

LITERATURE AS AN AGENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: THE CASE OF CAITLIN DAVIES'S *PLACE OF REEDS* AND *THE RETURN OF EL NEGRO*

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ABSTRACT

This article considers two of Caitlin Davies's novels on Botswana, *Place of Reeds* and *The Return of El Negro*, as exemplifying the ways in which literature addresses issues of justice within the postcolonial context. A narrative which see-saws between history, journalism and anecdotal reporting, *Place of Reeds* exposes the underbelly of Botswana society, particularly with regard to the country's mistreatment and marginalisation of its minorities and women. Paradoxically, *El Negro* is a story about an unidentified Southern African man whose body was clandestinely taken to Europe by natural scientists who put it on display, subjected it to scrutiny, and used it as a specimen for scientific research. In the years leading up to the end of the twentieth century, the body was brought back and buried in Botswana's capital of Gaborone. What Caitlin Davies's second text does is to lay bare the violence of colonialism. Using Homi Bhabha's concept of a vernacular cosmopolitanism, a notion which he uses to suggest that global progress should be determined from the perspective of those people who have suffered all manner of injustices in the past, this article argues for and shows the extent to which Davies's fiction bears witness to the role that literature plays in addressing issues of social justice in society.

Keywords: literature; social change; Caitlin Davies; agent; *Place of Reeds*; *The Return of El Negro*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “literature” as a genre has always been a contested category, going back to the time of the Greeks. In Plato’s *The Republic*, for instance, in which Socrates’ definition of literature is limited to poetry or, to use Gregory Castle’s expression, “imaginative writing” (Castle 2007, 6), the idea of literature is delineated. However, in recent times there have been “changing notions of reading and interpretation and changing notions of what constitutes literature and the literary” (Castle 2007, 9). Thus, apart from referring to imaginative works, the category of literature now encompasses and subsumes other domains such as literary theory, criticism, autobiographical writing and journalism. Notions of literature and what constitutes the “literary” are of direct relevance to this paper in which I examine two works of journalistic reporting by British-*cum*-Motswana female writer, Caitlin Davies, in order to demonstrate the extent to which literature can be used as a vehicle for raising difficult ethical questions that relate to issues such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality and belonging – in short, what it means to be human.

In his famous essay “Looking Back, Moving Forward: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism”, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha posits the idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism as the most viable, enlightened approach to reaching resolutions or a related settlement, particularly in a world that has been traversed by all forms of demographic shifts and displacements. In such a world, he argues, the ontology of vernacular cosmopolitanism is well-placed to be the touchstone for measuring human progress because it deals with identity issues from the perspective of those who have suffered the fate of history – the formerly subjugated or colonised, ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalised groups. For Bhabha, a vernacular cosmopolitan is ideally placed to understand and cope with the depredations of modern life. He states:

[t]he vernacular cosmopolitan takes the view that the commitment to a ‘right to difference in equality’ as a process of constituting emergent groups and affiliations has less to do with the affirmation or authentication of origins and ‘identities’, and more to do with political practices and ethical choices. Minoritarian affiliations or solidarities arise in response to the failures and limits of democratic representation, creating new modes of agency, new strategies of recognition, new forms of political and symbolic representation – (NGS, anti-globalisation groups, Truth Commissions, International courts, local agencies of transitional justice...) Vernacular cosmopolitanism represents a political process that works towards the shared goals of democratic rule, rather than simply acknowledging already constituted marginal political entities or identities. (1994, xvii-xviii)

The above quote encapsulates the essence of the “in-between” space or marginal condition which has become the mainstay of life for many people in the colonial and postcolonial condition who endure all forms of hardship and exclusions. In a world haunted by transgenerational and transhistorical memorialisation, notably memories of slavery, colonialism and genocides, Bhabha sees the pertinence of perceiving our world from the vantage of minorities who, as individuals or communities, always grapple

with ways of establishing a connection to such a callous world. Davies's two works exemplify the extent to which minorities struggle to "stage a relationship to a world that has been rendered restless by transhistorical memories" (Bhabha 1994, xix).

Born in 1964, Caitlin Davies holds a dual citizenship of Britain and Botswana, the former as the country of her birth, and the latter through marriage to a local Botswana man before the dissolution of their marriage. Apart from *Place of Reeds* and *The Return of El Negro*, Davies is the author of *James Blues* and *Black Mulberries*, as well as a contributor to *The Independent*. Her two works being examined in this article exemplify Bhabha's notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism in the way in which she foregrounds the plight of those people – be they colonised or minorities – who have been the victims of oppression and tyranny. On the one hand, in her representations of journalistic narrative in *Place of Reeds*, Davies highlights some of the most enduring social ills with which the country will have to grapple, including the oppressive remnants of tradition which engender discrimination based on gender, the suffering of marginalized groups, the suppression of minority rights, and the rise of other forms of discrimination such as xenophobia. Not only is Davies openly ostracized and marginalised because of her white race but she also finds herself at the receiving end of xenophobic behaviour from Ron's relatives, especially when their marriage begins to show symptoms of rupture.

On the other hand, the story of *The Return of El Negro* is set in an unknown locale in Southern Africa at the beginning of the 19th century at the height of European colonialism. The story revolves around an unknown man whom the colonialists give the name of El Negro. Upon his death from natural causes, his grave is disinterred by Europeans and whisked to Europe where it becomes an object of scientific analysis. This story bears a striking parallel with that of Sarah Baartman, nicknamed "Hottentot Venus". Baartman was

a woman of Khoisan ancestry who, following her enslavement from South Africa, was turned into a commodity and public spectacle by being exhibited in London and Paris in the early years of the nineteenth century. Baartman became an object of curiosity and was subjected to ... invasive scrutiny because of her (by European standards) unusually large buttocks and putatively unprepossessing feature." (Kalua 2012, 126)

As with Baartman, El Negro's cadaver was also displayed for entertainment, as well as being used to advance research relating to discourses of race and racism. Although El Negro's body was returned to Southern Africa and re-interred near Gaborone, Botswana, his memory has become a representative figure of all those who suffered at the hands of the colonial enterprise.

In *Place of Reeds*, the narrator, Davies herself, dramatically introduces her "unhomely" world in the prologue to her story as follows:

I'm not quite sure how I got here. Until a few months ago I was living in Maun, a southern African village on the edge of the Okavango Delta, a miraculous inland swamp in a land of desert. Maun was my home and I never thought I would leave. (Davies 2005, 1)

As the narrator, she then ends her story with the following disclaimer:

The events portrayed in this book are true, but some names have been changed and, in some cases, fictional characters used in order to protect certain individuals.

Both the opening lines of the novel and the disclaimer make the important point that Davies's work draws on both her personal experiences and historical facts, but that these have been reworked to read like a novel.

In her book, Davies recounts the story of her sojourn in Botswana from about 1991 – a sojourn and relocation made possible by her marriage to Ron – up until the dissolution of their marriage twelve years later. On the one hand, Davies's story, which see-saws between history, journalism and anecdotal reporting, records the broad sweep of Botswana's history from the pre-colonial era right through to the twenty-first century. This historical range includes, for example, the gold rush of Francistown in the 1860s, the Botswana Chiefs' rejection of Botswana's Union with South Africa in favour of becoming a protectorate under the British, the establishment in 1915 of Maun or "place of reeds" as the Capital of North-East Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama's controversial marriage to an English woman before leading his country to independence in 1966, and De Beers' discovery of diamonds in 1967. But, crucially, Davies's narrative also concerns her ability to fictionalize some of the events which form the core of her story.

Amid the chequered history of this postcolonial state, Davies peppers her narrative with the kind of reportage that certainly exposes the underbelly of Botswana: for example, the country's mistreatment of and marginalization of its minorities, in particular, the Khoisan people, a case which she exposes while working for a Botswana newspaper. In addition, Davies's story is about her life in a society where tradition is alive and well, modernity and globalization notwithstanding, the most notable example being the pervasive sense in which men and women are seen as essentially different. In fact, the major preoccupation of the second part of the novel is the narrator's unhomely life in a large extended family where she must grapple with banalities such as childbearing and family chores. It is partly tradition and partly the extended family system that reduce her to the status of a servant, a situation which leads to her breaking up with Ron, her husband. Finally, the immensely disturbing incident of her rape leaves the narrator shattered since nobody wants to talk about it. Ron is, at best, silent, and his family members choose not to go to court to offer their support for the narrator's trauma. Everybody is so very insouciantly indifferent that the court appearance itself is a farce. This leads her to conclude: "[i]n Botswana people didn't want to talk about ... rape" (Davies 2005, 386).

This marks the height of her feelings of displacement, exemplified by her involvement in an organisation called War Against Rape (WAR), believing that perhaps rape is an institutionalized form of violence in this society. This is also followed by the desire to leave the country. All these events bring to the fore the firm stand the narrator takes on matters of race and feminism.

This feeling of belonging expands and is enjoyed by Davies as she joins Ron's family and expresses the following outpouring of positive sentiments about her new home:

I felt comfortable here now. I felt included in the family; I knew how to relate to its different members. With Eliah I was always polite, interested in her advice, quick to offer any help she might need. With Madintwa I could be more myself, telling stories and jokes, questioning her about life and Maun in the old days. And Ron softened in their presence, sinking down on to a chair with ease, proud of the new house he'd built, his salary that allowed him to buy them meat, the way his daughter, Alice, knew him as a father and was growing confident and loving. (Davies 2005, 161)

However, as time goes by, Davies's feeling of belonging begins to be whittled away, and her world begins to shrink, giving way to a state of spiritual diminution and unhomely moments, as the result of a stultifying tradition which does not allow her space to articulate her needs as a woman, and as a foreigner. Instead, she becomes "an unhomely presence" (Bhabha 1994, 19) in the eyes of Ron's family. As Bhabha verbalised it, her:

recesses of domestic space become sites for ... the most intricate invasion in that displacement, the borders between home and world, become confused ... disorienting (2004, 13).

Thus, the idea of unhomeliness is a product of the deleterious effect of the Botswana model of patriarchal ascendancy and the African extended family system, both of which gradually wear Davies down. The narrator feels searing moments of anguish and despair, real moments of *unheimlich* and dislocation, as her husband Ron turns into "a proper African patriarch" (Davies 2005, 209) and cuts his wife out of all decision-making processes, while at the same time allowing members of his family, especially his mother, to interfere in their marriage. Thus, benefiting from the two systems, Ron neither consults his wife on anything nor helps her with the chores as he used to. Instead, his manipulative mother takes over the running of their family, thereby becoming the bane of Caitlin's existence. With the gap widening in the eight-year marriage, Caitlin becomes "increasingly isolated" (Davies 2005, 314), and the idea of Botswana being home becomes irrelevant. This feeling leads her to reach the conclusion that apart from Ruby, her daughter who could belong to both England and Botswana, she herself "didn't belong in Botswana" (Davies 2005, 434).

Secondly, the narrator reflects on the kinds of changes that have taken place in Botswana during her twelve years of living there. For example, she considers that after independence in 1966, the combination of a culture of good governance and the discovery of diamonds in 1967 turn Botswana around into "a place where constructive criticism and opposition are actively encouraged" (Davies 2005, 24). The wealth generated by the diamonds, together with the democratic culture instituted by the country's leaders, ensures that within a few years, the country is "one of Africa's shining success stories" (Davies 2005, 24). Ten years on, not only is Gaborone, Botswana's capital city, "one of

the fastest growing cities in the world” (Davies 2005, 34), but the “place of reeds” has also undergone a massive transformation. She writes as follows:

Maun had now acquired an official status, with Internet cafes, a cinema, three shopping malls, plenty of bars and a handful of restaurants selling European food. Botswana itself was now reasonably well known in England, with a Miss World and an Olympic running star. (Davies 2005, 392)

Davies portrays a country that is slowly globalizing and becoming part of what Bhabha calls “global cosmopolitanism”, the kind of society whose “relative prosperity and privilege [are] founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free-market forces of competition” (Bhabha 1994, xiv). The internet, shopping malls, exotic food and participation in international events, among other factors, are tell-tale signs of global modernity in Botswana and project a cosmopolitan society where its inhabitants participate in a celebration of multiple cultures, thereby inhabiting “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983, Bhabha 1994).

But for all its much-vaunted democratic values and the rule of law, Davies paints a picture of Botswana as a place where the good and the bad coexist, albeit uneasily. Further, whilst freelancing for the *Mmegi* newspaper and researching various topical issues, Davies almost places herself on a collision course with the authorities, following her recounting of the scoop in the paper she works for, concerning the looming scandal involving the government’s decision to forcibly remove the Bushmen from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. With Davies herself at the centre of the controversial article, she observes that:

the paper became caught up in the threatened removal of the Basarwa – or Bushmen – from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Ever since the 1980s, the Botswana Government had wanted to move the Basarwa out of the reserve, though it never really said why. The Basarwa didn’t want to go and every time relocation plans were suggested the inhabitants of the reserve refused. (Davies 2005, 196)

This report brings her into trouble with the government, especially when it becomes evident that it carries insinuations of the government’s use of strong-arm tactics as well as bribery to court the complaisance of the Khoisan in the relocation process.

Further, Davies becomes involved in researching the issue of violence against women in North-West Botswana by writing for WAR. While doing so she garners significant but profoundly disturbing realities about traditional Botswana: that “rape was too unmentionable” (Davies 2005, 341); and that “a woman is raped in Botswana every twelve minutes” (Davies 2005, 354). She concludes that this state of affairs accounts for the fact that the country exhibits “the highest HIV rate in the world” (Davies 2005, 392). In a trial involving her own rape case, Davies experiences an intense awareness of the entrenchment of patriarchy in Botswana, despite modernity.

The Return of *El Negro*, on the other hand, is another interesting, if disturbing, piece of reportage by Davies. The story is set in Southern Africa in the first two decades

of the 19th century, and at the height of colonialism in the region. This is a story which revolves around a black man who is stolen by European natural scientists and his body is exhibited in Europe for two centuries before it is returned as a result of intense protests. About this man whose exact identity remains a subject of highly speculative theories, the author provides the following summation of his contradictory, and hence symbolic, identity:

El Negro was the name given to a southern African man whose body had been stolen from his grave almost two hundred years earlier. The body had been stuffed, in exactly the same way trophy animals were stuffed, and taken to Europe to amuse the public. In the 1990s, after a decade of protest, it was finally agreed that the body be repatriated to southern Africa. In October 2000, El Negro was laid to rest in a sombre state burial in Botswana... Like the unknown soldiers of the world wars, El Negro would come to represent thousands of individuals whose mortal remains had no identity. Unlike the dead soldiers of war, however, this man would symbolise all the murdered, excavated and stolen from Africa and taken to Europe in the name of exploration, entertainment and science. (Davies 2003, 1)

Thus, apart from the symbolic name of El Negro, details of this man's life remain scanty. As the story opens, two French naturalist brothers named Edouard and Jules Verreaux are seen digging up a grave of this man who must have been buried the day before. The location is not Botswana but rather at the "confluence of Orange and Vaal rivers" (Davies 2003, 12) in present day South Africa. The reader learns the man is a Tswana, a "member of the Mo Tlhaping people" (Davies 2003, 13).

The fact that a black person is taken to Europe and turned into a commodity and public spectacle by being exhibited in museums bears witness to various manifestations of prejudices, most of which led to excesses such as slavery and colonialism. In many, if not all, circumstances, the black people were easy prey for such greedy materialism. In this case, the man becomes the object of curiosity and is subjected to such invasive scrutiny and racism because of his racial make-up. Thus, like many black people who had suffered under colonialism and slavery, this stands out as an instance in which the man is portrayed as being the symbol of exploited blackness.

Davies intersperses the journalistic narrative with a running commentary regarding the historical period, as follows:

It was the golden age of travel for those from the north and the information taken back to Europe would contribute to strategies for further imperialism. Natives – dead or alive – were also urgently needed for scientific study. Natural history, the leading science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had classified plants and animals; now humans were to be classified too. Once classified, once the physical differences of 'race' were established, this could be used to justify positions of superiority and inferiority so useful to colonisation. (Davies 2003, 19)

Presently, we learn that El Negro is on display in Baron Delessert's gallery in Paris (Davies 2003, 29). Towards the end of the 19th century, after the death of the naturalist brothers, we learn El Negro has a new owner and is being exhibited in Catalan, Spain.

These are some of the ways in which some people, particularly minorities and the weak in society, find themselves “implicated in the traumatic events of global history” (Bhabha 1994, xix).

In closing, I have demonstrated the extent to which Davies’s two works of reportage which I have discussed in this article fulfil the norms or criteria of the category of literary works which take a moral position in matters that affect humanity. To invoke Bhabha’s formulation and wisdom with regard to the pertinence of the notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism, the works “reveal the profound ‘unsatisfaction’ that dwells in our shared history of human civilisation and barbarism” (Bhabha 1994, xix). Stated differently, the works are an enactment of the excesses, horrors and brutalities of our racialized and essentialised identities. To that end, they bear witness to the various ways in which, as a species, we often find ourselves gripped and overwhelmed by a nervous apprehension about who we are and how to grapple with the existential question of what it means to be human.

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