Torn Between Islam and the Other: South African Novelists on Cross–cultural Relationships*

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Summary

In this essay the depiction of intimate relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim is analysed and discussed with reference to some present-day South African novels. The work of internationally known authors Achmat Dangor and Elsa Joubert, as well as that of the less-established but now prize-winning Rayda Jacobs, can be studied as portrayals of the personal and political conflicts ensuing from the relationships between people of opposing religions and cultures. Emotional and social insecurities, and the individual unease within a restrictive group environment, are recurring themes. All three writers portray their characters as part of a fragmented and hybrid society; one in which racial, cultural and religious diversity coexists warily. The concepts of "self" and "other" in this ambivalent post-colonial world are experienced as changing, uncertain and contradictory entities. The three authors can each be regarded as a representative of a different society, but together they are also voices contributing to the same discourse. The historical reality of the Muslim in Africa – whether as slave, trader, political activist or religious outsider – is translated into fictions where the brittle personal relationships also point to larger issues of rootlessness, multicultural relationships and the search for personal identity.

Opsomming

Hierdie opstel gee verslag van 'n ondersoek na die uitbeelding van intieme verbintenisse tussen Moslem en nie-Moslem in die romans van drie bekende Suid-Afrikaanse outeurs: Achmat Dangor, Rayda Jacobs en Elsa Joubert. Die narratiewe kan gelees word as artikulasies van die persoonlike en politieke konflikte wat die verhouding tussen mense van botsende gelowe en kulture begelei. Emosionele en sosiale twyfel, en die individuele stryd binne die beperkinge van 'n voorskriftelike leefomgewing, is motiewe wat herhalend voorkom. In al drie romans word die karakters geplaas binne 'n gefragmenteerde, hibriede maatskappy; een waarin religieuse, kulturele en etniese diversiteit ongemaklik saambestaan. Die persepsies van "self" en "ander" in hierdie postkoloniale opset is veranderlik, onseker en teenstrydig. Die drie skrywers wat elkeen as verteenwoordigend van verskillende kulturele groeperings beskou kan word, neem deur hierdie romans aan dieselfde diskoers deel. Die historiese werklikheid van die Moslem in Afrika – as slaaf, handelaar, politieke aktivis of godsdienstige randfiguur – kry fiksioneel vorm in die persoonlike verhoudings wat heenwys na groter kwessies rondom identiteitsoeke en transkulturalisme.

1 Texts and Context

That the thematic thrust of this essay is imbedded in contentious issues and current, nonfictional affairs, has been underlined by a spate of recent reports and opinion pieces in newspapers, magazines and even daily news bulletins. The grim fatality figures emanating from ever new localities around the world where armed conflict against and amongst Islamic societies occur; the rhetoric that characterises presidential elections; the fight between a blonde Parisian and the political power brokers over the legacy left by a Palestinian hero – all this form but part of the encompassing context of clashing cultural constructs. But the shrill discourse on relations between Islam and what could, very broadly but imprecisely, be called the "West", have also had diverse inputs on an individual scale – some very profound, others unfortunately extremely trite. A fellow writer who mused upon the high visibility of Muslim authors in the Dutch literary world, referring to an "Islamisation" of the literature of the Low Countries, offered as one explanation for a nationwide fascination the "opulent" and "exotic" culture of Islam.[1] It is doubtful whether this is still valid after the gruesome murder in November 2004 of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh, ostensibly because of his film *Submission*, which severely criticised the position of women in the Muslim world. A respected South African weekly earlier drew attention to an opinion piece on the probable marital problems of the British heiress Jemima Goldstone and the Pakistani cricket icon, Imran Khan by proclaiming boldly on its front page: "Leilas in Lala-land. Loving a Muslim ain't easy" (Venter 2004; Magardie 2004). And in a review of several Arab authors' commentaries after the Beslan school tragedy in Russia, the caption which was used, read: "Now the World Once Again Views Muslims as Monsters" (Alibhai-Brown 2004). Quite clearly, the coexistence of Islam and the West remains an uncertain and uneasy experience, racked with complexities caused by the legacies of ancient conflict and the bloody tumult of twenty-first-century everyday life.

Whilst the points of view referred to above may indicate a resurgence of (a postmodernist) orientalism or merely conform to the slogans of political expedience, the representation and experience of Islam in South African literature has been a long-standing and steady, if understated, presence. That literary presence must be described against the background of the contact between Islam and Christianity which, on African soil, has been an ongoing and multilayered process since prerecorded historical times. In South Africa, this contact became formalised during the seventeenth century with the advent of colonial rule and the link between different regions within the Dutch sphere of influence. The first slave ever in the Cape, then a settlement founded to replenish ships sailing the lucrative trade routes to the Dutch East Indies, was one Abraham from Batavia, who arrived in March 1653 (Schoeman 2001:

101). During the following century, the slave numbers were increased through official trade, by convicts from the East sentenced to hard labour, and by a small group of rich and eminent political exiles who were mostly staunch followers of Islam. This latter group attained, despite their deplorable situation in the Cape, a remarkable degree of influence in religious, political and cultural matters amongst their fellow Muslims and potential followers, and the origin of a distinct Cape "Malay" group can in part be traced back to those early years. By the beginning of the eighteenth century more than half the population at the Cape were slaves, and of those, more than half were Muslims. The colonists actually encouraged the spread of Islam amongst convicts and slaves, not only because the Dutch authorities had prohibited the sale of baptised Christian slaves and therefore did not want to "deplete" their own pool of slaves, but also because of the perception that a Muslim – constricted by religious and cultural conventions – made a better domestic servant (Mahida 1993: 1-5). But officially Islam was not a legal form of worship, and only during 1804 when the Cape, no longer under Dutch influence, had become a British possession, the ban was lifted (Salie 2004). By 1840 more than a third of the total population of the Cape Colony were so-called Cape Malays, originating in main from what is today known as the Malay archipelago and the Indonesian islands. From 1858 onwards, several large groups of Muslims from Java and also from different states in India arrived in South Africa as labourers and traders in what was then the colony of Natal and the free republic of Transvaal. Today, about 400,000 South Africans are of the Muslim faith (an estimated updating of figures presented by Mahida 1993: 122).

Adherents to Islam have had a wide-ranging and important impact on South African life in general. The specific nature of the colonial relationship between the Dutch and the Malay people at the Cape settlement had, for instance, a marked effect on the development of the Afrikaans language and culture. It produced, for the purposes of teaching the Koran, some of the earliest texts in Afrikaans. For the major part of the twentieth century, while being excluded from political power on the basis of colour and creed, Muslims played a prominent part in the struggle against sociopolitical disenfranchisement. The death of Imăm Abdullăh Hăron, while in detention by the security branch of the then government, represents a low point in the relationship between Islam and the governing establishment, and even appears as a motif in "struggle" poetry. However, in South Africa the closest connection between these opposing cultures developed through intimate relationships. In aspects of Afrikaans vocabulary and syntax, in gardening and cuisine and general lifestyle, in the corridors of contemporary financial and political power, but perhaps especially in the nature of personal attachments, the resilience and growth of those early Islamic influences are clearly visible in the South Africa of today (Roos 2003).

The focus of this essay falls on one particular theme in recent fiction: romantic love and/or sexual relations between Muslim and Christian, and how the interweaving of those bonds with the larger issues of rootlessness, fragmented societies and the preservation of an own identity within a bicultural construct is articulated. Three prize-winning novels written by three well-known South African authors are discussed; each author commonly identified with a different generation, gender and culture. On the one hand, the reader is left with the strong impression of the many similarities in the three novels. Not only specific events and characters, tropes and images reappear, but even analogous narratological strategies feature prominently in all three novels. The early foregrounding of very detailed descriptions of place and historical time, the prompt introduction of the clash of cultures, the emphasis on physical attributes, the isolation of the main character within a close-knit family group, and also the ongoing allusions and signs that anticipate events and endings are but some of these common devices. On the other hand, the ways in which the characters are depicted and questions of bi/multicultural relationships addressed, also contribute towards the contradictory views eventually expressed by each text. In their different accounts of how cross-cultural relationships unfold, however, all three novels attest to the ambivalent attitudes displayed in a fragmented post-colonial world.

2 Authors and Books

> ... my people are no longer my people.
>
> (Joubert 2002: 326)

The first text to be discussed is the English translation of an Afrikaans book, *Isobelle's Journey* (2002, first published in Afrikaans in 1995 as *Die reise van Isobelle*), an outstanding novel by the doyenne of Afrikaans literary fiction, Elsa Joubert. Joubert has not only received the highest literary prizes awarded within her own language group, but a translation of an earlier publication has also enjoyed international acclaim.[2] The works of this still active octogenarian are valued as innovative, probing narratives; stories which reveal the history of injustices practised by and involving her kin; always affirming the ideal of racial reconciliation, and depicting the white characters as an inevitable part of Africa.

Isobelle's Journey is an epic novel, relating a family's history through the lives of women from four successive generations, simultaneously reflecting the sociopolitical realities of their time. Belle, the central character in Part 3 of this novel, is a child of the fifties, and her callous attitude towards all those not sharing her own narrow point of view, is symptomatic of the Afrikaner nation

at this point in history – blindly allowing self-interest to support the then increasing legalisation of racial intolerance and discrimination. Her unexpected encounter with and passionate love for a young Indian Muslim leads to a tragic and violent destruction of all her earlier illusions. Although this event remains a secret to her family, her consequent rebellious but ineffectual gestures bewilder and anger them, and inexorably Belle's life descends into meaningless apathy.

> He feels immersed ... these are his people, these dark-faced, hook-nosed hybrids.
> (Dangor 2001: 170)

Bitter Fruit (2001) is the latest novel by Achmat Dangor, an esteemed South African author whose previous novel, *Kafka's Curse* (1997), contributed to his already high international standing. The latest edition of *Bitter Fruit* has been placed on the short-list for the 2004 Booker Prize. Dangor, who calls himself "a lapsed Muslim" (De Waal 2001), is part of a politically active and reputable family. He had been Director of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund; his sister is at present South African ambassador to Mozambique. In his references to his own mixed parentage – a long convergent line of Muslim and Christian and brown and white and speaking Afrikaans and English – he articulates the questions of identity and roots which complicate the post-colonial experience and permeate post-colonial literature in South Africa today.

Racial hatred, political rape and incest lie at the heart of the various conflicts portrayed in *Bitter Fruit.* The seemingly thriving Ali family is forced to deal anew with the rape of Lydia Ali twenty years previously by a then security police officer, after which she fell pregnant with the child of this white Afrikaner. The lives of the husband, a cynical but successful civil servant in the new government, the wife who became a nurse because in a racist South Africa she was denied a university education, and the son who had never been told of his true parentage, change dramatically. Mikey, filled with disdain for this secular and sophisticated society to which his parents now belong, becomes the avenging assassin and eventually turns towards fundamentalist Islam to rediscover his spiritual and moral identity.

> I'm not threatened by other people's beliefs.
> (Jacobs 2001: 159)

Sachs Street (2001) is not Rayda Jacobs's first novel, but it is the book which turned her, after many years of residence in Canada, into a household name in the country of her birth. The status of that literary re-entrance has now been established by her subsequent publications and the ensuing prizes. A recurring motif in her work is the life of the Muslim woman and (often single) mother

– fully part of a modern (Westernised) South Africa in career and lifestyle, whilst simultaneously being intensely committed to Islam through family ties and religious beliefs. Jacobs professes that her stories are to a large extent autobiographical, and in a recent interview named her favourite interest and book topic as "all religions" (Booyens 2001). One may wonder how this preference contributes to the light, often very humorous and even irreverent touch upon, once again, questions of identity and self-esteem.

In *Sachs Street* a story of love and intermarriage between Muslim and Christian as it has been repeated over several generations, is seen through the eyes of Khadidja Daniels, a Malay woman from the Bo-Kaap – that area in Cape Town that has been reserved for Muslim households since colonial times. The childless Khadidja who is divorcing her Muslim husband because she refuses to accept a polygamous marriage, gets deeply entangled with a younger, white man – a fundamentalist Christian. Although this relationship founders on their numerous disagreements, she falls pregnant, but eventually forms an enduring bond with Ulf, a Norwegian academic.

3 The Common Threads

3.1 Place and Space

A remarkable feature of all three novels is the early and detailed placing of characters and events within a specific place and time. This device naturally achieves a vivid and realistic fictional space, but it also attests to the importance of the sociopolitical context. The notion that locality and architecture regulate personal and group identities, comes into play and the reader is drawn into a rich subtext of factual, related and remembered events and images. In *Sachs Street* the narrative starts with an explicit indication of place and time, a reference to that specifically South African historical space which through its racially determined nature explains the young narrator's astonishment at the appearance of a "white" grandmother in her neighbourhood. The young Khadidja says of her unruly hair, "I was a living barometer of where I lived" (Jacobs 2001: 9), referring to the wet and windy climate, but implicitly also to matters of (the then crucial issues of) appearance which determined racial identity and therefore social and political status. Where she buys her own house many years later, is a choice that speaks of a now changing political landscape as well as her own emancipation from family restrictions. The almost fairy-tale setting of the concluding paragraphs supports the image of an idyllic relationship with Ulf – but it also raises the question about how valid this happy ending could be.

The meeting between Belle and Hussein in *Isobelle's Journey* takes place outside South Africa – implicit comment that at that time there would be no opportunity inside the country for them to meet as equals. Her initial reason for visiting her "grandfather's" farm in Kenya, was to visit the lonely war grave of her young brother, also a family misfit because of his ideologically unpopular decision to join the Second World War. The strong attraction between Belle and Hussein is mirrored in their shared awe of the immense landscape and their exploration of the simple African village; the beauty of the surroundings is described in great detail and almost lyrical prose. The thatched-roof room where Belle stays during her visit, is the visible sign of her entering a new world:

> Now she was standing in the space normally occupied by the strange dark man. She'd never in her entire life been in the room or home of a coloured person or an Indian – come away, stand at the gate and call, don't go in, her mother had always told her. She wasn't even allowed to go in the little shops in the lower end of town – you'll pick up germs, her mother said.
>
> (Joubert 2002: 284)

This rondavel becomes an emotional haven, a feeling which she tries to recapture many years later in a similar dwelling at a run-down weekend retreat. Years afterwards, after her "grandfather's" death, the contestation of the ownership of that farm in Kenya signifies the final destruction of her dreams about Hussein. The unknown white family in South Africa claims the property and ejects the old man's Muslim partner and the other long-time inhabitants. The references to the homes of Belle's family in South Africa accentuate the insulated existence in the "whites only" suburbs with their opulent houses, whilst her alienation and eventual mental decline is played off in dingy apartments and dark cinemas. And yet it is only in this urban world that she feels connected; as part of the anonymous people and the neighbourhood blocks and streets and buildings, she claims: "[W]e are the inner heart of the city, we can only exist in the hub of this ugly, noisy city"(Joubert 2002: 371). The strongest depiction of her bond with those people with whom she can identify, is the very evocative image of Belle who, like countless black, migrant workers all over the city, stands on top of the apartment roof at sunset, staring at the boundless horizon (Joubert 2002: 371-372).[3]

The Johannesburg cityscape in all its complexity also plays a pivotal part in *Bitter Fruit.* The network of streets so meticulously described, separates, but sometimes also connects, the Ali's in their middle-class suburb with their family in the surrounding townships. Mikey, when in a state of confused anger, prowls the urban nights and determinedly unravels the confusing topography of the black townships in search of his childhood past. These, and even the

detailed descriptions of the trendy restaurant where Silas Ali and his former "Struggle" friends now lounge around, are all spatial images attesting to a fragmented and rootless existence. Repeated references are made to the historic and political link between identity and dwelling place: the erstwhile legal prohibitions on "mixed" living areas and the consequent removal of people and destruction of houses to achieve separate communities; the current aspirations of the recent middle class to more expensive and showy living spaces. The dark and shadowed house in Berea where the Ali's play out their family drama, is a "survivor from grander days .... How strangely like their inhabitants homes become" (Dangor 2001: 60, 71). Mikey's profound awareness of the hallowed atmosphere inside the mosque, and the introduction of recurring images of water and fountains in this latter part of the narrative indicate the existence of an alternative space – one in which the old world can be cast aside to start anew. While the narrative gives almost no information on how Mikey murders two people, his escape route after these acts is described in great detail:

> Someone will drive him to Lenasia, drop him off at the Nural Islam Hall. From there he will be transported to a scholar's retreat near Potchefstroom in the North West Province. India comes later, much later, after he has learnt enough about being a Muslim to perhaps become one ... Michael is to die. Noor will be incarnated in his place.
>
> (Dangor 2001: 247)

Related to this meaningful spatial structure, is the foregrounding of intimate family structures in all three texts. In each case the protagonist belongs to a large and very close family grouping, with the resulting interaction forming a central part of the narrative as his/her actions and behaviour are scrutinised and sometimes controlled by the group. But every family harbours painful secrets; Belle and Mikey and Khadidja are all regarded as strange and different in some way, and the conflicts between generations are portrayed as deep and sometimes fatal. In *Bitter Fruit* Mikey exemplifies a generation betrayed by their parents – the rape and incest are the explicit embodiments of personal treachery, but there is also a betrayal in the abandonment of political, moral and religious ideals. His withdrawn manner, his sexual exploitation of older (white) women, and his eventual turning toward Islam, indicate a rejection of his parents and the bicultural identity they seem to accept. He now embraces that side of the family to which his father never belonged: the devout and single-minded offspring of the Imam.

In *Isobelle's Journey* the conflict of the generations points ironically in the direction of eventual harmony. The implied message is that Belle and Hussein were ruined because the time was not right. This family epic is therefore also a story of evolution, of times that will improve. What Belle could not attain,

her granddaughter Isobelle, will. A similar process is implied in *Sachs Street*. The troubled relationships between white and brown and Muslim and Christian which started centuries ago, converge in the happiness of Khadidja and Ulf and the beautiful son fathered by Storm Callaghan.

3.2 Love and Lust

The remarkably similar events of rape and forced miscegenation described in all three novels, could be read almost as a separate story line, a subplot relating the sexual abuse often perceived to be characteristic of colonial history. Khadidja implies that her roots can be traced back to such an incident between her slave ancestress and a white colonist farmer, and her first sexual encounter with Storm Callaghan is so brutal as to be considered as rape.[4] Later, when deserted by Storm, she is taken for a prostitute by a rich tourist and, in a state of intense emotional upheaval, agrees to his offer. Although there is no direct physical violence involved, the nature of this encounter ("animal-like and visceral" (Jacobs 2001: 276)) in which both the paid sex and alcohol are alien to her cultural norms, underwrites the notion of (neo-)colonial and male abuse of power.

A very well-known colonial stereotype, that of the boorish but arrogant British soldier, plays a crucial part in both *Bitter Fruit* and *Isobelle's Journey.* Mikey's grandfather fled from India during the First World War after murdering the soldier who had raped his young sister; an assault that led to the girl being ostracised by her community and eventually declared insane. The relationship between Belle and Hussein, right from their first meeting up to the violent end, is played off in the shadow of drunken, racist English soldiers: "army types. Thrown out of India, now they think they own Africa" (Dangor 2001: 277). The difference is that in *Bitter Fruit* the rapist is "executed" by the dishonoured brother; in Joubert's novel the resentful soldiers "execute" Hussein, and Belle is left without protection to wither away.

The problematic relationship between parents and children, and married partners and lovers, is articulated not only in terms of the equation white/-Christian versus brown/Muslim, but also occurs within colour groups and across religions (such as the marital strife in *Sachs Street* and *Bitter Fruit*, and Belle's alienation from her aloof mother). But the violent aspect of the (sexual) relationships is very explicitly placed in a racist, colonialist context. The attitude of the policeman when raping Lydia and thus fathering Mikey, can be described as one of simultaneous sexual attraction and repulsion, an ambivalent experience which Young (1995: 90-98) regards as characteristic of the cultural construction of race in colonial discourse. Yet, in the mouths of several characters in *Bitter Fruit,* these supposedly long-discarded assumptions resound anew. Lydia excuses her son's callous behaviour by blaming the

women involved:

> Why are blonde women in particular attracted to him? They find him exotic, she thinks, and then considers how unkind this judgement is to white women. But she strengthens the resolve of her own prejudice: they *do* fall for black men, for the innate sensuality of black skins, those pearls of sweat on dark flanks. White women want black men simply because they are different.
>
> (Dangor 2001: 218)

Repeatedly Mikey makes disparaging remarks about his "bastard" identity (see for instance pp. 83, 98, 147, 215), and when he listens to Moulana Ismail's tirade against imperialist expansion, he hears that the rape of colonised women was a form of planned genocide, as "you conquer a nation by bastardising its children" (Dangor 2001: 183). The Imam's words, rejecting any positive notion of a hybrid culture, disturbingly echo various nineteenth-century racist arguments, and especially Gobineau's ideas on racial mixing.[5] According to Gobineau, male civilisation and the Western races were attracted by natural law to the female from subordinate black and yellow races. But, "from the very day when the conquest is accomplished and fusion begins, there appears a noticeable adulteration in the blood of the masters" (Young 1995: 104).

These startling views on race and identity also include equating a Western/Christian identity with being lesbian or gay. When Lydia remembers her convent upbringing, Catholicism is experienced in terms of passionate lesbian love and furtive masturbation.

3.3 Who is the Other?

Despite the categorical statements often appearing in *Bitter Fruit*, the concepts of "self" and "other" in this ambivalent post-colonial world are experienced in all three novels as changing, uncertain and contradictory entities. The position of the periphery and who the marginalised is, can be decided anew through each specific experience. In both *Sachs Street* and *Isobelle's Journey* a long history of cross-cultural relationships and marriages is related. The troubled events of the narrated present can be seen as but one – admittedly more problematic or politically profiled or intimately personal – amongst many other, similar instances. Khadidja's tormented love affair recalls how her slave ancestor gave birth to a white farmer's child; the same situation also occurred in the life of her Oemie, the beloved great-grandmother. In both instances Muslim men raised the children, and the ensuing family associations were often based on conflicting affinities; the "bastard" identities either hidden or professed by "pretending I was one of them" (Jacobs 2001: 10). In Uncle Solly's Christian household, the Oemie was an embarrassment to her son

because of her Muslim faith; to the people of Sachs Street she was disturbingly white. The Islamic tenor of Khadidja's world is evidently not a homogenous one. Alison, her best friend, converted to Islam but is not fully accepted by husband and in-laws; both Khadidja and her mother refused to accept their husbands' second wives and because of their divorces were somewhat set apart in the community. Her paternal grandmother on the other hand, articulates the conventional attitude when she warns Khadidja's mother about the children's Christian playmates: "You want them to mix with their own kind" (Jacobs 2001: 57).

Isobelle's Journey depicts the race laws of the nineteen fifties which, after centuries of innumerable instances of intimate bonds across colour and religious lines, legalised and enforced separation. The moral degeneration of Belle's highly placed uncles is portrayed by how they disown their childhood bonds and shirk their personal obligations to people of colour when it became politically expedient. The tensions that are manifested in various emotional and physical ways, in the supposedly solid marriages and in individual behaviour, are linked to this denial of their own fragmented pasts.

In both these novels statements and knowledge about the own and the opposite cultures and beliefs across colour lines often occur. The strangeness that Belle experiences on the Kenyan farm is articulated through vivid observations of Hussein and Aunty Latifa's appearance, dress, personal habits, taste in food and their speech. There is no reference to Islam as, in Belle's experience, a strange or contrasting set of beliefs. The textual context in which their love develops, is formed by the Persian poetry to which she is introduced by Hussein. But, just as would be done with a religious script, these verses accompany her after his death during the time of her mournful drifting through Europe. Khadidja in *Sachs Street* has known whites and Christians on many intimate and professional levels; she is a career woman, admires Western art and literary traditions, and is more at ease with the atheist Ulf than with Alison's new husband, the Imam's son. Although several characters pronounce judgements critical of cross-cultural relationships,[6] the overwhelming message is one of acceptance and rapprochement. Perhaps the term "bicultural" (Sommer 2002) becomes apt: absorbing what pleases her in Western ways, does not "contaminate" Khadidja's Muslim faith; she is free to select between the differing reference points, and becomes, simultaneously, an insider and an outsider. Code switching, that "escape route" so familiar to a bicultural, bilingual life, plays a significant role in *Sachs Street.* Her constant movement between Afrikaans expressions and utterances and English usage, affords Khadidja the opportunity to enter different moods and relationships with ease. It is noticeable that in *Bitter Fruit* this same device creates the opposite effect. The Afrikaans phrases are signs of vulgarity or references to a stigmatised past; their use accompanied by resentment and strife (Dangor 2001: 76).

In *Bitter Fruit* a general scepticism about cultural complexity seems to prevail. Silas Ali "is a half-hearted Dutch Protestant, his soul confused by the omnipotence of Ali Ali's Islam, by the purity of its whispered music" (Dangor 2001: 80). He has many white friends, almost all of them former political comrades and also part of his thriving career. But (therefore?) his life is experienced as a failure: the continuous compromises demanded in the political world, the growing distrust in all around him, the alienation from and loss of wife and son. The two people closest to him are identified as an egotistical lesbian and an ineffectual Jewish intellectual. I use these derogatory phrases deliberately, as the narrative is strewn with statements of racial and sexual prejudice. In the other two novels cultural and racial stereotyping is almost absent, but it abounds in *Bitter Fruit.* Lydia's Catholic upbringing is recalled in the lurid terms of a teenager's sexual obsessions and she regards white women with singular disdain. Mikey is haunted by a "sense of not belonging, of being unmoored ... the fault of his parents" (p. 80). After reading his mother's diary and discovering who his true father is, he describes himself as "the child of some murderous white man ... a boer" (p. 118). He goes in search of his Muslim family, anticipating a confirmation of his true identity. But "the meeting at the mosque is not what Michael expects": he is "surprised by the range of personas that [the fundamentalist cousin] Sadrodien's voice gives him", and in his rediscovery of Islam the stereotypical experience of orientalism is completely overturned. Islam offers a pure and principled focus in his life (pp. 172-184). When Mikey listens to "a fable of sorts", the story of his grandfather's flight from India almost a century earlier after having revenged the rape of his young sister, he believes that according to Islam he too must seek justice and vengeance. To Mikey the rape of his mother and the incestuous relationship between his girlfriend Vishnu and her white father, perpetuate an ancient history of colonial repression through sexual domination,[7] and in killing the modern perpetrators, he aligns himself with his ancestors and regains his "true" identity.

Perhaps it should not be unexpected, but one is struck by the strong emphasis on women's rights and the anti-patriarchal stance in all three novels. The column referred to in the introductory paragraph of this essay, presents an outrageous, but perhaps not yet completely repudiated image[8] of women who in the Muslim world are predestined to become subservient wives to abusive husbands. Spivak's utterances (1988: 271-313) on the subaltern woman – one who is spoken, written, argued, legislated for, but not allowed to speak for herself – comes to mind. Mikey's sexual affairs with two older white women reveal a disquieting cruelty (in a striking reversal of the stereotype); the marriages of his aunts and uncles on both sides conform to traditional ways; Vishnu is the silent victim of long-standing incest. Lydia, though, breaks the mould. Although it is suggested that the unhappiness in her relations with her

husband was caused by the rape, the narrative also attests to her intellectual and emotional ambitions which eventually lie outside her family. From the outset Lydia acts in unconventional ways. Her reaction to the news that the rapist has re-entered their lives, is exorbitant: she dances on pieces of broken glass and is wounded so seriously that she has to be hospitalised for some time. She is portrayed as an extremely self-contained person: withdrawing into her secret world of books and music, revealing her emotions only to her diary. Her strongest – but hidden and tormented – emotions concern her almost primitive bond with her son. During the edgy celebrations of her husband's fiftieth birthday at a party arranged by his white friends, the tensions in the Ali family explode. Mikey is on his way to shoot his biological father – the aged and terminally ill rapist; Silas is confronted by his father's diary and that resented Muslim past, and Lydia gets sexually involved with an unknown young man. When the news of the killings breaks, she is already on a solitary journey away from her former life. In surprising contrast to the grim news and her bleak surroundings, her mood is upbeat:

> Time and distance, even this paltry distance, will help to free her. Burden of the mother. Mother, wife, lover, lover-mother, lover-wife, unloved mother .... Carry your own burdens, Mister my friends.
>
> (Dangor 2001: 251)

The reader is struck by what could be seen as an ambiguous message: Mikey seeking a new identity in the context of rigorous religious doctrine; Lydia cutting loose from all restraints.

Khadidja's life is a complete contradiction of the stereotypical view of the Islamic world – this is evident in her mother's unusual position as head of the household, the "white" oemie, her own career as a successful magazine editor, her writing success, her easy relationships with people outside her faith. But her story is also an account of emancipation; in this case becoming reconciled with her estranged father and so leaving behind the demons of the past. Khadidja does not experience her identity in terms of the binary opposites of race and religion, but in coming to terms with her fear of personal rejection. This fictional process links up surprisingly with general statements made by the academic and theologian Faried Esack in an essay "Reshaping Islam in South Africa". His conclusion is that the believer must constantly rethink the meaning and implications of the faith, and that "how we deal with our internal 'others', is really the only truthful measure of what our values are all about" (Esack 2004: 33).

Belle is portrayed as truly victimised; left completely deserted after Hussein's death she eventually returns to South Africa to be ruled – however benignly – by uncles, husband and doctors. The descriptions of a middle-aged

Belle conforming to the stereotypical "good girl" image – dressed prettily and preparing canapés and never uttering a dissonant sound – after a series of electrical shock treatments, seem almost exaggerated. But in the tradition of the family epic the emancipatory notion will be repeated in the lives of the ensuing generations. In Part 4 of *Isobelle's Journey* the story is about Belle's daughter Leo, and this child enjoys a measure of personal freedom that the mother could not even imagine. The unborn grandchild embodies all the ideals associated with a transformed political dispensation and a new life, and Leo can proclaim: "Whatever lies ahead [it will], not [be] precarious balance. Rather faith in the possible beyond the impossible. I'll call her Isobelle, In full: Isobelle. In full. In full" (Joubert 2002: 582-583).

4 Distinctively Different

4.1 Different Narratological Structures

There are striking differences in the narratological structure of the three books. *Sachs Street,* which at first sight impresses as a down-to-earth, realistic account of everyday life, can in many ways be read as an updated fairy-tale. The narration is done by three different voices: a first-person narrator recounts, retrospectively, the story of the young Khadidja and of her "white" grand-mother's arrival in her family's lives; a third-person narrator portrays Khadidja as an adult in the fictional present, and these two stories are interspersed with very short inscriptions from a diary – probably Khadidja's. This is also, in the classic fairy-tale mode, a cautionary tale. Warnings are given about misbe-haviour, and punishment follows when the rules are transgressed. This can vary from gating a teenager for sexual precocity to lifelong guilt after causing a fatal accident while high on marihuana. But virtue is rewarded and wounds can be healed. Two fairy godmothers contribute to the eventual happy ending. During her childhood, Khadidja develops from the ugly duckling into her Oemie's beloved swan. As an adult, the resentful daughter is transformed into a confident mother with the help of the psychiatrist Anna. The literary allusions are of great significance: the references to the books she read and stories she was told as a young child, the direct quotations from well-known tales, the parts played by the villain (Storm Callaghan) and the hero – the almost story-book figure of Ulf from Norway. And of course in the closing paragraphs, the characters are presented almost visually as if bathed in a golden light, which offers the perfect ending to this modern fairy-tale.

Isobelle's Journey conforms in many ways to the traditional family epic, chronologically presented, with a strong sense of inevitability. But it is a story

of different generations, closely linked to historical events, and within that context also emphasising the evolutionary notion of positive change. The focus falls on the matriarchal line, and women's issues are foregrounded when the questions of relationships, historical roots and personal identity are addressed. The reader experiences a fictional world of epic dimensions; a century of momentous events related by an authorial voice; the detailed characterisation effected through description, inner musings and explicit comments.

In many ways *Bitter Fruit* appears to be the exact opposite. The story unfolds in the summer of 1998, and the avalanche of traumatic experiences creates an effect of tension and turmoil. Although the narrative is also presented in (three) separate parts, the shifting focus on the different central characters, and the overlap of time and place across these formal boundaries create a strong impression of fragmented, conflicting and uncertain lives. The emotional alienation of the main characters and their "nomadic" lives (Dangor 2001: 14) support this sense of rootlessness. On the other hand, although descriptions and characterisation are vivid and credible, there is a strong discursive element present; the pronouncements and contemplations which are voiced almost demand response and debate. That the choice between Islam and the Christian/Western worlds is articulated in Mikey's terms, imparts, despite the evident sincerity of the character, a strong sense of irony and ambivalence. "'True faith lies in its ambiguity', Michael says, bored with his cousin's pedantry" (p. 174), whilst he is at the same time smitten with the idea of a God "unforgiving of all mortal indulgence" (p. 188). These contradictory views contrast significantly with the closure reached in the other two texts. Dangor indicated during an interview (Dangor quoted by De Waal 2001) that "there will be two more books growing out of this one", expanding on the same topic of a new generation, rebelling against the lack of idealism they perceive amongst the governing elite (Niewoudt 2001: 13; Isaacson 2001: 18). One cannot but wonder how the character of "Michael the Avenger" (Dangor 2001: 192, 201) will be developed.

4.2 Perceptions of Political/Ideological Place

A point of criticism amidst the general praise for *Sachs Street* is that the narrative is low on specifics, and that although the historical background to the novel could be identified as somewhere around 1986, there are even, in several instances, incorrect dates put to important events. The one episode during which Khadidja explicitly refers to the then current sociopolitical scene is when, listening to a recorded telephone message by Storm, she listlessly watches the television screen as the images of the prevailing political turmoil flicker by. This single paragraph indicating some political awareness caused one reviewer to question: did this period of upheaval matter so little to the

Muslim people? (Abrahms 2002).[9] This is very evidently a narrative where the focus falls not on the broader political context, but on the individual consciousness, however much that consciousness may be rooted in specific historical issues. Yet, in portraying the life of Khadidja, the long but often neglected history of the Bo-Kaap, from its slave days up to the current gentrification, is opened up to many formerly ignorant readers. It has also been questioned whether the easy use of alcohol and marihuana, and the tolerant sexual attitudes displayed, are credible reflections of "normal" behaviour in the Muslim world. But in discussing her film *Rayda*, the story of a young woman from the close-knit Bo-Kaap community, the writer/producer Zulfah Otto-Sallies pointed to these very issues as being part of present-day life there (Otto-Sallies 2002).

Isobelle's Journey, specifically Part 3 in which Belle's life forms the central theme, is a very evocative, yet still factually correct portrayal of a momentous epoch. Apartheid South Africa had by then almost reached its zenith; in colonial Kenya the aggressive mood echoed the resentment of a colonist society knowing that independence was imminent. These external factors contributed directly to Belle's physical collapse and mental decline, and the connotations of a patriarchal and authoritarian power being marshalled against the powerless, are clearly mirrored in the shock treatments she is forced to undergo. Belle's life can be read as a metaphor for the fatal damage caused by an inhuman ideology and by the individual succumbing to that ideology. The completely contrasting life that her daughter Leo chooses – community orientated, involved in the townships, a single parent – is, in a similar fashion, a metaphoric prediction of the new democracy.

The entanglement of personal and political space, contributing to the implied ideological stance that is conveyed in *Bitter Fruit*, is clearly articulated in the following excerpt:

> [H]e can write his history and the history of a whole country, simply by tracing his family's nomadic movements from one ruined neighbourhood to the next, searching through photographs, deeds of sale, engineering reports (this area is predominantly Indian or coloured or African, it is filled with noise, loud music, people congregate in the streets, it is squalid, it is a slum and therefore qualifies for clearance under the Slums Clearance Act), social workers' assessments (the children beam at you with dirty faces, unaware of their suffering).
>
> (Dangor 2001: 167-168)

In contrast to the other two novels which have been discussed, Dangor consciously explores political issues as one of the central themes of his book. The Struggle years are foregrounded in the depiction of family ties and personal secrets and by the little deceptions and abandonments which are

threaded through the unfolding plot. The boisterous relationship between two brothers-in-law hides the heinous betrayal during that Struggle past; the conflict between husband and wife stems from adultery between erstwhile comrades. Especially in the characterisation of Silas Ali, the dangerous and risky life of a committed activist is responsible for a sense of belonging, self-esteem and even romantic fulfilment. When that life is left behind and the mission accomplished he seems to, like his friends Julian and Kate, become self-serving and self-indulgent. Post-colonial disillusion can be detected in this novel in its demystifying view of the new government, its officials and its agenda; in the cool manner in which Mikey analyses the weaknesses of the state; in the general lament for an idealism forsaken or lost (Dangor 2001: 175-176, 192, 196). As the narrative unfolds, Islam is presented as the pure alternative to a young man rejecting a degenerate and uncaring Christian/ Western style of life.

5 In Conclusion

A very telling feature of all three novels is that crucial decisions about identity and association are linked in each text to vicissitudes, incorrect assumptions and subjective judgements. Mikey blames his parents for being "unmoored", and redirects his life so that he almost exactly retraces his grandfather's "remarkable journey, a veritable *hajerah*" (Dangor 2001: 182). But he is not related in any manner to this venerable Imam, his "real" identity is that of being the son of a white, Calvinist father and a Catholic mother of mixed origin. Khadidja's little boy, the pride of the close-knit Muslim family, is fathered by Storm Callaghan – a tormented, almost schizophrenic fundamentalist Christian. Khadidja herself looks back upon an old history of uncertain and hybridic parentage, where the decision between being Muslim or Christian was a matter of personal choice and changing circumstance, of switching between the two sets of cultural norms. In *Isobelle's Journey,* Belle meets Hussein because of her search for who she thinks is her "grandfather", but this old man, self-exiled in Kenya, has never been that. Yet, like him, she emotionally forsakes her own people, and identifies with the Indian clan because of the

> passion that superseded all else, your innermost self – your core identity ... she wanted to live completely cut off from her people. To do otherwise would be to betray Hussein, and the core that she had discovered in herself.
> (Dangor 2001: 347)

A romantic, orientalist vision of the Muslim world as mysterious, sensuous and all-enveloping is communicated in *Isabelle's Journey*; and in *Sachs Street* the

existence of cross-cultural relationships is almost self-evident. The ventures outside the group boundaries in *Bitter Fruit*, however, are characterised by a pervasive history of personal loss and political strife. But the three contrasting narratives convey in their diverse ways a shared insight into post-colonial realities, that is, that no true or set generic identity exists – in the post-colonial experience identity is an ever-changing and often contradictory notion, and when it is assumed, it becomes a matter of personal choice.

* Extended version of a paper read at the ICLA conference, Hong Kong, August 2004

Notes

1. "Ons het hier te doen met die ver-Islamisering van die letterkunde van die Lae Lande. Een rede ... is die weelderige eksotika van die kultuur van Islam."
(Venter 2004: 65)

2. *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* received the prize for the "Best Regional Novel in English" from the Royal Society of Literature in 1980.

3. With a bucket of washing under her arm she went up in the lift, right up, on top of the roof, where she could gaze over the city. She hung up her washing on the line they'd erected up there in the dirty, polluted air of the city, and she walked past the row of rooms on the roof, where the flat cleaners lived, until she stood at the parapet. She leant her elbows on the wall, she gazed out .... She was not the only one gazing. Across the narrow gorge of the street, on the roof of the building opposite her, stood a man who, like her, elbows on the parapet, head on his hands, stood gazing. And another one, and to the left of her another one; all over on the roofs black workers stood gazing, outside the rows of rooms on the roofs against the low walls, etched darkly against the fading light. During the day they wore the "boy's" uniform of unbleached calico, with red piping on the legs and sleeves, and they polished and they polished endlessly. But in the twilight they were men gazing over the city.
(Joubert 2002: 371-372)

4. "Do you think it was rape?"
"I wondered about that. I don't know. I said no, but I didn't kick him out. I could've if I'd wanted to. If it was rape, I allowed it."
(Joubert 2002: 148)

5. Count Gobineau, author of "Essay on the Inequality of Races (1853-1855)"; a text with founding status for European racial theory. It is generally accepted that Gobineau's ideas influenced those of Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, and this has given rise to the misapprehension that Gobineau was anti-Semitic. In fact he was not

– he classified Jews as Caucasians. He identifies race as the determining motor of history, and claims that all civilisations have been initiated by Aryans, but for the most part by contracting "fertile marriages" with other races (Young 1995: 99).

6. "A bird can't make a home with a fish, my girl. There's no common ground."
(Jacobs 2001: 12)

"Marriage is about compatibility. There's no compatibility when there's disagreement about God, when you argue about how children will be raised, whether you go to mosque or to church. In the Bible it says, *be ye not unequally yoked*. In our Qur'an, *do not associate with a disbeliever*."
(Jacobs 2001: 198)

7. In ancient times, conquerors destroyed the will of those whom they conquered by impregnating the women. It is an ancient form of genocide .... The Romans and the Sabine women, the Nazis and Jewish women in the concentration camps, the Soviets in Poland, Israeli soldiers and Palistinian refugees, white South African policemen and black women.
You conquer a nation by bastardising its children.
(Dangor 2001: 189)

8. They inhabit a sherbet world where exoticism turns them on, and they turn a blind eye to those teensy-weensy, less pleasant things that you don't see on the brochures. Such as, if they marry these men they might just be deprived of their human rights, or that far more Muslim men than we'd like to admit are (a) wife beaters, or (b) wife collectors, or (c) mini-dictators in their own homes.
(Magardie 2004: 9)

9. "Het die woelige gegewe die Moslem-gemeenskap dan so skrams geraak!"
(Abrahams 2002: 31)

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