

# Between the Kafkaesque and the Grotesque: The Monstrous Idea of South Africa in Fred Khumalo's Histiographic Metafiction

**Kgomotso M. Masemola**

## Summary

In its insistence on the allegorical frame of South African transformations that attend the disfigured stature of a hero into a cauldron of Kafkaesque sterility and grotesque existence, this paper draws parallels between Gregor Samsa's bizarre hidden away condition and awkwardness of South Africa's insularity and exceptionalism. In arguing for an integrated idea of South Africa, on the basis of Mandela's pluriversalism, it offers a retrieval of South Africa's simultaneous worldliness and Africanness, further to provide a decolonial critique of what counts as a place called South Africa from an ontological perspective of what Lewis R. Gordon in the fashion of Frantz Fanon calls a zone of "being and non-being" (2005). However, it adds two further dimensions: the immanent conditions of becoming South Africa(n) and the drives that define the agency of attaining ontological totality for putative citizens and denizens in South Africa.

## Opsomming

Hierdie referaat toon – in sy aandrang op die allegoriese raam van die Suid-Afrikaanse transformasies wat die misvormde gestalte van 'n held vergesel tot in 'n kookpot van Kafkaeske steriliteit en groteske bestaan – parallele aan tussen Gregor Samsa se bisarre verskuilde toestand en die onbeholpenheid van Suid-Afrika se afgeslotenheid en eksepsionalisme. In sy pleidooi vir 'n geïntegreerde idee van Suid-Afrika op die grondslag van Mandela se pluriversalisme bied die referaat 'n herwinning van Suid-Afrika se gelyktydige "wêrelds wees" en "Afrika wees". Dit voorsien ook 'n dekoloniale kritiek op wat as 'n plek genaamd Suid-Afrika gereken word vanuit 'n ontologiese perspektief van wat Lewis R. Gordon op die spoor van Frantz Fanon noem 'n gebied van "syn en nie-syn" (2005). Twee verdere dimensies word egter toegevoeg: die immanente voorwaardes om Suid-Afrika(ans) te kan word, en die dryfkragte wat die werksaamheid van die bereiking van ontologiese totaliteit definieer vir vermeende burgers en inwoners van Suid-Afrika.

It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes of the metaphors through which the West represents the origins of its own norms, develops a self-image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity.

(Mbembe 2001: 2)

Whereas Fred Khumalo's *Seven Steps to Heaven* (2007 – hereafter *Seven Steps*) opens at a time of political transition with the deteriorating, sore-festered protagonist Sizwe Dube connected to a wandering cockroach that feeds off his vomit, this readily calls to mind Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis<sup>1</sup> into "a Monstrous and bizarre subject" (Feldherr 2002: 163), as well as what Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming-animal" (*devenir-animal*) through a constellation of affects and deterritorialisation (2011: 92). On the one hand, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa who does not fully transform into a bug, Sizwe Dube does not become a cockroach but the writer's mobility is enabled by a multiplicity of alter egos, one of whom is a character named "Kokoroshe", literally the Cockroach,<sup>2</sup> who "was a chameleon of a boy" who had "a sharp intellect and could easily change his character to suit his character and disposition to suit his environment" (*Seven Steps* 64). On the other, his deterritorialisation of the South African socius becomes evident when another part of the multiplicity, Thulani Tembe aka Freedom Cele, haunts him psychologically as part of what is encoded in *Seven Steps* as the titular "*Oneness of Two in Three*".<sup>3</sup> This is also in evidence when the two obverse sides shebeen queen are characterised by Sis Lettie Motaung, from Teyateyaneng in Lesotho, who integrates herself into South African society.

1. For Charmaz (1983), the Kafkaesque transformation is a metaphor for how different countries handle disease. Cf. Loss of Self, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 5(2): 168-195.
2. According to Andrew Feldherr (2002: 163), metamorphosis into "a Monstrous and bizarre subject" instantiates a representation of "the irruption of the unaccountable" (169) in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip R. Hardie, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, pp.163-179.
3. "There is no subject: there are only collective arrangements of utterance – and literature expresses these arrangements, not as they are given on the outside, but only as diabolic powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed" (Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley 1983: 18).

Sis Lettie had worked outside Durban and established herself as both redoubtable entrepreneur and irrepressible femme fatale, she exhibits a much more colourful and human side to what ought to have been the makings of a Rainbow Nation that excludes Africans from neighbouring countries as she entertains everyone, irrespective of country of origin, in her Paradise Road shebeen. Sis Joy, the Hillbrow shebeen queen in Hillbrow, tries her best to inspire the good writer to emerge by castigating him no less than she does other patrons like Kort Boy who goes about stabbing to death people for their money as if he is “not born of a human being but some monster from hell” (*Seven Steps* 3). Khumalo’s *Seven Steps to Heaven* deliberately shifts from Exclusive Park outside Durban, where Sizwe’s connection with Thulani Tembe is initiated as focus of unification for their existence as alter egos, to Hillbrow in Johannesburg, where the tension of ontological insecurity at once heightens the multiplicity of becoming and dramatises the schizophrenia of belong to the multiplicity of the layered leitmotif onion. The deliberate moment of irresolution, however, is crystallised in Harare, where Sizwe has to find his complete ontological totality by killing the South African (Thulani) in himself. He declares boldly that only then “will I regain my identity” (*Seven Steps* 209). Freedom Cele is internalised in Sizwe’s mind; yet for the latter to attain his freedom, he has to find Freedom Cele in Zimbabwe’s Harare capital. In the manner akin to Kafka’s Samsa who must leave the restrictive confines of the room to which he was quarantined, the South African (Sizwe) must move across the border to Zimbabwe in order to regain his identity, pride and self-respect (*Seven Steps* 209). This border-crossing is a critical phase in Ngũgĩ’s idea of “globaletics” through which we witness “the liberation of literature from the straitjackets of nationalism” (2012: 8). Therefore, the deployment of Kokoroshe-becoming through Freedom Cele in Zimbabwe is a deterritorialising feature of “a mutually affecting dialogue, or multilogue, in the phenomena of nature and nurture in a global pace that’s rapidly transcending that of the artificially bounded, as nation and region” (Ngũgĩ 2012: 8).

For Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 23-24), “Animal-becomings are absolute deterritorializations .... To become animal is to make the movement, the escape in all its positiveness, to cross the threshold and reach a continuum of intensities which no longer have any value except for themselves”. Deterritorialisation here also involves crossing thresholds and borders into Zimbabwe for the South African monstrous bug to regain his full humanity. Yet the novel curiously introduces Nelson Mandela, the freedom fighter who had just been released after almost three decades in Robben Island for criss-crossing the African continent in his underground military assignments as Commander-in-Chief of Umkhonto weSizwe, as a prototypical precedent for Freedom Cele – the one intensity necessary to restore the humanity of the oppressed – in less flattering terms. Eschewing the cautionary optimism of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s epithetical descriptor of Nelson Mandela as “the

father of the post-apartheid nation” who is aware of the fragile state of South African identity (2013: 135-136), a symptomatic opening statement by the narrator of *Seven Steps* describes the walls of an abode adorned by famous people and, amongst them, “the flavour of the century, Nelson Mandela, in various poses” (2007: 2). By referring to Mandela as the ‘flavour of the century’ rather than “the Father of the South African nation,” a historiographic metafictional novel such as Khumalo’s renders its “implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic, to say the least as a formal marking of historicity – both literary and “worldly.” (Hutcheon 1989: 3-4).

To partake of “worldliness” is to prioritise “being-in-the world rather than the ‘selfing’ author’s *being-in-itself*, which signals multiplicities, responsibilities and choices that attend texts” (Masemola 2012: 55). Suffice to add that, by definition, these responsibilities are political because, as in the collective utterance that finds its place in Kafkaesque “minor literature”; for *Seven Steps* “produces an active solidarity – in spite of scepticism – and, if the writer lives in the margin, is set apart from his fragile community, this situation makes him all the more able to express another, potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 17). In another political and ethical sense delineated by Edward Said in *The World, The Text, The Critic*, Khumalo’s *Seven Steps* can be described as one of those texts that are “events and by that very fact what goes on in texts is affiliated to the circumstances that represent the text’s interest” (1983a: 4). Tellingly, it set in the period marked by Mandela’s release – effectively indexing the return of the Father to the family of the world in general rather than South Africa in exclusivity. After all, it was largely the international efforts of the struggle that culminated in the return of the man affectionately known as “Tata” or Father. In his Foreword to *Nelson Mandela: Conversations with Myself*, President Barack Obama makes clear to remind us that “A little more than two decades after I made my first foray into political life and the divestment movement as a college student in California, I stood in Mandela’s former cell in Robben Island” (2010: xii).

Significantly, in a similar context, Cristina Ionica (2015: 69) characterises the return of the father in terms of the manner in which “the progression of the Father’s story is continually punctured by authorial sarcasm .... The Father’s return from the underworld involves wondrous occurrences”. In *Seven Steps*, for the mayor of Exclusive Park, Mandela’s release from this Robben Island cell signifies his return as the Father who will bring forth the miraculous birth of a new democratic order: “Mind you, we are not entirely free yet, but with the release of Nelson Mandela last year, we can see hope on the horizon” (*Seven Steps* 136). This opinion changes the protagonist Sizwe Dube’s earlier appreciation of the historical milestone of Nelson Mandela’s release, which he had initially jotted down in his journal as an entry: “I lost my virginity on the same day that Mandela was released from

prison .... Mandela's release has made me a happy young man!" (*Seven Steps* 94). True to historiographic metafiction, the release was partly parodied in *Seven Steps* and partly put into perspective by the mayor's attachment of the hope of freedom to the return of the Father. This wondrous return is best described by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's debunking of the idea of South Africa as the invention of the African National Congress in his revelatory genealogy and historiography and of this idea through the vectors of "bantucization" and hybridity amid colonial encounters (2013: 145).

It is noteworthy that Mandela's release came after 27 years of imprisonment following his arrest slipping back into South Africa after his underground mobilisation in other African countries sympathetic to the liberation cause. Elsewhere it has been demonstrated that Nelson Mandela discovered the African coordinates of South Africanness in during his travails in his underground pose as the "Black Pimpernel" and leader of Umkhonto weSizwe in the African countries from which he received military training and support for "the transnational non-racial drive towards African nationalism" (Masemola 2013: 76). Mandela's return from Senegal, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania and many other African countries was much unlike his return from Robben Island in February 1990. If the transnational dimension of Mandela's South Africanness is anything to go by – based squarely on his autobiographical accounts of African pride he felt in Ethiopia upon seeing the Emperor Haile Selassie (Mandela 1995: 90), amongst others – then the very idea of South Africa must be located in the immanent field of historical, economic and geopolitical forces that shape the idea of Africa. South Africa as an idea is inextricably intertwined with the idea of Africa. To deny this is to not only apologise for Eurocentric coloniality but to also deny, on the one hand, the ontological totality of the connected continental histories of freedom struggle and, on the other, to reinaugurate the boundaries that are ever shifting in the fight for all Africans to achieve full humanity and citizenship in the South African liberal democratic order. Lack of fullness of subjectivity, of ontological totality, and of citizenship renders the idea of South Africa a monstrous chimera.

The fullness of Mandela's humanity must be understood in terms of his commitment to resolving questions of social justice in an unjust global order, culminating in a freedom fighter becoming "the father of the post-apartheid nation and an iconic symbol of reconciliation and unity" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 135-136). Fred Khumalo's novel tellingly straddles South Africa and Zimbabwe, and we are given to understand that Mandela's championing of unity and reconciliation is well understood in Harare, where the protagonist Sizwe indexes his ontological struggle as both transnational and ontological in the name of Mandela:

So, taking the leaf from the book of Nelson Mandela who saw good sense in a negotiated settlement for his country instead of an all-out war, he spoke slowly and clearly: "Gentlemen of Zimbabwe, comrades who fought in the

chimurenga, I have no fight against you. I realise that you are justifiably concerned, even paranoid, about the safety of your country. After all the world is crawling with spies and terrorists, and one has to go the extra mile to protect the citizenry of one's country. I salute and respect you, comrades. *You and our comrades from our liberation movements fought side by side against the colonialist oppressors at Wankie and in many other battles.* All I am asking you is this: Do you realise what I have been through? I've been through hell and back. And shit!" He raised his brows challengingly and said, "Do you know what you're dealing with? Do you know who I am?"  
(*Seven Steps* 203 – emphasis added)

Since the mode of historiographic metafiction in which Fred Khumalo writes also concerns 'the re-conceptualisation of history and parody' (cf. Hutcheon 1989), it is crucial to understand how the writer's vocation turns him into an ontological monstrosity before he recognises the fullness of his multiplicity or what he calls the "Oneness of Two in Three" in Zimbabwe. Thus, the exercise of re-writing South Africa's history from outside its borders is significant. In fact, reconciling South Africa with its neighbours completes the idea of South Africa. In framing the discourse of transnationalism through the common history of struggle, as in the persuasive recasting of the battles that took place at Wankie before independence, the histories of Zimbabwe and South Africa are enmeshed. According to Rafapa and Masemola (2014: 89), "What counts as common in the post-apartheid novel necessarily ranges itself against rigidities of both nation and identity". In this sense, the cross-border connections are a necessary index of transnationalism:

The increasingly invoked notion of "transnationalism", referring to various kinds of global or cross-border connections, currently frames the view of numerous researchers concerned with migrants and dispersed ethnic groups. "Identity", although it has long been one of the slipperiest concepts in the social scientist's lexicon, can suggest ways in which people conceive of themselves and are characterised by others. Transnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition.

(Vertovec 2001: 573)

Thus it is important to point out, on course reinscribing the idea of South Africa, the very conditions that make the idea intrinsically transnational and quintessentially African in order to achieve what Fred Moten terms "the preservation of the ontological totality" of the African subject in South Africa and also respond "critically to the brutal conditions under which many black people live as well as the existential interdictions all black people are forced to endure" (2013: 237). In Khumalo's rewritten record of such torture we find the reasons why the idea of South Africa is incomplete: Sizwe is found in possession of an identity document that belongs to Thulani Tembe, one of the mercenaries. Significantly, we are informed – courtesy of

the Yale University-trained Central Intelligence Organisation's Advocate Simba Chigumburi – that “He [Sizwe] is beyond schizophrenia .... He has internalised somebody else's identity” (2007: 206) and that “These South Africans are fucked up, always were” (2007: 208). Herein lies the monstrosity of the idea of South Africa.

In view of one South African's internalised identity of another, the question that begs to be asked is this: is it at all possible to attain the performativity of a full idea of South Africanness in the manner that Nelson Mandela transculturated Baroness Orczy's fictional character of the Scarlet Pimpernel (who evaded arrest during the French Revolution) into the Black Pimpernel in his *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995)? In this, Mandela had performed the idea of South Africa by shedding the European cloak of disguise and avoiding the internalisation of the Scarlet Pimpernel's identity. In one place, indexing the oft-neglected impact of Indian Ocean-based historiographic traditions that challenge the Black Atlantic paradigm, it has been demonstrated that in South Africa people like Mandela pursued their goals of freedom with a nuanced understanding of an “archive in which versions of modernity are negotiated in an ever-shifting set of idioms around tradition” (Hofmeyr 2007: 14-15). In another, Anthony Simpson's research on Mandela's September 1953 speech through which he not only introduced the so-called M-Plan but popularised the phrase “No easy walk to freedom”, clearly attests to the fact that, by his own admission, “Mandela had often used the writings of [Jawaharlal] Nehru without acknowledging them” (James-Smith 2010: 117).

What is significant here is that inasmuch as Mandela was keen on maintaining the alliance of the congresses in which the ANC and the Indian Congress were joined with the Congress of Democrats, he weaved a narrative of unity that did not alienate Africans by name-dropping the Indian Nehru. At a time when Africanists within the ANC were overly sensitive to a perceived takeover from Communists and Indians, his intertextual appropriations were a means to an end: the African in South Africa is part of the rest of the world, especially Africa. According to Simon Njami, “endogenous space cannot be created with the help of ‘outsiders’” (2011: 199). The outsider in *Seven Steps to Heaven* is not the Zimbabwean but the wearer of the Fanonian “White” Mask in this idea of South Africa. Lewis R. Gordon cautions against the Black mask, too, that is potentially read into Mandela's Black Pimpernel figure:

The black is marked by the dehumanising bridge between individual and structure posed by antiblack racism; the black is, in the end, “anony-mous”, which enables “the black” to collapse into “blacks” whereas “blacks” is not a proper name, antiblack racism makes it function as such, as a name of familiarity that closes off the need for further knowl-edge. Each black is, thus, ironically nameless by virtue of being *named* “black”. So blacks find themselves, Fanon announces at the outset, not structurally regarded as

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human beings. They are problematic beings, beings locked in what he calls “a zone of nonbeing”. What blacks want is not to be problematic beings, to escape from that zone. They want to be human in the face of a structure that denies their humanity

(Gordon 2005: 3)

While Mandela’s humanity is understood as universal and, by that very fact, beyond race, his iconic heroism is denied; for in the historiographic metafiction of *Seven Steps to Heaven* Thulani Thembe declares:

[Mandela’s] release is the beginning of a long process of betrayal of our cause. He was released on their own terms, on the terms of the white world. “Of course no one is saying Mandela was the be-all and end-all of our struggle”, Kokoroshe ventured, but he is a very important symbol of it .... But of course no single individual holds the key to our liberation, not the name of Steve Biko, not Sisulu ....

(*Seven Steps* 94)

At face value, it would seem possible that the disavowal of a Mandela personality cult is based on a binaristic race-based evaluation of the material losses and symbolic gains of his presence. For Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Nelson Mandela’s presence is that of “someone who is superhuman” – considering that he went to prison for 27 and emerged whole (Msomi 2014: 15). The wholeness in question corresponds to Mandela’s legendary ability to push for reconciliation between the races, ending years of hostility. Yet it is also a “wholeness” based on an idea of South Africa that is as much constructed as his self-fashioning in his *Long Walk to Freedom* on the basis of the transculturation of the Scarlet Pimpernel and the repetition of the traditional figure of Samuel Krune Mqhayi when Mandela entered the court “wearing a traditional leopard-skin kaross instead of a suit and tie” (1995: 311). On one level, the repetition of the Mqhayi figure of memory such that he simultaneously modernised its traditional context and traditionalised the modern content of his protest (Masemola 2010: 156). To be more specific:

The repetition of the kaross dress code gives occasion to once again recall what Frantz Fanon once asserted, that is, the ‘peasant’s cloak’ of the militant nationalist. That the police feared Mandela’s dress code would lead to incitement is less obvious than the electrifying effect on all the spectators in the gallery. In the years that preceded this courtroom spectacle and beyond, his third repetition of Mqhayi allowed him to internationally make bold justification for acts of mass defiance and sabotage against the South African regime. Such a remembering of Mqhayi as an image is brought to bear on contemporary challenges without repudiating the past nor glamorizing it: the third repetition radicalizes figures of memory

(Masemola 2010: 157)



At another level, the constructedness of the “wholeness” and humanity of Mandela is based on the collectivist idea of South Africa. In writing Mandela’s best-selling autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), there were multifarious processes that attest to a degree of polyphony and inclusivity that would reflect the making of Mandela as a reflection of the idea of South Africa. This is borne out by the fact that the authorship of the autobiography is mediated by the inscriptions of a multiplicitous Robben Island group and other specialist authors. It is important here to note that whilst the rhetoric of reconciliation is founded on this manoeuvre, the distinction between autobiography and biography becomes more or less important:

autobiography and biography [are] distinctly different kinds of rhetorical constructions with different legitimising strategies, grounds of authority, and points of view. Autobiography ... posits the speaker’s expressed truth to self as its preeminent claim and value. Biography, by contrast ... takes as its truth criterion not the authenticity of the insider’s view but the ‘consistency of the narrative and the explanatory power of the arguments’ based in the individual’s relatively comfortable relationship with her or his culture’s ground of assumptive value.

(Parke 2002: 108)

Nelson Mandela’s voice as his expressed truth is not drowned but amplified by a harmonious symphony arising from the Robben Island cultures ground of assumptive value of the collective’s shared truth of experience. In the introduction to *Nelson Mandela: Conversations with myself* (2010), Verne Harris makes bold to intimate that:

*Long Walk to Freedom* was fundamentally, and very deliberately, the work of a collective. The original manuscript was drafted on Robben Island by what Ahmed Kathrada – his long time comrade, friend and fellow prisoner – describes as an “editorial board”. In the early 1990s Mandela worked closely with author Richard Stengel to update and expand the manuscript, with Kathrada and other advisors forming another collective overseeing the editing process.

(2010: ix)

For Mandela to be amenable to the collective thrust, as it were, was symptomatic of the extent to which his life’s journey and vision were allegorical of the idea of South Africa. As an allegory that is written for honest nation-building and reconciliation in South Africa, *The Long Walk to Freedom* never aspires to glorify his individual achievements. According to Valentin Mudimbe, allegory is best understood in the sense deployed by Walter Benjamin, that is “in the sense of a cultural attitude (*Anschauung*) and as a manner of visualising something (*Anschauungsweise*)” with a clear intention of posing signifiers and questions such that in the end we have

“allegories that bring us in dialogue or separate us in confrontation” (2013: 28-29).

The possibility of vainglorious self-adulation is nowhere present when, for example, he painfully recalls having to reluctantly discard his traditional wife, divorce Evelyn Mase and marry firebrand Winnie Madikizela as the roles and routes of the family changed according to the demands of political engagements; similarly Mandela vividly remembers his return home to Winnie from a National Working Committee meeting that set him on a course of going underground to lead the clandestine existence of the banned African National Congress: “Seeing my face, she knew that I was to embark on a life neither of us wanted. I explained what had transpired and that I would be leaving the next day. She took this stoically, as though she had expected it all along. She understood what I had to do” (Mandela, 1995: 245). This part of testimony lends credence to the traumatic aspect of self-revelation through allegory; for it may:

sometimes transmute itself into that of τρῆμα (trêma), the substantive for perforation. Its English equivalent (trauma) denotes shock, initiating a lasting psychological damage that can lead to a neurosis. One would say, therefore, from the simplicity of the semantics of a line, there is no much worry about a rendering of such a procession. In effect, does not its signification belong to the banality of our daily existence, precisely the management of our activity and the stress it produces when correlated to health alignments?

(Mudimbe 2013: 29)

It seems apparent that the collective allegory of the trauma of struggle could be at once personal and shared. The breakdown of families in the anti-apartheid struggle, or indeed their radical reconfiguration in response to their reterritorialisation by design of laws of the territorial machine, made the conditions of triangulation as described in Gilles Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1987) impossible. In South Africa the relationship between the capitalist State and the family was mapped by a disjunctive apartheid socius, and the racial dynamics that attended that relationship between the self and a divided community redefined the political limits of urban and rural spaces in the course of radical responses to urban-rural migration. Involvement in the political struggle marks a line of flight, a break from traditional structures of triangulation, a deterritorialisation of the family into a nation space, a nation-becoming. Yet, in relation to the line of flight associated with the type of familial becoming that involves politics and tradition, Deleuze raises a series of questions:

What is it which tells us that, on a line of flight, we will not rediscover everything we were fleeing? In fleeing the eternal mother-father, will we not rediscover all the Oedipal structures on the line of flight? In fleeing fascism, we rediscover fascist coagulations on the line of flight. In fleeing everything,

how can we avoid reconstituting both our country of origin and our formations of power, our intoxicants, our psychoanalyses and our mummies and daddies?

(Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 38)

There is a palpable fear of rediscovering and recreating the deep insecurities of pre-1994 South Africa that predispose Thulani Tembe to assert, in seeming retrospection: “Mandela did fuckall for you and me.” (*Seven Steps* 94) He despairs about his father’s cavalier ways and his infidelities. As a way of seeking solace, he decides to read Mark Mathabane’s *Kaffir Boy* for inspiration after an argument with his mother over her lack of assertiveness. In this post-1990 setting, the nature of the relationships between fathers and sons becomes as delicate as that between husbands and wives. Reading an inspirational autobiography written during apartheid by Mark Mathabane, he seeks an improvement in his life and refuses to be beguiled. Significantly, Thulani’s attitude to Mandela is no different from his incredulity towards the narratives of his own father’s return from his escapades, after eloping with Sis Lovey from the shebeen. According to him, like all South Africans in awe of Mandela, the congregation is duped to think his disappearance to have been a result of a political kidnapping:

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Elder Mahlangu shouted at the congregation, his mouth foaming. “The Lord opened the gates of the dungeon and allowed his son to walk free. It reminds me of those gates behind which Daniel had been languishing, hallelujah, don’t we have a friend in Christ?”

“We have a great friend in Christ!” the congregation chorused enthusiastically.

On the strength of this story the faithful had come out in their numbers to see this holy man of God who had defied the evil forces and was back with them in the world of the living, gallantly spreading the word of God.

(*Seven Steps* 104)

Instead of upholding the image of holy men – from Mandela to Ramu the Hermit to Reverend Tembe – Khumalo’s historiographic metafiction vulgarises and pedestrianises the details of their personalia through sexual references. Their return as fathers (literally or figuratively) falls short of heroism: they can be monsters and so defiled in an iconoclastic fashion. Significantly, these seemingly “holy” men represent communities and, ultimately, the imperfect – if monstrous – idea of South Africa. The immanent connection between them is deliberately not glamourised but couched in the key synecdoche of *Seven Steps to Heaven*: the titular “Oneness of Two in Three”. If this is anything to go by, the very central trope of multiplicity that is sustained by the image of the layered onion (2007: 28) means the connection between Sizwe in South Africa and Freedom Cele in Zimbabwe. The re-inscription of identities and rewriting of

histories go beyond characters as nations are involved. Thanks to the monstrosity of being multiple, layered or, in the words of Simba Chigumburi, “fucked up” (*Seven Steps* 208), we discern here a new sense of the idea of South Africa that debunks “myths of a privileged autochthonous habitus” (Rafapa and Masemola 2014: 83).

To end that privilege is to allow both the protagonist, and indeed South Africa, to become part of an assemblage of a multiplicity of characters whose intensities are realised through crossing thresholds: his life’s narrative as a co-axial self, the manoeuvre of the writer who extends himself through others also indexes the life of a parasitic bug. This paper shows that when this bug further transforms back into the full circle of humanity as successful writer through yet another character of Vusi Mtungwa, who pens the thoroughly postmodern *Oneness of Two in Three* back-to-back with the prize-winning short story “*Ramu the Hermit*”, he overextends his role further to leave the cocoon of self-absorbed *being-for-itself* existence and morphs in Freedom Cele, the freedom fighter who resembles the disfigured writer in the leitmotif mirror as a monstrosity camouflaged as a being-for-others. Significantly, the bar settings in Johannesburg’s Hillbrow from which he sees himself as a conflation of Freedom Cele and his childhood friend Thulani Tembe is held in counterpoise by the courtroom drama set in Zimbabwe’s Harare Capital. For it is in the latter setting that the execution of the monster – apparently paying for the sins of conspiring in planning a coup – that the obverse, “non-monstrous” side of the dipsomaniac life of the writer is ironically reclaimed by the almost sacrificial killing of his alter ego in an envisaged *felix culpa*. A benign outcome, in sum, decisively depends on committing a grotesque act that redeems the writer from Kafkaesque sterility and monstrosity by the end of this transnational novel: as with Gregor’s becoming-animal in ‘The Metamorphosis’, the animal has the value of a true becoming and no longer merely describes the inertia of the subject of utterance (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 30). To counter the headline “Face of the Monster” that accompanied a caption on Freedom Cele in the *Cape Mail* (*Seven Steps* 160), a constellation of affects (and deterritorialization) with Kokoroshe and Zimbabwe emerges, in the final analysis of *Seven Steps*, as a sine qua non for redeeming the hitherto monstrous idea and commensurately fashioning an identity that can be experienced as part of the African assemblage on which, according to Ngũgĩ (2012: 8), the “wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension and motion” of the idea of South Africa entirely depends.

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**Kgomotso M. Masemola**  
University of South Africa  
masemk@unisa.ac.za