

History and Literature: Magic Realism and Italian POWs in a South African Novel

Mariëtte van Graan

Summary

This article explores the use of a colonial object (a novel) and generally perceived to be colonial practices (such as empirical historiography, the critical study of literature and literary theory) as tools in the ongoing process of decolonising South African minds. Using the magic realist South African novel *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (Etienne van Heerden) as a case study, with particular reference to the history of the Italian prisoners of war (POWs) that were detained in South Africa during World War II (WWII), the article investigates knowledge production through magic realist fiction and attempts to explain how the correlations and tensions between magic realist fiction and empirical historiography contribute to knowledge production and preservation on a broader metatextual level. The article aims to show how pieces of history that may be lost in the ideologically and politically driven decolonisation of history books and curricula may survive through fiction, and perhaps even serve as an effective, albeit subtle, tool for a way to decolonise the mind by creatively using instead of discarding pieces of history, objects and practices with colonial origins.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verken die gebruik van 'n koloniale voorwerp ('n roman) en praktyke wat algemeen as koloniaal beskou word (soos empiriese historiografie, die kritiese bestudering van letterkunde en literatuurteorie) as gereedskap in die aangaande proses om die denke van Suid-Afrikaners te dekoloniseer. Die roman *Die swye van Mario Salviati* (Etienne van Heerden) word hier as 'n gevallestudie gebruik, met spesifieke verwysing na die geskiedenis van Italiaanse krygsgevangenes wat in Suid-Afrika aangehou is gedurende die Tweede Wêreldoorlog. Die artikel ondersoek kennisgenerering deur magies realistiese fiksie en poog om te verduidelik hoe korrelasies en spanning tussen magies realistiese fiksie en empiriese historiografie bydra tot -kennisgenerering en -bewaring op 'n breër buite-tekstuele vlak. Hierdie artikel het ten doel om aan te toon hoe dele van die geskiedenis wat verlore kan raak in die ideologiese en politieke dekolonisering van geskiedenisboeke en skool-kurrikulums nie net deur fiksie behoue kan bly nie, maar miskien ook kan dien as effektiewe, dog subtiele, gereedskap wat gebruik kan word om die denke te dekoloniseer deur die kreatiewe gebruik van brokkies geskiedenis, voorwerpe en praktyke wat as koloniaal beskou word, eerder as om sulke voorwerpe en praktyke voor die voet te verwerp.

Introduction

South African historians have been concerned with rewriting the history books to correct metanarratives that excluded large segments of the population and their histories since the fall of the Apartheid-regime in 1994. Under the socio-political ideology of decolonisation, South African history that involves European and world events receive little attention in, for example, school curricula. A similar urge to “re-negotiate historical accounts” and revisit and critically re-examine the past became notable in South African literature, as with most post-colonial texts (Grzęda 2013: 154).

Within this context, the fact that Italian POWs were sent to South Africa during WWII is not commonly known. The publication of the Afrikaans novel *Die swye van Mario Salviati* (2000) by acclaimed South African author Etienne van Heerden (translated into English as *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*, 2002) has reintroduced this historical event into the public domain, if only for readers of South African literature. The novel is set in the late 1990s, a period in which the hopeful ideals of the “new South Africa” and its “rainbow nation” were still very much alive, but already starting to crack.

This complex and dense novel tells a multitude of stories, including that of a group of Italian POWs who are sent to a fictional isolated Karoo-town, Yearsonend, where they are placed as servants with various families. Their presence in and contribution to Yearsonend greatly influence the history of the town and the main plot of the novel.

The novel addresses processes of decoloniality directly through the experiences of the main character, Ingi Friedländer, a young curator at the National Gallery. It describes the looting of Apartheid-era artefacts from the parliament buildings, which the Speaker of the House attempts to explain: “it seems that our new politicians only feel they’ve really triumphed once they can flaunt one of these distasteful items on their desks” (Van Heerden 2002: 164). When Ingi objects that “these things may refer to a distasteful period of history, but they are still artefacts from the past”, the Speaker brushes her objections off: “other arrangements would be made – a museum of neglect and transgressions, perhaps” (Van Heerden 2002: 164). The Minister orders Ingi to “bring ‘rainbow art’ back to the museum – ‘to celebrate the wonders of freedom’” (Van Heerden 2002: 8), which catalyses the main storyline of the novel. Ingi travels to Yearsonend to buy a sculpture from recluse artist Jonty Jack Bergh.¹ Once there, she is drawn into Yearsonend’s history and its many secrets. She meets a host of strange characters, including the town’s present living inhabitants, the ghosts of already deceased characters, an

1. This highly sought after sculpture called Staggering Merman is shrouded in mystery and Jonty is deemed an appropriate artist to include in the National Collection not only because of the sculpture’s reputation, but also because the artist is “not white” but of “mixed origin” (Van Heerden 2002: 200).

immortal General and a very unorthodox angel. Ingi gets entangled in Yearsonend's greatest mystery: the location of a lost treasure (a wagon full of Kruger gold).

Whilst painting a background picture of bureaucrats in the art world fumbling through their part of the decolonisation process, the novel also portrays various characters that represent pieces of forgotten or discarded South African history. In the characteristic way of magic realism, these characters bring their own small, individual narratives into the novel's web of plots that undermine some metanarratives in South African history. Specific historical periods represented in the novel include the early years of British colonisation, the Feather Boom (1860-1879), the Second South African or Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and WWII (1939-1945). These historic events are largely treated as things that happen far away and have little direct effect on the insulated town and its people. Instead, the novel introduces characters that seem to come out of and away from history when they get to Yearsonend. Several characters representing previously marginalised sections of society and chapters in South African history are brought to the centre when they take turns to focalise the novel, including the sardonic Slingervel Xam!, Khoisan guide to a British explorer, and the melancholy Siela Pedi, a Xhosa woman who was kidnapped and raped by the supposedly noble and brave Afrikaner soldiers of the Republic during the Second Anglo-Boer War. Such characters undermine metanarratives of colonial South African history by unmasking the real horrors and shortcomings of their oppressors; they comment on history, power and truth – often sneeringly.

Out of the multitude of characters, plots and represented historical periods in *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*, this article will focus on the narratives and portrayals of characters that Van Heerden based on the historical Italian POWs in South Africa. A brief overview of the history behind these Italian POWs, their internment specifically at the Zonderwater detention camp and the aftermath thereof will illustrate how this novel picks up a part of their story that is seemingly absent from general historiography.

The History of Italian POWs in South Africa

For brevity's sake this overview paints the picture only in broad strokes. A solid amount of empirical information regarding the stay of the Italian POWs at Zonderwater is available for those who wish to know more but, as will be discussed later, there are significant gaps in the historiographic narrative.

During WWII Italian soldiers were captured by Allied Forces on the North and East African fronts. According to Captain John Ball (1967), a Union Defence Force (U.D.F.) staff member at Zonderwater, these POWs "poured into South Africa from the Desert campaigns" in Egypt, Libya, Cyrenaica and

Tripolitania. Between February 1941 and January 1947² approximately 100 000 prisoners³ were interned at Zonderwater, “the largest single Prisoners-of-War Camp throughout the Allied Territories” (Ball 1967). These prisoners built their own “town” at Zonderwater and created an impressive community with schools, libraries, chapels, theatres, sports and medical treatment facilities (Ball 1967, Kruger 1996, Szabo 2018). They received training and education – “some 9000 analphabete peasants learned to read and write Italian”, “some 5000 learned trades”; their spiritual needs were tended to by 23 POW chaplains and their medical needs by U.D.F. and Italian POW Medical Officers and personnel (Ball 1967). Only about 0.5% of these prisoners died in captivity – 233 from illness, 76 from accidents (Ball 1967). Such facts may create the impression that life at Zonderwater was almost idyllic, but it cannot be forgotten that these facilities were built over several years, that these men faced the alienation of being imprisoned far from home and family, and that even a humane prison is still a prison:

In the early days the prisoners were set up in conical tents which neither protected them from the bitter Highveld winters nor from the lightning bolts [...]. During the early years prisoners also suffered the humiliation of being guarded by black sentries, ferocious looking Zulus armed with assegais.⁴ Each tent housed 8 men while services – ablution blocks, sick bays, kitchen, sports fields – were gradually built by the prisoners themselves. [...] To avoid incidents and rebellions among the P.O.W.’s the blocks were isolated from each other by barbed wire fences. In April 1942 the prisoners, who then numbered 54,000, were divided into twelve blocks; by 1943 their number had grown to 64,000 and it became clear to the South African authorities that the conical tents would have to be replaced by the usual wooden huts adopted in all P.O.W. camps. The tent town had thus gradually grown into a sort of city whose population grew to match that of an average Italian town.

(Sani 1992: 298)

Partly thanks to Camp Commander Colonel H.F. Prinsloo, whose “open mindedness and humanity” earned him “the respect and love of the prisoners”

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2. WWII ended in 1945, but the camp remained open and operational until 1947 due to the lack of transportation to get the Italians home (Szabo 2018).
 3. The number of prisoners vary between sources. Kruger (1996: 88, 90) puts it at about 90 000 but mentions that the camp could accommodate 120 000 men; Somma (2012: 261 & 2013: 10) writes that up to 100 000 Italian POWs were detained in South Africa; Szabo (2018) mentions “tens of thousands” and Ball (1967) simply speaks of “thousands”.
 4. This sentence illustrates the ways in which ideologies influence historiography: written in 1992 (pre-Democratic South Africa) and within the context of the ideologies at play in the 1940s, being guarded by black sentries is described as a “humiliation” to the Italian soldiers.

(Sani 1992: 298), the enduring legacy of Zonderwater is still largely positive. Ball (1967) states that “what was achieved here in South Africa represents a very fine achievement in the field of human relations in the treatment of prisoners-of-war: and one that stands greatly to South Africa’s credit for all time”. Kruger (1996: 104) points out that the “good work” of the South African governments regarding POWs was never publicised by the opposition that came into power in 1948, and that it is therefore “doubtful that the average man in the street would have any conception of the leading role South Africa played in the manner in which prisoners of war were treated during the Second World War”, or of the impact and legacy of the skilled Italian men and their families who immigrated to South Africa after the war.

After WWII ended, Prinsloo and three of his officers (including Ball) were “invested with the Order of the Star of Italy by the post-war Italian government”, and Prinsloo received further recognition when “the Pope conferred upon [him] the ‘Ordine di Bene Merente’, that is the Papal Decoration, the Order of Good Merit” (Ball 1967: Editor’s Note).

The cemetery, museum and memorials at Zonderwater stand to this day, and those who lived and died there are yearly commemorated with a wreath laying ceremony attended by the South African Italian community and high-ranking government officials from both countries (Kruger 1996, Szabo 2018). But still, as Kruger pointed out long ago, the “average man in the street” just does not know. The maintenance of the memorials and artefacts as well as the commemoration ceremonies seem to be largely done and driven by Italian groups such as the Zonderwater Block Italian ex-POW Association (Kruger 1996, Szabo 2018).

From 1942, and especially after Italy surrendered to the Allied Forces in 1943, some prisoners were allowed to work outside the camp (Somma 2013: 9). 4000 South Africans employed POWs, mostly for agricultural labour (Ball 1967). 1762 soldiers were employed as labourers by the South African Air Force (Szabo 2018). Including the recruited prisoners, over 30 000 Italians contributed to the economic development of South Africa through their work on huge irrigation schemes such as the Upington project (canals built to bring water from the Orange River that irrigated 1500km² of farmland) and roads, bridges and tunnels (like the Montagu pass between Oudtshoorn and George) (Szabo 2018). After WWII most of the POWs were shipped back to Italy, but approximately a thousand sought asylum, and even more applied to immigrate to South Africa after their return to Italy.⁵

In general South African history textbooks – the kind a layman would read for an overview, or a learner might use for a school project – the topic of

5. Again, the numbers vary: Kruger (1996: 88, 96) mentions “thousands” applying to return and 800 who were allowed to stay; Italian ambassador to South Africa Pietro Giovanni Donnici mentioned that “more than a thousand” stayed behind and “over a thousand” decided to return later in his speech at the 2018 commemoration ceremony at Zonderwater (Szabo 2018).

WWII is almost glossed over. After skimming through books like *A history of South Africa* (Thompson 2000), *A History of South Africa* (Welsh 2000), *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika: van voortye tot vandag* (Pretorius (ed.) 2012) and *The History of South Africa* (Beck 2014), one could be forgiven for getting the impression that this globally devastating event was a distraction for the South African government who, at the time, seemed focused on establishing and enforcing their Apartheid ideology. These books broadly describe how South African forces eventually allied with the British and joined the fray, but nowhere is there a mention of Zonderwater or these Italian POWs. Whilst such general history books can obviously not include every event or detail of a conflict such as WWII, these particular omissions are notable considering the number of people involved, the contributions these Italians made to the South African economy and infrastructure, and the influence these events had on the treatment of POWs. Such omissions starkly illustrate the incompleteness of the metanarrative created and main-tained in general history books.

Still, these events are not completely forgotten nor ignored. Somma (2013: 13) points out that there is a “body of published memoirs, histories, archived regalia, a film documentary and other material created under the aegis of the ex-POWs themselves, or using their input as primary material” that feature “detailed accounts of various POW experiences that were forged into a powerful metanarrative that still exerts a strong influence on Italian-South African discourse [...] in the decades between the end of the period of POW internment and the beginning of the twenty-first century”. Unfortunately such materials are not readily available to the general public and would only be sought out by those who would know to look for them. Thus, outside of academia, this particular piece of history is omitted from general historiography and school curricula, and consequently fading from South African memory.

One can speculate that these omissions are connected to the fact that these events predominantly involve Europeans, and as such are “intrusions” into African history that should have less consideration in decolonised South African historiography. The validity of such speculation is not particularly relevant here. There always has been and will be some ideological underpinning to empirical historiography. What is discarded in one era can be rediscovered and retold in another. What is under discussion here is whether the metanarratives and gaps in historiography can be filled in, expanded on and even subverted through fiction, particularly magic realist fiction.

The biggest gap in the historiographical narrative concerning these Italian POWs is the part outside of Zonderwater. We know that some of these POWs were sent to rural areas as agricultural labourers, but empirical information on exactly what happened to all of them and where they ultimately ended up, is hard to find. Even for anecdotal accounts, inside knowledge is required – the researcher has to search for rare texts and personal accounts, and/or find

people whose family history includes direct contact with such men. Oral narratives are considered to be a prime source of information among magic realist narrators (Hegerfeldt 2005: 192). Van Heerden (2002: 438) mentions that “a plaited leather belt given to my father by an unknown Italian prisoner of war who worked on our farm Doornbosch” during WWII partly inspired the novel. This author’s family history involves one of these Italian POWs, and this is partly how an Afrikaans magic realist novel which includes characters based on Italian POWs in South Africa, came to be written.⁶

Fictional Italian POWs in *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*

The novel tells nothing specific of these Italian soldiers’ experiences during WWII or their stay at Zonderwater. It picks up their story as they leave Zonderwater by train (Van Heerden 2002: 46-49), and so fills the gap in historiography with fiction.

Their arrival and allocation to the different Afrikaner families of Yearsonend is handled with much pomp and circumstance, but also in a way reminiscent of the slave trade (Van Heerden 2002: 49-55). Due to a tipsy Italian translator and the locals’ unreasonable, stereotypical expectations, the POWs are placed in situations that they are not equipped for. On their first night in Yearsonend, “housewives pointed to spice racks and shouted eagerly, ‘Pasta! Pasta!’, young men shrugged their shoulders helplessly. A tailor bent over the engine of a motorcar and scratched his head” (Van Heerden 2002: 59). The men are put to work, but also ostracised because they are foreigners, POWs, considered a threat to the chastity of the young townswomen, and their Catholic practises are alien to the Calvinist locals (Van Heerden 2002: 139).

The titular Mario Salviati is one of only two characters from the group of Italians who are named and play a pivotal part in the plot (the other being Lorenzo). The townspeople nickname Mario Dumb Eyetie because he is a deaf-mute, and gossip that Mario arrived in Yearsonend “as if he’d been sent” (Van Heerden 2002: 49). By incredible coincidence, Mario is a stonecutter by trade and Karel needs a stonecutter for his ambitious Lightning water-project. With Mario’s expert help, Karel builds a seemingly miraculous canal that carries water through the desert, over Mount Improbable and into Yearsonend. After Karel’s disappearance, Mario continues the project and builds an irrigation system that serves the town into the present day of the novel (reminiscent of the irrigation projects the real Italian POWs helped build in South Africa). In his Author’s Acknowledgements, Van Heerden (2002: 438) ties the inspiration for this character to “a photograph of an Italian mason working at the Meiringspoort Pass” that was published in a tourist guide and

6. See Murray (2002: 69-70) for more detailed information on the history (and historiography) behind this novel and Van Heerden’s creative process.

captioned “An unknown Italian, unable to communicate with his fellow-workers, laying stones in the retaining wall”.

Mario is a crucial character in the novel both because of his role in the town’s development, and because he is the only one alive who knows the answer to the town’s most enduring mystery: he knows where the lost Kruger gold is buried. Mario keeps this secret (and others) not only out of loyalty and discretion, but also because he is deaf, mute, and later blind, leaving him almost no way to communicate.⁷

After their arrival in Yearsonend, the Italians gather on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons after church, go for walks and picnic on the slopes of Mount Improbable. The religious restrictions placed on them by the townspeople inspire Mario to secretly carve a statue of the Virgin Mary on the slopes of Mount Improbable. When he reveals it to his comrades, “[tears stream] down their cheeks and right there and then [...] the young men [conduct] a Catholic mass” (Van Heerden 2002: 141). The locals eventually see the statue, condemn it as idolatry and send men to destroy it – but Mario awaits them there with a .303 rifle resting across his chest. After a silent standoff the men change their minds and leave. Despite the wrath of the town elders, the statue stays: “And to this day, the statue of the Virgin Mary, now slightly weathered by sun and rain, still stands on the place that came to be known as Madonna’s Peak” (Van Heerden 2002: 143). With this statue, his quiet but powerful act of defiance, and his work on the irrigation project, Mario earns the respect of his comrades and the townspeople. He goes on to marry Karel’s sister, Edit, and has a daughter with her.

Whilst Mario is needed, accepted, respected, and loved, Lorenzo is ostracised more than any of the Italians from the moment he arrived. Though a carpenter by trade, he gets chosen to serve as butler to the Pistorius family because he has a large red birthmark on his face and a club foot. His ugliness makes him a seemingly safe choice for a position that includes chauffeuring the chaste Pistorius daughters to their lessons (Van Heerden 2002: 56-57). The birthmark, gossiped to be a slap from the devil or proof that Lorenzo has a pact with the devil, earns him the nickname Devil Slap and a temporary excommunication from the church (Van Heerden 2002: 139-141).

Later on Lorenzo becomes a caretaker for the aged Attorney Pistorius, and this leads to his obsession with the lost Kruger gold. The placement of these two Italians with these two prominent, rivalling families draws them both into the town’s biggest secret. Rooibaard Pistorius was the Boer soldier in command of a secret mission to hide a wagon full of Kruger gold from the British enemy during the Second Anglo-Boer war. After months of depravation in the desert (which they use as an excuse for their kidnapping and repeated rape of Siela Pedi), the soldiers abandoned their mission when they reached Yearsonend. With the help of Karel’s father, Meerlust Bergh, they

7. Hence the title *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*.

buried the gold in the desert. Rooibaard and Meerlust murdered the soldiers to keep the location a secret. They each retained one half of a map that lead to the treasure – but the maps got lost, Meerlust died and Rooibaard was left decrepit after a stroke. Despite their connection to the secret buried treasure, neither Mario’s nor Lorenzo’s employers can reveal to them what little they know.

Although friends at first, Lorenzo grows jealous of Mario and starts to follow him around, suspecting that Mario’s relationship with Karel will eventually lead to the treasure (Van Heerden 2002: 414-418). The plan pans out: on the day of Karel’s disappearance, Lorenzo follows Mario and Karel and so also finds the location of the treasure.⁸ Lorenzo steals one gold coin from a soldier’s corpse and flees without marking the location. He is never able to find Gold Pit again, and becomes obsessed with it (Van Heerden 2002: 210-216, 422-426). In attempts to get the secret out of Mario, Lorenzo blinds him by urinating in his eyes (Van Heerden 2002: 425-426), and later attempts to murder Mario but accidentally murders Edit instead (Van Heerden 2002: 409). After Edit’s murder, Lorenzo somehow flees the country, or is “sent summarily back to Italy [...] in two days flat” against wartime regulations (Van Heerden 2002: 237), or “caught and put on trial, at which he did not utter a single word, and was hanged without ever giving an explanation for his deed” (Van Heerden 2002: 409-410).

The complete narratives of these characters cannot be explored and compared to the history here, but the main points are covered above. Mario and Lorenzo can be viewed as two possible versions of the real Italian POWs’ fate. Mario, despite his disabilities, led a relatively good life. He had a satisfying career, married and had a daughter, but lived out his days alone, with no voice, hearing or sight. Mario left an undeniable legacy in Yearsonend through his irrigation canals, the statue, a living descendant and his involvement in the town’s greatest mystery. Lorenzo, on the other hand, led a frustrating, unfulfilling life as butler, cook, chauffeur and man-servant to the snobby Pistoriuses. He grew angry and jealous to the point of insanity, blinded Mario and murdered Edit. His ultimate fate is unclear, but the varying versions can hold equal truth-value in a magic realist novel. Lorenzo leaves no legacy other than his secret involvement in Mario’s affairs. Thus, Lorenzo fades from Yearsonend’s history, and Mario leaves a largely silent legacy in stone.

The novel tells us these two small, individual narratives in a way that evokes empathy for both. Similar to the historiographic narrative, the novel does not fully tell what happened to the Italian POWs when the war ended. Only Mario and Lorenzo’s fates are known – although Lorenzo’s multiple endings can also be viewed as a reflection on and undermining of supposedly real history,

8. Completely by accident – a distraught Karel was fleeing madly over the desert plains when he came upon Gold Pit (the townspeople’s name for the location of the treasure).

exposing the shortcomings thereof. The rest of the nameless Italian characters seem to disappear from the town, just as the real Italian POWs faded from the historical metanarrative.

History and Magic Realism in Literature

Magic realism is a complex literary genre (or mode, as some scholars prefer), and, as with most literary genres, attempts at definitive definition remain problematic. Literary magic realism has had strong ties to political ideology, postcoloniality and decoloniality from its early days (the late 1940s), particularly in the way scholars attempted to define and set the genre as a Latin American phenomenon. Hegerfeldt (2005: 17-20) shows, for example, how the influential essays of Alejo Carpentier can be read as “a programmatic attempt to invert the cultural hierarchy between Europe and South America” and, in postcolonial terminology, attempts to “reverse the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the centre and the margin”. She also points out that contemporary criticism frequently characterises magic realism as an “inherently postcolonial mode” (Hegerfeldt 2005: 29). Partly out of this connection between the postcolonial and magic realism comes a broad spectrum of African magic realism – sometimes named after the continent, parts thereof (such as West-African magic realism) or a specific country (such as Nigerian magic realism). This article only focuses on one characteristic of this particular genre, namely how it deals with and addresses history, within the South African context.

Hegerfeldt writes extensively on magic realism’s preoccupation with history, and states that many magic realistic works could also be categorised as “historiographic metafiction or fantastic histories” because they “undertake rewritings of official versions of history” and offer playful, alternative accounts (2005: 63). Magic realist novels often tell stories from the perspectives of the oppressed, and in doing so reveal “the extent to which history never consists of purely factual and impartial accounts, but serves the interests of those who write it (Hegerfeldt 2005: 63).

According to Anker (2003: 236), magic realist fiction suggests that the whole human existence lies somewhere between reality and imagination, between the story and the history, between the knowledge and the dream, between the experience and the facts. Anker (2003: 237-238) also stipulates several characteristics of South African magic realism, including that the South African situation and history (the racial struggle, Apartheid, political history, ongoing racism, reconciliation, guilt, socio-political commentary and current actualities), as well as the wars and history of exploration and the shared Khoi-San past, are recurring themes. He also confirms that the narratives are often focalised from the position of the previously margin-alised (Anker 2003: 237). Furthermore, the taboos of the past form part of the magic realist South

African milieu and are undermined just as history is undermined in these texts (Anker 2003: 238). Alberts (2005: 45) adds to this that magic realism not only recreates the past, but also the identities of individuals, communities and nations. All of these characteristics of South African magic realism are evident in *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*.

South African magic realism is not unique, but rather a localised continuance of international trends of magic realism (Van Graan 2015: 71-74). This ties in with one of Hegerfeldt's key arguments, namely that magic realism is a form of knowledge production that combines *mythos* and *logos* (2005: 64, 159-159). Simply put, meaning and truths about ourselves and our past can be constructed through the combination of an empirical (logical) historical truth built on Western concepts, and the fictional (mythical) narratives taken from indigenous knowledge systems that are both present in magic realist fiction. Specifically in and on Africa, the domain of knowledge generation has been "excessively exposed to external and imported Euro-American paradigms" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 492). This partly explains the presence of magic realism in African literature, along with the previously mentioned strong ties between magic realism, postcoloniality and decoloniality. South African magic realism is often linked to postcoloniality – so much so that the term postcolonial magic realism has been used to classify *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (Van Graan 2015: 233-235). The novel also directly addresses issues relating to decoloniality, specifically pertaining to the decolonisation of collections of art and historical artefacts (as discussed earlier).

Decoloniality is what comes with and after postcoloniality, but the two theories are often confused because they converge in their aim to deal with the colonial experience (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 490). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015: 491) argues that postcolonial theorists are "concerned with dismantling metanarratives" and decolonial theorists "push forward an analysis predicated on questions of power, epistemology, and ontology as foundational questions in the quest to understand the unfolding and operations of the modern Euro-North American-centric modernity". Both these aims are found in magic realism. Magic realism dismantles meta-narratives of empirical historiography by substituting it with fictional individual micronarratives. These smaller narratives, often presented from the viewpoint of the marginalised, speak back to power, and question and critique the Euro-North American centric modernity and that point of view on the history of the former colony. Furthermore, magic realist novels present multiple versions of one event (such as the ultimate fate of Lorenzo), aiding in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls the "pluriversality" found in decoloniality. While postcolonial theory and genre-classification are applicable to *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*, it is the decoloniality-aspects of magic realism that are particularly relevant to this article. By shifting the focus in the telling of (fictionalised) history to the perspectives of South African characters, novels like *The Long Silence of*

Mario Salviati purposefully move away from the Euro-American perspective on African and South African history, thereby achieving what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015: 490) describes as the decoloniality of knowledge:

[Decoloniality] involves re-telling of the history of humanity and knowledge from the vantage point of those epistemic sites that received the ‘darker side’ of modernity, including re-telling the story of knowledge generation as involving borrowings, appropriations, epistemicides, and denials of humanity of other people as part of the story of science. [...] At the core of decoloniality is the agenda of shifting the geography and biography of knowledge, bringing identity into epistemology – who generates knowledge, and from where? Decoloniality’s point of departure is existential realities of suffering, oppression, repression, domination and exclusion. Decoloniality enables the unmasking of racism as a global problem, as well as how knowledge including science was used to justify colonialism. Finally, decoloniality accepts that fact of ontological pluralism as a reality that needs ecologies of knowledges to understand,

(Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 492)

In *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* the issue of the “denials of humanity of other peoples” is directly addressed in the humanising treatment of marginalised characters, including characters representing specific South African marginalised people and more generally marginalised groups such as POWs. The “geography and biography of knowledge” is firmly shifted to the South African context and not only to South African characters, but also to Italian (European) characters that are literally and metaphorically dumped into South African history. Through both South African and European characters, the novel displays their suffering, oppression, repression, domination and exclusion. The novel does not endorse scientific justification of colonialism, but rather uses these characters to illustrate the harsh consequences of colonialism and political ideologies such as Apartheid. I propose that by adding European characters, specifically the Italian POWs, in a way that illustrates their exclusion from South African historiography, the novel also hints at some of the consequences of ideological decolonisation of history books.

Decolonising Minds with a Colonial Object

Decolonisation is a complex, multifaceted process and, particularly in the South African context, a sensitive subject. Debates about and processes to decolonise Africa and South Africa reach far beyond the Humanities; it is spread across public and personal domains, from education, politics and health care to personal, individual choices in fashion and entertainment (books included). It is not the aim of this article to delve into the ideology behind decolonisation or to critique it, but rather to show how perceived

colonial objects and practices can be used as part of the decolonisation process.

Language, for example, is one of the most complex issues in the ongoing decoloniality discussions in South Africa. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015: 493) contends that decolonising the mind “speaks to the urgency of dealing with epistemicides and linguicides”. The issue of language is no small matter here, and it has direct bearing on this discussion of *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*.

While some South Africans argue for the equal promotion and use of all indigenous languages, others push for the use of English – a colonial language – as the sole official language of communication. *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* was originally written and published in Afrikaans and therefore had a limited audience. It has since been translated into several world languages, including English, but not into any other of the 11 South African official languages. Afrikaans is widely considered a colonial language because it evolved from the Dutch spoken by Dutch colonisers, but the development of Afrikaans was also heavily influenced by other African languages, and a linguistic argument can be made for it being an African language.⁹ However, calls for the removal of specifically Afrikaans as a teaching language at schools and universities as part of the ongoing decolonisation process remain common.

But this Afrikaans novel with its undermining of “official” history and its empathic portrayal of characters from marginalised and oppressed sections of society can perhaps also be viewed as a subtle prod towards the decolonisation of the Afrikaans language by specifically engaging and confronting Afrikaans readers with issues and questions relating to history, identity, postcoloniality and decoloniality in the ways previously discussed. This effect of the novel could only be strengthened if the novel were to be translated into more South African languages, and engage more South African readers.

The language(s) dilemma is a manifestation of a central aspect to the decolonisation process: the *how* of it all – should one focus on eliminating everything perceived to be remnants of colonialism; or should one focus on merging colonial remnants with the local while prioritising the local? The ongoing debate regarding the very nature of African literary studies is a prime example of this conundrum. In debates pertaining to African literature, theory “almost always implies ‘their’ theory in relation to ‘our’ literature”, writes Jeyifo (1990: 35), meaning that Western or Eurocentric evaluative norms and criteria are applied to non-Western traditions of writing. This implies that African scholars of literature rely on “inherited” traditions of critical discourse in their scholarly work. This inheritance is problematic because its “premises, frames of intelligibility, and conditions of possibility have been yoked to foreign, historically imperialist perspectives and institutions of

9. See, for example Carstens & Raidt (2019).

discursive power” (Jeyifo 1990: 35). Jeyifo views this as a serious problem with regard to the survival and vitality of African literary studies and states that “the question of an African critical discourse which is self-constituted and self-containing in line with the forces acting on the production of African literature is intimately connected with the fate of that literature” (1990: 35).

But he also points out that “the constitution of African literary study as a legitimate academic discipline [...] began in Africa, not in Europe or America” (Jeyifo 1990: 43). The continued existence and growth of African literature and literary studies shows us that while the Euro-American influences have certainly not disappeared, African literature is not disappearing either. While there are still quarrels about African literary studies and the undeniable ties it has to Western or colonial practices, I would argue that “their” theory and “our” literature have evolved to co-exist and co-operate, and that African literature and literary studies have been absorbed into decolonisation processes. There are certainly arguments to be made for the roles of literary genres and theories such as postmodernism, postcolonialism and new historicism and how they play into or against the ideologies surrounding decolonisation, but this article’s focus is on magic realism.

In the simplest terms, books (including novels) can be viewed as colonial objects because the printed book and the technology to print and mass-produce books was brought to the African continent by European colonisers. This is not to say that written texts did not exist in Africa before the colonisers came. While books cannot be viewed as replacements for oral and other indigenous ways of knowledge production and transference, they can aid in the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Literary magic realism specifically lends itself to this purpose – printed books have historically aided in the transference and the preservation of indigenous knowledge, and magic realism specifically has a “propensity to make use of myth, legend and folklore” and “oral traditions” (Hegerfeldt 2005: 64). These alternative forms of knowledge (*mythos*) are fundamental to the ways in which magic realism challenges the Western paradigm (*logos*):

Traditionally, one way to store, organize and communicate cultural knowledge has been to cast it into narrative form: myths, legends and fairy tales have been seen to provide listeners with patterns of judgement and behaviour, thereby allowing them to become competent members of society. Therefore, scientific and narrative knowledge are not mutually exclusive, but complimentary.

(Hegerfeldt 2005: 64, 159)

Particularly in the ways in which it deals with history, magic realism directly participates in the decoloniality movement by presenting the reader with oral histories, legends and folklore and treating these narratives as having the same truth-value as empirical historiography. Grzęda (2013: 167) argues that South African magic realist texts seem to “adopt the basic principle of inclusion in their attempt to annihilate the privileging or totalising of any of the narratives

depicted” and that “magical realist narrative strategy might be viewed as particularly apt to address a certain paradigm shift” that marks a transformation (in the South African context, instigated by the decline of Apartheid) in the way history and fiction are perceived.

Magic realism can engage with coloniality, decoloniality, postcoloniality and other less Eurocentric theories, especially in the way in which it presents and re-presents history and the disenfranchised, treats knowledge production and balances *mythos* with *logos*. As Grzęda (2013: 170) explains, magic realism shuns easy solutions and thereby remains attentive to the “challenges laid out by social political transformations”, counteracting the “amnesia so often inculcated in transitional South Africa in the name of forgiveness and reconciliation”.

Conclusion

It certainly cannot be said that historiography, literature in all its forms or theory of literature and historiography are free from political ideology. On the contrary, they are often products and representations of as well as critiques on political ideology. It is also not a new idea that fragments of historical truth discarded or neglected by historiographers can be preserved in fictional texts. Literature often has more freedom than historiography to interrogate, criticize and subvert not only ideology, but false or incomplete metanarratives created in such situations. A layman can learn some history through fiction, a critical reader can be inspired to research the seminal facts behind such stories and learn even more. What if, ironically, a crucial route to decolonising South African minds is not only to decolonise the history books and history curricula, but also to expose readers’ minds to the sometimes perceived colonial practices of critical reading, literary genre theory and narratives – even novels written in Afrikaans – that undermine both the ideologically sanitised history books and their perceptions of what decoloniality should look like?

Storytelling is a universal and ancient practice. It as a crucial part of indigenous knowledge production and preservation in all parts of the world, and this function does not dissolve when the story is presented in a colonial object. Magic realism, African magic realism and South African magic realism all have broadly the same aim when it comes to the treatment of history: to fill in the empirical historiographical gaps (caused in part by the ideologies and politics in play) with indigenous knowledge; to tell the stories the historians may not or could not have documented; to add the myths and folklore that fall outside the scope of historiography to metanarratives; to remember histories and peoples that might otherwise be forgotten; to challenge and dismantle the metanarratives of institutional historiography by having the disenfranchised speak. Even when the disenfranchised include Europeans who played a part

in South African history – because magic realism in many ways undermines the same things it recreates or seems to champion. While *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* champions decolonisation through the stories and characters of SlingerVel Xam! and Siela Pedi, it also critiques it by highlighting how important historical artefacts can be lost in the process, and by including unconventional European characters like the Italian POWs.

The Long Silence of Mario Salviati introduces the titular deaf, mute and blind Italian POW who became the silent secret-keeper in a town steeped in history and mysteries. He is reminiscent of all the Italians POWs who stayed behind and whose stories are not in the history books, but left as legacies in the stones they laid, the lives they affected and the descendants they generated. The novel also presents Lorenzo, an unpleasant man broken by war and imprisonment, ostracised and driven to insanity and murder in a country where he did not belong; summarily shipped away or executed for his crimes. One can read him as a reminder of all the casualties of history: the unwanted, undesirable individuals who had no choices and no chance to make meaningful contributions to society (as they perhaps could have done in different circumstances).

Neither of these men were real, but their stories could have been. Magic realism not only remembers and recreates them and their stories, it also points to what the history books omits, hides and distorts to serve an ideology. Magic realism challenges our perceptions of our own identities and the meta-narratives of history that shape those identities. It urges us to reconsider what we know about ourselves and our (hi)stories. Perhaps it can even help to decolonise our minds using colonial objects and practices.

This article is not an argument against the ideology and processes of decoloniality. It is rather an argument for the usefulness of literature and literary studies, which is still so often questioned. It suggests that magic realist fiction can be used to informally, unofficially, challenge the current official versions of history and, to some extent, plug the intended or unintended holes in historiography and the processes of decoloniality.

After all, magic realism is lies that tell the truth.

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Mariëtte van Graan

University of South Africa
vgraam@unisa.ac.za