
DESDEMONA: Am I that name, Iago?
IAGO: What name, fair lady?
DESDEMONA: Such as she says my lord did say I was.

SHAKESPEARE, Othello, iv. ii 1622

This chapter explores the genre of prison and exile writing that reflects the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s. The two descriptive terms, prison and exile, are placed together because prison writing emanates from an impulse that also spurs autobiographical works penned in exile. In relation to South Africa, such texts were written by individuals who had, at some point, fallen foul of state authorities and their authorising apparatus. In some cases, the state had, after often lengthy trials, prescribed incarceration, while others had to accept what was called an exit permit, which allowed individuals, having been categorised as an ‘undesirable’, to remove themselves from South Africa, though they could not, under any circumstances, be permitted to return. A desperate choice was to leave the country by unofficial means.

Those who left South Africa, and those who stayed in prison, had the burden of physical and spiritual exile imposed on them, which is what ties these two sets of autobiographical writings together. Neither set of exiled individuals was permitted by state authorities any form of redemption. Incarcerated persons, on completion of their sentence, could be ‘banished’ to a remote part of the country from which they did not originate for periods of up to five years at any one time. Such banishment involved severe restrictions which proscribed the individual’s daily activities and
interaction with the local community where they found themselves. A key restriction involved a banned or banished person remaining within the confines of their residence between the hours of six in the evening and six in the morning during weekdays; nor could they leave their domicile between six o’clock on Friday afternoon and six o’ clock on the following Monday morning. This even interfered with the spiritual lives of detainees as Sundays fell within the restricted times.

As a form of punishing ‘recalcitrants’, banishment had been retained from the 1927 Native Administration Act which, at the time, empowered the Governor-General to order any tribe or native to proceed forthwith to any designated place and not leave it again except by permission. The Act allowed the officers concerned or the Native Commissioner to serve any African deemed a problem to be carried without prior notice from his home and, with only what possessions which could be carried, to be dumped anywhere within South Africa, as a form of internal exile. The most harrowing aspect of banishment was its indefiniteness, for the order simply remained in force until the government whimsically gave permission for the banished person to return home. This Act was used more prominently from the late 1950s and early 1960s onward following the mass arrests of those suspected of responsibility for the pass burning incidents around the country. One direct consequence of pass burning was the Sharpeville massacre of March 21 1960. Banning a person, by contrast, was carried out in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 – first introduced in Parliament as the Unlawful Organisations Bill – which allowed the South African Minister of Justice to restrict those deemed to oppose apartheid policies.

A primary concern of this chapter involves the definition of what is “autobiographical writing” and what may be seen as a ‘memoir’. Nicki Hitchott, in an essay published in Research in African Literatures 28(2), makes a subtle distinction between autobiographies which ‘simply record a chronological series of verifiable facts and those which trace the development of the author’s personality’. She sharpens this distinction by classifying the former as a memoir, or a ‘referential’ communicative text, and the latter as an ‘emotive’ communicative text. For her, the distinction lies in a memoir referring to ‘a context beyond itself, and conveying concrete objective information. Autobiography, on the other hand, aims at expressing the addresser’s emotional response to a particular situation, rather than being a purely referential description of it (1997, 19-20). It is useful to see this
distinction as a matter of emphasis. However, I venture to pose a few questions: for example, does a record of verifiable facts necessarily preclude authorial/narratorial development? Does such a record not, in some instances, involve rather painful and spiritually draining episodes that, on closer scrutiny, reveal an emotive response? Can emotive responses be carefully delineated according to ‘emphasis’? Hitchcott is silent on these matters, and my concern is that too heavy an emphasis may not take into account the subtle manner in which individual narrators of specific episodes reveal the depth of their emotional response. To base one’s criterion of distinction solely on what is seen as ‘emotive’ communication is to miss the various ways in which the historical subject (the biological life) may refuse to allow the autobiographical subject (the speaking “I” in the narrative) too much emotion. Emotions emanating from, say, torture, may be suppressed or even elided from a textual account because of shame felt by the historical subject. The point is, some texts which detail periods of torture – and are thus referential - may be so painfully ‘real’ that the scenes being described seep through to the narratee, however pared down their construction. However, a scene involving, say, an incarcerated person seeing his or her child for the first time in ten years – and is thus significantly emotional - may reveal nothing of the depth of anguish such a prisoner-parent may feel. Historical subjects can and do choose to be economical with the ‘truth’ of verifiable facts.

My contention is that certain autobiographical texts’ ability to record in chronological order verifiable facts should not suffer under the instability of academic nomenclature. Such facts impact on the reader to a degree that the space-time dimension of narrator and narratee is reduced to nil, while accounting for the narrator’s perceived growth in the eyes of the reader. Redemptive suffering is understood here as that form of suffering in which the autobiographical subject accepts the suffering in order to ameliorate the larger suffering experienced by those with whom he or she identifies. This strategy forms narratorial hooks creating a literary chain of textual identifications that cannot survive the strictures such as Hitchcott proposes and propagates in her essay. The constant repetition of such suffering in diverse texts, and, more importantly, the acceptance of it, means that there exists a greater ideal towards which the autobiographical subjects propose to journey. Instead, therefore, of seeing a memoir as an instance or chronicle of
verifiable facts, perhaps the boundaries Hitchcott constructs need to be made contextual, and hence easy to stretch to suit particular circumstances. I am not here arguing a case for autobiographical regionalism, but suggesting rather that specificities of experience, which allow for the growth of a particular part of a literary tradition, might be seen as a criterion for according certain genres the title ‘prison literature’ within the world body of literature per se.

The reluctant fugitive: Frank Chikane

A key aim of this chapter is to examine further the question of identity construction and especially to see if prison/exile autobiographical texts allow for identity’s fullest possible realization. Identity in this instance takes on a particular bent since, as alluded to above, it is through a tenacious belief in the righteousness of a chosen struggle that the historical subject may in a sense ameliorate the suffering of others. Such a struggle might also sometimes ends in rather appalling circumstances. This should not imply that such suffering is willfully courted as a matter of choice, but rather the reverse. In identifying with a social milieu, for instance, the historical subjects ought at least to feel themselves duty-bound to undertake what is clearly not supportive of a repressive state. An instance of such a choice in fictive writing would be the priest in Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory. In Frank Chikane's autobiography, No Life of My Own: An Autobiography the historical subject attempts to account for his own choice when he begins his narrative with point blank focus on this aspect:
If I was asked whether I would have liked to live the type of life I am living now, I would most certainly have said No. If I was asked to choose a particular type or form of life to live, I would have definitely chosen a normal life like other people. But now I am living a life that is not my own; I am living not for myself but for others. I am living a life full of risks and uncertainties, to such a degree that I work on the basis that I could be assassinated at any time of my life. It is a life full of detentions, torture and treason trials, but no crime, even within the very unjust apartheid laws. It is a life full of external pressures that disrupt any form of normal family life. My family sees very little of me. My wife, Kagiso, has assumed almost all the burdens of the family. She also acts like a single parent. Our boys, Obakeng and Otlile will be eight and four by the end of 1988. Even when I am not in prison or in hiding, they see very little of me. The family knows very little of a ‘Daddy’ who goes out with them – except on work trips. (1988: 1)

A sense of persecution underlies this extract. Chikane brings about the ideas of redemptive suffering and identification: he is under constant threat of being assassinated, yet he ‘works’ on the basis that he is prepared to die; he is not living for himself but for others, and he is adamant that, if he had a choice, he would not countenance such a lifestyle. There is a level of awareness (‘I work on the basis’) intermingling with an almost resigned acceptance of it all (‘I am living a life full of risks and uncertainties’). Acceptance in this instance comes from the fact that while he is aware of the risks and uncertainties, he is willing to forego whatever (relative) safety may come from a cessation of his ‘work’. He oscillates between unspecified ‘work’ and prison, involving periods of hiding, experiences which cause undeclared pain except, in Hitchcottian classification, as ‘a record of simple verifiable facts’. The autobiographical subject does not say much, but, even from the little we have read so far, can we say that he is unemotional? Why, we may ask, does he not ‘give it up’? It all implies a process of identification with a larger polity, a larger social milieu since he names the source of his troubles, ‘unjust apartheid laws’. While he insists that no crime is responsible for his present predicament, surely that sword of Damocles hanging over his head is warning enough to those who do not want this form of identification not to venture into this kind of identity construction?
A quest for identity, under the circumstances he describes, presupposes a situation of seemingly reconcilable differences. Writing on this aspect of identity construction within autobiography in his doctoral study ‘Order Out of Chaos: Purpose and Design in Autobiography’, Frederick Stephen Thompson suggests that the autobiographical subject’s quest, and the society’s, must be seen to be converging to a point of creativity, since:

…identity, to realize its greatest potential, must be established in a social as well as personal context, the second stage of the autobiographer formulating a social role which maintains his personal values and which gives his life a moral purpose. A complete resolution of the identity crisis cannot occur until the self, no matter how strong in its sense of self-definition, discovers a constructive association with society. (1975, vi)

It is in ‘constructive association with society’, the manner of which leads to self-realisation, that redemptive suffering may be understood. The process is seen by Thompson as moral in orientation because the quest, as alluded to above, is for a higher ideal. If the Chikane example is anything to go by, this quest supersedes even family ties, not in a crude sense, but in a way that makes the family understand that, in attempting to come first in the historical subject’s life, it would occlude an important aspect of its personality. If ‘identity’ literally means ‘sameness’, then something of this quest also involves the active attempt to co-share values and principles that are of benefit to the larger milieu within which the self finds itself. Historically and culturally, the self has to have a centre from which it draws sustenance and in which there exists mutuality. That is to say, the self is determined by and influences its environment, its society.

Terry Eagleton, in an essay on subjectivity, takes on various positions that seek to demonstrate that culture and history are important components of the self. He writes:
There is … absolutely no reason for the postmodernists to persist with their tedious straw target of human autonomy as individualist, undetermined, monadic, paranoically totalized and the rest. A self-determining human subject is not one who miraculously conjures him- or her-self out of nothing … He or she is rather someone who has been able to negotiate his or her freedom within the determinants set upon it by nature, and by the right to self-determination of others. It is for this reason that all the ponderous chicken-and-egg arguments between ‘humanists’ and ‘(post-)structuralists’ about whether the subject or structure came first, whether we fashion ourselves or have the job done for us, whether we are autonomous or determined, are finally beside the point. For the autonomy of the human subject simply means that it is determined in such a style as to be able to react back upon those determinations and make something new and unpredictable out of its encounter with them. It is part of the nature of a subject that it must either continually make something of what makes it, or go under, and this is just another way of saying that its nature contains an enormous hole where, if it is to survive at all, culture and history must implant themselves. (1997, 269)\textsuperscript{52}

Wa thint’ abafazi: Helen Joseph

The constant interplay between society, history and culture, together with the self, thus offers a way of perceiving subjectivities that accept so momentous a phenomenon as redemptive suffering. In Eagleton’s terms, it is foolhardy to ignore how much history and culture are inscribed in personalities who make up autobiographical subjects. Here life can be seen as a journey that takes the self on a meandering but purposeful endeavour. In reflecting on such a journey Helen Joseph, in her autobiography Side by Side, alludes to this process:
On that day in August 1956, I was already fifty-one. I often wondered how it took me so long to find the road to what must surely be the highest peaks of my whole life. On that day I walked with seven women at the head of a march of 20,000 women of all races to the Prime Minister of South Africa. Looking back now at age eighty, it seems that perhaps for twenty years I travelled inevitably, if unknowingly, uncaringly, along this road towards that great day and what followed it. As a white in South Africa, I belonged to an unjust society, protected, cosseted by the colour of my skin. I had left England when I was twenty-two. It was only in my forties, during and after the Second World War, that I began to open my eyes to the real world around me. (1986, 21)

It is little wonder that Joseph foregrounds her race in this extract precisely because, when she describes how she joined in a march of those women, she was being a transgressive. She had chosen to identify herself with what was unusual in an unjust society: the course of justice that, in the eyes of her fellow white South Africans, would bring the demise of their privileged lifestyle. In this context, Joseph’s transgression was all the more remarkable since, for white South Africans, race could not be transgressed. To paraphrase Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the growth of race consciousness, racism and racialism was coterminous with a shared assumption among South Africans that race was a “thing,” an ineffaceable quantity, which irresistibly determined the shape and contour of thought and feeling as surely as it did the shape and contour of human anatomy (Gates: 1986, 3). If we follow the logic of her statement, it means that Joseph had contracted out of her ‘race’, that she was not behaving as South African society expected her to.

This account is written in such a way that it collapses the space-time chronotopic divide, and allows us to actually determine what it felt like. After the presentation of the deputation’s protest to the functionaries of state (the then Prime Minister, J.G. Strydom, had refused to meet the delegates), a half-hour period of silence was called for and observed by the women:
The clock struck three and then a quarter past; it was the only sound. I looked at those many faces until they became only one face, the face of the suffering black people of South Africa. I know that there were tears in my eyes and I think there were many who wept with me. (2)

In organising, canvassing for, and joining women on this march, Joseph certainly placed herself on the path of redemptive suffering, for henceforth her life would utterly change. She was then living in a country undergoing rapid political change and got caught up in its swirling currents. The change that she underwent was gradual, however. It involved much soul-searching, and, as a lecturer in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force during the Second World War, she notes that:

A new world was opening up for me, a new vision and new knowledge. I began to view the South African scene with better-informed eyes. As I studied the conditions in which black children struggled for education and opportunity, and compared them with how most whites lived, I began to feel ashamed of my own position as a white. Talking about democracy brought home to me that black people did not share it with me. I had a parliamentary vote and they not. As I spelt it out to the WAFFFs, so I spelt it out for myself, questioning my own values as never before. I did not turn immediately into a socialist, but began to see people as human beings, regardless of colour, began to have some idea of how the half of the South African world lived. To some extent the ties to my comfortable civilian way of life were still strong and I could not really see myself living any other way … But the seeds were there. (27)

A remarkable aspect of the Joseph personality is that she does not see what she was doing as anything transgressive. There is instead a constant reference to her shame because of ‘race’ that reveals humility and an understanding of the difficulties that underlie the lives of the ‘other’. Also, in the text the autobiographical self does not come across as unremittingly abrasive. And yet, in the socially stifling 1950s of South Africa, she chose to live in Johannesburg alone without her husband, Billie Joseph, who lived in Durban. She chose not to have a family - which she claims is not much of a choice: ‘yet to be totally without a family is not to be envied’ (16). In her mature years she finds a purpose which brings her much pain and suffering akin to what
Frank Chikane described. A point that makes a strong impression on the narrator is the fact that she could, at any time, have chosen flight, have chosen to return to England. She does not do this, and indeed makes reference to this much later in her text. What she undergoes is a systematic process of victimisation, and her private self shrinks at the horror of it. Describing how she is raided the first time, she writes:

The first raid on my flat appalled me. The very thought of hostile hands fingering my private papers, of hostile eyes reading my private letters, was utterly repulsive. Yet, since I had chosen the road of public political action, I could not hope to escape such police attention. (53)

Just as Chikane does not have a life of his own, so in this instance Joseph illustrates her loss of a private self and she fully understands why – she had chosen a difficult role and therefore incurred the wrath of the state apparatus which viewed her stance as a threat. The self-effacing stance she adopts in her narrative belies her importance in the Congress of Democrats (COD), an extra-parliamentary political group that she had joined and of which she was secretary. Its first national president was Bram Fischer. The COD was set up with the aim of changing the views of white South Africans and worked in close alliance with the African National Congress and the Indian National Congress. This alliance had joint committees with its national presidents occasionally meeting to plan and evaluate progress. Joseph writes that, in any one of the meetings, she was always learning:

These meetings were especially valuable to me because there I met the leaders of the other congresses and from other regions. It was a unique privilege. I was always there with our national President and one or two others, so I did not have to do much talking myself. I was able to listen and admire the stature of these national leaders. I was always learning. (43)

One cannot fail to notice the self-effacement here: she ‘did not have to do much talking’; she sits and listens and admires the leaders (mostly men!). One may argue that here Joseph adopts a gendered role, but equally that, as a late-comer to politics, her fears of making errors are genuinely the reason for her reticence.
terms of what Patricia Meyer Spacks calls ‘female rhetorics’, too, of self-suppression when she hints at her “unworthiness”. It may be a good point to remind ourselves of what Jill Conway recognises about female autobiographies:

The history of women’s autobiographical writing in Europe and its offshoots underlines the extent to which experience is both shaped by gendered difference and subject to the same economic and cultural forces which influence the shape and style of male narratives. To begin with, women inherited a different tradition from classical antiquity and early Christianity than the one which shaped St. Augustine’s consciousness. Classical antiquity provided only the myth of the Amazons of the female heroic action and saw the image of the physically powerful female as monstrous rather than admirable. The fabled Greek democracies revered by the post-Renaissance West did not count women as citizens and left them out of the political theory which is central to the Western ideal of democracy and of citizenship. Although the women of the Hebrew Scriptures gave ample evidence of the power to rule, and to bear witness, the Pauline influence on the Christian Scriptures gave early Christianity its fear of the senses and the injunction that women should keep silent in church. Thus the problem of voice for European women was acute since their culture defined them as incompetent in or irrelevant to two core areas of speculation about life, politics and theology. (1998, 11)

Because Joseph believes herself to have been ‘privileged’ to work with so many ‘worthy’ leaders, this sense of not-quite fitting in is a constant refrain in the text. It is as though Joseph doubts her ability to make a meaningful contribution both in the theorising and strategising on aspects of the struggle. She seems, at times, to suffer culturally (as a western woman) and from a perception of patriarchy within the African National Congress, though of course she sees her participation as a 'privileged' one. An example of the sense of 'privilege' is the following, where she listens to the witness Nelson Mandela speaking from the dock:
Listening to Nelson, I realised again the grandeur and prestige of the African National Congress. Even though I was banned, detained and facing a charge of high treason, I wondered how I could ever have deserved to be so honoured as to be close to these leaders of the Congress Alliance. How could I really have come so far in less than ten years, after my fruitless existence during so many years of my life? (95)

Joseph, in this instance, goes to the leitmotif with which she started the text: her supposed blindness to the real situation in South Africa. By her own admission, she has developed a political self in a relatively short period of time. Equally, the autobiographical subject makes it a point that the idea of identifying with the personalities she respects is also an acceptance of her bannings, detentions and possible incarceration, which the historical subject experienced. Joseph believes she does not deserve to have been singled out as a trialist, but the state views her as a dangerous person and labels her a communist and she joins the national leaders in the dock as the Treason Trial begins:

After my flat was searched I was driven to a police station to be fingerprinted for the first time in my life. I was subjected to it on many occasions later, but that first time was a horrible experience. I had my hand seized and my thumb roughly pressed down onto an inked pad. Then all my fingers in turn and then the other hand. It made me feel as though I had been convicted already, but I scarcely knew of what, for treason still meant nothing … I knew that even in South African law, an accused is presumed innocent until found guilty, but I didn’t feel that this was the case at all! What with fingerprinting and a police escort, I felt like what I was: a prisoner. (54)

Joseph’s criminalisation is as acutely felt as her being served with a five-year banning order in the middle of the trial itself. After the trial, she has a brief respite during which she investigates the experience of those banished to internal exile. In this instance her identification, coming so close after the treason trial, is complete. The harrowing experiences of the banished she would later publish as Tomorrow’s Sun. Having identified with the oppressed, and having vowed to fight with them ‘side by side’, she undergoes further difficulties:
On 13 October 1962, I became the first person in South Africa to be put under house arrest. The minister was “satisfied” that I had engaged in activities which were furthering or were calculated to further the achievement of any of the objectives of communism. Because of this satisfaction he could and did tear my life to pieces, set me apart from my fellows and deny me association with others, the very stuff of life itself. (122)

This house arrest, of course, was meant to augment the already strict restrictions of her banning orders. House arrest meant that she could no longer entertain visitors, that she could no longer have social engagements. At some point she is sorely tested regarding her religious practice since she has to be in her home throughout the weekend. It is ironic that apartheid, which the Dutch Reformed Church saw as having been ordained by God, could, in protecting itself, sever believers from the Church. This form of incarceration made the historical subjects their own jailers, with regular trips to a designated police station to report and sign a book as evidence of their presence in the chosen magisterial district. Failure to do so meant a trial and probable jail time. At this point, too, she cannot enter a building that houses any trade union activities and offices, and thus loses her job with the Transvaal Clothing Industry’s Medical Aid Society, of which she had been secretary-director. Nor is she free of intimidation and death threats. Answering her phone call early one evening, she is frightened out of her wits:

A very quiet English voice asked to speak to Mrs Helen Joseph. “Now don’t put the phone down. I have a very important message for you.” I waited. “I am coming tonight to get you and kill you.” I slammed down the phone and phoned the police who said they could do nothing about it. They wanted to know why I was under house arrest and why my husband did not protect me. (148)

Here intimidation foreshadows what became a regular feature of South Africa: the unexplained deaths of activists. It is important to note, too, that the police whom she calls are not the security police. Regular police did not know all the activists, and so could not understand why she is under house arrest. This is because the security
police did not deem it necessary to keep the regular police informed. Ironically, the police also reveal their gendered mentalities: why couldn’t Joseph’s husband ‘protect’ her? In the masculine world of the police, it is inconceivable that Joseph could be a transgressor. Indeed, her intimidation is such that she survives gunshots fired randomly at her house, and a bomb scare. However, at no point does she contemplate flight:

Personal reasons for going were many and varied. None may sit in judgement on those who had made a difficult and painful decision for themselves and their families. In some cases it was the fear of interrogation and detention, of possible conviction and gaol. “You are useless in gaol!” I heard this very often but I didn’t agree, for to me there is an enormous value in being ready to endure something of what our friends and colleagues endure, in keeping that undying pledge of the Freedom Charter, “Side by side, throughout our lives, until these democratic changes have been won.” (164)

As elsewhere, the core of Joseph’s understanding of herself is apparent: she is part of a stratum of South African society that has accepted redemptive suffering, an acceptance based on knowing that, while she cannot enforce change, her mere presence is enough. Although she acknowledges the reasons that others had given for choosing the exit route, she is clear that, for herself, childless and (at this time) still single, it is not an option. Indeed, there is a sense in which she criticises those choosing flight:

Some would say they must go for the sake of their children. I think of the Mandela children, the Sisulu children, the Motsoaledi children and so many more. Yet I am childless, so it is not for me to question such decisions. Others were unable to adjust to banning orders and house-arrest restrictions. This must depend on the individual capacity to adjust, to accept what you cannot change. (164)

The depth of this understanding of the extent to which others suffer, the juxtaposition of those who claim to be going because of their children with Mandela, Sisulu and Motsoaledi, is especially telling. It is as though the autobiographical
subject, while understanding what drives others to choose flight, reserves part of the moral high ground to explain her own choice, to say ‘If others can endure, then I am not special’. Admittedly it is not a simple value judgement to make, but if identity formation involves the confluence of social and individual values, then it becomes clear why Joseph adopts this stance. Nowhere is such a stance more explicit than when, in a moment of self-sacrifice, she renounces her British citizenship:

Early in 1973 a law was passed in Parliament which filled me with forebodings. It provided for the removal of South African citizenship in the case of citizens who had the nationality of another country, “when it appeared that it would not be in the public interest that such a person should continue to be a South African citizen.” I was a South African citizen, but I was also British by birth. This alarmed me, for the last thing I wanted was to be compelled to leave South Africa. This land was my adopted home and I belonged there. Yet the authorities might well not agree with me and the minister need not supply any reason for a decision to withdraw South African citizenship. If this happened to me I could be liable for deportation … I went speedily to the British Consul and renounced my British nationality. I bought myself out of the British Commonwealth for eight rands and ten cents. Now I was safe. I could not be deported. The government might still do many things to me, but it had me for keeps and I was satisfied. (173)

Since most of the white South African exile community chose England as a destination of safety, Joseph’s act is all the more astonishing given that she had nothing about which she could be apologetic: she had endured the lengthy, costly and debilitating Treason Trial of 1956-1960, nine years of bannings and house arrest, intimidation, death threats and the harsh loneliness of those long years. Yet, as she buys herself out of the Commonwealth, she is ‘satisfied’ because the government of South Africa had her forever. As with Chikane, she lives with the uncertainty of death but makes it clear that her stance cannot be changed by those who threaten her life. Indeed, in a mild way, her act reflects what Alan Paton, in his autobiography Towards the Mountain (1981, 56), realised when he wrote that ‘This feeling of what I can only call British nationalism, declined in strength as one became more and more
of a South African.’ Such sentiments contrast quite sharply with Janet Levine’s stance as a liberal in South Africa. She explicates this in her autobiography Inside Apartheid: One Woman’s Struggle in South Africa. Liberalism has almost always been the preserve of white, English-speaking South Africans and had always been at odds with black nationalism and its communist sympathisers. Indeed, it is a conflict that continues to this day with the liberal Democratic Party, the official opposition, at odds with the ruling African National Congress. Levine, for her part, could not envisage the kind of self-sacrifice seen in Helen Joseph. She writes:

Overt political acts of “terrorism,” leading to martyrdom and prison, were options I had rejected since my days of student activism. What were my other options? My quandary was the disturbing search for identity of the white liberal. And although I continued to develop and embrace the identity of a white liberal activist, it was always with gnawing doubts eating away at the edges of my persona. Like other liberals I knew, I had become a convincing rationaliser. (1988, 134)

There are sharp contrasts here with the Joseph autobiographical subject. At no point does that subject believe she is courting martyrdom, and at no point in the narrative does she speak of engaging in acts of terrorism. For Levine’s autobiographical subject, it was important to ‘play safe’. She knows that Joseph never had “terrorist” intentions (at some point she lived very near the Joseph residence), and that her crisis of identity is precisely because, in identifying with the oppressed, she had to be cloaked with redemptive suffering. Instead of stating it as clearly as possible, Levine ‘rationalises’. In the broad struggle for emancipation in South Africa, little or no room remained for tergiversation, which becomes part of the reason why Levine chooses, at the close of her narrative, flight to the United States of America. In a way that raises questions of honesty in an autobiographical work, Levine claims that she later tries to ‘rationalise’. The blurb to the text says that she was an associate of Steve Biko. The word ‘associate’, in its pristine sense, means someone in close contact with, someone who knows the discussant very closely. The historical Levine subject only met Biko once. There is a telling episode that the autobiographical subject narrates in her coming into contact with him. Taken by a
journalist colleague to the South African Student Association (SASO) conference in Hammanskraal, she writes:

“Which one is Biko?” I was eager to see in action, among his followers, the man who was the moving spirit behind the development of the Black Consciousness (BC) philosophy … I had studied the faces of the SASO leaders on the rostrum, trying to decide which one could be Steve Biko. One man in particular had a look of strength and resolution about him. Biko, I thought. But when he stood up to propose the formal adoption of the report, he was introduced as former SASO president Barney Pityana.

(130 -31)

Here the narratee may experience a moment of confusion: how could someone who hardly knew the person she wished to see ‘in action’ be seen as an associate? She practically has to imagine the historical Biko by dressing him up with ‘strength and resolution’. But she has to study the faces on the rostrum and imbue each one with her projections before she is disappointed. The point is, she did not know Biko at all, and it is infinitely cynical to label herself as his associate. She was certainly against all that Biko stood for - black emancipation. For the liberal-minded South African, freedom had to come on their own terms, with them as advisers, the ‘know-it-all’ community who could tell the ‘uncouth’ about constitutionalism, bills of human rights, respect for property rights, individual freedom and all that Liberalism holds dear. In this way, liberals hoped to dictate the pace and possibly direct the changes to come. The point is, this superiority complex of liberal white South Africans is exactly what Biko found distressing and was totally against. His view was that black people did not need intellectual overlords and he wrote vigorously on this subject in his text I Write What I Like.

Driving from a meeting held in a township, where she was introduced as a sister in the struggle, Levine is troubled precisely because she and her kind are no longer in any position to ‘direct’ black aspirations:
Driving home, I was confused and troubled. The meeting had been a rite of passage for me. In the priest, Molefe, and the young man from the UDF I had seen the faces of the new South Africa, irrevocably committed to changing the country. For the first time in twenty-two years of political involvement I felt the sap rising. It was different from what I had experienced in 1976. Now their moment – a faint, distant vision coming closer – was at hand. It was not my dream of a shared South Africa, but a vision of black nationalism triumphant. (255)

Levine does not believe, to the extent that the Joseph autobiographical subject does, in the Freedom Charter and neither does she ever discuss it. For someone worried about the ‘future’ this seems an odd omission until one realises that this document was for a long time discredited as ‘communist’ inspired. The level of distrust for the very people who see her as ‘a sister in the struggle’ makes her quandary all the more profound since those people who laud her do not know her inner thoughts as expressed above. She knows that the tide is turning, and instead of intensifying her efforts, she studiously avoids redemptive suffering. This avoidance, of course, is her right, and no one expects her to sacrifice herself. But it is also important to note that so many people in the text imbue her with heroic characteristics while she carps about black nationalism which she sees as emerging ‘triumphant’. This sort of response has been standard in settler communities whenever an African country showed signs of achieving independence. Not surprisingly, it is after this point that the Levines leave South Africa. In the United States, she continued to argue against economic sanctions being imposed on South Africa, suggesting instead that such sanctions would ‘hurt’ black people most. But, writing of the very same period, Joseph reflects on her life and is certain of victory in the end:
Thirty years ago, it was indeed the road less travelled by. But no more. Today there are untold millions marching along the road despite all the hardship and suffering they must encounter. Today it is an onward, accelerating march towards a free, democratic South Africa. My book is ended. Our struggle is not, but one day it will be. I do not know if I shall still be here then, for my time is running out, but I know that all that I have lived through, together with the people I love, will not have been in vain. (242)

Unlike Levine, therefore, Joseph is clear that, despite all the suffering, the struggle has really been about achieving a ‘democratic South Africa’ which has very little to do with ‘black’ triumphalism. In the final chronotope of the text, she writes about metaphoric windows in a way that indicates how diametrically and ideologically opposed are the two texts, hers and Levine’s:

Over the years I have become ever more conscious of my white guilt. It is not mine alone. I share it with a few million other whites. That does not make it less mine. I have never been able to forget Lillian Ngoyi’s bitter outburst about my pink skin making me better off in gaol. It does not make a difference that I have been gaoled, house-arrested. So have many others. I benefit by this accursed system and cannot shed my whiteness. I feel shame and contrition for my white skin for I have not been able to expiate. I cannot do it alone. The real expiation can only come about if white people of South Africa shed their greed and their fears and stand with the black people in every way. [I]n this book I have tried to open some of the windows on the history of the liberation struggle. I cannot open them all; mainly these are windows through which I myself have looked. We are halfway through this decade and I cannot see clearly how it will end, but I hope that there are signs of a new, freer South Africa. (238, emphasis added)

Joseph once more places race at the fore, but only to highlight the ‘unsaid’: as a signifier, race in South Africa had been rarified to a level that was pathological. Her shame is no less painful than the fact that she is seen as a transgressor by the state and has to be ‘punished’. She is also clear about what the cause of all the suffering
has been, which she sees as white greed. More importantly, she makes it conditional that only through identification with their black compatriots can a ‘freer South Africa’ come about. She concludes by using the window as a metaphor for having searched for her self, and it is fair to conclude that she is content with the signs of an emergent South Africa.

Into the bowels of hell: Indres Naidoo, Caesarina Makhoere and Simon Farisani

A significant amount of prison literature came out of South Africa in the last two decades of the past century. It is no coincidence that Robben Island features largely in such writings because a number of prisoners who were incarcerated on this island wrote memoirs about their experiences. One such text is Indres Naidoo’s Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63 (1982, reissued 2000). It is a harrowing account of the depths of depravity called imprisonment. But the account is important, in my view, because it highlights the necessity of redemptive suffering that Naidoo underwent. There is a view in South Africa, which may have an element of truth in it, that African-Indians were not part of the identificationary process so necessary to weld together a South African identity. While there certainly was a component of the Indian community that resisted such identification, the Naidoo family can lay better claim to having been part of the struggle than most black families can. In reviewing the re-issue of the text, Henk Rossouw notes:
Born in the Naidoo family, Indres grew up with the demand for human rights as part of him, like a tongue. His grandfather used his body as a shield to protect Mahatma Gandhi in Johannesburg from the blows of the police, and was sent to prison 14 times. His grandmother gave birth in prison. His father studied under Gandhi in India, and was jailed six times on his return. For more than a hundred years, the solidarity of the Naidoos, with their strong sense of “we”, gave them the agency to protest, fight, resist. Even at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in the Fort, they submitted their testimony together, as a family.

His family’s hundred years of identification with the South African reality is something that Indres Naidoo implicitly understood. It may be that he felt destined to play his role. Growing up in such a political atmosphere must have been a heady experience. When the African National Congress was banned in 1960, therefore, he and other like-minded individuals and cadres decided to join the military wing of the movement. He and two other cadres were arrested just as they were about to blow up electricity pylons, and for this they got various sentences, Naidoo himself ten years. The memoir opens with their arrest and the beatings endured during and after trial. But the experiences on the island take centre stage, and Naidoo’s introduction to life on the island in 1963 is anything but cosy. When he is picked out by a warder, he remembers that the first tussle was over language, which was clearly an attempt at diminution, at making the Indian feel worthless:

One of the young warders came up to me and said, ‘God, hiers ’n koelie hier. Wat maak die koelie hier? – God, here’s a coolie. What is a coolie doing here?’
‘Sir,’ I replied in English, ‘we are not coolies.’
That really set him off.
God, watter taal praat jy jong – God, what language are you using, man – die plek is Robben Eiland – this is Robben Island – en in die plek ons praat nie daardie kaffirboetie se taal nie – and here we don’t use that kaffir-lover’s language – nog, hier ek is jou baas – what’s more, here I am your baas. (66)
It is a conversation regularly repeated in many of the autobiographies by ex-prisoners, revealing the attempt to crush their sense of being, to belittle and ultimately destroy their sense of worth. Language, the central signifier of Afrikaner nationalism, was to be the weapon of control and instruction. But Naidoo, a South African of Indian descent, is further reminded of the contempt the Afrikaners reserved for his community. The extract also illustrates the young warder’s bemusement for it was not common for Indian South Africans to engage in political acts that would see them wind up in prison. Such an identification, however, was being forged, and the Naidoo family was prominent in the process.

Naidoo writes about the bitter times on the island. In the 1960s, when political repression in South Africa was at its height, prison conditions were at their most primitive. But the prisoners bonded together in a way that surprised the warders. By bringing them together in the first place, the authorities merely extended the form of identification that they had started out with. Naidoo writes:

> It was a bitter time for us, a time of hardship and suffering, yet we were all sustained by the feeling that something special was happening; that through our comradeship and our day-to-day struggles in support of each other, something very fine and deep was growing – we could feel the new South African nation in birth, right there in the depths of prison, and this gave us strength to fight on, and great hope for the future. (57)

That the ‘new South African nation’ was made possible by such imprisonment is infinitely ironic, given that it was meant to achieve the opposite. Through strategies such as hunger strikes, go-slows (that is, to work at a pace inconsistent with the warders’ demands), and a steadfast belief in themselves, the prisoners wore the warders down. Thus when a reader comes across criticism such Judith Coullie’s (1994, 77) that Naidoo sets up his characters for shooting down, one is alerted to the inconsistencies that critics are wont to come up with. For instance, in her thesis, Coullie takes Naidoo to task for setting up the warders as irredeemably bad, the Pan African Congress prisoners as uncooperative, and the ANC prisoners as egalitarian. Coullie does this not on the basis of a well-reasoned criticism but as a way of showing the book’s weaknesses. This is engineered disputation, the idea being to read in order to unmask falsities. In the first three years of Naidoo’s incarceration,
the conditions on the island were bestial, and cannot be otherwise described. The endless disagreements between the ANC and PAC prisoners are understandable only if one acknowledges the fact that, at the time of Naidoo’s incarceration, it had been four years since the Africanist members of the ANC broke away and founded the PAC. Relations between the two groups of prisoners were always going to be difficult, and not to acknowledge this is merely to score points. Then again, the Naidoo text arose from regular readings of his experiences over the radio in Mozambique with a signal beamed to South Africa. This makes the text appear overly critical, but, and this is the crux of the matter, when someone like Nelson Mandela makes similar points critics keep a respectful silence. Why one autobiographical subject is made more believable than others is a question of how as critics we set them up as heroes or saints over others.

One of the key texts to reflect the changes that South Africa underwent in the 1970s is Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s No Child’s Play: In Prison Under Apartheid (1988). Here there is an uncompromising spirit recognised by Mazisi Kunene in his poem ‘The Rise of the Angry Generation’ and celebrated in lines such as the following:

...The once proud planet shrieks in terror
Opening a vast space for the mysterious young bird.
For the merciless talons of the new generation
They who are not deterred by false tears
Who do not turn away from the fire
They are the children of iron
They are the fearless bees of the night
They are the wrath of the volcanic mountains
They are the abiding anger of the Ancestral Forefathers.55

It is a generation that learnt to fight fire with fire, in a language that is as uncompromising as their humanity was seen as non-negotiable. Makhoere represents the new brand of activists from 1976 onwards who took to the streets and launched a revolution. While many arguments have been made and re-made about exactly what caused the 1976 generation to decide on the politics of conflict, it cannot be denied that one of their key inspirations was the spirit of the Black Consciousness
Movement, which had a huge psychological impact on black people at the time. The feelings that the movement sought to engender in blacks, particularly the message that psychological liberation was indispensable to physical liberation, found fertile ground in a generation that had nothing to lose. While the older generation of black people was viewed with near contempt by the younger one, Black Consciousness adherents had the advantage of being closer to the youth in age. They were also highly articulate and could easily reach out to the youth by advocating an uncompromising spirit of black solidarity, initiative and resistance to the status quo. When the Student Revolt broke out on the fateful morning of June 16, 1976, the groundswell not only involved student frustration with Afrikaans, which provided the spark, but also with the lives of black people in general. Consider what Makhoere articulates when, in the act of attacking their teachers at the Vlakfontein Technical High School, the students psychologically liberate themselves. Matters were not helped by the fact that the teachers here were mostly male, white, and of Afrikaner stock, who had earlier rendered assistance in the arrest of some students wounded in a skirmish with the police:

When the bell rang we all assembled in the school yard. But when the teachers appeared, standing in front of us, we charged them. We were angry that these very teachers had handed our wounded colleagues to the police to be arrested. By beating them up we wanted to show them how we had no respect for them, that we were not afraid of them. We had stopped being nice, tolerant, obedient students. This was the language they understood best. (6)

The loss of respect for authority, particularly when that authority was seen as insensitive, is apparent here. But much more important is the loss of fear of the white male, an aspect of South African society which for a long time had been the determinant in regulating the success of apartheid. The fact that Makhoere and her colleagues plan and execute their deed reveals the level at which both sides - the regulators of authority and the regulated - spoke one language: force. It is in this way that the students graduate from being obedient and tolerant to being political activists. While they may not, at this point, have recognised that they were in fact undergoing a rite of passage in adopting redemptive suffering as their manner of
identification, the determination to continue the process begun with the revolt is unnerving. Makhoere and her companions begin to encourage, assist and carry out recruitment for the ANC’s external guerilla army. She comments forcefully:

You can’t fight bullets with stones. The trigger-happy apartheid monster had to be met with its own death weapon. Period. End violence with violence, period. It was better to send our comrades outside to be trained and armed. It was time for our comrades to rise and join our only shield: Umkhonto we Sizwe (The Spear of the Nation), the military wing of the African National Congress, known as MK. I spoke to seven people, six of them students. I wanted us to get military training. Unfortunately one of our committee members was arrested and revealed all our plans and those who carried them out. This place was now too hot for me. We had to hide. I decided to go to a relative in Potchefstroom and lie low for a bit. That was the biggest mistake I ever made. (6)

The stark manner in which Makhoere, in a few sentences, describes her conversion from a schoolgirl to an activist is rhetorically powerful. Organised violence in the form of military training and incursions into South Africa become the main defining aspect of her life. She is adamant that apartheid cannot be overhauled by ‘peaceful’, legal means such as those Levine wants. Nowhere in these early pages does Makhoere doubt the righteousness of her actions, nor does she see herself as a ‘martyr for terrorism’. In this instance the impetus is provided by the shooting, incarceration and death of fellow activists caused by what she terms ‘the apartheid monster’. The anger that propelled the initial uprising fuels her actions, but, as her mistake in visiting her relative implies, she is arrested. Incredibly, in an exceedingly sad part of the autobiography, the police are led to her hideout by her own father. As Makhoere writes about this, the reader senses how she attempts to come to terms with this betrayal:
When I was born in 1955 my father had been a policeman for seven years ... He knew I was on the streets, organising and fighting, opposing the system. He knew I was in the leadership in the fight against Bantu Education in particular, and the anti-apartheid struggle in general. Even today I don’t really blame him for everything that happened to me. He never deliberately tried to hurt me or my mother. He was trapped and could not help pointing out where I was hiding when I was on the run. (1)

Here the divisions between the two generations are apparent (in stark shades of Bopha! the play). While the father is an officer of the law, his daughter is diametrically opposed to the very laws he is supposed to enforce. The father, while never acknowledging his daughter’s actions, knows that she is endangering his own career in the police force. Just a few years short of retirement, and thus of his pension, he cannot help but lead the security police to her hideout. His belief in her innocence also reveals a naïve acceptance of the rule of law, for he does not know – being in the regular police force – the methods and tactics of the security police. For Makhoere, however, this is a baptism of fire. When she is arrested and taken for interrogation, it is to be met with a manifestation of the ‘apartheid monster’ she so hates. As she recalls the first incident, her pared down tone belies the horror of the situation:

I spent the night at Mamelodi Police Station. The following day I was taken to Compol Building in the centre of town. Compol building houses the Pretoria Security Police. I was marched to the first floor, into a small room where, without warning, I was beaten up. Four hefty men, two white and two black, gave me the beating of my life. Van der Merwe, Beukes, Selepe and Dunura threw me all over the place. I thought they would kill me there and then. The ordeal I underwent still hurts today. Other people described how helpless you feel, how at some point you no longer know you are human; that’s how I felt. (7-8)

Such beatings, which feature regularly in most prisoners’ memoirs, operate on two levels in the extract: first to break Makhoere’s physical resistance to the security police’s interrogation, and second to instill in the detainee a fear of further beatings. In this way the cooperation of the detainee, whether voluntary or not,
could secure a ‘confession’ to ‘terrorist acts’ and thus a conviction. It is interesting to note that the South African general public was not divided by the claims of former detainees that they had been beaten and tortured. As Natie Ferreira observes in his autobiography The Story of an Afrikaner: Die Rewolusie van die Kinders? white and black people had implicit belief that dreadful things happened when someone was detained. But the paradox of the present situation is that white South Africans cry, ‘We did not know’. As Ferreira observes (in relation to the then Minister of Police in South Africa), as a newspaper political correspondent he was critical of government statements and conducted his own survey:

House of Assembly. The Minister of Police, Mr. Jimmy Kruger, yesterday categorically denied that South African policemen tortured prisoners and said such scandalous allegations should stop. He appealed to members of the Opposition to help set the record straight, saying: ‘These things are absolutely scandalous and you should raise your voices against it. I want to deny categorically that the South African Police, and particularly the Security Police, torture prisoners. The scandalous insinuation is that they (prisoners) are being murdered by the Security Police and that everything that follows is just eyewash.’ Since the deaths in police detention of the Imam Haron and more recently Mr. Mdluli and Steve Biko, I have been conducting a private survey. Wherever I go I ask people the following simple question: ‘Do you think the Security Police actually killed so-and-so?’ Do you know, Mr. Kruger, I must have questioned several thousand people over the past few years and the vast majority have replied ‘Yes,’ without hesitation. (1980, 58)

Makhoere’s experience, coming long before Ferreira wrote his observations, must have been among the first in the period immediately following June 1976 (she was arrested on October the 25th of that year). One of the reasons for recording such brutal acts of state-sanctioned terror, I believe, is to carry forward the identification process with which the detainee started out. It is as though the autobiographical subjects, in their sometimes dry, matter-of-fact accounts, seem to be relating an oblique message to the narratee: ‘This happened, I was there. But you were there with me.’ The power of such an account makes it cement certain popularly held
views as truth, and Ferreira's straw poll indicates the extent to which the veracity of
prison accounts were believed in certain quarters of the black community. This
message intensifies as the autobiographical subjects begin to describe the conditions
and struggles in prison after their sentencing. For Makhoere, saddled with a five-year
prison term, the conditions in her initial prison, Kroonstad, were certainly bleak.
Matters were not helped by the fact that, together with fellow prisoners, Makhoere
steadfastly believed that the struggle for human dignity and respect, coupled with
the struggle for freedom, could not be won by docility. She writes of numerous
physical fights with warders – male and female – and policemen, together with on-
going hunger strikes that they periodically engaged in. In particular, the tone with
which she began her personal narrative does not change, but intensifies:

After all, there is one thing that I have learned about this system of the
South African government. When you talk soft, they don’t listen to you,
whatever you say. Until you take action, action in the true sense of the
word, where people are fighting physically, not verbally. It is only then that
they believe you mean business. You must hit hard. (41; emphasis
added)

If the time for patient and respectful requests for better treatment, better
understanding and greater tolerance belongs to the generation exemplified by Chief
Albert Luthuli (Let My People Go, 1962), Makhoere’s angry generation fights fire with
fire. Certainly in the text there is very little room granted to feminine tastes, feminine
touches and sympathies. It is as though their imprisonment un-sexes them. Consider
the following episode in which Makhoere and a colleague attack a particularly vicious
warder who, by Makhoere’s account, ill-treated them with relish. Having carefully laid
a trap for the warder, whom they had nicknamed Mbomviana (literally, ‘the red one’),
they execute it with deliberation and a degree of satisfaction:
And we [with Thandisa Maqungo] went for Mbomvana. We stabbed her several times with those mathematical instruments. We had made up our minds that this person was not going to treat us like this; we wanted to kill her, have had enough of her. We assaulted her for a long time, stabbing her in the face, on the head, on the body, all over. She was bleeding on the passage of the floor. After we had satisfied ourselves we went back to our cells. (64)

Between warder and prisoner, therefore, there was no love lost. In this instance the equivalent of Naidoo’s identity-in-opposition account of the relationship between warders and prisoners on the island is apparent. There is a kill-or-be-killed mentality here that illustrates just how far from one another the representative antagonists were. Nor is there any hint of the empathy, at a human level, as Mandela’s autobiography resonates. This makes it very difficult for Makhoere’s autobiographical subject to come to terms with reconciliation. For this subject, such a process would, at the time of her writing at least, surely have appeared absurd. Segregated as a punishment from her colleagues and fellow prisoner, Makhoere’s bitterness breaks through:

I spent two-and-a-half months there, alone. From August until the end of October. That segregation was the most destructive part of my sentence. If I had had to stay there until November I would have gone raving mad. I was on the brink of it. Fortunately I was transferred to Pretoria. Whenever I think of it, that hatred starts again. I am trying to outgrow it. But when I think of that particular period – they ill-treated you always in prison, but those months I will never forget – I think I will not ever forgive those people. Of course anything is possible, but I don’t think I will change in this respect. At times I think I am tough. They did not break me then, either. (75)

The familiar device of solitary confinement as a means of driving prisoners mad is here laid bare, but with a terrible proviso, delayed revenge. Makhoere is possibly the first historical subject who contemplates this act in her autobiographical subject without flinching. But there is in the extract also a degree of vulnerability. The autobiographical subject does not categorically state that she has an ‘unforgiving
spirit'; she simply thinks it is not possible to manifest it. She does not shut the door on reconciliation, she has her doubts, and knows that she is vulnerable: ‘At times I think I am tough’. For such activists as Makhoere the process of reconciliation must be particularly difficult to negotiate, especially as, at the end of her narrative, she lives in a similar state of limbo as the Chikane autobiographical subject. Indeed, the chronotope she adopts is that of an open cell, an open cage, an indeterminate sea in which she may be devoured by a predator at any time:

Umzima, mchana, umzima [it’s heavy, cousin, it’s heavy]. The struggle is hard and long. Today I sit in a small room, with white walls, a tiny bed, a table there. At least I can open the door when I want to. The rulers of this country have declared a State of Emergency. We heard that my name had appeared on the death squad hit list, so it would not just be arrest and detention this time. So I live for a while in a little barren room in another town, and then I move on. I cannot walk into a city centre, in this different city, for fear someone will recognise me. I change hats, doeks, make-up, hair styles. It has become a game. My comrades take care of me. So many of us these days are ‘swimming’. We hide like fish in the water, one person among the people, my people. (120)

This extract, much like Chikane’s, reveals the uncertainties that directed activists’ lives as they were then perpetually on the run. They were hunted, but the remarkable form of identification with which they began remains their source of inspiration. For Makhoere to write about how she ‘swims’ among ‘the people, my people’, reveals the extent to which the polarities of identification, at least in the black community, between her initial arrest and release have collapsed together. In the period of the declaration of the first State of Emergency in South Africa in 1985, the townships were entirely in black hands for the youth had then decided to ‘render the country ungovernable’.

For Makhoere and others like her, the temporary respite between hiding places was made much easier than when she was initially arrested. But the threat of assassination remains. It remains, in essence, a powerful chronotope, because, without being giving any details, the narratee remains unaware of whether she manages to survive the times or not, for this is information that she does not
provide. For the record, the text does reveal the aftermath of Makhoere’s life: she did manage to survive the death squads. The acknowledgements in the texts are directed at the Black Sash, a liberal organisation which fought for human rights in South Africa. This, we may surmise, is her earlier foothold prior to being on the run once more. Further, acknowledgements are paid to personalities who at some point worked for the ANC’s Cultural Desk. This is revealing, for the perceptive reader will recall that the ANC was never allowed to operate openly as an organisation within South Africa between the periods of its banning under the Unlawful Organisations Act of 1960 and its unbanning by F.W. de Klerk on 2nd February 1990. Thus it is safe to assume that, at one time during her period of ‘swimming’, Makhoere left the country for the relative safety of exile and also began to study for a business degree. Her autobiographical account, however, is an important document if we are to broadly understand the manner in which black social and gender roles were subverted in volatile periods of South African historiography. Beginning with her daring defiance of her father as a policeman, she represents a literary iconoclast, a common feature among autobiographies written by black South African women. A critic of black women autobiographies sees these as diverging from white women’s accounts in significant ways. In her article on African-American women, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observes:
A literary tradition, even an autobiographical tradition, constitutes something more than a running, unmediated account of the experience of a particular group. The coherence of such a tradition consists as much in unfolding strategies of representation as in the experience itself. Some would even argue that the coherence of a tradition is only to be sought in the strategies of representation; the self is a function of discourse—a textual construct—not of experience at all. Others, including black feminist critics, would emphasize black women’s writing as personal testimony to oppression, thus emphasizing experience at the expense of text. Neither extreme will do. The coherence of black women’s autobiographical discourse does incontrovertibly derive from black women’s experience, although less from experience in a narrow empirical sense than from condition—the condition interlocking with gender, class, and race. But it derives even more from the tension between condition and discourse, from changing ways in which black women writers have attempted to represent a personal experience of condition through available discourses and in interaction with imagined readers (65).56

It would be difficult for a critic to see the autobiographical subject of Makhoere’s work as simply a textual construct because the details described are too vivid. In other words, she constructs in the text that which has acted and interacted in society. Also, the experiences she describes are part of the social fabric of South Africa and are recounted in an idiom that is distinctly South African. This idiom of the township Makhoere employs to authenticate her self, involves a language that is culturally urban, militant and suave. Indeed, it says much about the publishers’ faith in her project that this language is not provided with a translations, suggesting that her audience is primarily black and South African.

If Makhoere managed finally to escape the grasp of the ‘apartheid monster’, other autobiographical subjects record a different outcome. The 1980s were a period of unprecedented repression and heightened resistance. Many of the submissions alleging crimes against humanity that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission received and had to investigate stem from this fateful decade. When witnesses to the brutalities of state repression began to publish autobiographical accounts of their detentions, a modicum of honesty began to seep through the morass of lies and
subterfuge engendered by the apartheid government. It must be remembered that this government was particularly sensitive to perceptions that could be formed in western countries by the publication of anything that was deemed negative to its interests. While autobiographical writings published in the West claimed to testify to the atrocities of the South African government, at the same time the myriad routes by which the self-same government attempted to provide a balanced view of its actions were also highlighted. The government was wont to pay well-placed individuals in the Western media for favourable reviews, as well as making it possible for such individuals to warn it beforehand of any unfavourable publications so as to ban them before they reached the news stands in South Africa. In this way the battle for the hearts and minds of the western populace was an on-going and lasting project. In his autobiography Inside Boss: South Africa’s Secret Police (1981), Gordon Winter candidly admits that part of his ‘assignment’ was to refract the favourable publicity that a text may have obtained from the objective press in Britain:

Another ‘instant action’ job was to get advanced copies of any books published in Britain which Pretoria knew would contain material critical of the South African government. As a journalist it was simple for me to contact the publishers and arrange to get review copies of the books on the day before their official release, or even earlier. I would quickly read a book for ‘danger content’. (175)

With such dispatches from Britain, Winter managed to keep South Africa’s secret police, relevant officials and cabinet ministers educated on the ‘danger’ content of publications which were then routinely banned. This of course did not only happen in Britain, but in most western countries. However, the western concerned groups were not, in most instances, convinced by the subterfuge. Publications of personal accounts still made such groups pause and reflect on the situation in the country, and in some instances, take appropriate action. In the foreword to the memoir of Dean Tshenuwani Simon Farisani, Diary from a South African Prison, John Evenson writes of the paucity of black accounts of their lives in South Africa. This is a crucial point to make, for, as many critics have previously recognised, the black
person in South Africa was always spoken of and spoken for, but rarely heard as an individual. Evenson makes a telling point when he writes:

Life in Southern Africa is best described by those who live it. But firsthand report from black people of South Africa is often missing. This book by Reverend Dr Tshenuwani Simon Farisani is such a witness. Unfiltered by Western preconceptions and justifications, this is a personal account of the struggle of a pastor and prophet for truth in a land that mocks all concepts of justice. It is a witness that must be heard if one is to begin to understand the depth of evil that permeates the minority-rule of South Africa today. (1987,11)

Farisani’s account, therefore, seeks to lay bare the problematics encountered by anyone who dares, at the time, to question the South African state. Inspired by the doctrine of liberation theology, the Dean was in the wrong place in the wrong era, but he nevertheless persevered with his mission. In doing so, however, he incurred the attention and the subsequent wrath of the South African authorities, and his diary begins with his first detention (he was to be detained on two more occasions). In particular, this diary is an exploration of the intractable positions of the opposing ideologies of liberation and apartheid. Farisani believes that his preachings are inspired by the Holy Ghost and therefore that he is on a righteous path. This is revealed by how he writes about himself in the third and first person, shifting almost imperceptibly between the two positions as though he manages to step out of himself. He begins his account in a self-deprecatory manner. He surely cannot see the security police coming on a 'friendly visit' for the reason that in the volatile 1980s there was no love lost between certain sections of the community and the South African police in general. One was either a resistor or a collaborator, and a 'visit' by the security branch usually spelt trouble:
He preached on Matt 2:20-28. Almost cracking the corners of his mouth, his chest expanding rhythmically, most probably responding to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the congregation’s undivided attention, he exploded. The Dean, a youthful man, perhaps a little overweight for a man just under five feet and a half, excused himself from the joyous company. Something told him that this was no friendly visit. I expected God to intervene. After all, was I not preaching the truth? Was it not God who called me into the ministry to preach the Word, the love, justice and equality in apartheid South Africa? I looked all around me, and finally into the overcast sky, but God seemed to have retired behind those unthinking black clouds. Was God perhaps on holiday? (16-17)

Farisani’s narrative of his initial arrest indicates the total disbelief that he could have fallen foul of the authorities for anything as innocent as preaching the Gospel. Indeed, he rather naively thinks that the righteousness he believes in is so apparent that it cannot be faulted. But he learns a painful lesson in that, in identifying with the masses and providing a message of hope, he sidesteps the ideology that is enforced in the land. Such an ideology was justified on Biblical grounds and was therefore tenaciously believed by the police and the general white populace. When he is taken to his home in order for the security police to search it, he resorts to reading the bible while the search goes on. He is rudely shocked from this exercise, however, and his bible is confiscated. The point is that in such instances the sanctioned law of the State supersedes biblical injunctions and instruction. In the same episode, Farisani relates the result of reading the ‘wrong’ scripture when a young security policeman finds out which part of the Bible he is reading. There is an element of hysteria in the policeman’s castigation, as though something so sacred has fallen into the ‘wrong’ hands:
This is the hell we shall not stand. Always reading the wrong verses of the Bible. Stop this kak [Afrikaans for human excrement]. After all, you don’t understand the Bible. No Lutheran does. All communists, Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, the English press! The Christian Institute, Black people’s Convention [BPC], the South African Student Organisation [SASO], the South African Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, your Lutheran World Federation! All ugly organizations promoting murder and rape of children and women under the cloak of human rights – wolves in sheep’s clothing. The United Nations. Double standards. This government, my government, comes from God. Why don’t you preach Romans 30 [In fact he meant Romans 13]. Only one church – and I am very proud I belong to it – preaches the true gospel in South Africa. Give me this damn Bible. (22-23; explanations in the original)

This extract appears as a first person narrative in the text. How the historical subject could re-construct it in its entirety is beside the point. What it reveals about the mindset of the policeman, and of his own community, is the deep religiosity that they professed (even if, as the ironic bracketed comment reveals, they did not know the bible as well as they thought!). Indeed, as Winter relates, the genuine religious fervour of the Afrikaners made it a rarity to find a home without a Bible. Yet the blindspot was that their love of Christ did not extend to their fellow compatriots. For the policeman therefore to cast his net as wide as he does to include all organisations critical of the South African government shows his utter conviction in the righteousness of apartheid. The point is substantiated by Ferreira, who notes that in Afrikanerdom it was near heresy to question any dogma that authority dictated. The Dutch Reformed Church oversaw a great deal of this self-deception. As Ferreira notes:

If the Afrikaner church really believed in the teaching of Christ it could never have remained silent throughout thirty years of Nationalist rule. And it did. It lends its silent support to every action of the Nationalist Party. It has become a party church, a political church, a dead church. (68)
For Farisani, detention meant a long trip from home. He was taken from the Northern Province to Pietermaritzburg, nearly a thousand kilometres away. There he was interrogated and repeatedly tortured by the security police. It may be necessary to add that he was not tortured by the security police who had initially arrested him, but by their counterparts in Pietermaritzburg. This made their actions impersonal – they did not know him at all, had had no contact with him prior to his arrest and detention. What they knew of him was supplied by their inland counterparts, and his ‘confession’ would be used against him as an authentic document of the court. The rules of civility are thrown aside as soon as he comes into the prison, where, as he is processed, he commits a cardinal sin:

A woman sat behind the counter and took my personal details: name, address, age, profession, etc. Then, looking at me with utmost contempt, she said, “What have you done?” “Nothing, madam.” I clenched my teeth and held my breath. “Madam is your black kaffir ass [kaffirgat]. Sergeant, take this baboon from me.” Evil words battled for the way and blocked her throat. “To him there is no missus and no Baas,” said the sergeant. “He calls us sir and now calls you madam. Tonight he shall know the difference. Write Section Six of 1967 [a no-trial detention act]. He is a terrorist. All of them are terrorists, the whole church and their organizations, devils, satans, communists.” (29-30)

The issue of language, as seen in Naidoo’s initiation into Robben Island’s mores and values, is again apparent in Farisani’s account. In his anguish, however, Farisani re-discovers his love of God, and this provides him with an important psychological handle on reality to withstand the worst that his tormentors might throw at him. It is at this point, too, that he argues against suicide, a common concern of prison literature. His steadfast spiritual belief is also reflected in other autobiographies such as Makhoere’s and Frances Baard’s (My Spirit is Not Banned, 1986). In prison the Bible serves a double role: to remind the detainees of their spirituality and to bolster their spirits to hold on, to believe in the righteousness of their cause. Of course, not all detainees write candidly on this aspect of their survival strategies.
After his release, Farisani continued to preach as he pleased. He was adamant that he preached out of love and compassion. But he was caught up in the intricacies of a total geographic separation of all ethnic groups in South Africa. Since he lived in the area of the VhaVenda, he was not immune from communal concerns at the time of Venda’s supposed independence from South Africa. This leads to his second detention:

A day before “Venda Independence” celebrations, I was asked to preach at the stadium. I preached about a foolish man who built his house on sand and the wise man who built on a rock. That night I was raided at home from 3 o’clock until 11:15 the next morning. My house was ransacked. I was banned from the rest of the program, and could not preach at any official function. Little did the authorities realise that I preached out of great love and not out of malice. I wanted to help people, not flatter them with the gospel of peace when there was a war raging at their door. (63)

The war that Farisani refers to was the low-intensity war between the South African states and the guerilla units from the ANC and PAC which were making increasingly daring incursions into the country. Of course, each time such an event took place, known activists and suspects were rounded up for detention. This happened to Farisani (his third detention) after a unit of Umkhonto we Sizwe bombed the Sibasa Police Station. On this occasion he is tortured to such an extent that he suffers a heart attack. Accused of knowing the bombers, he is tortured and electrocuted. This part of the text makes for grim reading:

I was forced to undress. Only my underpants remained on my body. They put a canvas bag over my head. Water was poured on the floor. A gluelike substance was poured over my spinal cord. Electric wires were attached to my earlobes and back of the neck. After pouring water over my head, they switched on the current. I jerked and collapsed into the water, the electric wires still on. From morning till noon I went through the process. I cried like a baby and begged for mercy. (70)
Such methods of torture and interrogation were not uncommon, but rarely has a window into the South African security police been opened with such a nakedly candid and factual account. Because of pressure from the Lutheran Church in the then West Germany, Farisani became a leading cause for Amnesty International. Much pressure was brought to bear on South Africa, which could no longer ignore world opinion. Farisani and his family left South Africa for treatment at the Center for Torture Victims in St Paul, Minnesota. He was, at the time the text was published, adamant that he intended to return to South Africa and continue his ministry, despite the negative publicity that his memoir brought for the country. In addition to the memoir, he also recorded an oral presentation on details of his ordeal. The videofilm was titled The Torture of a South African Pastor.

The prison literature of South Africa is a direct product of repression. There is, in the memoirs and autobiographies, a sense of 'shared' scripting of these memories. Most of the security policemen and women are named, the places and buildings are also named, and fellow detainees are mentioned. At times a reader comes across one incident described by different autobiographical subjects who witnessed the deed. This lends an air of authenticity to the narratives since, in corroborating their claims, the reader is faced not with one account but several. This makes the atrocities committed by the police difficult to ignore and to be defended under a veil of silence and denial. For several of the historical subjects, after serving their sentences, exile became the only way through which they could assume a semblance of normal life. This was the case with Indres Naidoo, Caesarina Makhoere, and Mosibudi Mangena (On Our Own: Evolution of Black Consciousness in South Africa/Azania, 1989). Other South Africans just could not return for fear of being locked up once more, even though they had left the country legally. In a memoir written after his ordeal, And Night Fell: Political memoirs of a prisoner in South Africa (1983), Molefe Pheto was warned by family members not to return to South Africa. Writing from the safety of the United States, he knew that a return would mean more of the same. He had been detained in March 1975 and forced to spend two hundred and eighty one days without being brought to court on any charges. Two hundred and seventy one days of his detention were spent in solitary confinement, nearly driving him insane. It is thus understandable that he took the
advice of his family seriously. Nevertheless, he writes that, if the security police were curious about who wrote the memoir, he would have the right response:

I have no doubt that the Security Police in South Africa will want to know who really wrote these memoirs. I would like to record that they did. Their fists did. Their animalistic hatred of me and my friends of what we were attempting to achieve for our people, did. Their isolating me, shuttling me from prison to prison and holding me in solitary confinement, wrote these memoirs. Their brutalization of me and other detainees did. I am only a recorder of their deeds. (218)

In this manner Pheto indicts the state authorities and its functionaries with brutality and hatred. It would be fitting to note that he struggles with what language to use to indict the police. This is the function of cultural inscription with which each autobiographical subject struggles. For such a struggle also reflects the cultural milieu within which such subjects find themselves. While Makhoere, for instance, resorts in large measure to township patois, Pheto, in the text itself, resorts to a montage-like approach, with dramatic moments considerably heightened. In one particular episode during interrogation, for instance, there is a tussle with a policeman about the word black. It reads as a comical interlude, but also reflects the tension language can engender. He notes that, when trying to explain to the police his organisation’s cultural orientation, he runs into trouble:
I told them: “MDALI [for Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute] is an organization of artists formed in Soweto in …” [sic] “Listen!” Heystek, who was coming in during the commotion, shouted at me. “Don’t shit on us! Why don’t you say Black!” I had purposely omitted the word Black because I could not afford another beating. But I soon realized that I would be assaulted more, this time, for not using the term “Black”. Either way, I had no choice. On the other hand, I had resolved to use the word “Black” as much as I could, knowing that they would not approve of the positive image of “Black” as used by us. I felt I should pay them back with the only weapon I had, although they insisted I use the term “Black”. Their insistence was a ploy to frighten me more. In the circumstances, one would be afraid to do so. I started “MDALI is a Black organization of Black artists formed in Black Soweto.” “We know Soweto is Black!” Heystek screamed and cut me short. The medicine was working and it hurt him so much he could not tolerate it. (69-70)

With such improbables Pheto inscribes his political and cultural selves in language. And yet, as he observes, it’s a double bind. Heystek knows that Soweto is a black township with no white equivalent, so that his own insistence on the use of the term becomes a source of irritation because of the positive image with which Pheto imbues the term. This ends in the destruction of all discourse between the two. It is a moment fraught with the sort of differences that South African prisoners were faced with, and, in writing about their experiences, record in minute detail.

However diverse these autobiographical writings, they are united by their autobiographical subjects’ acceptance that what they undergo is for the collective good. Indeed, the reverence with which political prisoners were regarded in the black communities in particular was almost akin to hero worship. Most autobiographical subjects, for instance, write of how, when in contact with common law prisoners, the latter showed a marked respect for them and helped them in any way possible, procuring for them such things as cigarettes, and, most importantly, newspapers. It is not uncommon, too, to come across a key phrase in such texts, ‘my/our people’. In such instances, there is a total identification with the oppressed that makes it difficult to separate the individual from the wider society. Perhaps, like James Olney, we may view imprisonment and all it entails as part of the metaphor of self. In his Metaphors
of Self, Olney there is the following extract which, to my mind, succinctly captures the texture and contours of the forging of identity in South African prison and exile literature:

Our sense that there is something – in experience – comes only when the elements that go to make that thing take on a relation to one another; in other words, the meaning emerges with perception of a pattern, and there can obviously be no pattern in discrete items and elements. We must connect one thing with another and finally assume the whole design of which the element is only a part. Metaphor supplies such a connection, relating this to that in such and such a relevant way … A metaphor, then, through which we stamp our own image on the face of nature, allows us to connect the known of ourselves to the unknown of the world, and, making available new relational patterns, it simultaneously organizes the self into a new and richer entity; so that the old known self is joined to and transformed into the new, heretofore unknown, self. Metaphor says very little about what the world is, or is like, but a great deal about what I am, or am like, and about what I am becoming; and in the end it connects me more clearly with the deep reaches of myself than with an objective universe. (1972, 30-31)

It is, I think, a succinct way in which to view this chapter on redemptive suffering. If the metaphor of ‘home’ is used as a leitmotif in assessing the seven autobiographies discussed here, it will be seen that this ‘home’ makes for the radical transformation of at least six of the authors. Newer selves are fashioned in this cauldron in the hope that the newer society might emerge: as Naidoo avers, that very society was evolving in these stark circumstances. By throwing all political prisoners together, the state committed a cardinal mistake: it made them perceive the futility of race classification and racialist thinking, and prepared them for the kind of society that would have to be brought into being. For Mandela, a greater part of his term as president meant living this creed as a reconciler. Physical, emotional and psychic suffering forms the main plank of these texts, and the myriad modes in which each author seeks to record and explain their diverse suffering adds to the picture of a dark and labyrinthine era of South African history. And yet, in having survived such
brutalities, each author is convinced of the need for such sacrifice. The identification experienced by someone like Joseph resonates with the idea that the greater shame would be precisely the lack of such identification. And in a sense all the autobiographers discussed here - with the exception of Levine - share this identification. What emerge at the end of their ordeals are the kind of newer selves that Olney writes about.

Internal exile, as exemplified by Joseph, was not at all easy. Physical exile, on the other hand, was the extreme form of such punishment. Two authors who were to make a significant contribution to South African literature chose exile and their experiences form the core of the next chapter, followed by an examination of the autobiography of F.W. de Klerk, The Last Trek, in an attempt to illustrate how, when confronted with a changed reality, identity itself can become a prison-house.