

Paradise Regained and Lost Again: South African Literature in the Post-apartheid Era*

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Summary

This article surveys South African prose in English and Afrikaans published after 1994. With the first democratic elections a new era began. The political and social changes are obviously reflected in the prose that was written in the previous decade. There are striking thematic parallels between the literary works in English and Afrikaans. The demise of apartheid led to a euphoric mood but very soon a new realism set in. A number of works appeared in which history was rewritten. Not only the immediate apartheid past but also the earlier history of South Africa is highlighted. The past is demythologised and the previously hidden sides of history are exposed. Moreover a lot of attention is paid to the new South Africa. The old parameters are no longer valid. The whites have lost their political power. This realisation often leads to a crisis of identity. New rulers also introduce new customs. The changes which have taken place are not always regarded as improvements. And then there are all the other seemingly insoluble problems such as the crime wave and the aids epidemic. But these problems are sometimes seen as catalysts for change as they can bring the races closer together. Both in English and in Afrikaans prose the hope is expressed that the transformation process will ultimately lead to a better South Africa.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel skets 'n oorsig van die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelstalige en Afrikaanstalige prosa wat na 1994 gepubliseer is. Met die eerste demokratiese verkiesings het 'n nuwe era aangebreek. Die politieke en maatskaplike ontwikkelings kry natuurlik hulle beslag in die prosa van die afgelope dekade. Daar is ook duidelike tematiese ooreenkomste tussen die Engelstalige en die Afrikaanstalige werke. Die einde van apartheid het aanleiding gegee tot 'n euforiese stemming maar al gou is die eerste entoesiasme getemper. Daar het baie werke verskyn waarin die geskiedenis herskryf is. Nie net die onmiddellike apartheidsverlede het onder die loep gekom nie maar ook die vroeëre geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika. Die verlede is gedemitologiseer en die verborge kante daarvan belig. Baie aandag is ook bestee aan die nuwe Suid-Afrika. Die ou parameters het hul geldigheid verloor. Vir die blankes het dit die verlies van hul politieke mag beteken. Dit gee dikwels aanleiding tot 'n identiteitskrisis. Maar nuwe regeerders bring ook nuwe gewoontes. Die veranderinge wat plaasgevind het, is nie altyd verbeterings nie. En dan is daar nog al die ander probleme waarmee Suid-Afrika te kampe het, soos die toenemende kriminaliteit en die Vigs-epidemie. Maar juis hierdie probleme kan 'n katalisator wees vir verandering omdat dit die rasse nader aan mekaar kan bring. Die hoop bly sowel in die Engelstalige as in die Afrikaanstalige werke bestaan dat die transformasieproses 'n beter Suid-Afrika tot gevolg sal hê.

1 A New Beginning

S.A. 27 April 1994 is a collection of the reactions of black and white writers to the first democratic elections in South Africa. Forty-five writers each sent in a contribution either in English or Afrikaans. Evidently, the general mood was one of incredulity, relief and happiness. A new dawn had broken. Apartheid and white domination had come to an abrupt end. The realisation that all the hardship and suffering had not been in vain fills Tatamkhulu Afrika and his female companion with joy:

“It is done”, she whispers, “we have walked the last mile!” Later still, I help her to the bed. We are careful with each other as though we hold a fine glass, and my heart sings. Yes, against all odds, my heart sings.

(Afrika in Brink 1994: 13)

André Brink describes the electrifying atmosphere on election day as follows:

We have all become members of one great extended family. Black, brown, white: in the course of this one day a quiet miracle has been taking place. A mere week ago some people have begun to barricade themselves in their homes, expecting a wave of violence to swamp them today. What is happening here is the opposite. We are discovering, through the basic sharing of this experience, that we are all South Africans. It is as simple and as momentous as that. Most of us will return to our separate existences tomorrow. In the commotion of the coming days, months, years, much of this day may fade. But one thing we cannot, ever, forget: the knowledge of having been here together; the awareness of a life, a country, a humanity we share. By achieving what has seemed impossible we have caught a glimpse of the possible.

(Brink 1994: 34)

A fully and truly multiracial and multicultural nation seemed to be in the making. This is symbolically expressed in a number of literary works in the arrival of a baby, for example in Johnny Masilela’s short story “The Day the Rain Clouds Returned” (in Oliphant 1999) or in Elsa Joubert’s novel *Die reise van Isobelle* (1995) (*Isobelle’s Journey*)¹.

However, the euphoria surrounding the election did not last long. In 1995 a follow-up book *27 April een jaar later/One Year Later* appeared. While in its predecessor the elation and the high expectations had made expressions of sober-mindedness and scepticism look unseemly, a new realism had set in. There was a growing sense that little progress toward a more egalitarian society had been made and even that history was repeating itself. The slow pace of change, the crime and the violence, the corruption, the dire state of the economy and a new form of racism, this time in the guise of affirmative action,

all conspired to make the initial optimism suddenly look very naïve. In his contribution Abraham de Vries writes the following:

Nou huiwer ek soms en wonder: het die patrone van magmisbruik, van korrupsie, van dom oneerlikheid, van politieke opportunisme, van geweld, van gewone mense se leed en lyding dan werklik so dieselfde gebly? Leef ek my lewe twee maal oor? [Now I sometimes shudder and wonder: have the patterns of abuse of power, of corruption, of stupid dishonesty, of political opportunism, of violence, of the pain and suffering of ordinary people really stayed so much the same? Do I live my life twice over?]

(De Vries in Brink 1995b: 51)

And Tatamkhulu Afrika gives the following damning assessment of the progress, which was made or, more correctly, the complete lack of it: “*We have not even taken the first step in the journey to the Promised Land. There is not even a glimmer of the dawn of the Golden Age for which we have struggled*” (Afrika in Brink 1995b: 12).

The pendulum had swung from optimism to caution and even to downright pessimism. How is the changing mood of the nation and the current state of affairs in South African society reflected in the prose published after 1994 and how do Afrikaans and English, black and white authors look upon “the state of our humanity, at this crucial juncture where a variety of cultures and languages and talents are groping towards intimations of a larger South African identity” (Brink 1994: 8)?

In what follows I provide an overview of the sociopolitical trends in South African prose after 1994. I am fully aware of the numerous pitfalls of and problems with such an approach. The reader should realise that it is impossible to survey all the texts or to do justice to the complex texture of the individual short stories or novels within the scope of a single article. Generalisations too cannot be avoided. My purpose is to show how the developments in South African society after 1994 are reflected in the works of prose written during this period. Through the identification of trends a useful framework can be created within which the individual text can be situated and interpreted. As its sociopolitical nature is perhaps the most determining characteristic of South African literature an attempt to discern trends and to sketch a broader picture seems to be justifiable and might provide some valuable insights.

2 Revisiting the Past

2.1 Black is Beautiful

The transition from white to black rule heralded a monumental change. The old parameters had suddenly lost their significance. Especially the Afrikaners found themselves in uncharted territory as the nationalist ideology they had believed in for so long had become totally untenable. They had to redefine their position vis-à-vis the other racial groups and to come to terms with their loss of power and with their relegation to the status of a minority group. In Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* [Triumph] (1994), the name of the white residential area which was built on the ruins of the multiracial Sophiatown, the utter bankruptcy of the Afrikaner ideology is made shockingly clear. The novel's only redeeming feature is that the grotesquely dysfunctional Benade family is prepared to accept Nelson Mandela as the country's first black president.

As they could not offer a way out any longer the Afrikaner traditions and values were thrown into the dustbin of history. With the demise of apartheid it is no wonder that in a considerable number of Afrikaans literary texts the past is demythologised and reinterpreted. Especially the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) comes under close scrutiny. On the occasion of the commemoration of its centenary a penetrating reappraisal of this white man's war was undertaken especially within the Afrikaner community.

The new writing about the Anglo-Boer War turns the bitter conflict between the Afrikaners and the British into a new, perhaps equally ferocious, battleground, this time for the soul of the Afrikaner. It is an obvious choice of terrain because the Anglo-Boer War is, together with the Great Trek of 1836, one of the seminal events in Afrikaner history. The loss of the war was an unmitigated disaster for the Afrikaners. Their striving for freedom and independence, of which the Great Trek is the embodiment, was once again frustrated. Nonetheless, a new sense of nationhood, bred in adversity, would allow the Afrikaner people to rise as a phoenix from the ashes. The defeat and the attendant resentment formed the impulse for the development of a strategy which allowed the Afrikaners to regain a dominant position in all spheres of life. The memory of past injustices is used to create and consolidate Afrikaner solidarity and, once power is obtained, to justify and defend Afrikaner rule at all costs. The loss of the Anglo-Boer War is used as a signpost to indicate that the Afrikaner people cannot allow something similar to happen again; it would lead to their destruction. Power is equated with survival.

The older generation, brought up on a diet of nationalist propaganda, unwaveringly believed in the righteousness of the Afrikaner cause. The younger generation no longer obligingly accepts the traditional values of the

Afrikaner people. It has come to the realisation that the nationalist ideology has led the Afrikaner to the brink of the abyss. In a considerable number of contemporary Afrikaans texts the traditional interpretation of the Anglo-Boer War is thoroughly debunked. This is the case in the novels *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* [In Search of General Mannetjies Mentz] (1998) by Christoffel Coetzee; *Verliesfontein* [Spring of Loss] (1998) by Karel Schoeman and *Niggie* [Little Niece] (2002) by Ingrid Winterbach.

Apart from exposing the ideological use that has been made of their history, as they have done since the 1970s, Afrikaner authors have also directed a spotlight at its darker corners. In André Brink's novel *Sandkastele* (1995) (*Imaginations of Sand*) white history is not only given a female but also an interracial twist as the founding mother of the family dynasty is Kamma/Maria, a Khoikhoi woman. In a number of novels about early white settlement at the Cape, such as *Eilande* (2002) (*Islands*) by Dan Sleigh and *Pieterella van die Kaap* [Pieterella of the Cape] (2000) by Dalene Matthee the interracial mixing which was a feature of embryonic Cape society is not shied away from. *Krotoa-Eva* (1999) by Trudie Bloem and *The Slave Book* (1998) by Rayda Jacobs touch upon the same subject matter.

As a result racial barriers are broken down and the absurdity of racial segregation is exposed. Moreover, by tainting and diluting their whiteness, the European colonisers can, through their long neglected African ancestors, claim a birthright to the continent. This is where they belong; this is their home. In the poem "Rympies op 'yt'" [Short Rhymes Ending on "Ayt"] by Riana Scheepers she states: "in hierdie land/groot en wyd/sal ek wees:/boesmankafferhotnotafrikanermeid" [In this land, big and wide I shall be: Sanblackkhoikhoiafrikanermaid] (2001: 77). Similarly the Afrikaans language is explicitly positioned as an African language because it originated on African soil.

The telling of new and sometimes unsavoury stories about the past also lies at the core of the magic realistic novel *Die swye van Mario Salviati* [The Silence of Mario Salviati] (2000) by Etienne van Heerden. History is revisited and a number of dark family secrets, which have mainly to do with the mixed ancestry of some of the characters, get unearthed. The novel also points to the crucial role of the artist in the coming into being of a new society.

However, not only the whites, but also the blacks have to reinvent themselves and their past. *David's Story* (2000) by Zoë Wicomb could be a counterpart to *Die swye van Mario Salviati*. In Wicomb's novel too the past and the present get inexorably intertwined. David Dirkse is a freedom fighter who has to try to make sense of his life as an individual, a male and a Griqua, during South Africa's transition to majority rule. The novel is also very much about the representation, or lack of it, of the female voice and the impossibility of accurately rendering it. For Etienne van Heerden the writer is a magician:

through his fiction he can conjure up a new reality. Zoë Wicomb's ghost writer on the other hand is defeated by her task: "I wash my hands of this story" (Wicomb 2000: 213). Words fail her in her effort to write David's story.

Apartheid had effectively cut the blacks from their roots. The racist policies of the government foreclosed a positive appraisal of one's ethnic background and traditions. With the installation of a black government, black pride was restored. The burial in 2002 of the remains of Saartje Baartman, the Khoikhoi woman who was put on public display in England and France in the early nineteenth century and whose dissected body parts were exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, signals the rebirth of an ethnic consciousness and a re-awakened cultural and historical awareness. According to Matty Cairncross, a member of the Khoisan community, Saartje Baartman is a

symbol of our history that's been taken away from us. We have a rich history and culture, which needs to be revived and shown to the world. We need to hear more stories about forgotten people like the Khoisan in books and theatre to correct the imbalances created by the previous system of apartheid.

(BBC News 2002)

Saartje Baartman thus becomes the symbol of a people's lost memory.

As in *David's Story* and *Die swye van Mario Salviati* Zake Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) explores the relationship between the past and the present. The novel is set in post-apartheid South Africa but also delves into the history of the Xhosa people. The historical episodes which are recounted centre around the futile resistance of the Xhosas to white encroachment. Despite the fact that in Zake Mda's novel a bitter, age-long feud still splits the rural community into traditionalists and modernisers, it is stressed that the past should not be forgotten and that old traditions and customs are still valuable. They can be a source of pride and even form the basis for small-scale development, which will benefit the whole community. The novel *'n Stringetjie blou krale* [A Small String of Blue Beads] (2000) by E.K.M. Dido also deals with the problem of belonging and hence of identity. The main character, a coloured woman, has repressed her black roots. Only by accepting her blackness can she find peace. The topic of colour and identity is also dealt with in the short story "The Divine One" by Colin Jiggs Smuts (in Oliphant 1999) and in the novel *Klapperhaar slaap nie stil nie* [Coir Does Not Sleep Softly] (1999) by Kirby van der Merwe.

It can be no surprise that there is renewed interest in and even celebration of life in one's own community. While in *Kafka's Curse* (1997) by Achmat Dangor the coloured and Muslim Omar Khan changes his identity into the Jewish Oscar Kahn in order to "try for white", Rayda Jacobs's novels *Sachs Street* (2001) and *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003) and a number of short

stories from *Postcards from South Africa* (2004) are firmly set in the Muslim world. Aziz Hassim in *The Lotus People* (2004) and Imraan Coovadia in *The Wedding* (2001) portray life in the Indian community. In *Shadows of the Past* (1996) Jimmy Matyu paints an affectionate picture of Jabavu Road, New Brighton, a black township outside Port Elizabeth when life, in spite of the ever harsher apartheid laws, had the innocence and tranquility of one of the paintings by George Pemba. In Afrikaans literature Elias P. Nel in *Iets goeds uit Verneukpan?* [Something Good from Verneukpan?] (1998) and *Mafoiing* (2001) and Karel Benjamin in *Staan uit die water uit!* [Get Out of the Water!] (1996) and *Pastoor Scholls trek sy toga uit* [Reverend Scholls Takes off His Gown] (1999) provide a humoristic, anecdotal and ultimately uplifting account of life in the coloured community.

Moreover, a lot of attention is paid to the peoples who were nearly wiped out by the white settlers. They are the forgotten voices, the silent victims and witnesses in the historical record books. With the controversial “Miscast” exhibition, which was organised in Cape Town in 1996, the curator, Pippa Skotness, had the explicit aim of exposing the way in which history had dealt with the Khoisan. The exhibition denounced more in particular the dehumanisation they suffered at the hands of the colonisers and anthropologists. Skotness showed that in the past the Khoisan were “cast out of time, out of politics and out of history – miscast” (Skotness 1996: 7). In recent years numerous books have appeared about the San and their cultural products. Especially their rock art and mythical folk tales have been extensively reproduced and commented upon.

The historical novels *Verkenning* [Exploration] (1996) by Karel Schoeman and *Eyes of the Sky* (1996) by Rayda Jacobs describe the tragic fate of the San. The monologue by a captive San woman, with which *Verkenning* ends, is a searing indictment of white colonialism. The present-day situation of the few remaining San also leaves much to be desired. Novels such as *Die spoorsnyer* [The Tracker] (1994) by Piet van Rooyen and *Die laaste dans* [The Last Dance] (1998) by Jan Vermeulen depict their miserable and doomed lives. However, sometimes they are viewed as an idyllic people, living in perfect harmony with their surroundings. Willem D. Kotzé’s *T’sats van die Kalahari* [T’sats of the Kalahari], (1994) *T’sats, grootste van die groot jagters* [T’sats, Greatest of the Great Hunters] (1995) and *T’sats se wraak* [The Revenge of T’sats] (1996) are adventure stories depicting the primitive exoticism of the San. The San’s intimate contact with nature allows them to remain unspoilt human beings who have direct access to the world’s stored wisdom. In novels such as *Die olifantjagters* [The Elephant Hunters] (1997) and *Gif* [Poison] (2001) by Piet van Rooyen and *Like Water in Wild Places* (2000) by Pamela Jooste the white characters are guided by the San. Through them they gain fundamental insights into the essence of life.

2.2 The Memory of Apartheid

Obviously the most glaring silences in South African history have to do with apartheid and its dire consequences. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to exorcise the past and to facilitate the coming into being of a rainbow nation. Whether it has achieved its purpose, will remain a matter for debate for years to come. The novel *Pouoogmot* [Peacockeye Moth] (1997) by Rita Gilfillan, which has the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as its backdrop, expresses the hope that the walls between the different races will come down. New bonds have to be forged on the basis of the full acceptance of the other. That the truth can be elusive and its discovery a harrowing experience forms the subject matter of *Red Dust* (2000) by Gillian Slovo. In *Country of My Skull* (1998) Antjie Krog gives a personal account of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which she followed as the head of the reporting team of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Antjie Krog is not a distant but an emotionally involved observer. The perpetrators were her people. *Country of My Skull* is not only a confrontation with and a denunciation of an extremely painful and traumatising past but also a quest for healing. Antjie Krog is of the opinion that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done an excellent job:

Against a flood crashing with the weight of a brutalizing past on to new usurping politics, the Commission has kept alive the idea of a common humanity. Painstakingly it has chiselled a way beyond racism and made space for all of our voices. For all its failures, it carries a flame of hope that makes me proud to be from here, of here.

(Krog 2000: 278)

The realisation of a shared humanity, despite a history of racial discrimination and brutality, creates according to Antjie Krog on South African soil the conditions which can lead to the establishment of a tolerant and humane society.

Apartheid comes under close scrutiny. In autobiographical or biographical form the struggle against the Nationalist Government and the living conditions in the apartheid state are documented in amongst others Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) and its counterpart James Gregory's *Goodbye Bafana: Nelson Mandela, My Prisoner, My Friend* (1995); Elinor Sisulu's *Walter & Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (2003); Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976* (2001); Mamphela Ramphele's *A Life* (1995); Max du Preez's *Pale Native: Memories of a Renegade Reporter*, and Carl Niehaus's *Fighting for Hope* (1994). In *Deliver us from Evil* (1997) Johnny Masilela recounts his childhood on a tobacco farm in a conservative

Afrikaner community. In *Shirley, Goodness & Mercy: A Childhood Memoir* (2004) Chris van Wyk evokes his youth in a coloured township in the sixties and seventies. Other books focus on life under apartheid. In *The Hostel-dwellers* (1998) Rrekgetsi Chimeloane describes what life was like among the migrant mineworkers in the seventies. Charles Van Onselen's monumental *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894-1985* (1996) vividly portrays life and living conditions in a rural environment.

In fiction too the apartheid past is recorded. The three novels by A.H.M. Scholtz *Vatmaar* [Just Take] (1995), *Langsaan die vuur* [Beside the Fire] (1996) and *Afdraai* [Turn-off] (1998) cover the whole of the twentieth century and focus on the impact of an increasingly hardening apartheid system on the coloured community. *Die storie van Monica Peters* [The Story of Monica Peters] (1996) by E.K.M. Dido is about the love between two ANC activists, the white Eric Richmond and the black Monica Peters. His activism costs Eric his life but the downfall of apartheid and the triumphant reception of Nelson Mandela in Cape Town signal that his sacrifice was not in vain. Elsa Joubert's *Die reise van Isobelle (Isobelle's Journey)*; Etienne van Heerden's *Kikoejoe* [Kikuyu] (1996) and Corlia Fourie's *Die oop deur* [The Open Door] (1996); to name just a few titles, look at apartheid from an Afrikaner but critical perspective. Apartheid and its attendant mentality are also recalled in English novels such as *Embrace* (2000) by Mark Behr; *Frankie and Stankie* (2003) by Barbara Trapido; *A Blade of Grass* (2003) by Lewis DeSoto; *Other Secrets* (2000) by Farida Karodia; *We Shall not Weep* (2002) by Johnny Masilela; *Heaven Forbid* (2004) by Christopher Hope; *Karoo Boy* (2004) by Troy Blacklaws and in the romanticising novels *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter* (1998) and *Frieda and Min* (1999) by Pamela Jooste. In the short story collection *My Voice is Under Control Now* (1999) by Peter Horn a number of stories deal with the madness engendered by apartheid in both blacks and whites.

Of course the actual struggle against apartheid is also a prominent topic in a number of literary works. The fight for freedom is presented as legitimate and just. Tatamkhulu Afrika's novel *The Innocents* (1994) is set in the Muslim community. Yusuf is the leader of a small-time terrorist cell which operates in such an amateurish fashion that it does not qualify for support from the People's Army. Nevertheless, Yusuf remains unreservedly committed to the struggle. The novel is a finely drawn psychological study not only of Yusuf, who loses his innocence but keeps his integrity, but also of interpersonal relationships under straining circumstances.

In *Underground People* (2002) by Lewis Nkosi, Cornelius Molapo, a poet, dancer and political orator is sent to Tabanyane in a distant homeland on a mission to organise a campaign of military resistance. Against the odds he is so successful that he even dies as a hero. Not so much the liberation struggle

but the shenanigans going on behind the scenes are highlighted. No-one can be trusted, not even the comrades-in-arms. Everyone seems to have his or her own hidden agenda. No tactic is considered unfair in the effort of gaining the upper hand and of achieving self-promotion. Nkosi sketches brilliant cameos of his motley cast of characters. *Underground People* is a very convincing and engrossing human drama. Both Nkosi and Afrika take the freedom of criticising the liberation movement for its self-serving arrogance and cold-blooded calculation. In Mangone Serote's novel *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002) the liberation struggle and the violent clashes in the black townships form the backdrop for a debate about how to bring about a just South Africa. The striving for justice in society is interwoven with the individual's search for love and happiness. A just society and personal fulfilment are seen as complementary.

3 The Post-apartheid Era

3.1 Remnants of the Past

As a result of irresistible internal and external pressures the National Party, under the leadership of F.W. de Klerk, released Nelson Mandela on 11 February 1990 and started negotiations with the ANC. On 10 May 1994 Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first black president. Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Nelson Mandela became the nation-builder par excellence. He strove tirelessly for reconciliation and he extended a hand of friendship to the white community. In December 2000 Carl Niehaus reciprocated by launching the "Home for All" campaign. All white South Africans were asked to sign a declaration in which they recognise the damage which was done by apartheid and its lasting consequences. According to the organising committee the whites have the moral duty to try and do away with inequalities ("ongelykhede te probeer regstel"). Through supporting the empowerment of the underprivileged communities ("die bemagtiging van benadeelde gemeenskappe te ondersteun") (Niehaus 2000) they can make a contribution to reconciliation. The campaign was not successful. Most whites did not see the need for self-humiliation, self-blame or redress.

Mandela's plea for forgiveness is echoed by Dido in *Die storie van Monica Peters*: "Onthou, geen haat of wraak nie, laat regverdigheid seëvier" [Remember, no hatred or revenge, let justice be victorious] (1996: 12) and in the foreword of *Langsaan die vuur* by A.H.M. Scholtz. However, forgiving is not as easy as it sounds. In the short story "Wintervoorraad" [Winter Stock] (1997) by Abraham de Vries, Abigail, the coloured manager of a supermarket, one

day catches sight in the shop of the headmaster who in the apartheid days sent her away from the white school where she was a pupil. It ruined her youth. She considers confronting him but she decides against it when she hears him tell a coloured customer that he is so proud that the school now has a coloured prefect to which he adds that he has always tried to change the system from within. The headmaster's cringing attempts to justify himself are ample redress for Abigail: "Van al die heldhaftigheid sal hy nog baie moet vertel. Hy het nog ver om te kruip" [He will still have to recount his heroism very often. He still has far to crawl] (De Vries 1997: 43). In "Dictator" by Ahmed Essop (in Oliphant 1999) a corresponding situation is dealt with when the once dictatorial school inspector gets his comeuppance. In "The Finger of God" by Graeme Friedman (in Oliphant 1999) a black civil servant is haunted by the memories of the torturing he had to undergo. It makes even talking to a white petrol attendant into a traumatic experience. The main character in *Bitter Fruit* (2001) by Achmat Dangor is Silas Ali. He has a high-ranking position in a ministry and has to liaise with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When one day he bumps into Lieutenant Du Boise, a security policeman who raped his wife in his presence, a crisis ensues. The cracks in his marriage are exposed. While Silas and his wife drift further apart until they decide to go their own separate ways, their son kills Du Boise, whom he suspects of being his father. The breakdown of Silas's marriage and his inability to establish a meaningful relationship with his son are indicative of the existential loneliness of man. His friends and his wife's family, his position as a minister's right-hand man and the bleak and violent city environment all add to the gloomy, depressing atmosphere. Life ultimately seems to be nothing more than crisis management. Everyone has to carry his own burdens and has to try and survive as well as possible.

Not only the victims, but also the perpetrators of atrocities during the apartheid years are not able to shake off the ghosts of the past. The fear of their past catching up with them is almost palpable. In the short story "Die verlede lê nog voor" [The Past Still Lies Ahead] (1998) by Izak de Vries, Jan Coetzee lives a contented and carefully planned life. He is happily married and his future looks rosy. Everything would be nicely under control were it not for his fear that he would be called up to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for misdeeds committed during his last army stint. His dark past, about which his wife knows nothing, hangs as a sword of Damocles above his head. Some perpetrators just cannot live with the atrocities they carried out. "Souvenirs" by Peter Rule (in Oliphant 1999) and "Not Born of a Mother or Father" by Peter Horn (1999) are short stories respectively about a soldier and a black youth who commit suicide out of remorse for the cruelties they committed.

In the short story "Ons moet vir jou 'n bees slag" [We Have to Sacrifice a

Cow for You] (1998) by Izak De Vries, Johannes is haunted by the atrocities he carried out in army uniform. Ultimately he subjects himself to a Zulu cleansing ritual in which he confesses his guilt and is forgiven by the black collective: “Dit is so maklik. *Phosa ngemva*, sit dit agter jou neer. Dit is verby. Die heling kan begin” (De Vries 1998: 89). [This is so easy. *Phosa ngemva*, put it behind you. It is over. Healing can start.] Johannes has found redemption.

3.2 New Rulers

The whites now live in a different country. The black government is a *fait accompli*. However, the whites react to it in different ways. Some embrace the new order with enthusiasm, some take some convincing, others are adamantly opposed to it as the short stories “Tandeka” by Eben Venter (2000) and “Die laaste winter” [The Last Winter] by Izak De Vries (1998) make clear. A minority of Afrikaners fanatically clings to the heroic past of their tribe. For them the similarities between the past and the present are striking. Indeed, once again the Afrikaners are threatened by an overpowering enemy as they were in the Anglo-Boer War. This is the argument developed in “Boeta, wat nou?” [Brother, What Now?] (in Ferreira 2001) by Christiaan Bakkes. The changes are not always tangible but they are nonetheless sweeping as the short stories “Wesenlike werklikheid” [Fundamental Reality] by Rachele Greeff (2001); “Rose” by Norma Kitson or “A New Dispensation” by Sandra Lee Braude (both in Oliphant 1999) point out. The rules have changed although not always for the better as “Lady, That’s the Rules” by Rayda Jacobs (in Oliphant 1999) intimates in humoristic fashion. In the short story collection *Aan die ander kant van die stad* [On the Other Side of Town] (2003) Herman Wasserman draws a vivid picture of what it means to live as a white person in a post-apartheid cityscape. K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) depict black urban life in all its shocking reality. *Thirteen Cents* deals with a thirteen-year-old street-kid who has to try and survive as best he can. He is involved in gangs, homosexual activity and gets badly beaten up regularly. Life is utterly depressing. The city in all its harshness also forms the backdrop in Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001).

The choice the whites are faced with is highlighted in the conflict between idealism and disillusionment which lies at the core of *The Good Doctor* (2003) by Damon Galgut. After a painful divorce Frank Eloff works in a hospital in the capital of one of the former black homelands. The hospital is neglected and lacks patients. Everybody is keeping up appearances. One day a young doctor, Laurence Waters, arrives. He is an idealist who wants to reach out to the local communities but only gets lukewarm cooperation from his colleagues. After Laurence’s mysterious disappearance and the transfer of the black administra-

tor, Frank takes over the running of the hospital. Everything continues in much the same lethargic way as before. The novel does not present a positive picture of the new South Africa. The new rulers seem only interested in their personal advancement and enrichment. They do not take any responsibility with the result that everything is allowed to deteriorate. And neither does the cynical Frank Eloff, who is quite content to let things fall apart. He does not have a stake in the new South Africa.

The whites clearly no longer call the shots. While before they could behave with near impunity, they are now no longer above the law. They are called to account for their irresponsible and brutal behaviour as the short story “Langnaweek op Rietkuil” [Long Weekend at Reed Hole] (1998) by P.J. Bosman indicates. The short story “Regstellende aksie” [Affirmative Action] (1997) by Herman Wasserman sketches an ironic reversal of roles when a black charwoman pays her white employer for a bout of casual sex. Something similar happens in a scene from the short story “Postcards from South Africa” by Rayda Jacobs when a black taxi driver returns the fare to a destitute white who is unemployed.

Only occasionally do the whites manage to get their own back. In the short story “My naam is Anna” [My Name is Anna] by Anna Kemp (in Ferreira 2001), Anna Labuschagne uses the pen-name Anna Mofokeng, obviously a black surname, in a short story competition organised by a supermarket chain. She wins it. Of course the organisers expect the laureate to be a black woman. When the white Anna Labuschagne turns up, they are taken aback but she gets her prize nonetheless. For once the new ruling class has been beaten at its own game. Ironically, Anna’s story of her life would not be different from that of any black woman.

3.3 New Customs

Black rule seems to usher in the end of European traditions and values despite the fact that the whites are constantly called upon to provide jobs and financial and material assistance to destitute blacks. The short stories “Extension Lead” by Charles Fryer and “’n Dag in die wingerd” [A Day in the Vineyard] by Helen de Kock (both in Ferreira 2001) deal with this topic. The short story “Die Aandsakkie” [The Evening Bag] by Elsa Joubert (in Ferreira 2001) suggests the end of a European way of life as even going to the concert has become a risky undertaking. Moreover, the confrontation with the harsh realities of Africa, in the guise of the homeless black street-children who rob the concert-goers in the foyer of the concert hall during the interval, makes it impossible to withdraw into the cosy cocoon of a Western lifestyle. An era has gone for good.

However, much more is at stake than the luxury of enjoying the products of

Western civilisation, the moral pressure to extend a helping hand or the imposition of new norms. The restoration of or reparation for lost land and other ownership rights has become a sensitive and contentious issue. Recently a South African court has ruled that the impoverished Nama community of the Richtersveld, near the Namibian border, had a legitimate claim to the ownership of the land they had been forced to leave in the middle of the nineteenth century, including the mineral rights to the lucrative diamond mines at Alexander Bay on the north-west coast. Ironically both the state owned mining company and the black government opposed the claim, building their case on the same arguments as those used by the white government to chase the Nama off their land. The San too are reclaiming their traditional hunting grounds and so are other dispossessed and resettled communities. In *I Loved That Place Tjoubogas* (2004) Martin Opperl recounts the idyllic youth he spent on a farm near Springbok. Eventually through the machinations of the white Town Board the coloured family lost the farm in the early apartheid years. Now the land lies derelict and Opperl is trying to reclaim ownership of the farm through the Land Claims Court. In *The Memory of Stones* (2000) by Mandla Langa a black community has been given its land back to the chagrin of a local black thug who wants to rule the community as his fiefdom. He does not succeed because he encounters the spirited resistance of the daughter of the chief who with the help of some unlikely associates manages to hold onto the land. In the novel Langa fiercely criticises the goings-on at a local and national level after 1994.

Not always are the land and other ownership claims settled via a court procedure or the parliamentary system. The violence against and the murders of white farmers have skyrocketed after 1994. In *Midlands* (2002) Jonny Steinberg investigates the killing of a white farmer's son in the Midlands of Natal. He lays bare a history of friction between the different landowners and the adjoining black community, which inevitably becomes the chronicle of a death foretold. *Midlands* describes the dark side of present-day South African society. South Africa finds itself in a moral vacuum in which an all-out fight for land is taking place. The novel *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee caused quite a stir for its unflattering portrayal of extreme black ruthlessness. The changed power relationships and the repossession of land are once again central issues. While owning and living on a farm used to be seen by the whites and especially by the Afrikaners as possessing a piece of paradise, this myth is completely undermined in Coetzee's novel.

A similar situation is sketched in "Kompos" [Compost] by Henning Pieterse (in Ferreira 2001). Together with an accomplice the garden boy one night breaks into his employer's home. The latter is battered to death and his wife, Mariana, raped. Mariana gets pregnant, presumably kills the baby at birth and buries the corpse in the garden. When the garden boy – still the same one –

accidentally discovers the tiny body, he digs it deeper into the soil where it will become compost. South Africa has always been and will continue to be a breeding ground of violence and death. It is a natural cycle, which apparently cannot be broken.

It is no wonder that the whites feel, quite literally, under threat. The endemic violence casts a dark pall over their lives. Houses get burgled, innocents attacked, injured and sometimes killed, women raped, cars hijacked. The feeling of danger is clear and present as the humoristic short story "Free Range" by David Medalie (in Oliphant 1999) or "Julie and the Axeman" by Finuala Dowling (in Van Wyk 2003) suggest. Moreover, the violence is often gratuitous, wanton and vicious. The whites are forced to barricade themselves in their houses and even there they are not safe. No-one can be trusted anymore. This leads to a permanent state of alertness and fear. The short stories "Vals alarms" [False Alarms] by Corlia Fourie and "Sjuut" [Shush] by Erika Murray-Theron (both in Ferreira 2001) deal with this subject. As a result the divide between the different races seems to have become wider than ever.

In a lot of texts the current crime wave in South Africa is a recurring theme, for example in Rachelle Greeff's *Merke van die nag* [Marks of the Night], and in a large number of short stories from *Kruis en dwars* [Criss-cross] (2001) edited by Jeannette Ferreira, a collection of short stories about post-apartheid South African society, to which 37 Afrikaans writers made a contribution. In *Postcards from South Africa* (2004) by Rayda Jacobs quite a few short stories also deal with crime and violence and so does "There is too Much Sky" by Moira Lovell (in Van Wyk 2003). Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* (1998) too analyses the consequences of a pervasive climate of fear and violence.

Whereas in the apartheid years the blacks were portrayed as the victims of white racism and institutionalised violence, now the tables are completely turned. The whites are no longer depicted as diehard racists but as well-meaning idealists such as the married couple in "Rooi kombersie" [Little Red Blanket] (2001) by Rachelle Greeff, or as caring people who are concerned about their black employees. Moreover, the victims of black aggression are often innocent children or defenceless women such as the medical doctor who works in a hospital which serves the black community in "Wit" [White] by Amerie van Straaten (in Ferreira 2001).

In their desperation, which is fuelled by the fact that the police are seen to be powerless to reign in the violence, the whites are sometimes driven to take the law into their own hands. In the short story "Manus was 'n sagte man" [Manus was a Gentle Man] by Margaret Bakkes (in Ferreira 2001) Manus, a farmer, shoots the black murderer of his son. If he had done this in the apartheid days he would have been branded an incorrigible racist. Now Manus's revenge is presented as a just act of retribution for his son's senseless killing. A similar situation occurs in the short story "The Guilt" in *Postcards*

from *South Africa* (Jacobs 2004).

3.4 The More Things Change ...

South Africa has not overnight turned into a nonracial paradise. In some ways the country has not changed at all. There still is a wide gulf between the lives whites lead and those of blacks. “Cropping Angles” by Tania Spencer (in Oliphant 1999) is a case in point. In the short story “Mission Statement” from the collection *Loot and Other Stories* (2003) by Nadine Gordimer the white, female Assistant to the Administrator of an international aid agency has an affair with the black deputy director of a ministry. However, when he proposes to take her as one of his wives, she refuses. She does not accept that this

man of the present, free, could want to dredge up into his life some remnant from the past – how could he not have seen that it was offensive, surely to him as to her; how disguised the aversion.

(Gordimer 2003: 65)

Despite the fact that it is the agency’s role to respect the traditions of the host country there are bridges which cannot be crossed. Blacks and whites obviously have different value systems. The short story “Boek” [Book] by Riana Scheepers from her collection *Feeks* [Hellcat] (1999) makes a similar point.

Moreover, the patterns of black on black violence still persist as the short stories “Sipho se skoen” [Sipho’s Shoe] by Murray la Vita; “Extension Lead” by Charles Fryer (both in Ferreira 2001); “Walking the Road of Death” by Peter Horn (in Oliphant 1999) and a number of short stories in *Postcards from South Africa* (Jacobs 2004) make abundantly clear. And where the coloured community had put high hopes in the new black government it finds its situation basically unchanged. Under white rule the coloureds were considered too dark to be white, now they are seen as too white to be black. In the short stories “Doktor Olraait” [Doctor O.K.] by Peter Snyders and “Introspeksie” [Introspection] by Anthony Wilson (both in Ferreira 2001) the continuing discrimination of the coloureds is fiercely criticised.

However, sometimes the coloureds too behave as diehard racists. In the short story “Rough Landing” by Sandile Dikeni (in Oliphant 1999) the black narrator returns to South Africa and to his coloured girlfriend. In her he finds a cultural richness which complements his own upbringing:

A coloured, yes, because it is folly to deny the richness of her cultural otherness. It was an otherness that was healthy and willing to pour over into empty patches of my upbringing, breaking down my own traditional dogmas. Anotherness

willing to gulp the satiated calabash of my own black African humanity, even when it was more often than not crucified for an alleged inferiority.
(Dikeni in Oliphant 1999: 165)

However, he is not accepted by the family of his girlfriend because he is black. The coloured family has the same colour prejudices as the whites, as is suggested by the behaviour of the elderly white woman on the plane home.

4 Finding Common Ground

Frustration with the inefficiency of the black government, the lack of stability, the corruption, the poor economic prospects, the endemic violence, affirmative action programmes and the aids epidemic force the whites to re-examine their relationship with their country. Out of disappointment some decide to leave. In the short story “The Promised Land” (in Oliphant 1999) by Barry Levy the promised land is no longer South Africa but Australia. However, in a bitterly ironic twist of fate the daughter of the Jewish family who has emigrated to Australia’s Gold Coast is murdered in their flat by a burglar.

Others re-affirm their unswerving commitment to South Africa. This is the case in the short stories “Respyt” [Respite] by M.C. Botha and “Ek en die nuwe Suid-Afrika” [The New South Africa and I] by Cecile Cilliers (both in Ferreira 2001) and in the novel *Donkermaan* (2000) (*The Rights of Desire*) by André Brink. Through his platonic love for Tessa, his youthful lodger, Ruben, an unworldly librarian, becomes more attuned to the outside world, which is also represented by the ghost, Antje van Bengale, and his black household help, Margrieta. After an attack on Ruben and Tessa while they are out on a walk, the former realises that he has ignored the cries for help of his fellow citizens for all too long. *Donkermaan* brings a message of faith and of hope, in sharp contrast to J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Thus, paradoxically, the violence acts as a catalyst for change by creating the awareness that only through everyone’s positive involvement in society a turn for the better may be realised. The white community cannot escape its duty to the country.

By shocking people into action the violence can have a beneficial effect. The suffering and grief the violence causes can also bring the different races together. This is for example the case in “Nag van twee vroue” [Night of Two Women] by P.J. Bosman (in Ferreira 2001) in which a white and a black woman find consolation by sharing their grief and this despite the fact that the son of the black woman killed the white woman’s child and was later killed in the hot pursuit operation. In “Maar daar is” [But There Is], a short story by Riana Scheepers, an elderly white couple are attacked in their home. In shock the woman shuts herself off from the outside world. However, after a visit by

her old black charwoman, her depression starts lifting: “Daar is nie troos in hierdie land nie, weet die vrou, maar daar is.” [There is no consolation in this country, the woman knows, but there is.] (1999: 68) Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (1998) deals with a similar theme. The novel is based on the death of Amy Biehl. It describes from the perspective of the mother of the black perpetrator the circumstances which led to the killing. The black mother addresses the mother of Amy Biehl directly. Both mothers are victims; they share the same grief.

The differences between the races can be transcended and a bond of common humanity established. Blacks are not in any way different from whites. The short story “For Love” by Elleke Boehmer (in Oliphant 1999) is about Edward, the Zulu “helpmate”, on a smallholding. He commits suicide when his woman leaves him. The short story suggests that whites and blacks have exactly the same feelings, experience the same pain. Indeed, as soon as the racial prejudices are stripped away common ground can be found and a meaningful relationship established. This is the point in the humoristic short story “Meneer Visagie kom tot ’n besluit” [Mister Visagie Arrives at a Decision] by Izak de Vries (in Ferreira 2001). In the short story “The Piano” by James Matthews (in Oliphant 1999) Mrs Samuels, a woman living in a coloured township, is visited regularly by the white rent collector and watchdog for the Municipal Council. One day Miss Carlisle is accompanied by three other white women. She wants to show them Mrs Samuels’s house as it is one of the better kept ones. During the visit the piano becomes the focus of attention. To Mrs Samuels it symbolises what she wants for her children. One of the white women says that she too has a piano. She likes playing it, even though she is not very good at it: “Mrs Samuels looked at the speaker. Suddenly she was transformed from just another white face into an individual conversing with another, no barriers between them” (Matthews in Oliphant 1999: 151). Racial stereotypes, colour prejudices disappear as soon as the “other” is seen and treated as an individual, as soon as a personal relationship is established.

This is also very much the point in the Afrikaans and English prose works written by Antjie Krog. In her literary works written in Afrikaans and in English she tries to create the necessary conditions to make South Africa and the individual whole again. This is only possible when there is understanding, respect and equality. She firmly believes that transformation is possible and that a better society will emerge. In *A Change of Tongue* (2003) the writer returns to the farm near Kroonstad where she spent her youth. Antjie Krog wants to take stock of the transformation which has taken place in South Africa after the first democratic elections of 1994 and of the transformation processes she has gone through in her own life. South Africa has changed into a very different country from what it was. Of course finding new ways of living together is not plain sailing. Antjie Krog is under no illusion concerning the

difficulties South Africa is still facing. Whites and blacks are frequently at loggerheads. They have very different perceptions of the impact of the process of transformation, or the lack of it. While the whites are of the opinion that their world has been turned upside down, the blacks believe that nothing much is different, especially for the poor. Nevertheless, blacks and whites are beginning to establish a working relationship.

Zakes Mda shares Antjie Krog's hopes and dreams. His novel *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) goes back to the spate of Immorality Act contraventions in the Free State in the early 1970s. As a result a number of coloured children are born. The novel describes what happened to Niki, her daughter Popi and the latter's son Viliki. Finally Popi accepts her colouredness. With the subsiding of her anger, the rifts of the past are healed. The novel not only describes the history of black-white relationships but also deals with the black anti-apartheid struggle and the corruption of the new black elite. It thus provides an insight into and an overview of the past and the present.

Also in Farida Karodia's "Against an African Sky" ultimately a new dawn is breaking:

I gazed at the koppies in the distance and felt a surge of hope. Inexplicably my spirits soared and I felt as if a fog had lifted and that for the first time I was seeing clearly. Perhaps, I thought, the gods have now been appeased.

(Karodia 1997: 178)

Maybe both on a personal and a communal level paradise can be regained after all.

South African writers are dealing with the aftermath of apartheid and the revolutionary changes which have taken place in society. The picture presented of South African society in contemporary prose is definitely not a pretty one. The writers, white and black, Afrikaans and English, do not put a gloss over reality. The problems South Africa is faced with leave little or no room for naïve expressions of optimism. South Africa has not changed overnight into a multiracial and multicultural paradise. On the contrary, the initial waves of enthusiasm have been replaced by a tide of disillusionment. The bright colours of the rainbow nation have lost some of their lustre. South Africa is still experiencing a post-apartheid trauma. Nevertheless a number of literary works keep the hope of a more tranquil and prosperous future alive by stressing that all South Africans are united by a shared destiny and a common humanity. Afrikaans and English prose brings an accurate seismographic registration of the shockwaves affecting South African society. The writers' involvement with

their country remains as strong as ever. This commitment guarantees sometimes provocative, often gripping, but always thought provoking and moving literary works.

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

Note

1. All translations are mine.

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