Article

Sartre, Satire and Transcultural Affinity in Nthikeng Mohlele's *Revolutionaries' House*

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Abstract

Nthikeng Mohlele's eighth novel, *Revolutionaries' House* (2024), emerges in uncanny synchrony with South Africa's watershed 2024 elections, when the African National Congress – liberation movement turned ruling party – lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 30 years. The broader zeitgeist of political disillusionment finds an echo in Mohlele's protagonist, Winston, a popular politician who dramatically abandons the party and a privileged life to live rough on the streets of Johannesburg. Against the negative critical reception that views *Revolutionaries' House* a failed political novel, we argue that this satirical novel, drawing on Sartrean philosophy, provokes the reader to rethink politics through the lens of existential ethics. We follow Winston's trajectory beginning with his departure from power, to his self-confrontation and the lessons he learns from lovers and confidantes, to the final chapter where he sits on the threshold of return, poised for ethical re-engagement with the world. Instead of a manifesto, *Revolutionaries' House* offers a vision of political praxis grounded in small, ethical acts and intimate connections. We conclude that its open-ended resolution gestures towards what Chielozona Eze describes as transcultural affinity, and aligns with Sartre's notion of committed literature, a literature that entwines aesthetic creation with ethical and political engagement.

Keywords: politics; praxis; philosophy; Sartre; satire; Chielozona Eze; transcultural affinity; committed literature

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Introduction

Nthikeng Mohlele's novel, *Revolutionaries' House* (2024), proffers as protagonist a powerful up-and-coming South African politician who rejects the status quo with a dramatic and vitriolic speech; and who gives up a potential presidency to sleep rough under a bridge, turning his back on politics and community. During his long years of hard living on the streets of Johannesburg, the homeless Winston philosophises about his existence, embracing a revolution of self. With a "mysterious optimism and a little rage" (Mohlele 2024, 3) this character is on a quest for new meaning in his life, representing the disillusioned, twenty-first century South African who, having struggled for freedom, is faced with a democracy that does not look or feel as it was imagined. Our reading explores how this novel tempers and challenges that disappointment to present, instead, an elusive optimism using Winston as its vehicle. Through extensive self-confrontation, Winston learns that politics is effective, not as an abstraction, but through action albeit small acts. Mohlele thus critiques the stagnation of inherited rhetoric and reimagines the political through the personal as a provocation to all South Africans; while, furthermore, interrogating the nature of power.

Winston views his former life in relation to the important women in his life and ponders on what each has taught him. The protagonist's musings are divided into chapters named after the women characters. They are Alessandra Pedreira, former lover; Monica, his wife's twin sister; Meera Chakrabarti, the manager of a homeless shelter; and Mmalerato, a nurse who tends to him following a stabbing that nearly kills him. This is where – in this novel – ethics, politics and the erotic collapse into one another: it is the Sartrean convergence between the personal and the political, and between the body and the mind. Mohlele's novel is therefore a "literature of praxis" (Sartre 1981, 219) blending art, ethics and politics; it exemplifies what Jean-Paul Sartre terms "littérature engagée" or, in English, "literature of engagement" (1981, 219). Notably, there is no chapter headed with his ex-wife's name, Naomi, even though she is a constant presence who facilitates his ultimate self-awareness. Instead, the novel culminates in a final chapter titled "Nothingness" in which it dawns on Winston that he has the freedom to create meaning in his life for himself.

Mohlele's substantial oeuvre, as well as his recognition in the *Mail & Guardian*'s "200 Young South Africans Award" in 2009, underscore his role as a socially engaged literary figure. *Revolutionaries' House* (2024), Mohlele's eighth novel, extends a literary career that includes: *The Scent of Bliss* (2008), *Small Things* (2013), *Rusty Bell* (2014), *Pleasure* (2016), *Michael K* (2018), *Illumination* (2019), and *Breasts, etc*. (2023). In addition to his novels, Mohlele has also published two short-story collections: *The Discovery of Love* (2021) and *A Little Light* (2023). Among his novels *Pleasure* (2016) has received particular acclaim. It received the University of Johannesburg Main Prize for South African Writing in English (2016), the K Sello Duiker Memorial Award (2017), and was long-listed for the Dublin International Prize (2018).

Mohlele's writings have thus attracted considerable critical attention. Scholars and reviewers have noted the philosophical and existentialist preoccupations of Mohlele's earlier works (Boikanyo 2019; Frost 2020; Mashego 2024; Sosibo 2018). These concerns resurface in *Revolutionaries' House,* which like his earlier fiction centres on an urbane, socially elevated Black protagonist involved in complex relationships with women. A description of *Small Things* (2013), in particular, as a satire of "Johannesburg flânerie and unrequited yearning" (Wright 2019, 198) could equally describe this most recent novel (a point on which we will expand).

Meaning in Mohlele's novels is developed through intertextuality, with epigraphs often taken from existentialist philosophy. Perhaps the most overt "artistic reflective appropriation" (Jacobs 2020, 40) is apparent in his *Michael K* (2018), directly referring to J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). Mohlele's thematic concern with questions of memory, power and post-apartheid identity – evident in *Michael K* – are continued in *Revolutionaries' House* where Black masculinity, class and political history intersect to shape the crises faced by the protagonist.

To date there is no sustained critical scholarship on *Revolutionaries' House* beyond a handful of early reviews by Olivier Moreillon (2024), Khaya Mtshali (2024) and Gitte Postel (2024). These reviewers dismiss the novel on three main grounds: that it lacks narrative coherence, that its protagonist undergoes no meaningful transformation, and that it fails as a political novel by offering no clear vision for change. The narrative is described as "opaque" and "too laboured", with a hero who is "ultimately a victim of his own lack of power" (Postel 2024).

Much of the frustration emerges from Winston's characterisation: his "suffocating neuroses" and "pompous phraseology" is so self-regarding it makes the reader "cringe" (Mtshali 2024). The chorus of disparaging descriptors – "self-involved," "abstract and aloof" (Moreillon 2024) – calls to mind another exasperating hero: Antoine Roquentin in Sartre's novel, *Nausea* (1969), who has been described as "pathological" and "neurotic" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025).

Although one reviewer of *Revolutionaries' House* does discern the existentialist cue of the final chapter, "Nothingness", Winston's insights – that "human life is [. . .] futile in the face of mortality" (Mohlele 2024, 159) – are deemed to be "dramatic and simplistic" (Moreillon 2024). Ultimately, the reviewer does not measure the novel's success by its philosophical depth but disparages it, rather, for its lack of political didacticism (Moreillon 2024). Likewise, another reviewer tellingly observes that "there is very little [politics] in *Revolutionaries' House* [. . .] no policies, bills, or organizational structures" (Mtshali 2024). It seems initial readings have missed the point while inadvertently providing the rationale for our own alternative reading, orientated to the novel's philosophical inquiry. It is worth noting that Winston's seemingly nihilistic insight echoes that of the Sartrean existentialist character. Roquentin proclaims that "[e]very existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by

chance" (Sartre 1969, 180). It is Sartre's concept of "nothingness" that paradoxically provides the opportunity for existential freedom; it is the call to become one's own creator of meaning through action. Deliberately (and for some, vexingly), Sartre leaves the reader at the end of *Nausea* with Roquentin "vacillating" (p. 237); his change seems insignificant and his future unclear. Mohlele's novel ends similarly with Winston poised to take action but still considering options.

Both Roquentin in *Nausea* and Winston in *Revolutionaries' House* confound their readers with their words and deeds. Winston's ambiguous narrative voice – acerbic, self-deprecating, grandiose – is not unlike Roquentin's where "it is difficult to tell the line between jest and sermon" (Carruth 1969, xiii). Although not a satire, *Nausea* does contain satirical elements and if the character, Winston, in *Revolutionaries' House* is read in the light of the intertextual links with Sartre, he shifts from being a failed realist hero to a Sartrean comic-tragic type whose very excess is integral to the novel's design.

We argue that to appreciate Mohlele's protagonist and the novel's themes it is imperative to consider the satirical elements of *Revolutionaries' House*, which earlier critique overlooks. Satire, as a literary genre, has the "primary purpose [. . .] to criticize through humor, irony, caricature, and parody" (Dickson-Carr 2001, 1). As indirect satire, this novel "allows us to draw our own conclusions from the actions of the characters" (Baldick 2008, 299). Winston's characterisation is hyperbolic, and he tells his own exaggerated, one-sided tale; so that, by the end of the novel, he has undergone immense change and development but, in his inherent arrogance and grandiosity, is yet poised for full understanding. As a satirical figure, Winston embodies Dickson-Carr's description of satire, that it is a form which "manages to fascinate, infuriate, and delight [. . .] to the extent that it transgresses boundaries of taste, propriety, decorum, and the current ideological status quo" (Dickson-Carr 2001, 1). It is in this light – considering the novel with Sartre and satire in mind – that the protagonist's meaningful development can be traced.

We argue furthermore that, as a political novel, Mohlele's refusal to offer neat ideological solutions is, in fact, his novel's power. If, as Chielozona Eze points out, the "African condition [. . .] is too complex to be captured [simplistically]" (2015, 216), Mohlele's novel is a case in point. It is a "discourse about Africa" that resists being "inhibited by the invocation of two conflicting attitudes: Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism" (Eze 2015, 216). Rather, through its fictional representation of "new mode[s] of living" and "an emergent cosmopolitan landscape" (Eze 2015, 216), the novel offers visions of what Eze terms "transcultural affinity", a concept "that captures [an] emergent moral and cosmopolitan condition" (2015, 217). Eze suggests that consciously chosen interpersonal relationships and experiences foster a sense of belonging as an alternative to former affiliations based solely upon ideological or ethnic links. Mohlele's fictional context is an entangled terrain, a space where ethical action is slow, small and often intimate. The novel thereby serves as antidote to the soullessness of contemporary politics and to a general post-apartheid disillusionment.

There are resonances between Eze's notion of transcultural affinity and Sartre's existentialism. In the wake of World War II disillusionment, and drawing on Marxist philosophy, Sartre asserts that "[r]eading is creation" (as quoted in Cox 2008, 220), and that prose challenges the reader to reflect on their own situation and "actively reject the status quo" (Cox 2008, 221). Eze, for his part, describes transcultural affinity as the practice of choosing one's ties across lines of difference. Put simply, both thinkers centre choice and responsibility, albeit at different levels: Sartre at the level that the text engages the reader; Eze at the level that people form ties and communities amid political change and in an "increasingly fractured, globalized world" (2015, 216).[1]

Having noted some of the affinities between Sartre and Eze as philosophers; it follows that there are resonances between Sartre and Mohlele as novelists. Sartre's novel *Nausea* reflects his philosophies in literary form, while Mohlele 's novel, we argue, reflects the existentialism of Sartre as well as notions of the transcultural, according to Eze. There are numerous parallels between Mohlele's novel and Sartre's, so much so, that we might be tempted to declare *Revolutionaries' House* an African retelling of *Nausea*. Our task and objective here, though, is not to compare the novels, but to tease out the meanings that entanglement and intertextuality with the earlier existentialist novel might provide for our reading of *Revolutionaries' House*.

Bearing the parallels and similarities between the two novels in mind, James Gibbs' insights about *Nausea*, could equally apply to a reading of *Revolutionaries' House*: that the text presents the reader with the task of "eliciting meaning from it" and that this task is representative also of "the individual's creation of their project of being, for both are dependent on choice" (2011, 71). Gibbs notes the aporia and undecidability of Nausea: on the one hand we face "the absurdity of existence and simply continue to be ([which is] the dry side of facticity)" and on the other we "aspire to achieve in the future that which is beyond [the text] and actively be ([which is] the muddy side of transcendence)" (2011, 71). Thus, Sartre and, arguably, Mohlele also, "presents the individual's existence as a choice between pessimism or the project, facticity or transcendence" (Gibbs 2011, 71). Indeed, Gibbs notes, one cannot choose. In Sartre's terms, a person is always determined by the facts of their situation, their bodily reality, their past (facticity), and their freedom to imagine and choose new possibilities (transcendence).

Gibbs then extends this quandary to how one reads a novel. He notes that *Nausea* is intentionally fragmentary and open-ended. It refuses to hand over a message; asking instead for interpretation. That interpretive act is necessary, but the temptation is either to read the text's fixed essence (pure facticity) or to impose a grand design the book cannot bear (pure transcendence). The honest Sartrean stance is to keep both sides in

1 Sartre enters African debates both conceptually and concretely. He wrote the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) and publicly condemned apartheid in a 1966 speech, "Those who are confronting apartheid should know they are not alone." His thoughts later circulated among South African intellectuals (including Steve Biko, Noel Chabani Manganyi and Richard Turner) and contemporary Black existentialist work (Reed 2025; Sela 2020).

view – to acknowledge the contingency of the materials presented while taking responsibility for the meaning that is as an ethical address that solicits the reader's freedom and responsibility. The same can be said about the fragmented and anachronous narrative of *Revolutionaries' House*.

In what follows, we will pick up the threads of Winston's tale to track his development: moving from his abrupt and dramatic departure from power, through his gruelling (self) reckoning, to his transformation as he reaches a turning point in his personal and existential journey. Leaving Winston at the end of the novel poised for ethical re-engagement with the world, we give our concluding remarks.

Departing from Power: A Little Rage

The novel opens with a one-page prologue in which the flamboyant narrator-protagonist, Winston, delivers a brief, dramatic introduction to the novel's themes and to himself. He begins his story with the ending, in the narrative present that occurs after the events of the prolonged existential journey that will make up his story. In the chapters that follow this introduction, he gives his account of how he has arrived at this point in his life and psyche. The retrospective story is therefore framed by opening and closing scenes that are set in the same point in time.

The prologue's opening sentence catapults the reader into Winston's pompous musings of designs for his own gravestone: it might have a "floral flourish" with the image of a "giant bumblebee" or the "Burj Khalifa-inspired skyscraper" or "Table Mountain" (p. 1). Beneath the tongue-in-cheek tone these three disparate images of gravestone designs each suggest alternative symbolic visions of self: devotion to collaborative work (the bee) or the cosmopolitan allure of international ambition and glamour marked by the Burj, and the desire for local rootedness signalled by the mention of Table Mountain.

Winston then adds three possible epitaphs that foreground the existential stakes of his journey. They are from Arthur Schopenhauer: freedom is found in solitude – a hint that Winston will become an urban eremite; from George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: tragedy is a clash between two rights, not between right and wrong – so this story will not deliver easy heroes and villains; and, from Immanuel Kant: knowledge begins with the senses and ends with reason, signalling the primacy of embodied experience. Read together, these opening choices set the terrain of his existential journey.

Winston then launches into his retrospective story, going back 10 years (or possibly longer as he is unreliable in his dealings with time) into his past. In the first chapter he briefly continues in the sardonic tone of the prologue before abruptly landing himself on the bone-freezing streets of a Johannesburg winter, "whimper[ing] like a puppy" (p. 3). Following two pages in which he describes his vagabond life, he begins to explain how and why he is here. The narrative proper then begins with the protagonist's vitriolic speech at Revolutionaries' House, the titular political headquarters of the ruling party

(analogous to Luthuli House of the African National Congress). This speech precedes his abrupt resignation and departure:

> To hell with the lot of you, he shouts, you do not [. . .] represent me. I was not tortured and almost killed, my freedom taken from me and from many other good men and women of conscience, to be counted among those soulless individuals who look on while our once trusted comrades behave in such vile and atrocious ways. It makes me physically sick, delirious, infecting me with rage that we, we, we who have suffered and sacrificed so much can be the very ones selling our souls like this! (p. 7)

Winston's dramatic speech resonates with the contemporary national (or even global) zeitgeist: there is a disenchantment with vacuous and ineffective ideologies that no longer translate into care and justice. As Mtshali notes, the novel "arrived during one of the most pivotal national election years in South Africa's three decades of democracy" (2024). The elections were historic because, for the first time in three decades the ANC did not gain parliamentary majority, which ushered in a new uncertain era of coalition politics. For this reason, Winston's grievances "might resonate with readers who have read the scorching anti-ANC op-eds in newspapers" (Mtshali 2024). Equally, his words may mirror the impotent outpourings that appear on innumerable contemporary social media platforms about any/all of the current global political situations. The specific reasons for Winston's ire are less important than the emotion itself because it is his anger that propels him. Winston peppers his outburst with words and phrases such as "bloody knives", "decimated", "shit", "tortured", "vile and atrocious", "suffered", "covered in maggots", "corroded", "rots", "charlatans", "unfeeling zealots", "depraved", "shame" and "political degenerates and sociopaths" (pp. 7–8). Though this emotionally intense scene presents – quite dramatically – his acute anger and disgust, yet it is textually condensed into just two pages. As an impetus for the narrative, it is not dwelt on; possibly because Winston, as a deluded and unreliable first-person narrator, overstates his tantrum. That it is met with "silence" (p. 8) could indicate either that it has no impact at all on his audience or that they are stunned.

The word "little" is hence ambiguous. Winston uses it as a sarcastic understatement, insinuating that his rage was in fact momentous, when he states sardonically that "a mysterious optimism and a little rage [compensate for] what [he] lacks in evolutionary maturity" (p. 3); but considered in the greater scheme of things, his rage could be dismissed as something that has little impact, except on Winston himself. As an element of the narrative plot, it is simply a launchpad for the story, and his turn toward introspection. This angry outburst provides a galvanising event following which the protagonist ejects himself from Revolutionaries' House and onto a path of existential enquiry.

In doing so, Winston rejects not one, but two homes. They are the two primary structures or "houses" that once gave him identity and purpose: one is his ideological and political home and the other is his personal home, his mansion. Winston is nauseated by these spaces. But he is nothing without his political persona and so he suffers an acute

existential crisis. After he departs from Revolutionaries' House, he reports that "seething with anger and utter frustration, [he] promptly fell sick: wave upon wave of nausea descended upon [him] like a plague" (p. 8); and he subsequently spends months in and out of hospital, consulting specialist doctors for this affliction. The intensely debilitating effect of nausea recalls Roquentin's exclamation:

> Nausea seized me, I dropped to a seat, I no longer knew where I was, I saw the colours spin slowly around me, I wanted to vomit. And since that time, the Nausea has not left me, it holds me. (Sartre 1969, 30)

In Sartrean terms, what both Roquentin and Winston experience is a visceral confrontation with the absurdity and contingency of their world – a realisation that the roles they have been inhabiting and the structures they have upheld have lost their purpose. Nausea is not merely physical, but ontological: a reaction to the collapse of meaning. Thereafter, Winston's movement from mansion to street becomes not just a socio-economic change but also a radical existential shedding.

Winston emerges as a kind of existential Everyman, but this evolution of self is gradual, requiring a decade of introspection and self-reckoning. Through this protracted journey, Mohlele critiques the status of inherited political rhetoric and reimagines the political as something that begins with the individual and the personal – urging and inciting the reader to reassess the ethical foundations of their own lives.

Gruelling (Self) Reckoning: Lessons in Love and Life

Winston's self-expulsion from his political career affects every other aspect of his life. His fast-food business falters, too, and subsequently so does his marriage to Naomi. Handing over the failing fast-food enterprise to his wife, he leaves the marital home (they divorce) and, over the months that follow, moves from sleeping in cheap motels, to friends' couches, then to his van, a public park, until he finally settles under a bridge on a pile of cardboard boxes (p. 21). Recounting his time on the streets as a vagrant, he is not defeated, though, insisting "I am not a beggar, never have been, and [I] work for my upkeep". From the outset, then, the reader is disabused of the notion that this is a moment of social decline; for Winston, this is a moment of existential triumph, it is an act of rebellion – not just against the corruption of the political elite but also against the hollow roles that once defined him. As a vagabond-eremite he paradoxically finds solitude not in retreat from the city but within it. He revels in his new independence declaring, "[a]ll I have is my mind [. . .] Spectacular. Powerful. Thunderous" (p. 5). In this moment he declares not poverty but a possession that no regime can take from him, his consciousness.

The exaltation of mind is political. He is aware that there must be a rethinking and a reimagining of the future. Old ideas that are no longer relevant must be replaced by fresh thought. But his journey is a painful one: it includes physical collapse (months of

nausea, social invisibility and a near-fatal mugging). These ordeals are not dead ends, though, they are the crucibles of transformation. He is "on a journey to places [he has] never been" (p. 22). During the decade or so that Winston wanders the streets of Johannesburg, he slowly analyses and dismantles his passively inherited identity, as a precursor to consciously constructing himself. Carruth observes that in his suffering an existential hero is "reduced to nothing [. . .] filled with meaningless, anarchic visions," (1969, xii) and yet this is "the preparing power of chaos [. . .] the necessary prelude to the re-establishment of self" (1969, xii). Winston's journey through memory can be seen as an existential reckoning: a confrontation with his freedom to reinterpret and consequently reclaim his past. Memory becomes a medium of ethical self-re-creation. His nostalgic recollections of the women in his life – Alessandra, Monica, Meera, Mmalerato and Naomi – serve as affective interlocutors in his gradual transformation. Once clouded by his erotic passion and desire, he begins to see the women in his life anew.

While Winston's reminiscences are laced with sensual details (obsessions with their bodies and their lingerie), each woman functions less as an object of desire than as a guiding beacon, not grounded in ideology but communicated through embodied presence. Amid sensual descriptions, what comes to the fore are their roles as professionals, caregivers and social actors: Alessandra works with the United Nations, Monica leads an agribusiness and charitable initiatives, Meera manages a homeless shelter, and Mmalerato is a nurse. They are agents of ethical insight, social responsibility and relational care, reflecting African womanist ideals in which civic-minded care and moral clarity are central. Through Winston's encounters with these women, the novel foregrounds the intersection of ethics, politics and the erotic, exemplifying the Sartrean entanglement of the personal with the political, the body with the mind.

While Winston does celebrate the "cerebral" (p. 1) – describing his own mind as spectacular, powerful and thunderous (p. 5) – he is also "sensual" (p. 1); that is, a man of the body, aligned with Sartre's view of consciousness as always embodied. As in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the body is not just an object in the world, but the very means by which we are in the world (Moran 2010, 59). If Winston is to begin rebuilding himself, it cannot be through abstract reflection alone, but must be through his embodied relationships with others.

Winston's reflections on the women who have featured in his life are merely sentimental musings. They represent embodied modes of knowing and being, each offering a counterpoint to his earlier performative masculinity and ideological certainty. Through touch, vulnerability, silence, resistance and care, they each teach him alternative forms of power and presence. They are not instruments of romantic salvation, but figures of moral and existential instruction. We must, however, be alert here to Winston as a satirical figure whose stories are always overblown and that therefore display, at times, what Mtshali has pointed to as "his objectification of women" (2024). In this attitude, with his apparent dismissal of the women as mere "sexual objects [or] ideological

femmes fatales," Mohlele's character displays the "types of sexism [that have] dogged satirists and besmirched their reputations" (Dickson-Carr 2001, 5). Consequently, the result is that the women's guiding influences are witnessed clearly – yet ironically – by the reader, while perhaps only felt (abstractedly) by the protagonist; because Winston is still coming to a full understanding of the lessons his relationships have provided.

Alessandra represents a global and cosmopolitan vantage point and an early ethical spur: she warns that "cracks are beginning to show" and that "corruption will rot everything from within," urging Winston to "speak to your comrades" (pp. 36–37). Her maxim that "all [governments] are the same" (p. 37) schools him in distrust of abusive power and the value of dissent (p. 159). In Eze's terms, she models transcultural affinity.

Meera brings the ground-level realities of the city into view, refusing spectacle in favour of self-effacing care. She foregrounds the practical failings of government, in her attempts to alleviate endemic hunger, homelessness and destitution (p. 83). For her, power is unglamorous service – Winston calls her a "mule for the wellbeing of the people" (p. 160). She teaches that efficacy may be quiet, local and indispensable. Her death marks the catalyst that converts Winston's slow insight into urgency, propelling Winston toward action.

Monica translates power into praxis: "power is about perspective" and "embracing ambiguity" (signalled in the Hegel epitaph). It is analogous to "walking on the beach and leaving no footprints" (p. 160). Her words in the final chapter foreground the intersection of Sartrean and Ezean ethics: calling him to join her in "concrete" "substantial" action (p. 150). Notably it is Monica who brings to the fore the urgent and contentious political agenda of land redistribution. As a farmer, through food production and reinvestment, she recasts land as instruments of care (pp. 133–34, 67), thereby embodying ethical action as collaboration.

A decade after his self-ejection from Revolutionaries' House, then, having survived physical and psychological despair, Winston ruminates on the lessons he has learnt as he stands at a metaphorical crossroads. Like many wanderer-figures in South African literature he must now choose how and whether to return to society. So where does this wandering take Winston? And what does it offer us as readers and fellow citizens? As in the final stage of a quest, Winston has returned home: to family, to community, to a vision of South Africa with an opaque optimism.

Notably it is in the ending of the novel and the prominence given to women that Mohlele's novel departs from Sartre's. As Carruth observes, "Roquentin's last hope is love [. . .] a thin hope," and one that is finally defeated (1969, xii). Instead he considers whether writing a novel might give meaning to life, "something precious and almost legendary" (1959, 238). By contrast, *Revolutionaries House* subtly suggests Winston's future lies in relational and cooperative action with women. His "art" of self-creation will not be a solitary project, but worked out with others.

Transforming: From "Nothingness" to a "Transcultural Affinity"

Finally, in the chapter titled "Nothingness", Winston holes up in the Hotel Winston smoking naked in his room. That the hotel carries his name, marks its significance as a womb-like refuge, a final stage of self-reckoning. He has two final realisations that are for him a "profane illumination" (Benjamin 1979, 227), an experience of the magical in the realm of the mundane, a moment of self-transcendence, a "revolutionary experience, if not action" (1979, 237).

First, Winston comes to understand that any contribution or effort, no matter how small, can have profound effect, using the analogy of how steam coming from a boiling kettle "without being there [. . .] as a tangible and touchable thing" yet has the power to "sting and burn". Thus, he accepts that it is possible that his "imperfect life has not been completely in vain" (p. 158). In the Sartrean sense this *le néant* (nothingness) at the core of human consciousness is not absence, but the condition for freedom, enabling one to say no to what is, and choose to become otherwise. It marks the difference between the facticity of being-in-itself (a passive, static being) and the transcendence of being-for-itself (a conscious being), orientated towards the future and capable of self-creation (Dolezal 2012, 11). In this final chapter, Naomi (Winston's ex-wife) is centrally present, suggesting that she and Nothingness are subtly conflated. Indeed, the name Naomi, is a homophonic play on "no-me" – a negation of egoism and an opening up towards relationship and ethical responsibility. Although this is an understated, open ending, when read through the lens of Sartrean existentialism, it suggests not futility but possibility in the presence of Naomi, whose quiet devotion and imminent departure abroad gesture toward a renewed sense of ethical relationality, a reimagined form of community, and a transcultural affinity (Eze 2015, 220) that locates Winston not only in post-apartheid South Africa, but also as part of a broader global human context.

Winston's second realisation is that the recreation of the self is a relational endeavour rather than a solitary exercise. Having pondered on the effects of his relationships with Alessandra, Monica and Meera, Winston, when he is conscious of Naomi's gaze upon him, comes closest to understanding himself. Naomi "notices, but completely ignores" (p. 162) his nakedness, as he sits smoking in his hotel room. And, even though he himself cannot determine whether or not he has "managed some degree of being a substantial man" (p. 164), he is aware that "Naomi still sees and seeks something [in him], no matter how elusive that might be" (p. 164). He is experiencing what Sartre calls the Look, which is the instance when we see ourselves as others see us, and we recognise the space between who we are and who we might become (Dolezal 2012, 25). Significantly, it is at this point that the narrator–protagonist discloses his full name for the first time, Caesar Mulaudzi, and states his intention to "do better" (p. 165). How he will "do better" is not entirely clear but he hints that he will "maybe" (p. 151) accept Monica's invitation to "do something concrete, something substantial" (p. 150) with her.

Consequently, by the novel's conclusion, Winston/Caesar is tentatively poised to re-enter society as a subject capable of ethical relationships with others in the world, as an individual embodying transcultural affinity. Eze's concept "captures [the] emergent moral and cosmopolitan condition, [examining] ideas such as entanglement (Nuttall), interconnectedness (Krog), ubuntu (Tutu, Ramose), and cosmopolitanism as registers of transcultural affinity" (2015, 217). Our use of the term ubuntu is not implied as a "feel-good" platitude. Rather, it echoes Eze's formulation: that it is a lived ethics of interdependence, not just an intellectual or abstract philosophy. It "is a virtue" (2015, 220), a praxis that foregrounds the importance of care and mutual recognition as the foundation of personal and political life. Through the women characters we discover that the desire to craft meaning out of the nausea and contingency of being lies in relational and cooperative action: Winston's future is articulated through ties that must be chosen, renewed and worked into being.

Finally he must face Naomi who addresses him directly as Caesar Mulaudzi, not Winston, the name appropriated from George Orwell's dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The use of his proper name, now, does more than simply identify him to the reader; it repudiates the "fictional" Winston. It signals that he is turning away from a dystopian African future and from his solitariness. Mulaudzi, as his legal surname, roots his African identity while his first name, Caesar, carries the historical resonance of authority and leadership. Naomi's final injunction is for him to "put on some clothes" (p. 165), which cements the novel's ethical call. Winston must re-enter the shared, public world in a posture of dignity and accountability. The ending marks a passage from rage, to nausea, to a "mysterious" but grounded "optimism" acknowledging his facticity.

Conclusion

Read together, the act of re-naming and the injunction to get dressed set the stage for the passage from interior rumination to ethical readiness: a Sartrean movement from consciousness to action and, in Eze's terms, the consolidation of transcultural affinity as lived relation. This emphasis on chosen ties and practical care accords with Eze's account of transcultural affinity (affiliation as elective openness across difference) and with ubuntu as a lived virtue, relocating "the political" to interpersonal responsibility and shared work.

Revolutionaries' House offers no neat conclusion. Winston is poised, not with a manifesto, but with a mysterious optimism only. This, we argue, is where the political is reframed. What may appear to have been social descent – homelessness, disillusionment, and solitude – is in fact the precondition of ethical ascent. Mohlele refuses the trope of redeemer or charismatic leader and, instead, offers a flawed Everyman who is transformed through embodied relationships with others – particularly women! In doing so, the novel challenges the negative appraisals offered by earlier

reviews that dismissed it as incoherent, politically empty and devoid of meaningful transformation.

Through a Sartrean lens, Winston's journey represents an invitation to be "substantial and consequential" (p. 164) by taking responsibility for even the most minuscule things. This is a different kind of liberation struggle; not a revolution enacted on the grand political stage, but in the quiet, difficult realm of the self. *Revolutionaries' House* is a work of committed literature, a literature of praxis (Sartre 1981, 242); not because it offers ideological prescriptions, but because it stimulates and activates the reader's reflective consciousness. Committed literature such as this exposes the injustices of the world while simultaneously revealing the reader's own freedom to transform it. It is "an irritant rather than a sedative [. . .] a form of secondary social and political action" (Cox 2008, 222). Sartre argued that it is "the writer's mission to dispel inertia, ignorance, prejudice and false emotion" (Caute 1978, ix). In Mohlele's *Revolutionaries' House*, even though the exaggerated satirical protagonist's growth is still somewhat dubious, it is the reader who is challenged – possibly transformed – by accompanying Winston on this existential journey.

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