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Voices in Contemporary South African Narrative: An Exploration of Narrative Strategies for Engaging with Current Socio-Political Issues

Ina Gräbe

Summary

The article comments on the depiction of socio-political issues in a post-apartheid society as reflected in specially selected novels by J.M. Coetzee, I. Vladislavić and M. van Niekerk. A comparative study reveals that the authors, while highlighting the plight of the destitute, the homeless and the socially unacceptable, are simultaneously pinpointing not only the decline, but also the reversal of institutionalized values. The hitherto unconventional approach to contemporary problems places the onus on the reader to come to terms with socio-political issues he or she has, thus far, been hesitant to acknowledge or confront.

Opsomming

In die artikel word die uitbeelding van sosio-politieke spitspunte soos tans in post-apartheid Suid-Afrika ervaar word, onder die loep geneem. Geselekteerde romans van J.M. Coetzee, I. Vladislavić en M. van Niekerk is vir die doel uitgesonder. 'n Vergelykende studie het aan die lig gebring dat die drie outeurs hulle enersyds toelê op die verknorsing van die nooddrufte, die daklose en die sosiaal onaanvaarbare, terwyl hulle terselfdertyd die verval en selfs totale omkeer van geïnstitusionele waardes beklemtoon. Hierdie onkonvensionele benadering noop die leser tot selfkennis rakende eietydse sosio-politieke vraagstukke waarvan hy of sy, hetsy bewustelik of onbewustelik, tot dusver weggeskram het.

1 Introduction

This paper will explore the extent to which narrative may be seen to engage with socio-political issues in the changing South-Africa of the nineties. Given the diversity of its population, which not only reflects the extremities of both first and third world conditions of wealth and poverty, but which also comprises various linguistic, ethnic and cultural clusters, one would expect to encounter divergent attitudes to the changes that eventually led to

a comparatively peaceful transition from minority white rule to the country's first widely publicized democratic election. It resulted in Nelson Mandela's being promoted from the world's most famous political prisoner to the first black president of the Republic of South Africa. This paper will investigate the extent to which the novelistic practice of authors from different cultural groups reflects comparable, divergent or complementary attitudes towards various changes in South Africa. A number of demarcations suggest themselves, with the most patently obvious being a cultural division based on the difference between so-called "black" and "white" writing. However, the broad cultural differences are complicated by linguistic diversity which cuts across ethnic and cultural divisions: firstly, black and white writing often share the same language (in the majority of cases this is English); secondly, white writing is in itself further divided in that both the former official languages of the country, namely Afrikaans and English, are used; and lastly, black writing also employs a number of indigenous languages, such as Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, etc. My own linguistic limitations restrict me to comments on works published in either English or Afrikaans.¹

To facilitate a comparative discussion, I shall focus briefly on two creative texts published in the last two years: Ivan Vladislavić's *The Folly*, winner of the CNA prize for English literature, published in 1993 and Marlene van Niekerk's Afrikaans novel *Triomf* (English "Triumph"), winner of the CNA prize for Afrikaans literature, published in 1994. As an introduction to those aspects of writing I wish to address in this paper, I shall also refer to J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* which appeared a few years earlier in 1990. In his novel Coetzee addresses the turbulent years between 1986 to 1989, which may be seen as a violent preamble to the final transitional steps towards a different political dispensation in South Africa. The transition, *per se*, commenced with the February 1990 speech of the then president, De Klerk, culminating in the elections of April 1994 and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president shortly thereafter on 10 May. These novelistic texts will be complemented by a collection of critical essays by an eminent black South African novelist and literary theorist: Njabulo Ndebele's *South African Literature and Culture*, with its evocative subtitle *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. These creative and critical texts specifically address different attitudes and responses to anticipated changes in the preamble to the elections. The three novels, one from Afrikaans and two from English South African literature, reflect both linguistic and cultural diversity within "white" writing; the critical text, written in English by an internationally renowned black author and literary scholar, reflects linguistic similarity between "white" and "black" writing, whilst simultaneously addressing the cultural specificity and particular vocation of "black" South

African writing. The comparative basis of these texts may be formulated in terms of a shared problematic: the perceived necessity for a reappraisal of the relevance of writing in the context of an anticipated political solution that would presumably render superfluous a continued production of protest literature seeking to enshrine the "struggle" against apartheid. As Ndebele succinctly formulated it in the 1991 preface to the first edition of his critical essays: "... with the demise of grand apartheid now certain, what are South African writers now going to write about?" (1994: vii).

In this regard, what I find particularly fascinating in the light of the linguistic and cultural diversity noted above, is the apparent consensus as to what should be relevant to the substance of writing in a post-apartheid society. I should go about formulating this consensus as focusing on depicting concrete social conditions affecting ordinary people in their personal capacity. This should be at the centre of fictional writing for the present rather than advocating lofty political causes with a view to uniting people in an abstract ideology. It is precisely this awareness that informs almost every essay in Ndebele's philosophical contemplation of the nature of South African literature and culture, and pertinently, the significance of the "ordinary" in this regard. Contextualizing his essays and the political debate they generated when he first delivered them, he sees the link between the contributions in the published collection as an attempt to "explore new ways of understanding the nature of South African society in relation to the nature of our literary response to it" (Ndebele 1994: vii).

In the novels I shall be referring to, the literary response seems to have at its centre, not the struggle of the formerly disenfranchised black community, but rather the plight of the destitute, whose daily struggle for survival precludes an indulgence in political power games. Writing about the economically deprived necessitates more than a mere portrayal of their plight - however important a sensitizing of readers in this regard may be. An exploration of their life-style reveals surprising qualities that suggest a reversal of institutionalized values.

2 Devious Discourse in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*: Socio-Political Commentary and the Condition of Homelessness

A reversal of such values, in an attempt to arrive at the "truth" of living, dying and writing, is exemplified in J.M. Coetzee's recent novel *Age of Iron* (1990). On one level this novel may be seen as a penetrating commentary on the disruption and upheaval suffered by individuals and communities during the years of turbulent change in the late eighties. However, the

depiction of the equalizing process between the wealthy dying Capetonian and the derelict sent to fulfil the actantial roles of angel, messenger and lover during the last stages of her terminal illness, suggests that socio-political commentary is achieved by a devious route, by exploring the stark reality of being destitute, idle and poor. At the same time poverty is politicized, as it is regarded as only one of the symptoms of a destabilized society where violence has become the commonly acknowledged means of expression in both political and criminal power struggles.

Before scrutinizing the consequences of poverty, as concretized in the lives of people who have become experts in the art of survival on a very basic level, we should first consider J.M. Coetzee's distinction between various categories in a divided society. In one of the passages in *Age of Iron* (1990) where he resorts to direct and explicit social criticism, the homeless are seen in perspective by pitting their relative "harmlessness" against the threat posed by both the dangerous gangsters from the underprivileged black community and their ignorant white "cousins" cushioned by the deceptive security of a comfortable middle class life-style.² The writing strategy chosen for this novel, namely the confessional letter of a dying woman addressed to a daughter no longer living in South Africa, provides a convenient means of relaying regrettable changes in the country to the reader:

There were not so many of these homeless people in your time. But now they are part of life here. Do they frighten me? On the whole, no. A little begging, a little thieving; dirt, noise, drunkenness; no worse. It is the roaming gangs I fear, the sullen-mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the prison-house is already beginning to close. Children scorning childhood, the time of wonder, the growing-time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified. And on the other side of the great divide their white cousins soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons. Swimming lessons, riding lessons, ballet lessons; cricket on the lawn; lives passed within walled gardens guarded by bull-dogs; children of paradise, blond, innocent, shining with angelic light, soft as *putti*. Their residence the limbo of the unborn, their innocence the innocence of bee-grubs, plump and white, drenched in honey, absorbing sweetness through their soft skins. Slumberous their souls, bliss-filled, abstracted.

(Coetzee 1990: 6-7)

It should be obvious that social commentary is conveyed by a metaphorical characterization of a divided society, thereby illustrating an important fictionalization strategy employed by Coetzee. Equally important is the narrative strategy whereby social issues are portrayed in terms of personal relationships: the levelling process which underlies the gradual acceptance of the derelict Vercueil by the wealthy, dying narrator, being a case in point. Even the fact that the narrator is a dying white woman may be

construed as a deliberate strategy, since it becomes a vehicle enabling Coetzee to address the problematical status of white writing in South Africa. This in turn illustrates the problematical status of words, talking and writing in a landscape where violence has become a way of life.

One may well be tempted to ask, at this point: What does this have to do with the relevance and status of writing in a changed and changing South Africa? In my opinion, Coetzee's devious writing strategy, whereby socio-political commentary is relayed through a penetrating contemplation of the condition of homelessness, shows that his vision of the truly oppressed, or of real suffering, not only transgresses perceived political divisions, but it also discloses basic human values, such as genuine caring. In these perceived inherent qualities of conditions which are normally condemned in society, Coetzee locates his pertinent questioning of the validity of institutionalized values.

What Coetzee achieves by means of "devious discourse", seems to me to coincide with what Ndebele in another context defined as an unmasking of sonorous, yet deceptively reassuring, slogans such as the so-called "New South Africa":

Writing enables us to crack the surface and break through to the often deliberately hidden essence. What we find may either bring joy or sadness, hope or despair, but almost always yields insight. It is this masking and unmasking that often constitutes the terrain of conflict between the writer and official culture. Writers strive to remove the blanket which officialdom insists on spreading and laying over things. When officialdom is under attack and lacks confidence, it is the new one that constructs masks.

(Ndebele 1994: 152)

Comparable strategies for an engagement with socio-political commentary are pursued in the novels by Ivan Vladislavić and Marlene van Niekerk. In both these novels a "home" of sorts serves to highlight unusual, in the sense of out of the ordinary, living conditions and personal relationships with which the reader has to come to terms, if intent on discovering the forces at work in a changing South African society. Moreover, both novels display a preoccupation with truly marginalized members of society, as found in Coetzee's work - it is almost as if in a Biblical sense, the reader is required to identify with the lowest and most humble of persons.

3 Focus on the Social Outcast in Afrikaans Writing: Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*

This book opens with a reminder to the reader, that it is fiction. Given the novel's positioning of its characters, as representatives of what could arguably be seen as the lowest class of poor whites on the social ladder, one would, on first encountering this instruction, be inclined to read it as a precaution against possible harassment from the powers that be that might not like its political message. However, in retrospect, it may be seen as a deliberate pointer towards the fictionalization strategy exploited in the book: an in-depth, but devious, probing of socio-political injustices by a merciless exposing of the ugly reality of incestual relationships within a poor white fictional family.

At a first assessment one would be inclined to view this novel as an unambiguous example of politicized writing in Afrikaans, intended to expose the social injustices of the apartheid era which deliberately suppressed the reality of class differences in the white community and which advocated, instead, discriminatory divisions on a racial basis. Support for such a reading can be found in the historical reference contained in the title of the novel, which conjures up the infamous Group Areas Act which stipulated where black people were *not* allowed to live. The former Sophiatown, a multi-cultural but mostly black township, was flattened by bulldozers in the heyday of apartheid, and on its ruins the new white town *Triomf* (meaning triumph in English) was rebuilt.

However, this novel, like Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, offers social commentary of a different kind in that it induces a reading of the Afrikaans nation in which the writer does not flinch from exposing the darkest recesses of the Afrikaner soul. If in *Age of Iron* confessional truth is coerced and informed by a sense of impending death, then it is a sense of impending doom which serves as a generating narrative force in *Triomf*. In this case the anticipated apocalypse is explicitly linked to the date of the election. It is also forcibly brought home by a relentless exploration of personal relationships in a family embodying the worst societal degradation imaginable: poverty, violence and incest. Yet, despite this terrible exercise in the exposure of degradation, Van Niekerk manages to discover redeeming factors in, for instance, the mother's sincere caring for the dogs, but above all in the family's ability to expose indirectly the hypocrisy underlying the society in which they have been condemned to powerlessness and silence.

The implicit social critique in this novel hinges, then, on the informed honesty which underlies the portrayal of the seemingly irredeemable situation of a poor white Afrikaner family occupying the lowest imaginable

position on the social ladder.

4 The Art of Exploiting the Condition of Homelessness: Ivan Vladislavić's *The Folly*

The title of Ivan Vladislavić's novel refers to an evaluation of an apparent irrational act of neighbourliness performed by a respectable working class male, who refers to himself as "Mr Hardware" - his family name of Malgas suggests that the reader should think of him ostensibly as a so-called "coloured". His comfortable bourgeois existence is disrupted when a homeless person by the Afrikaans surname of Nieuwenhuizen (meaning "new house"), implying that he is a poor white, one day pitches his tent on an unoccupied piece of land next to Mr Malgas's home and, in the course of the narrative, displays the art of living off waste in the true spirit of what may be deemed a culture of recycling. The bourgeois Mr Malgas gradually comes to appreciate the different lifestyle of the "neighbour" squatting on the piece of land adjoining his property. To a certain extent Mr Malgas's increasing attempts to act in a "neighbourly manner" and befriend the squatter on the open piece of land next to his home, is reminiscent of the equalization process depicted in Coetzee's novel between the affluent dying white narrator and the derelict acting as her companion during the final stages of her terminal illness. However, Vladislavić's novel differs from Coetzee's in that the homeless person deliberately exploits and manipulates the neighbourly acts of the respectable "Mr Hardware". In the end he betrays the trust of the gullible Mr Malgas, alias "Mr Hardware", who has truly gone through all the processes required for a material and spiritual identification with the homeless person. The art of survival, to Ivan Vladislavić, in the end comes to resemble an act of calculated exploitation of empathy in an assumed role of the homeless.

5 Concluding Remarks

The novels referred to represent different enactments of Ndebele's formulation of the ordinary. To him the concept of the ordinary would epitomize an essential *dignity* underlying the "normality" inherent in the daily joys and sorrows characterizing the everyday experience of the voiceless masses. In Coetzee's writing *humility* is seen as an essential element of the ordinary - Ndebele, one may notice, is curiously silent when it concerns the plight of the homeless, given the perceived shortage of

homes for countless black South African citizens. In Van Niekerk's novel we encounter a ruthless *brutalization* of the ordinary; and in Vladislavić's tale, finally, a calculated *exploitation* of the condition of homelessness to be associated with the ordinary. Consensus of the substance of relevant writing in a post-apartheid society apparently does not preclude diversity in the narrative strategies whereby the "ordinary" may be portrayed.

Notes

1. A number of black authors, such as, for instance, the internationally renowned Es'kia Mphahlele and Njabulo Ndebele, deliberately chose to publish in English, a so-called "metropolitan" language. They both commented on the inherent difficulties of deliberately expressing themselves in a language other than their mother tongue. In the South African context the choice of language, for a black writer, was inevitably politicized: on the one hand, those who wanted their protests against the apartheid system to be heard by people who, they believed, could eventually make a difference, deliberately chose English as their means of expression; on the other hand, black writers who elected to publish in their home language often found that, in order to have a readership at all, they had to subject their writing to the censorious scrutiny of educational boards who evaluated suitable reading material to be prescribed in schools.
2. I have dealt with a perceivable shift in Coetzee's writing elsewhere (See Gräbe 1993). In a comparison of two recent novels, *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990), it is shown that he moves from reflection on the conditions and problematics of the processes of (re)-writing a fictional story in *Foe* to a relentless probing of the causes and effects of conditions pertaining to a specific time and place in a "real" as opposed to an "imaginary" setting in *Age of Iron*. In his latest novel, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), Coetzee still explores death as a metaphor for writing, but the setting has again shifted to a foreign country far beyond the spatial boundaries of South Africa.

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