

Zungu, Shattered Dreams and a Multiplicity of Readerships in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*

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Summary

In this article I present two main arguments. The first argument addresses aesthetic concerns, namely Sol Plaatje's complex use of oral narratives-as-allegories in his novel, *Mhudi*. I argue that these allegories, while partly serving similar purpose to that of proverbs, are complicated by the fact that they are self-reflexive. This self-reflexivity often lays itself open to multiple interpretations, which in turn tend to make the overall political meaning of the novel complex and rather ambiguous. The second argument, which is inextricably linked to the first, addresses itself to questions of readership. Here I argue that the use of oral narratives-as-allegories serves to suggest and project multiple readerships – both national and international. I further argue that *Mhudi's* projected national readership cannot simply be reduced to white, as some critics seem to suggest. There are small, but significant, hints that suggest that the novel is addressed to various racial and ethnic groups. I engage in a close reading of the story of Zungu of Old to support my arguments.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bestaan uit twee hoofargumente. Die eerste argument spreek die estetiese aan, naamlik Sol Plaatje se komplekse gebruik van mondelinge narratiewe-as-allegorieë in sy roman, *Mhudi*. Die outeur beweer dat hierdie allegorieë, terwyl hulle dieselfde doel as spreekwoorde dien, gekompliseerd raak omdat hulle selfrefleksief is. Hierdie selfwederkering kan lei tot veelvuldige vertolkings, wat weer op hulle beurt die algehele politieke betekenis van die roman kompleks en selfs dubbelsinnig kan maak. Die tweede argument, wat onlosmaaklik met die eerste een verweef is, handel oor die kwessie van leserskap. Hier beweer die skrywer dat die gebruik van mondelinge narratiewe as allegorieë op 'n omvattende en veelvuldige leserskring sinspeel, nasionaal sowel as internasionaal. Die outeur redeneer verder dat *Mhudi* se geprojekteerde nasionale leserskring nie net soos sommige kritici skynbaar beweer, tot die blanke beperk kan word nie. Daar is klein, maar beduidende, verwysings wat daarop dui dat die roman 'n appèl rig tot verskeie rasse en etniese groepe. Ter staving van bogenoemde argumente word die verhaal van Zungu of Old met besondere aandag bestudeer.

Introduction

Sol Plaatje perceived literacy as a mode of preserving orality and the cultural wisdom it entails (1916: 1; 1978: 21). Also, in his attempt to preserve Setswana oral art forms, Plaatje, as Peter Esterhuysen argues, simultaneously employed the forms to challenge stereotypical views of orality as an iconography of the backward, unsophisticated African (1988: 67, 83), while also using proverbs and songs as mediative strategies as well as instruments of various forms of subversion (Mpe 1998). Because he viewed Setswana oral art forms as being similar to oral art forms of other societies (Plaatje 1916: 12, 16), he does not seem to have intended his employment of orality only as an illustration of the authenticity of his Setswana heritage. In addition, he was interested in the wisdom accumulated through ages and across ethnic-racial lines both in his society and worldwide. Also, he saw, in *Mhudi* at least, that he could employ orality for aesthetic as well as political purposes.

This brief paper sets out to realise two objectives. First, I hope to show how Plaatje uses oral prose narratives, with a particular emphasis on the story of Zungu, to allegorically address various political issues – like questions of land distribution and marriage acts in South Africa. Second, I hope to show how this use of allegory simultaneously suggests and projects a multiplicity of readerships. The purpose is not merely to demonstrate that oral prose narratives serve similar purposes to that of proverbs. Such similarity of purpose is clearly argued in Couzens's article (1987). Obiechina (1993) makes a similar point in his reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. But proverbs, as Plaatje (1916) reminds us, are often one-sided, and one needs the assistance of other counterproverbs if one is to adopt a balanced world-view. I suggest that oral prose narratives in *Mhudi* are more than just narrative proverbs: they also serve as complex allegories. I wish to argue that allegory in *Mhudi*, especially in the story of Zungu, is self-reflexive, while at the same time reflecting critically on other incidents and events in the novel. The result is sometimes a measure of ambiguity of meaning and intention – one is not entirely sure as to what Plaatje meant the reader to make of such an allegory. Also, I wish to argue that oral narratives serve as a useful strategy for suggesting and projecting a multiplicity of readerships – ethnic, national as well as transnational. As we shall see, these readerships are alluded to in various ways throughout the text. In illustrating my contention about the self-interrogating nature of allegory in *Mhudi*, and on oral narratives as a strategy for projecting multiple readerships, I offer a close reading of the most remarkable oral narrative in the novel, namely the story of Zungu. This story, despite nearly all critics' acknowledgement that it is of central importance as

a political commentary in the novel, has, to my knowledge, hardly received a close, comprehensive discussion in this respect.

The Story of Zungu as an Allegory

Mzilikazi recalls the story of Zungu after his nation is defeated and humiliated by the Barolong-Griqua-Voortrekker alliance. Zungu tries to tame a lion cub, hoping that he will in future use it to hunt valuable wild animals. Despite the fact that he feeds it with the milk of his cows, the cub grows up to betray him. Initially it is “apparently tame and meek”, but later on it eats his children and chews his wives, and, in killing it, Zungu is himself nearly killed (Plaatje 1978: 175). Other than the suggestion that its aggression is true to its nature, Mzilikazi says nothing of what Zungu’s family might have done, or not done, to raise the lion’s ire. Or, even, how Zungu himself might or might not have betrayed the lion – by forgetting or neglecting to feed it on that day, for example. In other words, the story of Zungu of Old is in a way an incomplete story. Indeed, as we will see later, just as Mzilikazi does not tell a full story here, he also fails to tell a full story, to his nation, of his contribution toward his and the nation’s own downfall prior to their migration to Gu-Bulawayo.

The story is used by Mzilikazi to predict the inevitable betrayal of his enemies, the Barolong – and Batswana generally – by the Voortrekkers. In so far as the Barolong have provided shelter and other forms of assistance to the Voortrekkers, they are like Zungu, while their assistance is similar to his feeding of the cub with his cows’ milk. Since the Voortrekkers urgently needed the assistance, they seemed tame and meek, just like the cub. At least one manifestation of this meekness is their promise to let chiefs Tauana and Moroka keep the lands they want should the allies defeat the Ndebele.

It would seem that the Voortrekkers’ misleading meekness is well known to Mzilikazi. They have, after all, displayed it when they extinguished Chaka’s dynasty (p. 175). We see here that the comparison of the Barolong to Zungu is extended to include Chaka. According to Mzilikazi, seeming friendship blinded Chaka, like the Barolong. Indeed, the Griquas are no different from the Barolong and the Zulus under Chaka. They have not only laid snares for Mzilikazi and his nation (p. 174), they have also joined forces with the blind Barolong and the deceitful Voortrekkers. Like Zungu in the story, Chaka learnt his bitter lesson, and in due course it would be the Barolong, and obviously the Griquas, who would learn theirs.

The seriousness of the predicted betrayal of the Barolong is described in disturbing terms, as it does not only mean the taking away of their land, but

also their total enslavement. In this enslavement, it is perhaps women who will suffer the experience of slavery more severely than men, as it is both their physical labour and their sexuality that will be mercilessly abused. The women will become “beasts of burden to drag [the Voortrekkers’] loaded waggons to their granaries”; their bare skins will be whipped in order “to accelerate their paces and quicken their activities”; the Voortrekkers “shall take Bechuana to wife and, with them, breed a race of half man and half goblin, and they will deny them their legitimate lobolo” (p. 175).

The suffering of the Barolong that Mzilikazi predicts matches that of Zungu on various levels. First, Zungu loses his children to his lion pet just as the Barolong will lose their youth to wars initiated by the Voortrekkers, without a reward. Second, they will lose their womenfolk to the male Voortrekkers, like Zungu lost his to the lion. Third, Zungu is a defeated man in that, in losing all the members of his family, he has lost all that matter most in his life, just as the Barolong will become defeated and lose all. A worse punishment, however, is that the Batswana women will give birth not to human beings but rather to grotesque animals (“half man and half goblin”; p. 175) whose behaviour is equally bizarre, as they will revolt against their forefathers. To underscore Barolong’s predicted helplessness – being ill-treated by the Voortrekkers and suffering revolts by their own sires – Mzilikazi says that they will not be able to wipe off their tears and mucus.

We cannot ignore the significance of the predicted sexual exploitation of Batswana women by the Voortrekker men, for the inverse does not apply: the Batswana men will not exploit Voortrekker women. This question of sexuality, gender and race is also addressed in Plaatje’s *The Mote and the Beam* (1921), in which he complains about the often one-sided application of marriage laws and policies in South Africa, especially in the Transvaal, in the 1910s. He observes, on one hand, that in this province, while white men could not marry black women, cohabitation was nevertheless permitted. On the other hand, any love or sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman was likely to be construed as an instance of “Black Peril”, by which, in Plaatje’s words, “the South African Whites mean ‘assaults by black men upon white women’” (1921: 3). The partiality of the law, in Plaatje’s view, did not only allow for the abuse of black women by both their fellow black men and their white counterparts, but also for births of illegitimate children and the advent of prostitution. He sums up his view on the whites’ contribution to the general social (im)morality of the Batswana thus: “... as it is true that white men brought Christianity and civilisation to Bechuanaland, it is also true that the first authenticated cases of rape, murder and suicide in Bechuanaland were the work of a white man” (1921: 15). The envisaged sexual exploitation of the Batswana women in *Mhudi* can arguably be read as

marking the beginnings of such cases of sanctioned rape. The sexual conduct of whites, for Plaatje, stands in sharp contrast to that of Basotho and Batswana: “There was time when it was an abomination for Basuto to have social intercourse with Shangaans, and when Bechuana custom forbade intermarriage with Matebele. They carried their prejudice to its logical conclusion and allowed no exceptions in favour of illegitimate unions with Shangaan or Matebele girls” (1921: 9).

While the above criticism in *The Mote and the Beam* is directed at white South Africans, the one in *Mhudi* is directed at the Voortrekkers and the Batswana, as well as Chaka and his nation, and the Griquas. All ethnic and racial groups in *Mhudi* contribute in various ways towards making political life difficult both for themselves and for others. Thus the criticism in Mzilikazi’s speech is not just levelled at the Barolong: it is also levelled at the Voortrekkers and, arguably, the Ndebele themselves. For if the Barolong join forces with the Griquas and the Voortrekkers, it is partly because the Ndebele terrorise the three groups. As such they are, in a sense, fellow sufferers. The Ndebele expansionist tendencies as well as their imposition of taxes on other tribes led to the “unnatural” alliance. Therefore, the tendencies are themselves as unnatural and worthy of criticism as the alliance. Indeed, the defeat and humiliation of Mzilikazi and his nation by the allied forces, the reappropriation by the Barolong and the Voortrekkers of the lands occupied by the Ndebele, and the final migration of the Ndebele to Gu-Bulawayo, can be seen as a shattering of their dream of a big Ndebele empire which Mzilikazi envisaged. The Barolong’s dream of controlling their lands will also be shattered. Arguably, the Ndebele, the Zulus under Chaka, the Barolong and the Griquas in the end prove themselves to be both wise and foolish simultaneously, for their dreams of nation-building and, or, self-protection, as well as of owning and controlling their desired lands, are at the same time a foundation for their own destruction.

Tim Couzens (1978) draws our attention to the fact that the story of Zungu is also an indirect reference to the past. Plaatje himself articulates this past thus:

In the early fifties (1800s) Commandant Paul Kruger sent a Boer messenger to Dithakong, the headquarters of the Ra-Tshidi, stating that he was leading an army against Sechele, the Chief of the Bakwena in the Protectorate, and asking “his friend Montsioa” to assist him with a couple of regiments, fully equipped [failing which] the Commandant would be satisfied if he sent a troop of men to act as guides, as ox wagon drivers and as herders to drive back to the Transvaal the looted Bakwena cattle, thus leaving the Boers to do the actual fighting.

(Plaatje 1976: 13-14)

Failing to understand what wrong Sechele had committed, Montsioa turned down Kruger's request. The Voortrekkers nevertheless ensured that Sechele suffered severely: he "was despoiled and denuded of his cattle; his homes were destroyed, including the mission house of Dr. Livingstone, and many women and children were taken into the service of the victors" (Couzens 1976: 14). Thus what looks on the surface to be a prediction by Mzilikazi in the novel is in fact Plaatje's strategy of alluding to this past, and using the past simultaneously to draw parallels with the present and project the past into the somewhat foreseeable future.

Mzilikazi seems to tell the story of Zungu both to remind his nation of the lesson they must have learnt from Chaka, and they are about to learn more from the Barolong. However, we must not be led away from seeing the prose narrative as Mzilikazi's strategy of shifting focus away from his own complicity. He does this partly by leaving the story of Zungu incomplete. Just as we do not know what Zungu and his family might or might not have done to raise the lion's ire, Mzilikazi similarly does not draw to his nation's attention his own complicity in their own self-destruction and humiliation. Surely he knows that he is guilty for having threatened the Barolong and the Voortrekkers by remaining close to them, instead of following the advice of his fortune-tellers to move northwards. He knows, too, if only retrospectively, that in executing his commands when attacking Tauana's people at Kunana, his son, Langa, exceeded his orders, and did more damage than was called for (Plaatje 1978: 95). In these two cases, Mzilikazi and his son, and the "patriotic" nation generally, did not exercise caution in their political actions. Hence the anger and subsequent revenge by the Barolong and the Voortrekkers.

If Mzilikazi's dream of super-expansionism in the end leads to his defeat and humiliation, then he himself overlooks the importance of the defeat and the humiliation. Instead of trying to advise the Barolong and the Griquas about their mistake in co-operating with the Voortrekkers, and instead of considering possibilities of reconciliation with them, he passes the lessons he draws from Zungu and Chaka's experiences to his nation and in the same breath undermines his own wisdom by calling for more Ndebele imperialism – which effectively means another grave threat to other African nations. As they set out to seek refuge in the north (in Gu-Bulawayo), Mzilikazi says: "The Ndebele assegai has served us well in the past. It shall be the indicator of our road to the land of plenty, in a far country that is good for raising corn and the grazing of cattle" (pp. 175-176). What happened in the past was that

the assegai was used to usurp lands from others while, as Chief Moroka of the Barolong would have said, there was enough fertile land for everyone. It was this abuse of the assegai that led to discontent and revolts by the oppressed groups like the Barolong. Presumably, the same process will repeat itself in the north, more so as Mzilikazi's and Umnandi's son, on succeeding the father, is not only more powerful, but also seems to be more ruthless than Mzilikazi himself in pursuing the dream of a great Ndebele empire (p. 181). Mzilikazi's quest for further expansion, and his failure to learn from his experiences, might suggest a dangerously selective nature of learning. It is a failure that in some ways undermines the moral and political value of the story of Zungu to his people. What perhaps reinforces this interpretation is the continuous, seemingly endless, cycle of political dominance and betrayal that we see in the novel. According to Mzilikazi, Chaka and his Zulu nation, the Barolong and the Griquas betray the Ndebele. The Barolong, and by extension the Griquas and other black South Africans who co-operate with the Voortrekkers, will be betrayed by these very Voortrekkers, their children and their descendants. From the Barolong point of view, the Ndebele, who massacre them and destroy their city of Kunana only because of the crime of one chief, Tauana, betray them. The Voortrekkers blame the British in the Cape Colony for being unfair to them, while the British will probably also fail to understand this hostile outlook of the Voortrekkers.

The story of Zungu, the destruction of Chaka's dynasty, as well as the defeat and humiliation of the Ndebele are clearly meant to be worthwhile lessons. Yet the cycle of dominance and betrayal deconstructs the force of both the story and the experiences as learning tools. If, as I argue elsewhere, the "treatment of history [in *Mhudi*] results in a novel that seems to oscillate between hope and, on a subtextual level at least, despair over the probabilities of ever achieving ... peace and justice" (Young 1988), then the oscillation is also between faith and lack of it in oral prose narratives – and proverbs and songs – as well as experience generally, as cognitive tools. While Plaatje values the use to which they can be put, he also implicitly seems to argue that the value attached to them is not entirely dependent on either the narrator or the writer, as the latter is also engaged in the process of negotiating meaning with the audience or readership. As such they can only influence rather than determine the final interpretation. In this respect, Plaatje will probably agree with James Young on the nature of narrative and interpretation.

Zungu, Allusions and Readership

In his study of Holocaust narratives, Young makes an important point that events and their representation may be so closely linked that they are virtually inseparable. He puts it thus:

Instead of isolating events from their representations, my approach recognises that literary and historical truths of the Holocaust may not be entirely separable. That is, the truths of the Holocaust – both the factual and the interpretative – can no longer be said to lie beyond our understanding, but must now be seen to inhere in the ways we understand, interpret, and write its history. Indeed, since the facts of the Holocaust eventually obtain only in their narrative and cultural reconstructions, the interrelated problems of literary and historical interpretation might now be seen as conjoining in the study of “literary historiography”. This is not to question the ultimate veracity in any given account, but it is to propose a search for the truth in the interpretation intrinsic to all versions of the Holocaust: both that interpretation which the writer consciously effects and that which his narrative necessarily accomplishes for him.

(Young 1988: 1-2)

Following Young’s argument, the question of meaning in Zungu’s story depends not only on the events in Zungu’s life and the manner in which Mzilikazi narrates them, but also on the position of the narrator and his audience, as this positioning influences interpretation of the story. The Ndebele, in this respect, interpret both the events and Mzilikazi’s narrative from the position of victims. As such, an element of blame perhaps partly blinds them to the fact that the story doubles back on them, to include them in its criticism of the narrow vision that the Barolong and the Griquas are said by Mzilikazi to have. Their expansionist tendencies, we have pointed out, in the end outrage those that they oppress, and the latter in turn revolt. Yet the Ndebele fail to learn from these acts of revolt. This is an instance of the general narrowness of vision they accuse the Barolong of having. What we see is that if the construction or reconstruction of a narrative is a selective process, then so is an act of interpretation. In fact, interpretation involves a reorganisation of a given narrative, as it involves an act of linking or associating that narrative with other narratives and, or, events. It is this linking or association that makes the narrative comprehensible. Comprehension in narratives, according to Louis Mink, is a “characteristic kind of understanding which consists in thinking together in a single act, or in a cumulative series of acts, the complicated relationships of parts which can only be experienced *seriatim*” (Mink 1974: 114). What is brought

together in the Ndebele case is Zungu's folly, the Barolong and the Griquas' narrow vision, the Voortrekkers' callousness, the Ndebele defeat and humiliation as well as their former military strength. As Mzilikazi's address shows, it is this former strength that encourages them to pursue further their military activities. If Mzilikazi and his nation are able to discern folly in others' political behaviour, then Plaatje probably meant the reader to see the same in the Ndebele.

The story of Zungu, we have argued, is analogous to that of Chaka, and will be analogous to that of the Barolong in the predicted future. We have also argued that we see in it the implication of possible revolt against and defeat of the Ndebele at Gu-Bulawayo. In drawing the analogy and using it to criticise Chaka, Mzilikazi, the Barolong as well as the Griquas, Plaatje clearly meant his oral prose narrative to be a call for black reconciliation and unity. In addition, his criticism of the predicted betrayal of friendship by the Voortrekkers, read in the context of his implicit intimation that a revolt of the oppressed is always inevitable, might be interpreted, as Tim Couzens does (Couzens 1978: 19; 1971), as a warning message to the sections of his white readership that would have been in a position to pass and/or enforce discriminatory Acts. Seen in this light, Plaatje's analogy suggests a national audience and its complex make-up: victims of imperialism and greed, oppressors, traitors, people fallen victim to their own self-protection strategies and so on. In most instances, a group's identity can comprise more than one of the listed sociopolitical identities. This clearly points to Plaatje's sharp awareness of the heterogeneous nature of identity, even of black identity. His black characters, and by extension his black readership, for example, are not simply thrown into a category of innocent victims. If they are victims of white rule, they are also shown to be active – although sometimes unwitting – agents of their own victimisation.

A further point to note is that *Mhudi's* projected readership goes beyond national boundaries. The fact that the Ndebele migrate to the north, and once there pursue further their expansionist tendencies with military ferocity, suggests that their barbarism, as portrayed in the early pages of the novel, repeats itself toward the end of the narrative. Historically, Plaatje seems to say, the political upheavals in South Africa are carried across the country's borders into Zimbabwe. Whether or not other ethnic groups at and around Gu-Bulawayo will employ the self-destructive strategies of the Barolong and the Griquas is not made clear. What seems obvious, though, is that an implicit warning is given to these ethnic groups: that should they form an alliance with the whites against the Ndebele, their people will also fall victim to deceptive friendship.

We see in Plaatje's analogy not just the past repeating itself across geographical boundaries, but also that past serving in the text to directly link his own sociopolitical present with the history of Zimbabwe. In other words, the text brings, in this case, at least three historical contexts together, and the three in turn comment on each other. A fourth context, namely the linking thread of slavery and enslavement, is alluded to in the opening pages of the novel. The Barolong peasants at Kunana, we are told, "thought nought of their overseas kinsmen who were making history in the plantations and harbours of Virginia and Mississippi at that time" (Plaatje 1978: 27). The Voortrekkers, according to Mzilikazi, will later enslave the Barolong. In other words, the Voortrekkers and plantation owners have at least one thing in common: they are enslavers. Some Ndebele are themselves slaves, however. When the Barolong-Voortrekkers-Griqua forces attacked the Ndebele shepherds and herdsmen at their outposts, "[s]ome of the herders were taken captive and permanently retained by the Boers as slaves" (p. 142). The Ndebele, too, were, like black Americans, making history as slaves. Accordingly, any political message intended for the Barolong – and other enslaved Africans – on the issue of slavery is, surely, simultaneously addressed to black slaves across the Atlantic. Similarly, a political message to the Voortrekkers arguably also applies to American enslavers. Thus, *Mhudi* is not just addressed, as Peter Esterhuysen (Esterhuysen 1988: 97) argues, to a white audience. Its readership is varied – in terms of race, ethnicity and even geographical location. In the broadest terms, in so far as it is an examination of imperialism and colonialism, *Mhudi's* projected readership is ideally universal.

This spirit of universal readership is arguably hinted at in Plaatje's tongue-in-cheek refusal to say explicitly who his envisaged readership is. He simply states that one of the objects of *Mhudi* is "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'" (Plaatje 1978: 21). Furthermore, Plaatje gives some hints that may imply a non-South African readership. For example, he makes an effort to explain that a "lake is called a 'pan' in South Africa" (pp. 154-155). Were he addressing a South African readership only, he would presumably simply have used "pan", with no explanation. Given the instances of such telling – though small – details, I think that it is erroneous, and perhaps even unfair to him, to simply reduce his projected readership to white or black South Africans. Rather, we should examine his projected readership by looking at individual narratives within the novel, as these imply either different or multiple readerships. It is perhaps this ideal of universal, multiple readership implied in the novel's narrative strategies, the broad conception of its perceived readership suggested by him in the preface to the novel, and an enthusiasm for trans-Atlantic dialogues (not to forget his

constantly difficult financial circumstances), that made Plaatje consider exchanging books with other writers like W.E.B. du Bois in the USA and Victor Murray in England (Willan 1984: 364). Plaatje was later to explore the possibilities of “arrang[ing] an edition of *Mhudi* for potential readers in England and the United States” (p. 365). Further, the broad terms in which Plaatje refers to his readership suggest that he viewed *Mhudi* not only as transnational – rather than national – property, but also as a trans-historical document. Indeed, his attempt to preserve Setswana tales for Bantu schools, *Mhudi* being part of this project, clearly indicates this. For the mention of Bantu schools suggests generations to come.

Conclusion

Given the varied and complex ways in which oral prose narratives could be employed, I suggest that it is inadequate to perceive them simply as equivalents of proverbs. They serve similar functions, clearly. But they also assist, in *Mhudi* at least, as devices for self-reflexive allegories which are capable of yielding rich, complex meanings. In addition – read in the context of the existence of certain hints and allusions – they serve as narrative devices for suggesting and projecting a multiplicity of readerships.

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