her great-great-grand-parents "who had faded fast with no record of burial," somehow "blinking out the memory slate" (169).

If Edward Said's *Orientalism* was often felt by his critics as laying too much stress on "a totalising and unified imperialist discourse" (Gandhi 77), almost giving "a disablingly one-sided account of the colonial encounter" (81), Spivak's theory of subaltern silence was also often perceived as not allowing the emergence of self-formation and agency, of "dynamics of power and resistance" (Lomba 233). Gandhi even concludes her presentation of Spivak by saying, "Meanwhile, in the wings, Spivak's 'gendered subaltern' silently awaits further instruction" (93).

They do not need to await further instruction any longer. By lending ink and paper existence to characters like Margaret and Mary-Mathilda in *The Polished Hoe* and *Web of Secrets*, Harris and Clarke, through fiction and literature, provide a resounding response to the convolutions of theory. Because neither Mary-Mathilda nor Margaret have been told about what constitutes them as human beings, they will not let themselves be cast in the role of the silenced subaltern any longer. They appear in both books as the ones who tell, the ones who speak and make themselves heard and listened to. The "winding, if not circuitous" journeys of Mary-Mathilda and Margaret come to an end once they have revisited the silenced past, and exorcised the "bondage to the terrors of the witch-craft of the past..." (Harris 174). Only the polyphonic web of voices and words can counter-balance the iron curtain of secrets and silences.

## Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 1963. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Brooks, Peter. *Troubling Confessions – Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Clarke, Austin. *The Polished Hoe*. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Harris, Denise. *Web of Secrets*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1996.
- Hooks, Bell. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Misrahi-Barak, Judith. "Tilling the Caribbean Narrative Field with Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*." Paper delivered at the colloquium "Confessions," LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, May 2004, to be published in 2005.
- Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 1-34.
- Parry, Benita. "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse." *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1-2): 27-58.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak ?" *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (eds). London & New York: Routledge, 1995. 24-28.



## **“A VICTORY OF SORTS”: *All Thirteen Cents and Bitter, Too***

Sam Radithalo

*We defeated them, the enemy and their agents. Well, a victory of sorts. Now we have to live with the consequences. War is like that.*

### ***Introduction***

Democratic South Africa is in many ways an ordinary society with extraordinary stories emerging from its communities. The disintegration of “formal” apartheid brought by the 1994 elections has left in its wake a nation with a constitution that is admired for its democratic ethos following years of legalised racial inequality. Prior to 1994, the question that was constantly being asked of writers was what they would write about now that apartheid as a theme had been dismantled. How writers allied to the liberation struggle would react became a crucial arena of debate.

Since then, writers have had a good occasion to probe the interstices of interiority, complexity and ambiguity in South African human relations. The years leading up to ten years of democracy have seen an efflorescence of literature. And yet, by and large, such literature tended not to focus so much on dysfunctions of families but on larger socio-political issues. Two authors who break the mould and re-locate the quotidian traumas of contemporary South Africa within the families are Achmat Dangor, and Sello Duiker. Here the problems the authors delineate emanate both from the past that refuses to go away and a present that betrays the ideals of the past. For these writers, there is no clear break with the past, and the future is murky and uncertain. The victims are seen as caught in a maelstrom of a vicious circle of degeneration neither of their making nor choosing.

A note of caution needs to be inserted at this point: the question of South Africa as slotting un-problematically within the ambit of the postcolonial sphere is necessary. Critical debates over whether the country can be described as “postcolonial state” have been held since early in the decade of the 1990s, and even then no consensus has been arrived at. Academics such as Rosemary Jolly (1995), Leon de Kock (1993), Kelwyn Sole (1994; 1997), Annamaria Carusi

(1989; 1993), David Atwell (1993), Nick Visser (1997) and others have flogged the desirability of what is seen as metropolitan discourses that rob the local of specificities while inventing a broad front eclecticism supported by liberal ideologues or by radical populists.

<sup>1</sup> At any rate, one also takes cognisance of the critique by scholars such as Arif Dirlik (1994) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1996) in saying that the applicability or not of such theories needs careful plotting and not mimetic appropriations even where these are markedly ill-conceived and theorised for a particular locale.

For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I deploy Achille Mbembe's "postcolony" to unpack the South African literary representations of the family; it will be seen that the "postcolony" is not mutually exclusive from postcoloniality. It is more a matter of emphasis. Explaining the nature of the postcolony, Achille Mbembe remarks that:

[t]he notion of "postcolony" identifies a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence that the colonial relationship involves ... The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation. (102)

Mbembe notes further that the postcolony needs to be apprehended in two ways: (i) how the state *creates* its own world of meanings – a master code that, while becoming the society's primary central code, ends up by governing, perhaps paradoxically, the logics that underlie all other meanings within that society and (ii) how state power attempts to institutionalise this world of meanings as a "socio-historical world" and to make that world real, turning it into a part of people's common sense not only by instilling it into the minds of the *cibles*, or target population, but also by integrating it into the period's consciousness.<sup>2</sup> The present South African government's obsession with "order" and "discipline" dovetails with Mbembe's observations that echo Atieno Odhiambo's notion of democracy in the postcolony as necessarily "guided democracy". Artists observe

---

<sup>1</sup> See in this regard Kelwyn Sole, "Democratising Culture and Literature in a 'New South Africa': Organisation and Theory," 16-24.

<sup>2</sup> Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly", 103. Criticism of just this sort of *commandement* attitude follows the African National Congress's "quiet diplomacy" engagement concerning the Zimbabwean question. At the time of writing, the Congress of South African Trade Union had sent a mission to Zimbabwe that was rudely rebuffed, leading to discord within the Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, COSATU and SACP. See for instance Cristelle Terreblanche's report, "War of Words over Zimbabwe Situation Escalates", and Rhoda Khadalie's critique, "ANC Can Learn Something from John Voster", *The Sunday Independent* November 7, 2004: 3 and 9.

and describe a completely different, “nonsense” society. How writers perceive South African society reveals remarkable congruence of perception and vision aligned to it.

The South African academy has not been lax in seeking to understand and probe the various creative outputs from writers in the country. For instance, Kelwyn Sole has written about the manner in which South African prose fiction has flourished in the ten-year period between 1994 and 2004. In his assessment, the “narratives of reconciliation, multiculturalism, reconstruction, examination of memory and the redefinition of identity loom large in short stories and novels” (“Witness of Poetry” 24). Such prominence is the result of academic attention to the genre. Yet he notes further that it is poetry that has carried “the burden of intellectually questioning, emotionally dense and formally experimental impetus over the last ten years” (24-25). In his view, post-1990 South Africa is less tolerant of political narratives, and poets continue to stress most insistently the roles of social responsibility and political commentary, and to demonstrate these in practice (25). While I am broadly sympathetic to these views, I would hesitate to assert that fictional narratives have been *solely* concerned with reconciliation, multiculturalism and so forth at the expense of social responsibility and political commentary.

In their technical differences, both genres penetrate and enrich reality.<sup>3</sup> It is this essential difference that accounts for the exploratory nature of the three novels that I discuss. Here, too, there is a refusal to downplay the political role of the writer in a post-liberation scenario.<sup>4</sup>

Two contemporary texts, *Bitter Fruit* and *Thirteen Cents*, portray a rather harsh social and political reality of the South African milieu, one of political sterility and social deprivation in which not even family bonds survive the upheavals of the past, nor the present. For reasons that need careful plotting, it would seem as though neither of these two writers place much faith in old bonds and institutions beyond the need to come to terms with the past (Dangor) and the need to survive the present (Duiker; this thematic strain is also apparent in his second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*). For both writers, the present triumphalist spirit of ten years of democratic rule cannot be fictively celebrated. As Jean Meiring attests, “*Bitter Fruit* is a story about a so-called coloured family who discover – inevitably – that the new democratic South Africa is no Eden.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Es’kia Mphahlele, “Voices in the Whirlwind: Poetry and Conflict”, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Following Sole, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Meiring, “The Sweet Fruit of Literary Success”, *Thisday*, 21 October, 2004: 6. The “Ali family” is drawn from the author’s own mixed race lineage. In the interview with Meiring, he reveals, with relish, how his great-grandmother was a Dutch woman who married his paternal great-grandfather, an Indian. He was brought up in Newclare, a designated “coloured” community in Johannesburg, as a Muslim. As Meiring opines, contrary to the apartheid government’s mistaken projection of the coloured community as an obvious and largely monolithic ethnic category, it was as startlingly varied as a kaleidoscope, which accounted in part for Dangor’s political activism.

Dangor, as a former political activist, surely has baggage, while Duiker, as a former street child, has experiences that spill over to the text he writes. Both texts decry the damages done to the family and it is on this quintessential human unit that they lay claim to a damaged society. And the question to ask is: with the apparent death of the family, what sort of possible futures does contemporary writing envisage? In proclaiming the death of the family – at least fictively – these writers seem to grapple with the intangible underbelly of society that requires further research. In the ten years of democracy there is nothing to celebrate if the family unit is no longer viewed as an integral part of the social fabric.

### **Bitter Fruit**

*Bitter Fruit* starts by foregrounding the past, and through this past the present becomes fraught with difficulties for the Ali family. Silas Ali, a past political operative is the “fixer” in the Ministry of Justice in the transitional period prior to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In the present dispensation, it is his job “to ensure that everyone remained objective, the TRC’s supporters and its opponents, that they considered the law above all, and did not allow their emotions to sway them” (59). He is himself confronted by someone whose presence allows for a slow but inevitable disintegration of once close, but curiously un-loving family even as he fights his emotions for “objectivity” against what lies at the heart of the family’s dreaded secret. Silas runs into his nemesis, François du Boise, in a local supermarket while out shopping for groceries. The narrator sees the meeting of the two as inevitable:

It was inevitable. One day Silas would run into someone from the past, someone who had been in a position of power and had abused it. Someone who had affected his life, not in the vague, rather grand way in which everybody had been affected, as people said, because power corrupts even the best of men, but directly and brutally. Good men do all kinds of things they could not help doing, because they had been corrupted by all the power someone or something had given them. (7)

From this inevitable meeting, the past takes on a pungent and devastating form in the lives of the Ali family. The “inevitable” meeting is precisely the result of victim and perpetrator sharing the same space, the same geographic territory. Du Boise, a former security policeman in the South African Special Branch, causes Silas’s self-control to slip. Henceforth the repressed past comes back to haunt not only himself but his wife, Lydia, and their son, Mikey/Michael/Noor. Worse to come is the revelation of secrets that held their private

grief together, and as these are revealed the cement holding the family gives way to the pressure of the “inevitable”. In his years of married life and during the political struggle, Silas Ali had never confessed to being an activist to Lydia. This is seen as the first betrayal in the text, for Lydia hardly comprehends how he could withhold this information from her: “He had endangered their lives, hers and Mikey’s because of his secretiveness, his inability to trust her, his own wife” (54).

From this initial betrayal, Silas and Lydia co-habit a space of uncertainty, resentment, repressed anger and even more secretiveness. She sees his act as one of “ancient insensitivity, and [though] not deliberate” it is nevertheless cruel (60). They remain alienated from one another and this alienation is strengthened by Lydia’s perception that Silas’s friendship with Kate Jessup, a former underground counter-intelligence commander to Silas, is “a genuine bond,” to an extent where “Lydia’s dislike for Kate turned to detestation” (54-5). In this world of previously strong alliances, it is the private spaces and public ones where the battles for loyalty and companionship or even comradeship are fought, with further betrayals. Dangor paints, with grim determination, a world where betrayal becomes a currency, a sort of cannibalistic in-breeding and in-fighting all interlaced with genteel manners and the curious politics of transition. Mbembe’s observation of the state as creating its own code of meanings and institutionalising such meanings is pertinent here. What Dangor illustrates is the manner in which publicly ‘disciplined cadres’ of the movement turn on one another while representing a “united front” for the target population.

Coming from the supermarket, Silas informs Lydia about who he had run into, and she begins a litany of why she feels he ought to have killed him if he were man enough, a rather difficult proposition given Silas’s entrapment in the politics of a job, of trying to “reconcile the irreconcilable” (30). Lydia, enraged, mocks him, saying: “If you were a real man, you would have killed him on the spot, right there in the mall, splatter his brains against a window, watch his blood running all over the floor,” since “[h]e took your wife, he fucked your wife, [and] made you listen to him doing it” (19). Disconsolate, Lydia dances barefoot on the shards of a broken beer bottle and nearly bleeds to death. Here “reconciliation” as a national creed is undermined for the horrific deeds perpetrated on the victims.

What the above process of disintegration shows is a microcosm of a society coming to terms with living in close proximity with former combatants and the impact of the political struggles on families. Families begin, in the transitional period, to re-examine what the past struggles did to their moral, communal and values’ fabrics. Du Boise in this instance is a catalyst activating long-held suspicions, resentments and other secrets between husband and wife. As Lydia lies recovering in hospital, Silas himself collapses in sheer exhaustion and the stress of burying uncomfortable thoughts in “constructions” (46). As he convalesces, the repressed returns to haunt him, in this instance the very person

who should be his pride and joy, Mikey. In a dream, he allows his fears to surface: “A distant fear came back to Silas, one that he rarely allowed to take shape in his mind – *Mikey is not my son, not physically* (83, author’s emphasis).

The primordial fear Silas dreads, like the rape of Lydia that they steadfastly refuse to discuss or even be counselled, haunts his dreams. It is Lydia, at the conclusion of the act of rape, who knows that she is pregnant with Du Boise’s child but maintains a prudent silence over the years (108).

What may be termed “the South African rape complex” is as old as the founding of the colony itself, and we need refer to Andre Brink’s *A Chain of Voices* (1982) to refract this complexity; miscegenation is part of the country’s intricate complexities.<sup>6</sup> Dangor explores and brings to the fore the notion, expressed by Sabine Sielke, of rape as part of the dominant master narratives that are nationally specific:<sup>7</sup>

... transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts. Fictions of rape belong with the allegorical master narratives Frederic Jameson considers “a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension about our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality (*Political Unconscious* 34) ... I want to insist that talk about rape has its history, its ideology, and its dominant narratives – narratives that, as I argue, are

---

<sup>6</sup> I borrowed the term “rape complex” from Sielke’s definition of the “Southern rape complex”, which she defines, and explains, thus:

...the “Southern rape complex” according to which the presumed sexual violation of white beauty by black beast figured the “rape” of the South during Reconstruction and legitimized retaliation through violence. At the same time, this complex inflicted a fear of rape that, like the threat of lynching, kept a subjugated group – women just in the process of fighting for suffrage – subjugated (Hall, *Revolt* 153). Cited and recontextualized one century later, this register’s rhetoric frames present conflicts by past interpretations and reinforces “solutions” such as segregation. More than that: since the metonymic drift of the paradigm of rape and lynching has dominated the discourse on sexual violation at and of the borders of race, class, and ethnicity, the objects of such violations are left behind in the debris of displacement ... Accordingly, it does not suffice to capitalize on rape, as Leslie Fiedler does as “an image of true archetypal resonance” (“Pop” 91) or to characterize the “symbolic” dimension of (female) rape fantasies, as does Molly Haskell, as “archetypal rather than individual” (“Rape Fantasy” 92), thereby dehistoricizing rape. Instead, I want to insist that talk about rape has its history, its ideology, and its dominant narratives – narratives that, as I argue, are nationally specific, even if they rely on widely established textual predecessors (such as myth) and patterns (such as the “othering” of sexual violence. (*Reading Rape* 1-2)

<sup>7</sup> This questioning of “national narratives” is to my mind begun by Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (2000).

nationally specific, even if they rely on widely established textual predecessors (such as myths) and patterns (such as the “othering” of sexual violence). (2)

Faced with having a wife who was raped because of his activities and a son whom he rejects at the unconscious level, Silas embodies the very contradictions of a nation in denial: hemmed in by the law that the new order upholds while watching the past becomes a living nightmare for himself and his family. Indeed, matters are not helped by Lydia and Mikey’s physical attraction for each other – nor her instinctual knowledge that Mikey sleeps with Kate for the fun of it - and Silas’s intuitive knowledge of this matter. Coming home from the office on a rather depressing day, Silas does well to stay out of the house for an hour or so while Mikey and Lydia recover from their near incestuous relationship: “Then [Mikey] senses another presence. Silas is outside, staring morosely at the house, unable to walk up to the door, slip the key into the latch, push it open” (130). Through a careful process of foregrounding, the reader has been alerted to exactly this sort of possibility, with hints and oblique references to Lydia’s near-obsessive desire to smell the child-turned-teenager (57; 82; 146; 150). This is the point at which these members of the Ali family consciously avoid each other, leading furtive lives and keeping contact to the minimum:

Somehow, out of expediency through collusion, because of the sheer need to re-establish the surface of their lives, things returned to normal. From the moment that Silas opened the door ... they established a code of silence, a set of mutual understandings – Silas and Lydia, Lydia and Mikey, Mikey and Silas – striking separate compacts with each other: whatever had happened on *that* day would not be spoken about or even hinted at. (136)

While Mikey’s and Lydia’s desire is never acted upon, Dangor does force the reader to consider the re-figuration of the rape-incest as a possible trope in the post-apartheid novel in the relationship between Johan Viljoen, a former exiled activist and his daughter, Vinu, a friend to Mikey (185-188). In this instance, both families are in a state of disintegration, and Mikey drops out of university, joins a (fundamentalist) religious sect and seeks out his mother’s rapist. Kate, who is in the intelligence community, obtains the file about Du Boise for Michael. At this point Michael knows he is (one of) the bitter fruit(s) of the title and fatally shoots his biological father after reading of Lydia’s rape in her diary (114). Dangor here violates the “cult of secrecy” (Sielke 142) about family conflicts held in check while refusing the “cult of reconciliation” that Silas requests of Lydia (19). For Lydia, going to the TRC to lament her violation would have been very painful, since even her extended family is not privy to the truth about Michael’s conception (117). Silas, the man who had lived for the

struggle, epitomizing the stoicism of “disciplined cadre” demanded by the party hierarchy, is prepared for the whole “truth” to be publicly aired (143-145). This comes back to what Lydia sees as his “monumental insensitivity” towards his family and herself.

The text ends on a surreal rupture. At a party hosted by Silas’s friend Julian Solomon to mark Silas’s fiftieth birthday, Lydia takes on a lover from the dance floor and liberates herself from Silas’s past. What makes it seem surreal is that she makes love to the young João Dos Santos Honwana with the knowledge that Silas (and possibly Michael) had seen them coupling (249). Michael leaves the country for India. The last we read of Lydia is as a traveller en route to Cape Town and hopefully a new life, freed of the burden of being a mother-wife-lover-rape victim. Silas, passed over for the ambassadorship to France, remains in the now truly empty house describing himself self-deprecatingly as “n bushie [Bushman] from the townships” who contemplates flight: “Perhaps it was time to go, leave this place, this house, this country and its contorted history?” (200). The bitterness engendered by the past conflicts survives and determines the present disarray of the Ali family. The family in Dangor’s vision lacks intimacy, and their sharing the space of “home as hearth” is nullified by the past. It is a home without private lives, without a history of intimacy. In the last scenario, with Silas sitting in the progressive gloom of the living room, this is a home that cannot sustain public life because it is unable to infuse into it the values of honour, integrity, compassion, intelligence, and creativity of a private space as home.<sup>8</sup>

### Thirteen Cents

The current South African literary scene is littered with works that make issues pertaining to sexuality explicit. This “expository” literature started with *The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr.<sup>9</sup> While there is nothing new in this (since sex matters had been part of the literature for some time), what does come as a surprise is the level of explicitness that writers now explore, as, for example, in “Mrs Plum”, a novella by Es’kia Mphahlele where sexual relations are between the Mrs. Plum of the title and her dog, Malan. It is well to remember the level of prudishness the past censorship boards used to display, banning outright texts that explored such topics. While such a concern is not the subject of this paper, the problematic of sexuality as a currency to those that do not have nuclear families is the subject of the text, *Thirteen Cents* (2000). In this text, Duiker paints a very poignant and painful picture of what the absence of a family means

---

<sup>8</sup> Here I paraphrase Njabulo Ndebele’s formulations from “A Home for Intimacy” in *Mail & Guardian*, 26 April 1996.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo Ndebele, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* by Sello Duiker and *Rights of Desire* by Andre Brink.



to young lives having to fend for themselves against the backdrop of Cape Town. The opening itself foregrounds the violence that allows for children to be rendered without family simply because of the deficiencies of the parents. The protagonist, Azure, reflects on how the street sellers yell at him without any knowledge of his past:

But like I said I am almost a man. I can take care of myself. '*Julle fokken mannetjies moet skool toe gaan,*' the fruit-sellers yell. It's easy for them to say that. I lost my parents three years ago. Papa was bad with money and got Mama in trouble. The day they killed them I was away at school. I came back to our shack only to find them in a pool of blood. That was three years ago. That was the last time I went to school. (2; author's emphasis)

To a reader, there are many questions that immediately arise out of this description of the parents' demise and the lack of schooling on Azure's part. Interlaced with the scene of killing is the idea of masculinity: "I am almost a man" thus able to "take care of myself". The arrest of childhood development to a middling adulthood here is striking. Also, the question of no more schooling in itself suggests a number of important (cultural) markers: lack of the bonds of the extended family Azure does not even wait for the funeral. So while the father is the cause of the family disintegration, the results stay with Azure. Strikingly, he is able to write off this episode without major psychological effects (or so he wants us to believe). Asked how the discovery of his parents made him feel, he is short-handed about it: "My friend Bafana can't believe that I saw my dead parents and didn't freak out. But I told him. *I cried and then it was over.* No one was going to take care of me" (2, emphasis added). Taking care of himself takes priority over mourning and seeking help. Henceforth the child-narrator must earn a living, helping park cars in Cape Town (3). This part of the narrative makes for grim reading of the lives lived by street children and the callous behaviour meted out to them. Azure's work is in itself a reminder of the lack of gainful employment for the city's flotsam, pointing to a larger societal problem of unemployment, which links up with criminality, prostitution and gangsterism. From such reading covering only the opening two chapters, we realize that Azure is no longer a child (in the real sense) and begin to follow his daily path of survival, from needing shoes, food, shelter and a sense of belonging. Initially, he starts off needing cash, and so "turns tricks":

I walk further along the beach to the moffie part of the beach. I sit on a bench and wait for a trick. I sit a long while before I hear someone whistling. Soon I'm walking back with a white man to his flat. When we get inside the lift he tells me to take off my shoes. *I know the routine.* Once inside his flat he will expect me to strip off at the door.

We go in and I begin to take off my clothes at the kitchen door. (8; emphasis added)

From the extract we realize the extent of survival Azure has internalised. He is knowledgeable about what is expected of him, and all of the transaction is without fuss (except the payment). Azure has learned not to ask questions, not to ask for names, to simply recognize the type of client he has and comply. He learns to survive the “mean” streets through guile and the sexual cannibalism prevalent in the city. He pays “protection money” to a pimp, Allen, who only understands money and traps Azure in a relationship of utter dependence (16). Aside from Allen, he has to contend with rich children who come up with drugs at Sea Point requesting to spend the night with him for “a totally outdoor experience ... to get the whole experience unedited” (21-22).

What Duiker does with these opening sequences is to lay bare the underbelly of a picturesque, beautiful city as a grim reminder that appearances can be deceiving; the city’s hoboes, street children and prostitutes also inhabit it, sometimes forming uneasy alliances in the face of a rampant commercialisation (25-27). He paints a picture of street children at the mercy of drug pushers, dealers, and ruthless gangsters who, having emerged from South Africa’s prisons, continue where they left off. The problem Azure has is that, in a moment of indiscretion induced by cannabis, he calls a local tough “n kaffir” (19). This allows Duiker to problematise Cape Town and its inhabitants, reinscribing the problems of ethnic orientations and the city’s apartheid legacy. It is a problem not only historically determined, but physically and psychically. The hierarchies in the ganglands as controlled by “Coloureds” and are not about to come down, and Azure’s real problem is that, contrary to the norm, he has the blue eyes that Gerald yearns for. From here on he is afraid to be captured by Gerald or his friends, and knows that the former is an urban predator (described as “T-rex”) (61).

When Azure is eventually “captured”, it is not because he did not make a run for it: he actually turns himself over to Gerald because he cannot survive the city without first atoning for his indiscretion. He is beaten senseless by Sealy and Richard thugs who work for Gerald. He is then taken to hospital and held as a prisoner who is starved, fed, then sexually molested before being accorded an audience with Gerald (38-57). It is here, at this meeting, that Duiker deepens and re-works the reality of the text, for Gerald demands total allegiance from Azure (now called “Blue”) as he now “owns” him as chattel. As property, “Blue” must make money in any other way for Gerald and is told: “Everybody has a job here. So go and do whatever it is you do but just be back at five” (57).

Given his life experiences thus far, it is correct to say Azure has aged far beyond his chronological years. Thirteen, an age when innocence is discarded for the teen years, finds him already “older”, as one friend comments (62). The emphasis on growing up fast highlights the necessity of acquiring street smarts

for his survival in the absence of parents, siblings and the extended family. In effect, he internalises the urban strain of “learning to live with fear” (68). Confusingly, he learns from Gerald that his dead parents were killed so that he could be “taught how to survive” on his own (71). When Joyce filches his money, and in the face of unremitting cruelty from Gerald, he grows truly desperate and runs off to the mountain and joins other “bergies”, people who live on the mountain (112).

Duiker, unlike Dangor before him, ends the novel on an apocalyptic note where Azure/Blue sees the destruction of Cape Town by giant waves and explosions as he stands on top of the mountain (160-164). Although we are somehow prepared for the bizarre by the death of Gerald (134), this sort of ambiguous ending in either hallucinations and/or magical realism, while germane, makes it difficult to pursue the story of the child-narrator beyond the present text (unlike Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, and *Songs of Enchantment*, for instance). Such an ending might seem contrived, defeating the beauty of the foregoing text because it negates closure to what has been written in the social-realist mode. But this is only on first impressions. In her astute study of Mervyn Peake, Lesley Marx, as though commenting on Duiker and Dangor’s novels, observes that the artist is called upon to do a double take on reality:

It can be seen that the continuum of possible responses from enchantment to disenchantment is an image of the artist’s dilemma ... the act of focusing solely on the beautiful and ignoring that which gives pain can lead to disillusionment; on the other hand, the act of confronting pain can lead to mute horror. And yet, the artist, by definition, is the one who must sustain the tension, aware of the pleasure and pain at the same time, of order and chaos, of beauty and the grotesque, of the mask and the skull it hides. (11)

While the theme of disillusion is stronger in Dangor’s text, the freakish and the theme of disenchantment runs through Duiker’s text. In Marx’s assessment, this is termed “a nonsense universe” which provokes an uneasy laughter that modulates into a sense of horror as the dark world of fear, ruin and chaos around us is made apparent (1). For a first novel, Duiker’s text is a gripping reading of contemporary post-apartheid society. In a real sense, therefore, South Africa is different and yet not so different from other societies emerging out of a traumatic past, given what the sensitive points of such societies record. Its constitutional democracy and respect for the rule of law provide the matrix for order and coherence. It is in the social practices, however, that the order is rendered chaotic, and makes nonsense of the notion that in a way this is a “special type” of society.

### Conclusion

In his text *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe makes a startling claim that, in our times, “the African experience appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of ‘human nature’” (1). Part of the problem that Africa belabours is precisely that it does not divest itself of such negative perceptions. The protracted and thoroughgoing manner in which Mbembe researches the postcolonial offers a variety of postcolonial theory that is distinct to the continent. South Africa is undergoing rapid changes in many political, social and economic spheres. While it does not necessarily fall within the template wrought by Mbembe, it comes close to it through state-created codes of meanings that are now being deployed and made into a fetish: “the signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the *commandement* produces are meant not merely as symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is forbidden to depart from or challenge” (103). Worrying convergences of such formulations abound; contestations on identity, a code of meanings sanctioned by the state, and a centralisation of power being the more obvious manifestations.

Writers, ever sensitive to seismic changes, detect these manifestations earlier than many of their compatriots. Hence, in South Africa, the literary outpouring by fiction writers has been to question, explore and attempt to disaggregate such changes. *Bitter Fruit* revisits the issue of family disintegration, betrayal of former comrades, the loss of intimacy. Dangor strives to show how the centralised notion of a “rainbow nation” shows fractures in how it is not possible for all to manage a single identity but that there is a need to manage several identities as the character Michael does, contracting out of the South Africanness that entraps his stepfather, that genders his mother. *Thirteen Cents*, on the other hand, explores the underbelly of a South African picturesque city to show the unpalatable side to it, rendering South Africa a “nonsense universe” for some of its peoples. It is a harrowing read that is unsparing of the disintegration of social mores and values, and renders African *ubuntu/botho* insufficient to rescue Azure/Blue from a life of penury. It highlights the vulnerability of children in a world that seems to have gone upside down, thus its ending in a phantasmagoric destruction of the city illustrates the “dark circus” in which the lives of street children are enmeshed. These texts, in their diverse ways, return us to Caudwell’s assertion that novels are the expression of that which writers seek, not in their unity in society but in their differences, of their search for freedom in the pores of society. If the two novels seek the domesticity and intimacy one associates with the family, they perhaps fail precisely because

in democratic South Africa “the family” cannot be fictively celebrated in the first decade of democracy.

## Works Cited

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" Padmini Mongia (ed.) *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. London, New York, Sydney & Auckland: Arnold, 1996: 55-71.
- Attwell, David. "Introduction." *Current Writing* 5 (2) 1993: 1-6.
- Brink, Andre. *A Chain of Voices*. London: Faber and Faber, 1982.
- Carusi, Annemaria. "The Postcolonial as a Problem for Political Action." *Journal of Literary Studies* 7 (3/4) 1993: 228-238.
- . "Post, Post and Post. Or, Where is South African Literature in All This?" *Ariel* 20(2) 1989: 24-34.
- Caudwell, Christopher. *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*. Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1956.
- Dangor, Achmat. *Bitter Fruit*. Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001.
- De Kock, Leon. "Postcolonial Analysis and the Question of Critical Disablement." *Current Writing* 5 (2) 1993: 44-69.
- Dirlik, Arif. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20 1994: 238-356.
- Duiker, Sello K. *Thirteen Cents*. Cape Town: David Philips, 2000.
- Higgins, Lynn A and Brenda R. *Silver Rape and Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Hunter, Eva. "Probing the Roots of Post-Apartheid Trauma." *The Sunday Independent* December 28, 2003.
- Jackson, Maureen. "Winnie as a Symbol of the Burden of Waiting." *The Sunday Independent* September 21, 2003.
- Jolly, Rosemary. "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa." *PMLA* 110.1 (1995): 17-29.
- Marx, Lesley Glen. "The Dark Circus: An Examination of the Work of Mervyn Peake, with Reference to Selected Prose and Verse." M.A. Thesis. University of Cape Town, 1983.

- Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001.
- Morphet, Tony. "Cultural Settlement: Albie Sachs, Njabulo Ndebele and the Question of Social and Cultural Imagination." *Pretexts* 2 (1) 1990: 94-103.
- Mphahlele, Es'kia. *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela – A Novel*. Claremont: David Philip, 2003.
- . "A Home for Intimacy." *Mail & Guardian* 26 April 1996.
- Odhiambo, Atieno. "Democracy and the Ideology of Order in Kenya." *The Political Economy in Kenya*. Michael G. Schatzberg (ed.) New York: Praeger, 1987: 177-201.
- Osofisan, Femi. "Theatre and the Rites of 'Post-Negritude. Re/membering: Arguments from the Perspectives of a Contemporary Playwright.'" Mimeograph. *Conference on Identity and Conflict in Africa*. Leeds Studies Unit, University of Leeds. September 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> 1997.
- Sampson, Anthony. *Mandela – The Authorised Biography*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Sielke, Sabine. *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Sole, Kelwyn. "The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculations, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa." *New Formations* no. 45 Winter 2001-2002: 24-53.
- . "Democratising Culture and Literature in a 'New South Africa': Organisation and Theory." *Current Writing* 6 (2) 1994: 1-37.
- Visser, Nick. "Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and its Appropriations in South Africa." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 27 1997: 79-94.





## WAYS AHEAD

### Family and Transformation in Mda's *Ways of Dying* and Taylor's *He Tangi Aroha*

Irene Visser

It is no chance matter we are discussing, but how one should live.  
Plato, *Republic*

Apirana Taylor's *He Tangi Aroha* (1993) and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) have attracted considerable attention and critical acclaim since their publication, and may be considered important works of mid-nineties New Zealand and Maori and South African literature respectively.<sup>48</sup> Both novels are set in the contemporary historical period of the early 1990s; times of social turmoil and political instability. In representing the actual political and social conditions of their times, the novels convey an urgent sense of the need for change – a feeling that will strongly resonate with readers who, like myself, have witnessed, even from the other side of the globe, the difficulties and the suffering brought about by these transitional periods. Both novels engage with the question – no “chance matter” – of how one should live. Both sensitively explore the life situations of their protagonists in transition eras of social upheaval and political unrest, delineating not only the seemingly insurmountable obstacles they are faced with, but also, in their final pages, suggesting possibilities towards change and transformation: ways ahead. In this process, the family – in a new configuration – is given a central position in both novels.

*He Tangi Aroha* and *Ways of Dying* have more common ground: they are also similar in their lightness of touch, their deceptively simple style and their unobtrusive philosophical questioning. Seen from the perspective of post-

---

<sup>48</sup> The authors, I feel, have much in common. While writing from different cultural traditions, and while each author addresses specific aspects of his national culture, they both investigate the personal and social implications of the political situations with sensitivity and humour. Both authors, too, are multi-talented: they are not only novelists, but also write poetry, short stories and plays; Taylor is an acclaimed actor, and both Mda and Taylor are painters. Both have taken part in international tours and exchange programmes and have been called cultural ambassadors of their nations.

colonial literary studies, too, they share a large area of common ground. Maori literature and black South African literature in English both have a similar historic context of protest and struggle against white oppression and racism. This common ground may seem less important now, perhaps, than the differences between their political and social struggles (also in view of the difference in numbers of population), but we should bear in mind that at the time of these novels' creation and publication, this common ground was frequently emphasised, in particular by Maori writers and political activists. During the 1980s Maori political activists often pointed out that racism in New Zealand was similar to the racism inherent in the South African apartheid system. Donna Awatere-Huata, for example, in her much respected political statement *Maori Sovereignty* (1984) explicitly refers to "the connection between apartheid and racism and colonisation here" (qtd. in Ihimaera 96).<sup>49</sup>

The racism and oppression of the political and social context is the backdrop to both Mda's *Ways of Dying* and Taylor's *He Tangi Aroha*. Both novels, I wish to argue in this paper, pose that through the transformation of the family, personal lives find new directions, and that from the transformed family, as a basic social force, will come positive change for society as a whole. In suggesting this change, it is important to note, both novels place great value on the continuation of tradition, in particular through the mysterious and potent forces of traditional art forms. Transmitted through the ancestors, these spiritual and creative forces enable the transformation of the family into a locus of renewed hope, creativity and social engagement. Striking is the similarity between these novels' visions (presented in their final pages) of a way towards a hopeful future, against the backdrop of continuing material deprivation and social and political turbulence. The last section of my article briefly explores some aspects of the concept of transformation and their implications for my reading of "family and transformation" in these novels.

In his 1994 collection of essays subtitled *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Njabulo S Ndebele reviews the situation of black writing in South Africa during the 1980s and formulates his hopes for a new South African literature of the 1990s. These essays are now generally considered important documents on the situation of black South African literature in the 1980s and later. Ndebele here states that South African fiction during the early postapartheid era is politically most potent *not* when it continues to use formulaic protest literature as "a weapon in the struggle against apartheid" but when it seeks in the details of ordinary life new possibilities of understanding and action (169). Mda's *Ways of Dying*, in

---

<sup>49</sup> Donna Awatere-Huata here expresses the need for Maoris to make Pakehas (white New Zealanders) aware of this parallel racism by protesting against the Springbok Rugby Tour of the early 1980s. Ripeka Evans also points out this parallel: "the white New Zealander is the same stock as the white South African. They have lived with the hypocrisy about the injustices to us for so long they can't see the contradictions" (qtd. in Ihimaera 91).

dramatising its protagonists' search for meaning and action through the mundane actions of their everyday lives, is particularly effective as a response to Ndebele's call for a new postapartheid literature. These everyday lives are characterised by violence—in numerous appalling manifestations. This is the violence of the early 1990s transition period of the early postapartheid era in South Africa; a time of enormous turmoil; of numerous 'ways of dying' through violence in many forms, from black-on-black violence to police violence to mutu killings and "necklace" murders. It is a time in which a peaceful death is rare, and in which the deaths that people have become "accustomed to," as Mda's narrator tells us, "are deaths of the gun, and the knife, and torture and gore. We don't normally see people who die of illness or of old age" (157).

In this novel, then, Mda gives shape to what Ndebele in his 1994 publication outlined as the task for the new literature for South Africa; to explore how and why people can survive under these extreme conditions and to understand their "mechanisms of survival and resistance" (160).

The same exploratory function may be argued for Taylor's book *He Tangi Aroha*. Here, too, violence is a catalyst in the process of social and political change. The time is 1990; the threatening shadow of the Gulf war is the story's backdrop. The way ahead seems dark. As Taylor's protagonists Tawhaki and Kate tell each other, "There seems to be no hope or light at all for the world" (195). The specific problems of the Maoris at this historic moment, and what is termed their "poverty-stricken and bleak future" are dealt with in detail in various narrative strands, but they are given a common causal connection. All of the troubles of the present are seen as deriving from the Maori history of colonial oppression. In Tawhaki's thinking:

[t]he destruction of Maori society began when the Pakeha arrived. Once the Pakeha began to outnumber the Maori they set up a government and a system in which they had all the power and control. Little, if any notice was ever taken of Maori aspirations. It was all destruction destruction and drunkenness and beatings up and broken families and loss and wondering and mangling and incest and weakening, no more warrior all broken down broken down broken smashed, he yelled and raged inside. (144)

An urgent need for change runs like a refrain through the novel; it is felt by all the novels' characters, regardless of race, age or gender. Most Paheka characters in this novel, too, desire recognition of Maori rights and improvement of their situation (the racist and repressive Pakeha position is present, but is not foregrounded). These, then, are times of ongoing oppression and political uncertainty, but also transitional times, in which processes of change are set in motion.

The violence of the period around 1990 in Maori urban community is also the subject of Alan Duff's novel *Once Were Warriors* (1990). Heim writes: Taylor sees this violence in broader context of "a rather global systemic violence that shows itself in unemployment, pollution and war" and speaks of the social deprivation of the urban Maori as a "manifestation of structural violence" (52). The violence is self-reproductive, as Heim states; it is a systemic violence—that of "institutionalised racism (in the education and legal systems and in government policies), of unemployment and a history of domestic violence" (53).

Yet this view of the violence of the early 1990s as self-reproductive is not the view ultimately supported by Taylor's *He Tangi Aroha*. Both this novel and Mda's *Ways of Dying* present these violent times as transition eras, times of potential transformation. In reporting on transformation processes, South African author and journalist Antjie Krog writes that transformation processes follow a pattern: there is a specific agent for bringing about change, and this follows a specific route. Several phases may be identified in which transformation takes place, and first of all, resources have to be unlocked; society must be opened up to all who have previously been excluded from it. This is a time of great unrest and violence. This indeed is the situation in both Mda's and Taylor's novels: the early 1990s liberalization of resources. In both novels the social unrest, violence and political and personal power struggles testify to this first phase in the transformational process. About the South African situation, Krog writes:

More people were killed between 1990 and 1994 than during the previous ten years. On the one hand, there was violence; on the other, a constitution was being drawn up to create a new shared vision for the country, a statement about who we are and what kind of society we want to live in. The opening up of resources is always accompanied by violent tensions. (127)

Set in times of transition, both novels share a sense of temporary historic indeterminacy, which is mirrored in the protagonists' life situations: Taylor's Tawhaki, recently separated from his wife and children, does not feel at home in his new life; he attends a carving class for a while, but has no job prospects; he has taken to drink. Mda's Noria lives in the illegal settlement, in a shack which may be burned or bulldozed down overnight, while Toloki sleeps in a waiting room, keeping his few possessions in a shopping cart. This waiting room is emblematic of the times; here people are waiting for change to happen; for their lives to take on new meaning; for – as Mda explicitly formulates it – "a new way to live."

In both books, then, the atmosphere of indeterminacy is borne out by the temporariness of the life situations of the protagonists, who live alone, outside of

any familial context. As such, their lives are stagnant; unconnected to a future and cut off from the past. Western readers, such as my students and myself, tend to interpret this as a situation in which characters can find themselves; realise their potential and become autonomous individuals. We respond in this way, I think, because mainstream Western culture, and Dutch culture in particular, embraces a literature that has individualism as its central tenet. This is a realist literature in the Western twentieth-century tradition that, as J. M. Coetzee aptly puts it, concerns itself “with individual strivings and individual destiny. Toward tradition it is hostile: it values originality, self-founding.”<sup>50</sup> In the books under discussion, however, individualism and self-founding are *not* the answer to the needs of the protagonists, which are succinctly expressed in Mda’s recurring question of how to live.

How to live in these times of transition and violence is the central question in these novels. It is the age-old question of literature, and, according to philosopher Martha Nussbaum, a significant question in the area in which philosophy and literature meet (23). Nussbaum, in her *Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), regrets that contemporary literary theory (i.e. theory after deconstruction) is not open to these life questions, and argues persuasively that these larger questions can be and should be approached through the study of literature, because literature represents complex particular cases (21). In posing the question of how to live, Mda invites literary criticism that does not evade the issue of this life question, while Taylor, too, implicitly poses this question throughout the narrative. Both novels raise this life question in the context of extreme uncertainty, in which the first challenge seems to come to terms with the violence of the times.

The answer to the question is first sought in mourning. Toloki, in *Ways of Dying*, has constructed his own official function of professional mourner, which we see him perform at the funeral of Noria’s small son. It may be argued that Toloki has taken for himself a similar function to that of the traditional *iimbongi* or praise singers, who, according to professor Sizwe Satoyo of the Xhosa Department at the University of Cape Town, are “go-betweens between a leader and his people” and must criticise and praise the leader in the best interests of the people (qtd. in Krog 207). Though Toloki has no official status and is certainly no traditional *iimbongi*, his mourning can be considered as his criticism of the political leadership and their inability to prevent the many ways of dying

---

<sup>50</sup> Coetzee’s remark is made in a more critical vein than is apparent from the intext-citation. In his words, the realist novel concerns itself “with individual strivings and individual destiny. Toward tradition it is hostile: it values originality, self-founding. It imitates the mode of the scientific case study or the law brief rather than the hearthside fairytale. And it prides itself on a language bereft of ornament, on the steady, prosaic observation and recording of detail. It is just the kind of vehicle one would expect Europe’s merchant bourgeoisie to invent in order to record and celebrate its own ideals and achievements” (192).

of the nation. Also, Toloki's actual manner of mourning resembles the ways of the *iimbongi*, who, as Satoyo explains, reaches a "kind of trance by making a range of evocative sounds, which allow him to reach the deepest levels of consciousness and abilities, a communal pool of sorts" (Krog 207). Thus, tapping into the communal pool of sorrow and suffering, Toloki contributes meaningfully to the mourning processes that go on ceaselessly at the cemeteries. Toloki's mourning, in its blend of selfless giving and communal sorrow, is similar to the mourning referred to in Taylor's title. *He Tangi Aroha*, as is explained, means "weep for love" and "a (mourning) song for love" (216). Through Noria's eyes, we are given an understanding of Toloki's apparently eccentric utterances as his attempt at expressing mourning and love. She admires him for his self-chosen function, wondering whether this may indeed be the answer to the question of how to live.

Yet it is Noria herself who provides a second, better answer to the question of how to live. Mourning, as a necessary but transitional moment, provides only a temporary answer. Toloki realises that not he, but Noria knows the answer to how to live (169). Noria, still young and strong, could have made a good living for herself, but instead she spends her days helping Madhimbaza, who is called the "twilight mum" of the settlement, who has been taking care of abandoned and orphaned children for the past fifteen years. The answer to how to live is found in care for children, in providing hope for their future, as a reversal of the familial and parental exploitation of Noria's and Toloki's childhood.

The answer to the question of how to live, then, is to be found in connectedness with the community. However it can expressly *not* be found in the re-installment of the traditional family structure. In Mda's book in particular it is striking to see how sharply the traditional family structures are rejected. Both Noria and Toloki have been severely traumatised by family life grounded in traditional patriarchal structures, which allow men to be domineering, self-centred and cruel. Toloki's father Jwara hated his own son for his ugly looks, and humiliated him at every occasion; Noria's wealthy father Xesibe starved his daughter and grandson and drove them from his doorstep; Noria's husband Napu, by far the worst of fathers, kidnapped his son, employed the child as a beggar, starved him and chained him to a post, until, on one of his drinking bouts, he simply forgot the child, who was eaten by dogs. The fathers in this novel, then, are particularly tyrannical, making the critique of traditional African patriarchal families the sharpest criticism in the book.

In Taylor's novel, too, male domestic violence is a central theme. There are several accounts of child battering in various stories, as for instance, in Rata's narrative. His father is the destroyer of his sons' lives; two of Rata's brothers gone "strange in their heads" because of the beatings they got as children. Rata struggles mightily to release the hatred that suffocates him but is in the end

defeated by it. He becomes his father's third victim when he loses his sanity and is shot by the police.<sup>51</sup>

Violence breeds violence, it is said in Taylor's novel, for Rata's father, too, suffered physical abuse as a child. Yet Taylor makes it very clear that domestic violence is not inherent in the communal system of the Maori tribe or *iwi*. Rata's aunty Mackay explains to him that when the tribe members had seen how his father was abused, they rode over on horseback to take him away; "but then – as she says – it was already too late; violence breeds violence." Otto Heim, in his comments on domestic violence in Maori fiction, notes that the reality of family violence has been recognised in Maori fiction since its emergence in the seventies. As Heim states, since the publication of Keri Hulme's *the bone people* (1984) family violence has become "a matter of prime concern in a number of narratives," in particular in Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* and Taylor's *He Tangi Aroha*. More generally, domestic abuse among the Maoris has been seen as a "problem of large social dimensions" since the late 1980s (28).

In *He Tangi Aroha*, domestic violence is related directly to the postcolonial condition, which allocates the Maori a position of inadequacy, incompetence and failure. "The destruction of Maori society began when the Pakeha arrived [...]. It was all destruction destruction and drunkenness and beatings up and broken families and loss [...]" (144). In Mda's novel, criticism of the apartheid system for its breakdown into massive social unrest and violence is implied by the many stories of "ways of dying." Explicitly, the novel criticises the political party and the tribal chief's terrorist activities.<sup>52</sup> In criticising the political party, Mda's novel also rejects the myth of political utopia of their marxist-socialist ideology. While this myth was vibrantly alive in the 1980s, as demonstrated in Serotes's *Gods of Our Time*, where political activists triumphantly proclaim themselves the gods of their time, the story of Noria is a vehement denial of its claims to an ideal political structure. After the gruesome death of her son Vutha, who was sentenced to "the necklace" (the burning rubber tyre) by the Young Tigers, Noria seeks redress from the political leadership, but is, instead, silenced. Her anger at this repression can find no outlet. Instead, she is forced to swear allegiance to the struggle, while, for good measure, her shack is burnt down in the night. This episode evidences that the

---

<sup>51</sup> Rata's experiences of abuse as a young child have much in common with the experiences of the victims of torture. According to Krog, who refers to the literature on torture in an essay in her book *A Change of Tongue*, the experience leaves no part of the victim's life untouched. "Torture victims display a wide variety of symptoms—depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, sexual dysfunction, irritability, physical illness. Their capacity to cope is usually overwhelmed, their trust in humanity eroded and sense of self destroyed. After being released, they feel alienated from others and may have enduring difficulties in forming relationships" (156). This description entirely applies to Rata.

<sup>52</sup> Out of respect for the novel's deliberate withholding of specific names, I, too, do not use the names of the political movement and the tribal chief.

question of how to live cannot be answered through the myth of marxist socialism, whose representatives allow and condone radical violence directed at its own members – even a five-year-old child.

Moreover, Noria is keenly aware that the party, despite its ideology of equality, bars women from the higher echelons of power: “All over the country, in what politicians call grassroots communities, women take the lead. But very few women reach executive level. Or even the regional or branch committee levels. I don’t know why it is like this, Toloki” (165). Thus, the novel suggests that the political movement allows for the continuing influence of the stranglehold of African patriarchy on women. Renewal and transformation are thus not to be expected through the “family fiction” put forward by the party’s political ideology.

Mda and Taylor both suggest that to break the cycle of violence and find ways ahead towards a more stable and secure future, a transformation of the family is needed. Mda gives it the name “creative partnership.” The term partnership emphasises equality and mutual responsibility, and does away with hierarchical power structure of the traditional family. Creativity, the engagement with the practical workings of art, is another essential characteristic of the new family structure. Both novels, as I mean to show, suggest that a creative partnership, anchored in cultural traditions, and closely connected to the community, is the essence of the transformed family.

Cultural traditions and family influences are not in themselves obstructions to transformation, as both novels show. While both books denounce repressive patriarchal family systems, the influence of tradition and the help of family members are seen as indispensable aids to the process of change. Tawhaki’s generation, in *He Tangi Aroha*, learns to value the support and sustaining guidance from relatives, in particular from grandmothers and aunts, such as Nan Kapo. They pass on stories, songs and prayers to the younger generation, forming a living connection to the ancestors; Nan Kapo, we are told, “taught without realising it” (16). Tawhaki and several other young men, all “labelled hopeless failures, shiftless lazy nobodies who lacked motivation and who were ignorant and dangerous criminals to boot” (25) learn the process of Maori carving in a project subsidised by the Labour Department. Under the guidance of Hapoka, the master carver, they learn traditional patterns of ancient chiefs. As the book emphasises: “these nobodies carved their ancestors” (25).

Traditional art forms are a mysterious force in both novels. In *He Tangi Aroha*, Tawhaki’s and Rata’s carving, Hapai’s flute playing and Kate’s acting are healing and restorative forces. By carving the beautiful traditional patterns but adding also violent images from contemporary life, Tawhaki succeeds in integrating the past and present. This helps him see a way forward in his life; he is now able to combat his alcoholism, fight the voices of despair, and is finally ready to maintain a healthy relationship. Aided by his relatives and inspired by the mysterious force of ancient Maori art, Tawhaki forms a family, committing



himself to Kate and their unborn child. Through their work as artists, they both equally contribute to and are connected to the community. This is more important than their material situation, which has not improved in the course of the story. Thus, while at the end of the narrative the social and political circumstances are still bleak, with “cop cars screaming in the distance,” Tawhaki’s final words are extremely hopeful:

Suddenly the exact words that he was looking for came to him. He wanted to shout them out but he didn’t. He kept the simple revelation to himself.

“To create and to love,” he decided. “That’s what I’m meant to do. That’s what we’re meant to do. Create and love.” (245)

In *Ways of Dying*, too, the integration of the past and present, the mysterious influence of indigenous art forms and the ancestors are the factors that enable the transformation of the family. In the final chapter, the past that Toloki has wanted to banish from his life manifests itself in the shape of a recurring dream in which his deceased father Jwara orders his art works to be brought to Toloki. When Toloki has accepted them, with difficulty putting aside his bitterness, Jwara's spirit is reconciled with his son and can now join the ancestors. Reconciled with his father, Toloki can finally integrate the past in his present and is thus – like Tawhaki – enabled to envisage the future. Change, then, must not mean a cutting of the bond with the past, which would lead to alienation.<sup>53</sup>

In an article on African art, McNaughton and Pelrine state that throughout Africa, spirituality often involves the use of artworks for the activation of energies and spiritual forces. Art works therefore are powerful objects, with curative or protective powers. Moreover, they play an important part in initiations, the ceremonies that mark a change in status or role, giving symbolic meaning not only to initiations of dignitaries, but also to “initiations of ordinary men and women who choose to join voluntary associations dedicated to particular causes or ideals” (224). This, I would claim, is how we may understand the creative partnership of the new family in Mda’s and Taylor’s final chapters. In both novels, the mysterious yet potent forces of art, transmitted through the ancestors, enable the transformation of the family into a locus of renewed spirituality, of creative cultural practice and of social engagement.

In its final pages, Mda’s novel, like Taylor’s, points towards a hopeful future. While referring implicitly to the death of Noria’s second son Vuthu

---

<sup>53</sup> Heim sees the continuation of traditional productive practices as a central concern in contemporary Maori fiction, in particular in the work of Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace. Both authors, like Taylor, he states, emphasise “the need and the possibility to integrate contemporary forms of composition into tradition” (205).

whose death was ordered by the Young Tigers, Mda's ending nevertheless proclaims an end to these ways of dying; an end to mourning; and the answer to how to live. In this final scene, in the context of the new family formed by Noria and Toloki and the children of the settlement, there is celebration and happiness on the brink of the New Year. Noria and Toloki, unmarried like Tawhaki and Kate, nevertheless act as parents to the children of the settlement, teaching them new beliefs to supplant the extremism of their political education; a commitment not to "fight until the end" but to live, to work together, and to achieve pleasure. "Tyres are still burning. Tyres can burn for a very long time. The smell of burning rubber fills the air. But this time it is not mingled with the sickly stench of roasting human flesh. Just pure wholesome rubber" (Mda 212).

In this vision of a hopeful future the novel fully answers Ndebele's call at this same period of history for what he termed "the restorative approach" in South African literature, in which the writer "reveals and restores to the oppressed the history of their cultural practice." Ndebele here referred not only of the material culture, but also to the spiritual culture, that aspect of the cultural process "which is oriented to the human soul, which creates and forms a person's intellect, ideas, feelings, ethical and aesthetic values, attitudes and behaviour" (118).

#### *Concluding remarks: on transformation*

Transformation is not the same as change. In her book *A Change of Tongue*, South African author Antjie Krog presents an interesting discussion of the concept of transformation, which had become a buzzword in 1990s South Africa. Krog's exploration of the concept is useful because it highlights common misunderstandings of the word, and points out meanings of the word that are relevant to the above discussion.

Transformation is often used interchangeably with "change" and "metamorphosis," but this is not correct, as Krog explains, for change is neither metamorphosis nor transformation but included in these words. Transformation denotes the ultimate, or profoundest form of change. The word "transformation" means a re-making or an over-making. As Krog defines it: "in its deepest structure, then, the word 'transformation' means: to form the other side, to start creating where you are going." And, in order to create the other side, she writes, "one has to remake the firmament—no mere change of structure or exterior, but of the guiding essence" (126). Transformation is more than change, which may be superficial. It denotes an internal change consisting of a new vision, new attitudes, an entirely new system.

I have used the term transformation in this article to refer to the structure of the family and of society, rather than to persons. This is in accordance with contemporary views in psychology, where, as Krog writes, the word

transformation is not used for persons, as it is assumed that a person cannot change, or even *should* not change essentially. Instead of “transformation”, the psychiatrist interviewed by Krog prefers to speak of “personal growth or development.” Transformation then also implies a destruction or loss of a central characteristic. In the transformation of the family structure as I have read it in Mda’s novel, what is lost is the traditional central characteristic of male domination, the father’s prerogative to wield absolute power over his wife and children. The loss of this central element is a prerequisite for transformation. Change can be seen, for example, in Noria’s family, where the father’s position of superiority is constantly challenged by the mother. This is, at most, a change in the family structure, but certainly not transformation. In Mda’s transformed family we see the complete disappearance of inequity.

In Taylor’s novel, the equality of the creative partnership extends to race, since for Tawhaki and Kate their racial difference is not an issue. Racial prejudice, or racial purity, may be seen as another element to be discarded in the transformation of the new family configuration, as is absence of a wedding licence (neither of the two couples are legally married). In both narratives, the main characters have grown towards this new relationship, but they have not themselves undergone an essential change or transformation; rather, it may be said that they have realised their human potential.

Underlying both novels’ final passages is a hopeful vision for the future of a nation in which this small-scale transformation takes place. It evokes hope for a society in which gender inequity and male domination are changed into equality and partnership, in which the feminine and the masculine each contribute creatively on an equal footing, and in which exploitation of children will no longer take place, and partners will educate children without claiming parental rights or ownership. The “parental” care depicted in Mda’s novel, in particular, is a truly transforming factor.

In a discussion on the genocide in Rwanda, a student from that country expressed her hope for literature as follows: “I want literature to go beyond what has happened here to individuals—to transform everything into an opening instead of a closed wall” (qtd. in Krog, 146).

*Ways of Dying* and *He Tangi Aroha* both end by envisioning the new family configuration as such a transformed opening; as a way ahead. Reconciliation and renewal are happening, even in these early stages of the larger transformational process.

## Works Cited

- Coetzee, J.M. *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999*. New York: Penguin Group, 2001.
- Heim, Otto. *Writing Along Broken Lines: Violence and Ethnicity in Contemporary Maori Fiction*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1998.
- Ihimaera, Witi (ed.). *He Whakaatanga o Te Ao : The Reality. Te Ao Marama Vol. 2* Auckland: Reed Books, 1993.
- Krog, Antjie. *A Change of Tongue*. Johannesburg: Random House, 2003.
- Martin, Phyllis M. and Patrick O'Meara (Eds). *Africa*. 3rd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- McNaughton, Patrick R. and Diane Pelrine. "African Art." In Martin and O'Meara, 223-256.
- Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. (1995) Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S. *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Serote, Mongane Wally. *Gods of Our Time*. Randburg: Ravan Press, 1999.
- Taylor, Apirana. *He Tangi Aroha*. Wellington: Huia Publishers, 1993.

# **THE UNIVERSE IS MADE OF STORIES, NOT ATOMS: NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY IN POST- APARTHEID FICTION<sup>54</sup>**

Margriet van der Waal

## *Introduction*

In May 2003, a teenage boy, Happy Sindane, arrived at the Bronkhorstspuit Police Station (South Africa), claiming to be white, and stating that he was abducted by his family's black domestic worker as a small child, who had since raised him as part of her Ndebele family. The incident made headline news in the South African media:<sup>55</sup> this story of a white boy who grew up in a black village and who speaks fluent isiNdebele challenged a number of strongly held ideas regarding ethnicity, culture and identity. After a number of people came forward to claim Happy as their long-lost son, DNA tests were in the end resorted to as a last measure to provide an answer to the question, "who is Happy Sindane?" The official answer to this question was that Happy Sindane is really Abbey Mzayiya, the child of a black domestic worker and her white boss; he was brought up by a friend of his mother, and when this friend, Betty Sindane, passed away, the boy was delivered to the mercy of Betty Sindane's father, a rather strict and conservative man, who apparently abused the boy until that day when Happy decided to report to the police station.

It was not only the news media that realised the selling power of this story; a paint company quickly adapted their advertising campaign to the event. In June 2004, they placed a full-colour advertisement in the print media, using their standard ad line ("Any colour you can think of") juxtaposed with a photo of Happy, and three colour samples: a pinkish shade of white, light brown and dark brown, suggesting three different types of skin colour. The implied message of the advertisement suggests that Happy's identity is either a mixing

---

<sup>54</sup> The title is a quote from the poem "The Speed of Darkness," by Muriel Rukeyser.

I would like to thank Dorien Daling, Lars Koch, Kees van der Waal and Irene Visser for their helpful and stimulating remarks on the themes of family and fiction and their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the Nicolaas Mulerius Fonds, and the University of Groningen for their financial support regarding a research period spent in South Africa in 2004, during which material for this paper was gathered.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Capel 12, Saunderson-Meyer 8, Lampbrecht 9.

together of these colours (representing a mix of different racial groups), or, alternatively, something for the choosing: in deciding about who he is, he could make his pick from the available racial identities to suit his taste, in the same manner that a paint buyer can choose the preferred colour for her or his home from a plethora of colour samples.

This real-life story reveals much about family life in South Africa at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The “Happy Sindane” history in the first instance not only undermines the idea that “family” equates marital suburban bliss that consists of a nuclear family made up of a father and a mother dearly loving and caring for their typically 2.2 children, but rather hints at some of the many problems that characterize family life in South Africa, such as migrant labour, child-headed households as a result of HIV/Aids, violence, and poverty (Cullinan, Bank, Murray, Ramphele).

On another level, the “Happy Sindane” story requires us to reconsider prevalent ideas regarding blood ties and ties of kinship relations, more specifically the notion that identity is stable and unproblematic or, formulated alternatively, that blood ties, race and culture are straightforward and obvious concepts.

The discourse on family and identity and their relationship is also a prominent theme in recently published literary texts in South Africa. In this paper, I will consider some of the meanings of the notion of “family”, and investigate how, as construct, it plays an important role in the process of identity formation, and specifically focus on particular narrative processes and mechanisms that establish and negotiate the relation between the family and identity in literary texts.<sup>56</sup>

### *The Family as Political Metaphor*

Family life is all but a simple issue in South Africa, as is clearly explained by Robert Shell, who, in his study on the slave society in South Africa, suggests that the domestic sphere where colonists and slaves shared a household (and soon enough also descendants) may prove to be the most promising context for the researcher to find clues to understand the complexity of social and kinship relations in the country (xxiv-xxix). Shell cites Davis who described the formative social influence of the family (in Europe, as part of his argument to explain the ideological acceptance of slavery) during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century

---

<sup>56</sup> Since the mid 1980s, psychological interests in narratological processes have led to a fast study field on this topic (narrative psychology), claiming special attention for the way meaning is constructed through the processes of telling stories about experiences and actions. This meaning construction is also productive on the level of the subject, i.e. as process of identity construction. See for example Polkinghorne, 1988.

as: “The family, whether nuclear or extended, [was] the prime agent of socialization and the source for later concepts of authority, subordination, security, rebellion, and identity” (Shell xxvi).

The family then, as it is now, was and is the primary site where hierarchical and authoritarian relations are produced – it is the site of every person’s initial socialization, and these relations of power are themselves reproduced in the public sphere. Cognitive linguistics shows us how our language use reflects this: we speak, for example, of a *patriotic* society, and a *mother* tongue, whereas the search for political independence is often explained to be the quest for a *homeland* for a people.

Colonial and post-colonial contexts provide ample opportunity to investigate how (complex) familial relations are reproduced on a socio-political level – and twentieth century South African society informed by Apartheid ideology is certainly a good example. The colonists, and later the Afrikaners, thought of themselves as the “head” of the household (the nation), and as having been given a Christian duty to “raise” the indigenous “minors” to civilization, in order to eventually achieve a form of “political independence” in their own bantustans (the Afrikaner version of the “white man’s burden”).

But instead of a neatly ordered, race-based adult society, South Africa found itself, by the end of the 1980s, in a state of uncertainty, trauma and violence. It is not surprising that many novels published after the power exchange of 1994 address this skewed situation of patriarchal power. A striking example is *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (1999), a text that may be read as commenting (also on a metaphoric level) on generational relationships all gone wrong in different contexts of society. This calls to mind what Nadine Gordimer has said of the South African transition period, taking the notion of “interregnum” from Antonio Gramsci: ““The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms”” (Gordimer citing Gramsci, 263, also used as motto for her book *July’s People* of 1981).

At the basis of the patronising attitude of the ruling group in South Africa was the pervasive idea that something like racial purity exists, a belief that was a determining factor in the complete social, political and economic organisation of South African society (Coetzee 1988).

### *Literary Production in the New South Africa*

The answer to the question of how to deal with such a complex situation where biological identity to a large extent has managed to determine other identities and where the recognition of one’s own humanity depended largely on the colour of one’s skin, under the influence of the myths of simple racial categories, is not self-evident. What is evident, is that after 1994, perhaps

imbued by the non-racialism that forms the basis of the new Constitution (accepted in 1996), South African literary production shows a remarkable occupation with issues of identity in a manner that is self-reflexive (cf. Giddens 1991). André Brink suggests that fiction after 1994 should not be a presentation of the real, but a creative effort of representing it:

[t]he enterprise of fiction [...] reaches well beyond facts: inasmuch as it is concerned with the real [...] it presumes a process through which the real is not merely represented but imagined. What is aimed at is not a reproduction but an imagining. (Brink 30)

This links together a reflection on identity, i.e. becoming aware of the constructedness of identity, and the possibility to consider alternatives, or new ways of being – with the creation of fiction offering a good starting place. However, if, as Manuel Castells argues, “identity politics start with our bodies” (359), we should remember that in the case of South Africa, (regardless whether we agree with it or not) identity politics entails, on a very basic level, the issue of skin colour, or put more bluntly, of race. Here, an important meaning of the concept of “family” enters into the picture: “family” as mediator of skin colour through the blood ties of one’s forebears. The challenge then, taking the cue from Brink and Castells, is to investigate how identity is imagined in the new context of a political ideology that stands for democracy and non-racialism in South Africa.

For such a project, turning to literature can provide fruitful material, especially if one considers the novels published after 1994, of which a conspicuous number examine personal history against the background of recent political events and the transition to a democracy. These fictive accounts challenge and undermine the simplistic construction of (racial) identity via a reconstruction of a family history: the *imagining* of a family history and family ties, as Brink has it. A few recent examples of such texts are the following:

In 1995, A.H.M. Scholtz’s text *Vatmaar* was published (the author, who received very little formal education, was 72 when his novel was completed). This text, with strong autobiographical features, tells the story of a Coloured community in a small town near Kimberley and the intertwined relations between the various characters, during a time when mixed marriages were still allowed, but a racial hierarchy was nevertheless establishing itself.

The first volume of J.M. Coetzee’s memoirs was published in 1997: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, a narrative that tells the story of a young boy’s growing up in a small country town in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s. Family life, and the mutual relations between the family members form one of the important themes of the text, and in the process of growing up, the boy constantly wonders about conducts and contradictions he observes not only within his family, but in the social sphere in general.



In *Mother to Mother* by Sindiwe Magona (1998), family life as basis for identity is examined in the form of a letter written by the mother of the young man who killed American exchange student Amy Biehl to the mother of Amy Biehl. In this letter, the narrator describes her life story, the circumstances in which she grew up (for example, how forced removals affected their family life), and the socio-economic conditions of her son's upbringing.

In 1999, Joseph Marble's text *Ek, Joseph Daniel Marble* was published, an autobiographical narrative of ex-gangster Joseph Daniel Marble, about his brutal and violent life growing-up with a foster family in the coloured townships of Johannesburg.

*'n Stringetjie Blou Krake* by E.K.M. Dido (2000) tells the tale of a nurse who confronts her negated past by acknowledging that she was born into a rural Xhosa community, but grew up with a coloured family in attempt to improve her chances in Apartheid society by assuming a Coloured identity. The protagonist, Nancy Karelse, investigates the effects of this process of identity change, on herself and her own family.

Shortlisted for the 2004 Booker Prize, *Bitter Fruit* by Achmat Dangor (2001) takes the completion and presentation of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as background for a family drama. In the novel Silas, his wife Lydia and their son Mickey are all confronted with aspects of themselves and the challenges posed to their identity by the transformations taking place in South Africa.

*Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* by Chris van Wyk (2004) is the (humorous) autobiographical tale of Van Wyk's childhood and adult life spent in the coloured township Riverlea (Johannesburg) in which he portrays everyday life of the community in which he grew up as a child, and lived in as an adult from the late 1950s until the early 1990s.

In 2004, Darryl Accone's family history *All Under Heaven* was published. In this text, Accone presents the story of a Chinese family who migrated to South Africa in 1911, and how living under Apartheid affected the family.

In these texts, diverse meanings of the concept of "family" are employed, and function as important factor in the production of meaning. The narratives all display a grappling with issues of identity, relations, lineage, and kinship, not only on the level of biology, but also on a social level.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> The relation between fiction (novels) and non-fiction (memoirs, autobiography) forms an interesting tension-line that has elicited much research lately, but a line I will not work out further here (cf. Raditlhalo 2003).

*Literature and Language*

Before exploring how the relation between family and identity is dealt with in one specific fictional text, *David's Story* by Zoë Wicomb (2000), I would like to make a comment about the issue of language. This is a thorny issue not only in many a post-colonial situation,<sup>58</sup> but also in the field of postcolonial studies itself. Louise Viljoen, in her discussion of postcolonialism and Afrikaans literature, points to the problems one encounters when investigating non-English literatures with the theoretical tools developed by an English-centred approach, specifically in the case of Afrikaans in South Africa:

It soon becomes clear that this English-based definition of postcolonialism [as one finds in *The Empire Writes Back*] cannot adequately describe the full variety of literatures produced in languages and literary traditions other than the English. (63)

The Eurocentrism, and specifically the Anglocentrism of postcolonial studies has also been pointed out by others, not only in theoretical terms, but also in terms which texts are studied as postcolonial literature (Ahmad 1987, Huggan 2002). In a multilingual context, such as South Africa, sensitivity to language-related matters is certainly necessary. Such a sensitivity not only opens the eyes to the particular problems one encounters when transposing theoretical insights developed in one context, for example, English Western, to another, for example, multilingual South African, but also to the possibility of studying texts in languages other than English.

During my research for writing this paper, the problems related to language in a postcolonial setting struck me, when I found that the publication of a text in a particular language is not always as straightforward a decision as it may seem, especially not in the multilingual context of South Africa today, where English maintains a strong hegemonic position. The fact that a text is published in English means much more than the fact that the literature is produced in an area that was previously under British command, and which currently forms part of the Commonwealth. Zoë Wicomb, for example, grew up in a house where both parents spoke Afrikaans, but who, as a political statement, decided at some point to switch to English and to bring up their children in this new home language (Winterbach 72). Other authors, such as Achmat Dangor, originally started writing in Afrikaans, but switched to English after being imprisoned by Apartheid authorities, although, ironically, Dangor did choose an Afrikaans publisher, Kwela, for his text, *Bitter Fruit* (Retief 21). There are also examples of texts originally written in English, by black Afrikaans speakers, who

---

<sup>58</sup> See for example the arguments of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) regarding the position of English in post-independence Kenya.

estimated their chances of getting published, as black authors, bigger if they wrote in English, given the complex political situation within the Afrikaans publishing sector. *'n Stringetjie Blou Krake* by E.K.M. Dido (Krog 27), and *Vatmaar* by A.H.M. Scholtz (Mischke 17) are both texts that were originally submitted as English manuscripts to the publisher, but rewritten in Afrikaans before the books were eventually published.

### *The novel David's Story*

To return to the issue of the relation between family and identity, one can argue that on a level that extends the intimacy of the biological family, social relations are themselves often represented and understood in terms of familial relations. This is, in particular, one of the themes of *David's Story* by Zoë Wicomb, the novel I would like to discuss in greater detail.

Briefly, the story is about David Dirkse, a member of the military wing of the ANC, who has asked a professional writer to write down his story of the struggle. But, instead of being mainly a story of the struggle, the novel becomes an investigation of Griqua history and Coloured identity, through its consideration of historical Khoi and Griqua figures such as Eva/Krotoa, Sarah Bartmann, and Andrew le Fleur. Historically, the Griquas are the descendents of European and Khoi ancestors. Their history as a group is one of traveling around and searching for a place to settle down. Despised as a “bastard” group during the Apartheid era, prominent Griqua leaders have recently started to re-invent their cultural identity to claim political rights as “indigenous people”, and more specifically, as the original people of South Africa.<sup>59</sup>

In a postmodern style, *David's Story* examines this historical given via the myth around the Griqua leader Andrew Stockenström le Fleur – his role as venerated patriarch of the Griquas is played with, and instead of representing him in the way he is often understood by Griquas themselves as a “messianic prophet,” the author, herself a great-granddaughter of Le Fleur (Bredenkamp 133), has chosen to represent this man as “a bumbling, incoherent visionary” (Willemsse 145). Undermining the notion of the great patriarch, Wicomb presents his wife, Rachael, as a caring and intelligent woman, the “mother of the volk” (sic, 58).

The story is not just about questioning the myth forming around Le Fleur, but is also an inquest by David concerning his own story. By the start of the 1990s, the period in which the novel is set, negotiations have started between the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP) government about a political transition, and, having reached the end of the armed struggle,

---

<sup>59</sup> For an overview of Griqua history, see Bredenkamp, for a more comprehensive study, see Mountain.

David, as a member of the ANC's military wing, has more time to think about issues beyond the struggle: no longer expected to prioritise political matters, he finds room to reflect on personal matters, and when he does so, he:

finds a gash, a festering wound that surprises him, precisely because it is the turning inward that reveals a problem on the surface, something that has stared him in the eye all his life: his very own eyes are a green of sorts [...] and that, to his surprise, he finds distasteful, if not horrible. (12)

The narrative here hints at the fact that David may be a great-grandchild of Andrew le Fleur. Andrew's grandfather was a French missionary (Eduard le Fleur), while his grandmother was a slave from Madagascar. The text uses the trope of "green eyes" to stress a kinship relation (family ties) between David and Andrew, who are both described as having green eyes.

In fact, in other texts too this trope is used to indicate a mixed racial background. In the novel *Bitter Fruit* by Achmat Dangor, Lydia (a coloured woman) is raped by a security police officer (a white Afrikaner), but decides to keep the baby when she realises she is pregnant as a result of the rape. Mickey, her child, is explicitly described as having green eyes (although his (white) father, Du Bois, is described as having blue eyes). Another character in the text, Vinu, who is the daughter of a Hindu (Indian) mother and a (white) Afrikaner father, is also described as having green eyes. She is "a bushie goddess. Beauty honed on the same bastard whetstone as I. We will make no more like her, or like Michael [Mickey], for that matter," says Silas, Lydia's husband, who is himself the child of an Indian father and a white, English mother (Dangor 199).

A third example is from *Age of Iron* by J.M. Coetzee, where the vagrant Vercueil, an enigmatic character, is also described as having "strange green eyes" (6, see also 11). Readers have problems placing Vercueil in a racial category, mainly because Coetzee refrains from being more explicit in this regard. Clive Barnett points to the expectation placed on South African writers to put their characters down according to recognisable racial categories: "In particular," he says, "South African literature is regularly read in terms of a pre-existing set of understandings of a society polarised along stark lines of racialised division." (294). One can read Vercueil's green eyes as a sign of the impossibility then to limit his identity down to a particular racial group, and confronts the reader with his or her own desire to categorise characters in this way.

It is not only David who finds his particular heterogeneous family history difficult to accept, it was also the Griqua leader himself who was troubled by his own "multi-racial" background. After all, the existence of a group such as "the Griqua people" could only be credible if the cultural and racial homogeneity of the group was believed to be real:

But of those, the ships from Madagascar or Malay, Le Fleur did not wish to think, and in any case, the high cheekbones, the oriental eyes were as likely to come from the native Khoisan. Of his own European ancestry, well, that blood was by now so thin, so negligible, there really was no need to take it into account. (88)

What Le Fleur, not originally a member of the “Griqua people”, is doing here is to claim, by using physiological traits (high cheekbones and slanting eyes) identification with the Khoi, who made up part of the Griqua population. The Khoi were (and are even more so today) regarded as the truly first people of South Africa. Le Fleur, in a political move, consolidated his leadership position in the Griqua group by marrying a woman from the Kok family, Rachael Susanna, daughter of the deceased Griqua leader Adam Muis Kok.

David believes that his attempts to establish some certainty about his family history – his attempts to care for the “festering wound” that questions about his family history have caused him – may result in healing, but his wife is more aloof, echoing the words of Spivak:<sup>60</sup>

Don't try to fob me off with nonsense about roots and ancestors [...] Rubbish, it's all fashionable rubbish. Next thing you'll be off overseas to check out your roots in the rubbish dumps of Europe...What do you expect to find? Ours are all mixed up and tangled; no chance of us being uprooted, because they're all in a neglected knot, stuck. And that I'd have thought is the beauty of being coloured, that we need not worry about roots at all. (27)

The story works with the notion of family on two levels: on the primary level it is the story of David occupied with unravelling the truth about his kinship ties. On a second, metaphorical level, the story investigates constructions of the leader, the “father” of a group of people, Andrew le Fleur. What Wicomb does in this novel, is to shift the emphasis from trying to find a truthful answer to either of these issues to the *attempt* of finding an answer, in other words, the narrative itself becomes important. The novel does not attempt to provide an answer to David's questions about himself, or to provide a factually correct representation that corresponds truthfully to the real le Fleur, but it emphasises that the process of establishing meaning is meaningful in itself. As narratology has shown, the process of meaning construction resides in the process of telling a story, when time and action are connected in such a way that (causal) relations are constructed between characters, events, space and

---

<sup>60</sup> “If there's one thing I totally distrust, in fact, more than distrust, despise and have contempt for, it is people looking for roots. Because anyone who can conceive of looking for roots, should, already, you know, be growing rutabagas”. (Spivak 93).

time. In *David's Story* this process is dealt with in a postmodern manner where the possibility of a singular meaningful story is undermined, and, subsequently, where “the truth” as the outcome of such a singular story is challenged.

The novel emphasises the narrative structure by presenting the textual construction of meaning on different levels: David's grandmother tells him stories about their family: “I've been thinking about the Griquas. All the old stories that Ouma Ragel told, about Chief le Fleur, and my Great-ouma Antjie trekking down from Namaqualand.” (27, see also 49-51, 103). David's own attempt at writing the history of the Griquas of Kokstad is a manipulation of historical facts:

With Cuvier now removed from his story, David flew off into another fiction, into the European origins of the Griqua chief. But the anatomist would not be deleted without a trace, so that the historical figure of Madame le Fleur was transformed into Cuvier's housekeeper, the good woman being lifted out of her period and grafted onto the wrong century. Charmed by the way in which one collapsing story would clutch at another in thin air, I suggest that, in spite of the error, we keep her after all. (35)

The narrator offers journal extracts dictated by Le Fleur, and written down by a scribe who at times misheard his mumbling master:

He [Le Fleur] hisses at the scribe perched nervously on a three-legged stool, a thin, creaking man who knows that it is not worth his while to interrupt, to ask the old man to go more slowly, to admit that he did not quite catch it. He, the amanuensis, would not dare to ask any questions, would write the words exactly as they fall from the Chief's lips, or improvise where he had not quite heard, not quite understood. (145)

Furthermore, there are references to newspaper articles written by the political adversaries of Le Fleur, who in turn challenged the credibility of his adversaries' ideas. Le Fleur actively engages in, what Eric Hobsbawm calls “the invention of tradition”, when he develops the notion of the “Rain Sisters”, a ritual of Le Fleur's own creation that supposedly would bring rain from the Peninsula to Griqualand West, based on the equally invented story of the virginal “Rain Sisters”:

We must revive the old customs Dorie, he said to his wife, those that have fallen into disuse; for he believed the idea, which had been born so smoothly, to be his memory of a lapsed tradition. I do not recall

such a thing, Rachael frowned [...]. You must have forgotten, he said. (153)

On a different level, the reader is sometimes given one version of an event by the narrator, which is then complemented by a different version told by David. There are also the imaginative attempts of the narrator to fill-in the stories of characters about whom David cannot or does not want to supply information (notably Dulcie, the woman hinted to be David's mistress), and finally, there is the story of David retold and re-presented by the narrator, who acknowledges that she has changed certain (crucial) aspects of David's original story.

The argument that the narrator tries to defend through her attempt at telling David's story, is that something like "the truth" does not readily exist:

Thus David ought to have seen how truth, far from being ready-made, takes time to be born, slowly takes shape in the very act of repetition, of telling again and again about the miracles performed by the Chief, [...] stories that made that much more sense than the remaining fragments of the old man's own text, which, as I pointed out to David, only goes to show that people cannot be relied on to tell their own stories. (103)

*David's Story*, then, is not about giving a faithful representation of Le Fleur or of Griqua history, or of David's own story. In fact, the narrator does not hesitate to put David's story down in a different version than he suggested, in other words, imagining alternative stories, because the aim is to see where one might end when opening up imaginative possibilities. The narrator realises that "truth" is "the word that cannot be written" (136).

Instead, the reader, along with the characters in the novel, discovers that the truth about identity is not about racial or kinship facts, but a reflexive process that involves "putting things down on paper so that you can see what there is, shuffle pages around, if necessary, *until they make sense*" (140, emphasis mine).

### *Conclusion*

The point that a text such as *David's Story* makes, is that in a complex situation, such as South Africa, one story on its own does not make much sense at all in an attempt at understanding something about reality. What is needed is the polyphony of various voices, with different versions of events, and different interpretation of the facts, to construct a more comprehensive story, because, as David realised, "we will have to make do with *mixtures of meaning*" (3, emphasis mine).

This does not only hold for a family narrative, but on a larger scale also for the South African context. Where the white narrative more often than not told the story of superiority and exclusivity, it is necessary to compensate these singular stories with more complex tales. What remains, however, is the focus on textuality and on the process of making narratives: the reality regarding family, kinship, identity and belonging may be proven with scientific DNA tests (as in the case of Happy Sindane), but our interpretation of it, and making it meaningful will remain a textual and constructed activity. Given the South African past, especially its colonial history, it is exactly concentrating on these processes of identity and subject formation, rather than on finding the truth about primordial identity, that may bear more fruitful results to the question of how people construct their realities. How this truth is “imagined” as Brink said, and how these different imaginations can be brought meaningfully in relation with each other, is a project that gives ongoing insight into our human universe.



## Works Cited

- Accone, D. *All Under Heaven*. Cape Town: David Phillip, 2004.
- Ahmad, A. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'." *Social Text* 17 (Fall 1987): 3-25.
- Bank, L. "Living Together, Moving Apart: Home-made Agendas, Identity Politics and Urban-Rural Linkages in the Eastern Cape, South Africa." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 19.1 (2001): 129-147.
- Barnett, C. "Constructions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J.M. Coetzee." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25.2 (June 1999): 287-301.
- Bredenkamp, H. "The Dead Bones of Adam Kok." *Group Portrait South Africa. Nine Family Histories*. Ed. Paul Faber. Cape Town: Kwela and Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2003.
- Brink, A.P. "Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-apartheid Narrative." *Negotiating the Past. The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Eds. S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Capel, D. "'I'm alive!'" *Drum* 29 May 2003: 12-13.
- Castells, M. *The Power of Identity. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Volume 2. Malden: Blackwell, 1997.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Age of Iron*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- . *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1997.
- . *Disgrace*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1999.
- . *White Writing. On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Cullinan, K. "The Loneliness of Zwe." *Sunday Times* 12 September 2004: 21.
- Dangor, A. *Bitter Fruit*. Cape Town: Kwela, 2001.
- Dido, E.K.M. *'n Stringetjie Blou Krале*. Cape Town: Kwela, 2000.

- Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Gordimer, N. "Living in the Interregnum." *The Essential Gesture*. Ed. Stephen Clingman. London: Jonathan Cape, 1988.
- Huggan, G. "Postcolonial Studies and the Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity." *Postcolonial Studies* 5.3. (2002): 245-275.
- Krog, A. "Afrikaans Soos Nog Nooit Tevore Nie." *Rapport* 17 March 2002: 27.
- Lampbrecht, D. "'Ras Knaag Nog in SA'." *Beeld* 21 June 2003: 9.
- Magona, S. *Mother to Mother*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1998.
- Maphumulo, S. "Happy's Greatest Gift to Foster Mom." *Star* 07 June 2004: 2.
- Marble, J. *Ek, Joseph Daniel Marble*. Cape Town: Kwela, 1999.
- Mischke, A. "Afrikaners Vertel Hulle Stories vir Mekaar in Eie Taal." *Rapport* 9 January 2000: 17.
- Mountain, A. *The First People of the Cape*. Claremont: Spearhead, 2003.
- Murray, C. *Families Divided. The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Raditlhalo, S. *who am i? The Construction of Identity in Twentieth-Century South African Autobiographical Writings in English*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Groningen, 2003.
- Ramphela, M. *A Bed Called Home. Life in the Migrant Labour Hostels of Cape Town*. Cape Town: David Phillip, 1993.
- Retief, H. "Mev. Kwela Sê tot Siens." *Rapport* 10 October 2004: 21.

- Saunderson-Meyer, W. "Jaundiced Eye." *Independent* on Saturday 24 May 2003: 8.
- Scholtz, A.H.M. *Vatmaar*. Cape Town: Kwela, 1995.
- Shell, R. *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652 – 1838*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Spivak, G.C. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Van Wyk, C. *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy. A Childhood Memoir*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004.
- Viljoen, L. "Postcolonialism and Recent Women's Writing in Afrikaans." *World Literature Today* 70.1 (1996): 63-72.
- Wicomb, Z. *David's Story*. Cape Town: Kwela, 2000.
- Willemse, H. "Zoë Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemse." *Research in African Literatures* 33.1 (Spring 2002): 144-152.
- Winterbach, I. "Haar Hart Wil Afrika." *Insig* May 2001: 72.



# THE FAMILY AND CHANGE

## Contemporary Second-Generation British-Asian Fiction

Janet Wilson

It is not surprising that the most common perception of the fate of the nuclear family in Western society since World War II should be of disorder and dysfunction. Divorce figures, statistics about domestic violence, family break-up and upheaval, and increased numbers of solo parents - all too familiar today - reveal that the family unit disintegrates more quickly and frequently than ever before. The war itself had a very disruptive effect on family life, but for reasons of departure, absence and death, all of which differ from those problems which mark the decline of the contemporary family. In this paper I shall argue that while the image of the nuclear family is reinforced in some diasporic British fictions, it is challenged and reevaluated through recourse to other ideas of domestic unity and community in others.<sup>61</sup> The representation of unconventional unions might be one fictional response to the social phenomenon of the family in decline; but it might equally well reflect the problems of dislocation that diasporic writers address. I shall examine fictions by second-generation British-Asian writers Meera Syal, Monica Ali and Hanif Kureishi.<sup>62</sup> How far do their marginal characters, who seek identity and a place in British society, reinforce traditional notions of the family unit by re-identifying themselves with their existing family networks? How far do they alienate themselves, discover alternative familial models, and so dislocate the nuclear family from its position of centrality? In contemporary multicultural and multiracial Britain, multiplicity of identity has come to be taken for granted (although not always by Asian migrant families who still adhere to traditional modes of betrothal), especially

---

<sup>61</sup>The term “diasporic” fiction can be used for all three novels under scrutiny, since they explore “diaspora space”. According to Avtar Brah this is “a conceptual space [that is] ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words [it ...] includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (182).

<sup>62</sup> I use this term to refer to the current generation of novelists, by contrast to migrant novelists’ writing and publishing in England from the 1950s to the 70s; although Monica Ali, born of English and Bangladeshi parents and arriving in England from Dhaka aged three, is technically a first-generation migrant, she belongs to an era of second-generation British-Asian novelists.

by the hybrid children of mixed marriages.<sup>63</sup> What do these fictions reveal about the hybrid subject's ability to cause disruption at the micro-level, in the domestic sphere (Moss 12)?

The problems of social marginalisation, of being outsiders, undoubtedly contribute to unease within the family. Both Monica Ali and Meera Syal depict protagonists dominated by their Asian ethnic, cultural origins and identities. In Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) the reader encounters dispossession, both economic and cultural, poverty, and reduced communication, both between family members and between the family unit and outsiders; in Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), there are racial discrimination, stereotyping, and identity problems. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), by contrast, shows family struggle and disintegration occurring as a result of a mixed marriage as well as class and racial conflict. But Kureishi focuses on the complexities of contemporary English society, to which his hero feels he unequivocally belongs, rather than the themes of origins, exile and cultural conflict of earlier black and Asian writing (King 186). To this extent his work anticipates the way that both Syal and Ali anchor their narratives about the arrival and survival of the Asian family in community life.

Writing at one remove from the displacement that their migrant parents experienced, Kureishi and Syal construct youthful narrators/ protagonists who challenge their parents and the Asian cultural heritage. Ali in *Brick Lane*, by contrast, dwells on the plight of Nazneen, a first-generation migrant from Bangladesh trying to come to terms with her limited marriage while discovering other possibilities for herself beyond the domestic circle; the theme of questioning, rebellious children is a secondary one. All three protagonists undergo the process of adjustment to the demands of British society through developing in-between identities, complex subjectivities, and multiple reference points (Bromley 133), in each case displaying growing optimism about tackling the difficulties of being "other". However such complexities of arrival come with a conflicted sense of home and belonging; as Avtar Brah points out, diasporic writing may inscribe a longing for home, and also a "homing desire", that is, not just a wish to return to a place of origin, but a desire for a mythic place in the diasporic imagination (197). Both Syal and Ali invoke the worlds that have been left behind: in *Anita and Me* through the close links the parents of Syal's heroine, Meena Kumar, retain with their relatives in the Punjab, including her grandmother who visits the family in England and teaches Meena to speak Punjabi; in *Brick Lane* through letters written from Dhaka by the heroine's sister, creating in Nazneen the "Going Home Syndrome" (Procter 63). Even *The Buddha of Suburbia* whose hero, Karim, has never been to India and has no

---

<sup>63</sup> This paper can only offer a tentative gesture at these issues, and indicate future directions for research.

yearning to do so, includes versions of the diasporic experience that involve desire for the distant homeland.

If the family unit features strongly in contemporary British-Asian fiction, so does the community context of family life. Usually the Asian cultural heritage is represented as in dramatic tension with Western cultural imperatives. This dynamic model of cultural syncreticism is common in British-Asian diasporic writing in which concepts of communal identity, dominated by the “politics of location”, are fluid and open to negotiation. As Avtar Brah points out, “the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from pre-given or fixed. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (183). Among the diasporic community’s cultural, religious, and ethnic values and beliefs, its identifications in relation to nation and nationality are multiple even contradictory, caught between that mythic place (perhaps the place of origin to which a return is unlikely) which the diasporic imagination constructs, and the new nation where the immigrant dream is tested out. In its intermeshing of family problems with community issues, then, contemporary British-Asian fiction differs from the writing of the Windrush generation like Sam Selvon’s whose narratives are closer to documentary realism and whose migrant characters have few lasting attachments, lack a family context or collectivised politics, and rely on a circle of similarly marginalized migrants to grapple with issues such as impoverished housing, sweated labour and exclusion.

### *I Anita and Me and Brick Lane*

Both *Anita and Me* and *Brick Lane* dwell on the experiences of marginality – alienation, displacement – and their heroines’ adjustments to their anomalous or insignificant social position on the one hand, and their over-prescribed roles within the family on the other. Both novels value the family unit as a vitally important anchor for the individual who has to make sense of the difference of being “other”. Meera Syal’s nine-year-old Meena Kumar develops multiple reference points and identifications: with her family, her school friends, in particular her working class friend, Anita, and other members of the local community. These merge and criss-cross each other so that establishing her real identity creates a crisis for Meena. The child of Indian migrants who came to Britain soon after partition in 1948, and who live in the 1960s in a rural West Midlands, ex-mining, working-class town, Tollerton, Meena’s rapid integration with her surroundings – acquiring a Tollerton accent and imitating the transgressive style of Anita – contrasts with her parents’ distance. They preserve their Punjabi culture almost intact, retaining ethnic dress, food, religious practices, language, moral beliefs and entertainment, most notably when their friends and relatives visit. As the only Indian family in the town, they are

respected within the community and Meena has no experience of racial discrimination until one day when one of the boys whom she has known at school turns against her. The discourses of racism infiltrate the village, relegating the family to an excluded category of “other”. The growing tensions between Meena and Anita on the one hand, and Meena and the so-called alternative culture of her family on the other which this development provokes are set against the decline of village life (a motorway is built, a new housing development takes place, the school closes), and the growing realisation that the local children with whom Meena identifies will have limited futures, by contrast to her expectations and those of her middle class parents: that the Tollerton community itself is marginalised.

One aim of this novel is to show how diasporic identity is of necessity a constructed one, in keeping with Stuart Hall’s definition of identity as “a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within not outside, representation” (222). Syal emphasises Meena’s predicament of being doubly estranged, first from her parents and their culture, then from her Tollerton friends. According to Roger Bromley, the process whereby Meena’s location “unbecomes” home, and she begins to acquire Brah’s “homing desire” (Brah 193) – to learn about her place of origin through a process of conceptualisation and translation (she has never been to India) – is necessary in order for her to reroute “that ‘origin’ into the ‘vernacular’ of her own split location as a British-born Asian” (Bromley 147).

As she comes under pressure from what slowly unfolds as a racist community, the more she needs to learn of the history, politics and languages of her parents’ India not as a place to retreat to, but as a cultural place to start out from, in order to contest the fixed, racialised identity inscribed in her localised experience in the rural West Midlands. (Bromley 143)

Only through rediscovering her ethnic identity through her parents, her aunt and grandmother who visit from the Punjab, does Meena reconcile her ambiguous status and relocate herself as an “outsider” to the society of Tollerton in which she had believed herself to be an “insider”. She has to distance herself from the principally monological white culture of Tollerton, live with displacement and reinvent herself in order to learn to cross class, social and ethnic boundaries. The narrative voice early on aligns this act of self-reconstruction with the art of fiction making: “I’m not really a liar, I just learned early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong” (10).<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> On the child narrator in Syal’s fiction see Devon Campbell-Hall, “Writing Second-Generation Migrant Identity in Meera Syal’s Fiction”.



Although Meena's capacity for untruth gets her into trouble with her parents it becomes metonymic of that larger exercise in self-reconstruction which constitutes the novel's interior drama. Immediate and extended family from India are therefore crucial to Meena's processes of *multi-locality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries* (Brah 194, italics in original) which enable her to move beyond the small town world of Tollerton and establish herself as an in-between subject. In mixed circumstances like this, even the story of her family's own migration from India acquires new value as she comes to distinguish between the self defined by the culture of origin and the self defined by her culture of re-location, and learns to blend the two.

Meena's family, believing they are the only Indians in Tollerton, have no one in the community with whom to share their migrant experience until the chance discovery of another Punjabi migrant living reclusively in the "Big House" on the outskirts of town. But in *Brick Lane* the migrant Bangladeshi community of East London's borough of Tower Hamlets provides the heroine, Nazneen, with the opportunity to move away from the constraints of her marriage. Like *Anita and Me*, the family unit is questioned through Nazneen's growing sense of self-worth as she acquires independence and self-motivation. Nazneen arrives in the UK from Bangladesh at the age of eighteen to enter into an arranged marriage with a much older man, Chanu, who wants to advance his own career, and permits her only to bring up the children and take in sewing. Such paternalistic constraints echo the circumscribed lives of other women in the Bengali community in Britain from the late 1970s – many coming from the rural Sylhet region where women were forbidden to work outside the home – who were criticised for not integrating into British society due to their poor command of English and their insistence on wearing traditional dress.

In Tower Hamlets where Nazneen, Chanu and their two daughters live, an increasingly Islamic type of radicalism is taking root in the form of local militant groups, the Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts, which hold regular meetings. The Bengal Tigers challenge racial discrimination and unite the community in protecting the local Ummah (Muslim community) and fanning belief in an Islamic brotherhood; these meetings provide Nazneen with an alternative public milieu to the domestic one. Her horizons are also widened through her friendship and later clandestine affair with Karim, Chairman of the Bengal Tigers, a kind of sweatshop middleman who delivers her the garments to sew. An activist displaying the rebellious resistance of the second-generation British-born Bengali, who has witnessed the failure of the immigrant dream of his parents, Karim introduces Nazneen to the International Muslim community, and encourages her to learn English. Eventually with his support and that of her friends, she and her daughters find the psychological strength and will-power to refuse to accompany Chanu when he decides to return to Bangladesh. Family life is displaced but not abandoned; Nazneen realises that life will go on without her husband as she acquires confidence and as new opportunities emerge. The

novel ends with her planning to open a sari shop with her friend Razi, designing a kind of fusion fashion for a metropolitan London clientele. As Razi says: “This is England [...] You can do whatever you like” (413).

*Brick Lane*, then, shows the evolution of Nazneen’s control over her life and destiny, beginning with the negotiation of her ethnic identity in ways that were not possible among Bengali migrants twenty years ago; but instead of the psychological processes of adjustment between British and Asian cultures that enable Syal in *Anita and Me* to reposition Meena as an “in-between” subject, Ali locates Nazneen’s emerging will to self-empowerment within the more general reworking of cultural identity taking place in the previously tightly knit and impenetrable Bangladeshi community in London’s Banglatown. Ultimately it is the newly attractive power of the Islamic brotherhood, a form of religious revival fuelled by the political dynamism generated by the International Movement, which redefines the meaning of the British Bangladeshi community.<sup>65</sup> The brotherhood constitutes this diasporic community’s “alternate public sphere[s]”, providing “forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/ space” of the host community (Clifford 308; qtd in Needham 13).

## II The Buddha of Suburbia

By contrast to Ali and Syal, whose characters are positioned as outsiders to mainstream society, Hanif Kureishi in *The Buddha of Suburbia* explores the collapse of the hybrid nuclear family and introduces relationships which are both revisionary and alternative. Writing into the gap between cultures, genders and ethnicities, Kureishi mockingly subverts normative values and reworks social and political structures to express a new confidence in being marginal. This includes a more “centred” articulation of marginal aspirations and anxieties. Also by contrast to Syal and Ali’s female protagonists, Kureishi’s Karim, being bisexual, exhibits an acute sense of sexual difference, exploring his sexual interests after departing from the family home, in what becomes a non-essentialised state of unbelonging and non-commitment. Moving between different circles, Karim identifies with no-one for long, apart from his almost-cousin Jamila whose radical feminism he finds exhilarating and liberating and who is his sternest critic: ““You’re not attached to anything [...] You don’t love”” (240).

Meena’s dilemma in *Anita and Me* illustrates that although the diasporic subject can relocate herself across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries, this can be a painful learning process for a child. Seventeen-year-old

---

<sup>65</sup> See Claire Alexander, 564, on the problems of Muslim integration into British society, and the representation of Muslims as “Other”.

Karim Amir of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, by contrast, born of an English mother and an Indian father who arrived from Bombay in 1950, is able to define his ethnic identity as a matter of individual choice and positioning rather than as a biological given (Hall 226). In this respect he shares affinities with Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus's celebrated novel, *L'Étranger* (1942), who is Algerian by birth but as a Francophile believes in the superiority of French culture over Arab; alienation is early on a way of life for him. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s famous opening, Karim sees himself as English rather than Pakistani: "I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories" (3). Yet family dysfunction is the crucible for his anarchic energy. He continues: "...I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action and sexual interest I could find, because things were gloomy, so slow and heavy in our family, I don't know why" (3). Karim separates himself from a "proper" Englishman as well as from his family background, at first through an affectionate physical liaison with Charlie Kay (son of his father's mistress, Eva), then after he leaves home and successfully establishes a career as an actor, through developing the fluid, mobile identity of the in-between subject. For Karim, unlike Meena, what is painful is the journey towards acknowledging that these sophisticated layerings of identity mask the suffering he experiences over the break-up of his lower middle-class family.

Karim's real and artificial multiple selves, developed from familiar colonial and oriental perceptions of the Indian (in one play he acts as Mowgli in a stage adaptation of Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and in another he uses his friend Changez as the basis of his characterization), are seemingly engendered by the inventive performances of his father, Haroon. The novel opens with Haroon's self-transformation into the pseudo-spiritual otherworldliness of a pseudo spiritual Buddha, setting himself up as a font of supposed Oriental wisdom to his suburban neighbours, and ultimately breaking up his marriage to his wife, Karim's mother. Karim goes even further than his father in mocking English assumptions about the "other": he mimics colonial stereotypes of Asians in the roles he plays, fetishises clothing, and is socially and sexually mobile. But he later has the revelation that prioritizing personal desire and ambition involves deception and betrayal: "... the night I saw Dad screwing Eva on the lawn [...] was my introduction to serious betrayal, lying, deceit and heart-following" (253). Karim's in-between state – acquired by negotiating spaces, positioning and repositioning himself, to achieve a both/and rather than an either/or location – can be read as a radical reaction to troubled family affairs. The gap in his knowledge about his Asian ethnicity can apparently be filled by invention: when he sees Indians who "in some way were my people" he admits,

I'd spent my life denying or avoiding that fact [...] Partly I blamed Dad for this. After all, for most of his life he had never shown any

interest in going back to India. So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it. (212-213)

But for the devastating break-up of his parents, invention or performance is no real compensation, as he confides to his younger brother in the novel's finale: "You know after Mum and Dad broke up, everything went crazy. I didn't know where I was" (269).

According to Bart Moore-Gilbert, family in Kureishi's fiction is always already dysfunctional, and to that extent family relations are a seminal influence upon his satire on British suburbia and Asian patriarchal society with its rigid codes (156). Haroon's impersonation of Oriental, Buddhist wisdom anticipates Karim's departure from the parental nest in the suburb of Bromley for the sybaritic territory of London. Old ties are broken and new ones develop: Haroon eventually marries Eva Kay, Charlie's mother, while Margaret, Karim's mother, acquires an English boyfriend.

Domestic drama turns into farce, however, with the introduction of a cartoon-like, essentialist migrant, Karim's Uncle Anwar, who insists that his daughter, Jamila, enter into an arranged marriage with the Indian Changez. A caricature of the exile who is fixated on the imaginary homeland, Anwar identifies excessively with rigid local customs which are inappropriate to the new country. His stand-off with his feminist daughter which culminates in his hunger strike, generates further comedy which has ambiguous sexuality at its centre: Jamila's marriage to Changez is never consummated; she takes up residence in a commune, has a baby by Simon, another member of the commune, and a lesbian relationship with another woman when Simon is not around. Changez lives up to the symbolic overtones of his name by becoming the baby's nursemaid, even seemingly developing breasts. This domestic entertainment provides the alternative "family" background to Karim's picaresque voyaging through inner London. He says of Jamila and Changez: "It was only with these two that I felt part of a family. The three of us were bound together by ties stronger than personality, and stronger than the disliking or liking of each other" (214).

Kureishi's alternative images of the family – fluidly shifting sexual liaisons and ambiguous parenting roles – to the ties of blood, marriage and children of the nuclear family, have some basis in alternative Western life-styles like squats and communes, familiar since the 1960s. They also belong to the novel's general revaluation of normative knowledge, apparent in the challenge to the codes of Englishness which Karim launches in his mimicking of colonial desire for the "other" in performance. As Roger Bromley points out, Karim is caught between mimicry and subversion, and his performances of ethnicity extend beyond the theatrical to unsettle the novel's very relationship to reality; representation itself is questioned as nothing more than "the articulation of

existing, and dominant, cultural codes” (149, 152) as different guises are adopted and shed, new roles taken up and abandoned, social codes dismantled and reconstructed. Exploring ethnicity at the level of artifice rather than identity has consequences. Karim, in the process of mimicking English stereotypes of the Asian, becomes trapped in the image of the “other”, thus undermining his own presence and authority, and so yielding conceptual space to Jamila and Changez.<sup>66</sup> Kureishi exaggerates the ideological and gendered mismatches between the generations, and the tensions caused by their conflicting ideas of home and family – the traditional, patriarchal view that Anwar clings to, and the “relocated” hippie life-style of Jamila – in order to mark out and evaluate as different the dynamic alternative space of this disenfranchised minority. Yet as Bruce King points out, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is also about the costs of desire and liberation, “especially the wounding effect of change on family and those with whom one has emotional ties” (158).

Kureishi called for a reevaluation of Britishness in 1986, arguing that mainstream British society should acknowledge its implication in the concerns of ethnic minorities:

[i]t is the British, the white British who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces, and a new way of being British, after all this time.  
(*The Rainbow Sign* 38)

In departing from the conventional pattern of ethnic belonging and social referencing that traditional family units provide, in marginalising normative domestic structures and in foregrounding the relational positioning of Karim (situated in and through, for example, social structures, institutional practices, ethnicities), *The Buddha of Suburbia* exposes the operations of power which effectively naturalise identity. According to Brah's theory of the situatedness of groups, this allows us to

... deconstruct the regimes of power which operate to differentiate one group from another; to represent them as similar and different; to include or exclude them from constructions of the “nation” and the body politic, and which inscribe them as juridical, political and psychic subjects. (182-3)

---

<sup>66</sup> Bromley, 153, in an interpretation to which I am indebted, points out that the novel “makes apparent the visibility of mimicry in particular ways, ways which displace and decentre the controlling gaze by liberating marginal elements: ‘the Other that belongs inside one’ (Hall 48) [...] ‘This is the self as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other’ (ibid.)”.

Furthermore, in defining the horizons of the suburban middle classes in terms of minority group issues, *The Buddha of Suburbia* speaks to a mainstream audience; it reveals a new dimension in the map of multicultural Britain. Writing in the vanguard of second-generation British-Asian fiction of the 1980s and 90s, Kureishi with his novels, short stories, plays and the success of the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) has created space for writers like Meera Syal, Monica Ali, and Zadie Smith; he has developed the possibilities of self-positioning between cultures and shown “how to live inside the nation with a difference” (Nasta 7).

These semi-autobiographical novels have adapted the form of the bildungsroman to the need of such minorities for liberation from “the spaces previously allocated to them by their pre-determined social and cultural positionings” (Nasta 195), and have made more visible their processes of initiation into a complex, multi-cultural society. As second-generation writers, Syal, Ali and Kureishi embody the unfulfilled desires of the first generation. Childhood in their fictions is therefore a state of innocence or confusion, often concealed within the adult psyche and emerging unpredictably in moments of regression as Karim discovers: “Maybe you never stop feeling like an eight-year-old in front of your parents. You resolve to be your mature self [...] but within five minutes your intentions are blown to hell, and you’re babbling and screaming in rage like an angry child” (280). Their real subject is the child’s transition to adulthood, through negotiating an in-between identity in the multicultural metropolis, and by developing relationships of affiliation as well as coming to understand those prior ones of filiation.

It is clear, however, that such diasporic fictions only obliquely reflect the social picture of the nuclear family in decline; for even families which are torn or fragmented retain importance in their fictional worlds as the crucial origin of and point of departure for their protagonists. As *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows, understanding the effects of change on the family circle, which often involves a difficult rite-de-passage, is an important underpinning to any challenge to the status quo in the social sphere. In this light the model of union that the extended family of Jamila’s commune represents is not merely an alternative one; it demarcates a dynamic space in which to explore the changes that such departures from the nuclear family unleash. This is equivalent to that space which Vijay Mishra claims as Kureishi’s achievement, for it confirms the “triumph of the hybrid, the power of the in-between to express the new and to mount a critique of the old” (437).

## Works Cited

- Alexander, Claire. "Beyond Black: Re-thinking the Colour/Culture Divide." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25:4 July 2002: 552-571.
- Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Doubleday, 2003.
- Ball, John Clement. *Imagining London. Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*. Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Bromley, Roger. *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.
- Campbell-Hall, Devon. "Writing Second-Generation Migrant Identity in Meera Syal's Fiction". Unpublished paper presented at the *EACLALS* Conference, University of Malta, 21-25 March 2005.
- Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology*. 9.3 1994: 302-38.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Jonathan Rutherford, ed. *Identity; Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 222-237.
- . "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*. Ed. Anthony D. King. London: MacMillan, 1991.
- Hand, Felicity. "Portraying London's Banglatown: from *Vigilantes* to *Brick Lane*." Unpublished paper presented at "Nation and Imagination", 13<sup>th</sup> *ACLALS* Conference, Hyderabad, August 2004.
- King, Bruce. *The Internationalization of English Literature: 1948-2000. The Oxford English Literary History*. Vol 13. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Kureishi, Hanif. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. London: Faber, 1990.
- . *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign*. London: Faber, 1986.

- Lee, Robert A. "Changing the Script: Sex, Lies and Videotapes in Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen and Mike Phillips." in Lee, ed. *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction*. London: Pluto Press, 1995. 69-89.
- Mishra, Vijay. "The Diasporic Imagery: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora." *Textual Practice* 10.3 Winter 1996: 421-447.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. *Hanif Kureishi*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- Moss, Laura. "The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Wasafiri* 39 (Summer 2003): 11-17.
- Nasta, Susheila. *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney. *Using the Master's Tools. Resistance in the Literature of the African and South-Asian Diasporas*. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Procter, James. "Review of *Brick Lane*." *Wasafiri* 41 Spring 2004: 63-64.
- Sandhu, Sukhdev. "Come Hungry, Leave Edgy". Review of Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*. *London Review of Books* 9 October 2003: 10-13.
- Syal, Meera. *Anita and Me* (1996). London: Flamingo, 1997.



# **ABANDONING FAMILY AND TRADITION FOR A CAREER**

## **An Analysis of Texts from and on Liberia**

Ritske Zuidema

### **Introduction**

Through most of its history, Liberia was dominated politically by a tiny Americo-Liberian elite, consisting of descendants of the freed American slaves who founded the country in the nineteenth century. Indigenous Liberians, comprising the vast majority of the population, were looked down upon and treated as uncultured savages and heathens by many Americo-Liberians. Only in 1980 did the Americo-Liberians lose their hegemony when Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, an indigenous Liberian, took power through a military coup. However, under Doe's regime, the politics of exclusion continued. The new political elite came to be increasingly dominated by members of Doe's own ethnic group, the Krahn, as well as elements of the old regime who were re-installed in positions of power. Once again, a small elite, representing only a minority of the Liberian population, divided amongst themselves all the money and important positions that could be accessed through government.

In this context, building a successful career was a formidable task for most Liberians of indigenous descent. During the years of Americo-Liberian domination, it was possible for a limited number of native Liberians to join the (lower) ranks of the country's elite, but only if they distanced themselves from their cultural background and assimilated into the dominant group. In his book *Liberia: The Heart of Darkness*, the Liberian journalist Gabriel I.H. Williams gives the following information about this:

Native children who were attached as wards to Americo-Liberian ... families for education and other opportunities, had to abandon their native names and values and take on Christian or European names, and also the attributes of their adopted families. ... Because the natives were regarded as heathens or barbarians, things of traditional or ethnic values were discouraged and treated with contempt .... It was acceptable for a native-born to be ashamed to speak or not be able to speak his or her ethnic language. Christian names were promoted because it was a way of identification as being part of the so-called

educated or civilized people in society. ... The adoption of biblical or European names and openly renouncing cultural activities were part of the transformation of many native converts. (50)

What Williams thus shows is that ambitious Liberians of indigenous descent experienced a conflict between career and family or cultural background. It is this conflict that I will focus on and analyse in this paper, using texts by three literary authors. I will show how this conflict was directly related to and caused by the exclusionary structure of Liberian society. In addition, I will try to relate this conflict to the civil wars Liberia experienced after 1990.

### **Henry Cordon**

The conflict between family and career is illustrated graphically in the short story “A Farewell to the Old Order,” written by Henry Cordon and published in 1979. The story’s main character is a native Liberian, named James Dahn, who has managed to work himself into the circle of Liberia’s elite. He has studied at university, and through a connection with an elitist family in Liberia’s capital Monrovia, he has managed to get a job as Assistant Minister for Personnel and Planning in the Ministry of Presidential Affairs. However, his assimilation into the Americo-Liberian elite is not complete, for he has two illiterate wives who have come straight from the countryside to the capital, and who look and behave accordingly. James Dahn’s Americo-Liberian boss tells him in no uncertain terms that this state of affairs is unacceptable. His social life needs to “reflect modern living” (7), and as long as this is not the case, he will not be promoted and even risks losing his current job. James can continue to see his “country women” in secret, but he needs to get married according to Western custom to one “civilised woman” whom he can present as his official wife and take to important public occasions and parties. He discusses the matter with his brother who emphasises how important it is for his community that he has such a high position in government and advises him to do what it takes to stay in that position. Eventually, James gives in. He tells his wives that they should leave his house, so that he can find himself and marry a “civilised” woman, and save his career.

### **Dwaboyea E.S. Kandakai**

The conflict between career and family background is further explored in Dwaboyea E.S. Kandakai’s novel *The Village Son*. According to the text on the blurb of the novel, it was written in the 1970s. However, it was only published

in 2001. By that time, Ms Kandakai had become minister for education in the government of Charles Taylor, a post she kept after Taylor was deposed.

One of the themes the novel deals with is the practice of having children from indigenous families adopted by supposedly civilised Americo-Liberian families to improve their (career) opportunities, thus separating them from their native family and community. This is what happens to one of the novel's main characters, Nannie, a girl from a village deep in the Liberian hinterland. At the age of 7, she is given away by her uncle to the Berry family in Monrovia, so that they could "civilize' and educate her" (2). The novel shows the advantages of such an arrangement, describing how it sets her on course to join the country's elite. Her future prospects look bright when at the age of 19 she is admitted to university. However, the novel also emphasises the negative effects of the arrangement, for Nannie has become a young woman whose sense of identity and belonging is rather unclear and fractured. Her foster parents have largely made her into what she is now, but she also feels attachment to her real parents in the village, whom she has not seen for twelve years. When she finally visits her native village, she experiences a degree of alienation from her original community and culture, caused by her long absence and her immersion in "civilisation." "She could not join in the dancing and singing. She felt too self-conscious and to her dismay, she had forgotten most of the songs and worse still, many words in her own local language" (5).

The novel also shows an alternative to the path taken by Nannie, and this alternative is represented by the novel's other main character, Neh Gateru. He is the chief's son and becomes Nannie's fiancé during her visit to her native village. Like Nannie, Neh was separated from his family and community at an early age, so that his career prospects could improve. However, after having been educated abroad, Neh Gateru decided to return home "to study the land and the people, his land and his people. While doing this ... he would work and share with the people what he knew, starting with his own tribe and his own village" (11). Thus, his immersion in so-called "civilisation" has not led him to distance himself from his people. On the contrary, he has decided to return to them to make them more conscious of their own abilities and qualities and to help them develop themselves and their living conditions. Significantly, he is very critical of his girlfriend Nannie's ambiguous sense of loyalty, which is divided between her real parents in the village and her foster parents in Monrovia. He tells her that he resents the hold that her foster parents in Monrovia have on her and the fact that she even carries their name.

Kandakai emphasises that during the time of Americo-Liberian domination, the kind of path chosen by Neh Gateru was a dead end. She describes how initially Neh's unorthodox choices bring him success and fame. He succeeds in bringing about important changes to his own village and the area around it, making it much more developed. His fame spreads throughout the country, and he is even asked to give a speech at the University in Monrovia,

where he takes a firm stance against the exclusionist nature of Liberian society and politics. However, his mission is cut short when he is suddenly arrested in Monrovia and put in prison, where he dies under suspicious circumstances. Thus, Neh's attempts to reconcile the conflict between career and family and bring about a more inclusive Liberia bring him into another conflict: a conflict between him and a powerful elite intent on defending the status quo.

## John Gay

When analysing the theme of the conflict between family and career opportunities in Liberia on the basis of literary works, it is important to include John Gay. John Gay is not a Liberian, but a white American with a missionary background who lived and worked in Liberia between 1958 and 1974. During this time, he conducted a lot of research on the Kpelle people, one of Liberia's largest indigenous ethnic groups. In his three novels, centre stage is given to the conflict between the so-called "country people" in the country's interior and Liberia's Western-educated and supposedly civilised elite. He refers to this conflict as the conflict between "kwii" and "country." The word *kwii* comes from the Kpelle language. According to John Gay, in the glossary of his first novel *Red Dust on the Green Leaves*, this is "a term referring to any Westernized or modernised person or thing, whether Liberian or foreign" (240). The term also appears in Henry Cordor's short story, where the kind of woman James Dahn is told to marry is described as a "kwii woman."

John Gay's novel *Red Dust on the Green Leaves*, published in 1973, is about the twin brothers Koli and Sumo, born in a rural town in the Liberian hinterland. They represent the two different options that indigenous Liberians could choose between during the time of Americo-Liberian domination, each of which had its own price. The first option was to build up a future within the context of community and family. Unfortunately, this made all the attractive career opportunities existing outside of that context inaccessible. The other option was to leave family and community behind, and to build up a future in the *kwii* world. This resulted in a degree of alienation from their roots, but at the same time it created access to career opportunities in the wider Liberian society.

Sumo goes for the first option. He stays in the village, and learns to become a *zoe*, a kind of traditional healer. Koli could also have become a *zoe*, for in his culture twins are expected to become *zoes*. However, his intention is to move beyond the confines of his native village, and thus he chooses the second option. He manages to get enrolled at a missionary school run by white people. As a result of this, his behaviour, his values and his outlook on life change considerably. His alienation from his native community is described vividly in the novel. During the time when he stays at the missionary school, he comes home only twice in six years, and during those visits he notices how difficult it

has become for him to adapt to village life. And when his father Flumo visits him at school, Koli feels ashamed, because his father does not behave in a “modern” way, and does not even wear shoes.

There is an interesting similarity between Koli and Henry Cordon’s main character, James Dahn, who was happily married to his country women, but eventually chose to abandon them as they obstructed his career opportunities. During one of his visits to his home village, Koli also falls for a “country woman,” and he even gets her pregnant. His community expects him to return home, marry her and look after her. However, as this would create serious obstacles to his career plans, Koli decides otherwise. He suggests that his brother Sumo marry her and accept the child as his own. Sumo, who also likes Kuluba, is willing to do so, and the matter is settled.

The novel ends when Koli gets a chance to continue his education in high school. His rather traditional father Flumo does not want to deny his son the opportunity to make his own choices. However, he is acutely aware of the price that may have to be paid by those who choose a future in the world of the *kwii*, and expresses his concerns about his son’s future in the form of a story about a warrior, a dog and a leopard:

A hunter had brought a leopard cub from the forest into town, after shooting the mother. The people in town played with the leopard cub and did whatever they wanted to it. And then one day a dog came up and sniffed the leopard cub all over. The dog thought nothing of playing with that young prince of the forest. The warrior saw the dog sniff at the leopard. He hesitated a moment and then took out his knife and cut the dog in half. He then began to cry. The people asked him why he cried. He said, “I know that when I die, people will do to my children what that dog did to the leopard’s cub. If the leopard’s mother had been there, the dog would fear the leopard too much to touch the cub. This is how people fear the warrior. When he is alive, no one will play with his children. But when he dies, they will do with his children what they like, and no one will lift a hand to help the little ones.”  
(236)

The story is meant as a comparison. Koli is the leopard’s cub. Originally a child of the forest, he is taken by a white man into the world of so-called civilisation, away from his family and his traditional culture. Flumo is afraid that Koli will just become the plaything of whites and Americo-Liberians, and will turn into a pathetic creature.

*Red Dust on the Green Leaves* has two sequels, *The Brightening Shadow* and *Long Day’s Anger*, which tell the rest of the lives of the two boys. Sumo stays part of his traditional culture as a *zoe*, and becomes a very successful man in his community. Koli tries to make a living in the so-called “civilised world,”

but fails to get further than the fringes of that world, as he is not smart and cunning enough to compete successfully in the world of the *kwii*. His father's fears thus largely become reality. And as Koli has already become too "civilised," in a cultural sense, to become re-integrated into village life, he remains stuck on the fringes of the *kwii* world, doing relatively low-paid jobs, with no prospect of ever really making it. By detailing Koli's failure to become a successful *kwii*, John Gay shows the difficulties involved in trying to gain a place among Liberia's "civilised" elite and emphasises how most members of Liberia's indigenous ethnic groups could hope for little more than entering the lower ranks of that elite.

### **The socio-political significance of the conflict between family and career**

In John Gay's three novels, the characters of Koli and Sumo have a wider significance. They symbolise what John Gay sees as the major division in Liberian society, the division between "*kwii*" and "country." In the preface to a new 2003 edition of his second novel, *The Brightening Shadow*, originally published in 1980, he asserts that this fundamental division has permeated virtually all aspects of Liberian society, and that over the years this division has become more pronounced:

*The ties that bind rural and urban society, bush school and Western education, subsistence and money economy, micro and macro politics, forest and world religion, unwritten and written law, covert and overt speech are now ... in the process of being stretched to the point that the lives of the twins can no longer be inter-twined in a harmonious whole.*

John Gay's analysis, particularly when read in conjunction with the literary works by Cordor and Kandakai, creates an image of a Liberian nation that was never much more than a construction on paper. The divisions within the country appear to be running so deep that it may be more appropriate to speak of two nations, with one of them probably further subdivided into ethnic segments. The literary texts discussed deal mainly with the period of Americo-Liberian political domination. However, the military coup of 1980 by indigenous military officers changed little in this respect, because a new (increasingly ethnically homogeneous) elite largely copied the habits of their predecessors, and continued the politics of exclusion. Now one had to belong to the Krahn ethnic group or to one of their allies in order to get access to opportunities in society. Significantly, even the division between "*kwii*" and "country" continued to an extent after the coup of 1980. In his book *Ethnicity, Class and the Struggle for State Power in Liberia* the Nigerian political scientist Eghosa E. Osaghae claims

that during the period after Samuel Doe's military coup, Liberia's Krahn people "saw in Doe's government, their own opportunity to play Americo-Liberians much to the envy of other groups" (80). Thus, it has been argued that the coup of 1980 did not result in a change of power from "kwii" to "country." On the contrary, power remained concentrated in the hands of people who were regarded as *kwii* and/or presented themselves as *kwii*. The coup only provided more opportunities for members of the new president's Krahn ethnic group, who used to be considered very backward and "uncivilised," to join the *kwii*.

It is hardly surprising that under such conditions the country moved ever closer towards civil war. Many Liberians became increasingly frustrated and dissatisfied about the exclusionary and divisive nature of the society they lived in. Moreover, because it was so hard for indigenous Liberians to succeed in the *kwii* world, many of those who tried to do so stranded somewhere in between. In the e-mail I received from John Gay, he said the following about these "in-betweens":

*Most people who began the process of leaving the tradition did not complete their schooling or find good jobs in the kwii world. They were often caught in the middle, members not of two worlds, but of no world at all. Such people, who neither succeeded in Western school nor in their own traditional culture, were natural candidates to join the armies of Charles Taylor or the other warlords. I like to think of a three-legged pot which falls if one of the legs is broken. In the Liberian case these are the moral foundation of church/secret society (which fill the same role in life), schooling (whether in the Poro/Sande<sup>67</sup> or in the Western school) and livelihood (whether through money employment or subsistence farming). The person who only goes half-way into the kwii world often has none of these legs on his or her pot. Belief structures are lost, education is partial and incomplete, and there is no gainful employment.*

In his famous article "The Coming Anarchy," published in 1994, the American journalist and travel writer Robert D. Kaplan appears to refer to the same people when he talks about "loose molecules" roaming the streets of West-African cities. Like John Gay, he links this group of people explicitly to the development of civil war.

Each time I went to the Abidjan bus terminal, groups of young men with restless, scanning eyes surrounded my taxi, putting their hands all over the windows, demanding "tips" for carrying my luggage, even though I had only a rucksack. In cities in six West African countries I

---

<sup>67</sup> Traditional initiation school or "bush school" of the peoples in Liberia's hinterland.

saw similar young men everywhere – hordes of them. They were like loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting. “You see,” my friend the Minister told me, “in the villages of Africa it is perfectly natural to feed at any table and lodge in any hut. But in the cities this communal existence no longer holds. You must pay for lodging and be invited for food. When young men find out that their relations cannot put them up, they become lost. They join other migrants and slip gradually into the criminal process.” (45)

In John Gay’s third novel, *Long Day’s Anger*, such a “loose molecule” is introduced: Mulbah, the second son of Sumo and Kuluba. At first, his parents are not sure in which direction they should stimulate him to go. They would like him to stay in the traditional village environment, but also wonder whether they should perhaps let him try his luck in the *kwii* world, which at that time appears to be encroaching more and more on their environment. Eventually, at a rather late stage, they decide to let him stay with Koli and his wife, so that he can go to a “Western” school. However, he becomes a failure at school, and an attempt to find his luck in the capital Monrovia comes to nothing either. Attempts are then made to get him back into his traditional cultural environment, but when a young Americo-Liberian man rapes his sister, he kills the rapist, after which he is forced to flee the country. In a conversation with Sumo, his brother Tokpa characterises him as follows:

Far worse are people like your own son, my brother Mulbah. We ... tried to take care of him to see if he could be brought back into the right way .... But if enough other radicals were to talk to Mulbah and get him all excited, then he could easily go wild. And if young people like him who are not really proper country people any more, and who have failed to become *kwii*, get power, then Liberia is finished. (128)

Perhaps not surprisingly, towards the end of the novel, Mulbah turns up again, now as a rebel, fighting for the warlord Charles Taylor.

Probably, the group of “loose molecules” became particularly large during the years in which Samuel Doe was president (1980-1990). Largely due to government mismanagement, Liberia experienced a very severe economic crisis. As a result, there were very few economic opportunities available. Hardly anyone who tried really succeeded in building a successful career. Thus, the exclusionary structure of Liberian society in combination with the very severe economic circumstances of the 1980s created a large reservoir of disgruntled and disorientated youngsters that could easily be recruited (by force or voluntarily) by warlords. Youngsters who had become lost after having distanced themselves from the stabilising structure of family and tradition were



particularly useful for the purposes of warlords. Such youngsters had started the process of leaving the world of family and tradition, but had failed to find another world to welcome them. The rebel armies gave them a chance of finding a sense of belonging in another, newly created, world: a world of warfare.<sup>68</sup> In this new world, they also became part of a new family, consisting of their rebel unit, with the commanders often being referred to as “daddy.” Sometimes, child soldiers were even told to kill their own family members, as a way of cutting off all their ties to the world they used to be part of. In addition, they often received a new name, which also suggests a break with the past and the family environment.

### *Conclusion*

The three literary authors discussed in this paper all suggest that throughout Liberia’s history, for many Liberians there has been a very serious conflict between on the one hand their family and communal background and on the other hand their career aspirations. Recently, this conflict appears to have acquired particularly morbid and destructive aspects, as youngsters abandoned their families and communities to join “rebel families,” looting and/or destroying what was left of Liberia after ten years of rule by Samuel Doe. By analysing and describing this conflict, the three authors lay bare a very fundamental fracture in Liberian society, and present valuable clues concerning the factors behind Liberia’s current predicament.

Henry Cordon’s short story shows a Liberian nation that is divided into two sub-nations, one composed of the *kwii* and one composed of the “country people.” In his story, the *kwii* are doing their utmost to keep the two sub-nations apart in order to preserve their own privileges. They admit a limited number of “country people” to their ranks, but only if they are no longer publicly recognisable as “country people,” thus continuing the division. In his story, Cordon sheds light on the important distinction between the public and the private, the official and the unofficial. Cordon’s main character James Dahn does not need to completely abandon his wives, as long as he is not formally connected to them, and is not seen with them in public during official occasions. Neither is there a need for him to completely abandon his community. In fact, they profit greatly from his position. He does, however, need to present himself

---

<sup>68</sup> Being from the Netherlands, the thought crosses my mind that similar groups of “in-betweens” may play a role in the current problems in my own country. Dutch society is currently struggling with the problem of radicalising Islamic young men from immigrant communities posing a terrorist threat. It may be worth investigating whether perhaps we are speaking of similar “in-betweens”, young men who have distanced themselves from the stabilising influence of the (moderately Islamic) culture of their parents, but who have failed to become truly part of Dutch society.

in public as a fully modernised and civilised *kwii* whose country background cannot be recognised. Thus, Cordor lays bare the fundamental inequality between the two sub-nations. Only one of them is considered to be compatible with modern government. Only one of them is considered to be fit to be shown in public and to represent the public face of the Liberian nation. The other is considered to be so inferior that it can only be “tolerated,” with its culture and practices kept as far away from the limelight as possible.

Neh Gateru, one of Kandakai’s main characters, questions this state of affairs. Unlike James Dahn, he is not prepared to publicly express his loyalty to the *kwii*, while keeping any remaining sense of loyalty for his own family and people secret. On the contrary, he seeks to give public expression to his loyalty to his own native community and family. While Cordor draws attention to the exclusionist nature of Liberia’s socio-political structure under Americo-Liberian rule in a relatively light and humorous way, Kandakai deals with the same theme in a much harsher way. Her character Neh Gateru’s refusal to comply ultimately leads to the severest of consequences. Like Cordor, Kandakai suggests that segments of the Americo-Liberian community considered it to be in their interest to maintain a deeply divided nation, in which access to elite positions remained restricted to their own group and to the few “country people” who managed to make it through a long process of assimilation. In the novel, this leads them to use any means necessary to stop Neh Gateru’s attempts to reconcile the conflicting demands of career and family/community/tradition, and to bring about a more inclusive Liberian society.

John Gay’s novel *Red Dust on the Green Leaves*, slightly nuances the message of the other two authors. While agreeing with Cordor and Kandakai that indigenous Liberians who wanted a career outside the context of their own traditional community were required to distance themselves from family and tradition, Gay suggests that it was also possible to have a fulfilling career within that context. Sumo, who stays loyal to family and tradition, has a much more satisfying career than Koli, who attempted to distance himself from family and tradition in order to enter the “civilised” world. On the other hand, one could also argue that both Koli and Sumo are not representative of all indigenous Liberians. Because they were born as twins, they had chances of becoming successful in their own community (as *zoes*), which many other indigenous Liberians probably lacked. Moreover, John Gay clearly supports the analysis of a Liberian nation divided in two. In fact, of the three authors, he provides the most detailed and extensive analysis of the fracture between the *kwii* and the “country people.” With the two sequels to *Red Dust on the Green Leaves*, he also points to the continuing relevance of this division, even after the end of Americo-Liberian domination.

Thus, on the basis of the works of three literary authors, read in conjunction with non-literary sources, it appears that the conflict between family and career is rooted in a very deep and very fundamental fracture in Liberian

society which has so far refused to go away. By laying bare the dimensions and implications of this fracture, the three authors stress how crucial it is to heal this fracture before a viable Liberian nation can emerge. Again, it is John Gay who expresses this most clearly in the preface to the new 2003 edition of *The Brightening Shadow*, saying that a true end to Liberia's war can only take place "when justice is available for all, in short, when Koli and Sumo, and all that they stand for symbolically, are once again united."

## Works cited

- Cordor, Henry S. "A Farewell to the Old Order." *Africa, From People to People: Six Short Stories from Contemporary Africa*. Washington D.C.: The International Africana Press, 1979. 1-18.
- Gay, John. E-mail to the author. 15 december 2004.
- . *Long Day's Anger*. Northridge: New World African Press, 2004.
- . *Red Dust on the Green Leaves*. Thompson: InterCulture Associates, 1973. (Reprinted in 2002 by New World African Press.)
- . *The Brightening Shadow. (First New Edition)* Northridge: New World African Press, 2003.
- Kandakai, Dwaboyea E.S. *The Village Son*. Accra: Sedco Publishing, 2001.
- Kaplan, Robert D. "The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation and Disease Are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of our Planet." *Atlantic Monthly* February 1994: 44-76.
- Osaghae, Eghosa E. *Ethnicity, Class and the Struggle for State Power in Liberia*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 1996.
- Williams, Gabriel I.H. *Liberia: The Heart of Darkness*. New Bern: Trafford, 2002.

## Notes on the Contributors

Christine van Boheemen is professor of English Literature at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She has published widely on narrative theory and family romance, and on postcolonial theory. One of her book publications is *Joyce, Derrida, Lacan and the Trauma of History: Reading, Narrative, Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler teaches postcolonial literatures at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, and is working on a PhD project concerning the continuation of oral storytelling traditions in written texts. Her research involves a case study of the fictional writing of four South Pacific authors.

Matt Kimmich is a lecturer at the Department of English Languages and Literatures at the University of Berne, Switzerland. He is currently working on a PhD thesis on what he designates as Salman Rushdie's family novels: *Midnight's Children, Shame, The Satanic Verses, and The Moor's Last Sigh*.

Judith Misrahi-Barak wrote her PhD thesis on the writing of childhood in Caribbean literature. She taught at the University of Aix-en-Provence and is currently teaching at Montpellier III, France. She has published several articles on Caribbean writers and the Caribbean diaspora in such journals as *Commonwealth, Alizés, Annales du Monde Anglophone* and *Journal of the Short-Story in English*.

Sam Raditlhalo is a lecturer at the department of English of the University of Cape Town, South Africa. His field of concentration is mainly South African Literature, with interests in Southern African cultural history, contemporary poetry, photography, and the critical arts. A recent publication is "Unzima Lomtvalo – 'This load is heavy': A Selection of South African Prison and Exile Life Writings" in *Life Writing* 1(2), 2004: 27-54.

Irene Visser is a lecturer at the department of English Language and Culture of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Her research interest in the field of postcolonial studies focuses on literatures of New Zealand and postapartheid South Africa, in particular on existential and gender issues. A relevant publication is "How to Live in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Reading Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*," in *Wasafiri* 37, 2002: 39-43.

Margriet van der Waal is currently completing her PhD studies at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. In her dissertation on the South African literary

field she investigates the influence of political change on the South African literary field, with specific reference to literature education and literary history writing, from a Bourdieuan field perspective. Her research interests include literary sociology, cultural identity and cultural change. A recent publication is “Crossed Borders? The Debate about Culture and Art in South Africa during the Period of Political Transformation” in *Aesthetic Autonomy: Problems and Perspectives*, edited by Van Heusden and Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peters, 2004, 87-112).

Janet Wilson is Reader in English at University College of Northampton, and editor of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. She is currently researching the white settler of Australasia, and the intellectual diaspora of New Zealand scholars who studied and worked in the UK in the twentieth century. Her article, “Fleur Adcock: The Ambivalent Expatriate, 1964-1974,” published in *The Journal of New Zealand Literature* 21 (2003): 57-72, is a study of the impact of relocation on the work of this New Zealand-born poet. She is also coeditor with Clara A.B. Joseph, of an essay collection on the postcolonial and globalisation, shortly to be published by Rodopi.

Ritske Zuidema studied English language and literature at the University of Groningen and graduated cum laude in 1997 with a thesis on the use of poetry in the South African anti-apartheid struggle. After having worked for a non-governmental organisation that provides aid to asylum seekers in the Netherlands for the past six years, he is currently looking for opportunities to enter the academic field again. As an academic researcher, he works on the crossroads of history, literary studies and political science. Geographically, his main interests are Southern Africa and West Africa.

## CDS Research Reports

R. Lensink, N. Hermes, *Regulatory Change and the Allocation of Finance: the Role of Business Conglomerates in the Case of Chili, 1983-1992*, No 1

A. Maatman, C. Schweigman, A. Ruys, *Synopsis of a Linear Programming Study of Farmers' Strategies on the Central Plateau in Burkina Faso*, No 2

N.Hermes, *New Explanations of the Economic Success of East Asia: Lessons for Developing and Eastern European Countries*, No 3

*State, Society and Ethnicity in Developing Countries: Lessons from the 1990s;* Lectures by Naomi Chazan, Martin Doornbos, Jan Pronk and Caspar Schweigman at the occasion of the festive opening of the Centre of Development Studies, February 1997, No 4

M. Thissen, P. Kerkhof, *The Dynamics of Reform Policy: a new political economy model with an application to Egypt*, No 5

R. Lensink, O. Morrissey, *Aid Instability as a Measure of Uncertainty and the Positive Impact of Aid on Growth*, No 6

N. Hermes, W.Salverda (eds.), *State, Society and Development: Lessons for Africa*, No 7

T. Thiombiano, *La Loi de Pareto: une loi sur l'inégalité ou sur la pauvreté? Réponses théorique et empirique*, No 8

E. Sterken, *Demand for Money and Shortages in Ethiopia*, No 9

C. Lutz (ed.), *Food Markets in Burkina Faso*, No 10

ZhongXiang Zhang, *Why has the Energy Intensity fallen in China's Industrial Sector in the 1990s ?*, No 11

P. Boele van Hensbroek (ed), *African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy*, .No 12

R. Lensink and O. Morrissey, *The Volatility of FDI, not the Level, affects Growth in Developing Countries*, No 13

- F. K. Hien, *L'Entrepreneuriat Feminin au Burkina Faso : Une Etude Exploratoire*, No 14
- C. Lutz, *Food Markets and Food Security in West Africa*, No 15
- C. Schweigman, *Developmental Research in Africa : Some Lessons*, No 16
- M. Kamminga, *On Global Justice*, No. 17
- P. Weesie and J. van Andel, *On Biodiversity and its Valuation*, No 18
- C. Schweigman, *Food Security: Opportunities and Responsibilities, Or: the Illusion of the Exclusive Actor*, No 19
- C. Schweigman, *La Sécurité Alimentaire: Opportunité et Responsabilité. Ou: l'Illusion de l'Acteur Exclusif*, No 19a
- A. Adegbidi, H. Dedehouanou, S. Kpenavoun, C. Lutz, *Dix Ans de Libéralisation du Marché de Mais au Bénin*, No 20
- P. Boele van Hensbroek, H. Schoenmakers (eds), *From Social Exclusion to Lifelong Learning in Southern Africa*, No 21
- M. van der Waal, Helen Wilcox (eds.), *Experience and Identity in Recent South African Literature*, No 22