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**CHANGING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH  
NOVEL AFTER WORLD WAR II, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PETER  
ABRAHAMS, ALAN PATON, ES'KIA MPHAHLELE AND NADINE GORDIMER**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

in the subject

**ENGLISH**

at the

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**PRETORIA**

November 1992

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## SUMMARY

The changing social consciousness in South Africa during the twentieth century falls within a political-historical framework of events: amongst others, World Wars I and II; the institution of the Apartheid Laws in 1948; the declaration of a South African Republic in 1960; Nelson Mandela's release in 1992. The literary social consciousness of Abrahams, Paton, Mphahlele and Gordimer spans the time before and after 1948. Their novels reflect the changing reality of a country whose racial and social problems both pre-date and will outlive the apartheid ideology. These and other novelists' changing social consciousness is an indication of the development of attitudes and reactions to issues which have their roots in the human and in the economic spheres, as well as in the political, cultural and religious. Their work interprets the history and the change in the South African social consciousness, and also gives some indication of a possible future vision.

## PREFACE

Objectivity is one of the chief criteria of academic integrity and discipline. However, as individuals we are shaped by our life experiences and our own personal beliefs and philosophies. While we should not allow these unduly to affect our academic perceptions, they give our contribution to research its unique character. Thus, this thesis was written from the perspective of one who has tried hard to understand the complexity, tragedy and challenge of the South African situation, and whose heart has often echoed Guy Butler's 'A Prayer for all my Countrymen':

... dear God, ordain  
such deeds be done,  
such words be said,  
that men will praise  
Your image yet  
when all these terrors  
and hates are dead ...

Born a white South African of German parents, I have at various times been part of the English, Afrikaans, 'Coloured', Venda, Zulu, Xhosa and urban black communities. Not only have I lived within these different communities, I also have deep personal and family ties within each of them. This has given me a 'different' perspective on life. It has, however, also often made it very difficult for me to 'define' myself. While I am in a very real sense a member of each of these societies, and each has become part of my being, I do not belong to any of them. I have, consequently, often felt torn apart in my own person by the conflict that separates them from one another.

My reading of South African literature and its critics has, further, largely been determined by my own 'radical' Christian view of life. This approach sees in what is happening in South Africa a marvellous challenge, an opportunity for all of us to help create a society which will be able to acknowledge its common humanity, yet celebrate its diversity. Such an outlook presupposes, however, that it will only be possible to meet this challenge if we accept that in the eyes of God none of us is guiltless. We somehow all stand condemned by our words and actions and, at times, by our inability or unwillingness to act. My

personal conviction, that there is none amongst us who is 'without sin', that we all share responsibility for the present situation, has determined my own definition of objectivity and makes it difficult for me to support any particular ideology. I have, furthermore, had to accept my own guilt, to acknowledge that I too have often remained silent, and have been neither loving nor compassionate, not merely because 'the situation' was too big for me, but because I could find many good reasons why I should not speak out, and, perhaps, because I preferred not to give up my privileged position.

This thesis is an attempt to comprehend some of the things that have hurt and separated us. It is written in the hope that there will come a day of real reconciliation, love and understanding, not just a superficial truce. While the thesis touches on deeply emotional issues, it attempts not to be judgemental. It is part of an endeavour to understand and thereby help bring about a therapeutic process in which we can really look at ourselves and each other and try to put right what is wrong.

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This MA thesis is dedicated to all those who have prayed for and with me.

My special thanks go to the English Department of the University of South Africa, and in particular to Professor Ernest Pereira. A special word of thanks and appreciation is due to Dr David Lloyd who has always made himself available, who has given more than was asked of him, and who has accompanied me through the very difficult process of putting my thoughts and feelings on paper.

Then there is a special word of thanks to people who in a particular way have been present during the writing of this thesis: Maureen Williams and Baba Nxala, faithful prayer partners through many years; Sandra Lee, Natacha LaGuardia and Carol Miele, loving friends and fellow pilgrims; Father Franz Baumann, a beloved friend and mentor, whose daily prayers and Masses have accompanied me through

both dark and joyful days; Msgr. Walter Niebrzydowski who has been present as I stumble toward my own changing consciousness, who has refused to let me give up, and who once reminded me that God hears 'the cry of the poor', and it is up to us, as individuals and as collectivities to respond with generosity and love.

My own thoughts and feelings towards a troubled South Africa are best summed up by the words of Peter Scagnelli, a prayer I hope will become real for each one of us:

Daylight fades in days when deathless  
Light has robbed earth's night of fear  
On the edge of all our twilights  
Easter's angels shall appear;  
When hearts broken by believing  
count their faith and hope as dead,  
Christ shall meet them in each other  
and in breaking of the bread.

Wondrous mystery of love's giving!  
Our forgiving Father's Son.  
Crushed in sorrow, raised to glory,  
Death had conquered; life has won!  
Once in silence he submitted,  
Now earth sings to him, our King;  
Fear will ever flee defeated  
When a heart in love can sing!

O Lord Jesus, risen Saviour,  
Hear our joyful hymn of praise;  
Grant a season of salvation,  
Peace and joy these Easter days,  
To our Father and the Spirit  
Equal praises ever be;  
Born again, we sing his goodness  
Now and through eternity.

## INTRODUCTION

There is today in the world a general desire for a literature which could penetrate with its beam deep into the tangled jungle of our time (Lukacs<sup>1</sup>: 1972:19).

Even at a time when the dramatic events in South Africa are catching the imagination of so many people worldwide, the South African situation with its multitude of conflicts seems to defy all attempts at definition. Thus, as the world watches the struggle taking place in South African society, more and more people in and outside the country are looking to South African English literature to make some sense of a situation characterised by anomalies which only the very naive and simplistic would define merely in terms of a cause and effect relationship *vis-a-vis* current political reality.

Through the novel of social purpose, the four novelists discussed here have, in their own way, committed themselves to dealing with conflicts and contradictions inherent in South African society<sup>2</sup>. Often their perception has been severely limited by a South African reality which 'effectively prevents any real identification of the writer with his society as a whole' (Gordimer: 1976:119<sup>3</sup>). Yet the social realism each has aspired to, in some way 'offers a clear and graspable conception of the relationship between individuals and their society' (Gakwandi: 1977:127). In their writing they have attempted to meet one of the most important criteria of the novel of social purpose: the reading public's need 'to deal with *ad hoc* issues' (Partridge: 1956:59), and the wish of individuals to define and understand themselves within their social reality.

The nature of their subject material, one of its primary concerns being inter-racial relationships in South Africa, defines these novelists as social critics rather than simply as entertainers. Consequently, their works will, inevitably, be 'treated retrospectively as social or literary "documents"' (Gross: 1980:vii). If, however, their novels are also to be viewed as part of a body of literature relevant beyond the immediate social context, they should 'challenge the whole of mankind' (Sartre: 1974:26) and not become mere vehicles for political or other propaganda which, like reportage or documentary and statistical evidence, is more suited to sociological treatises. The novel of social purpose is primarily concerned with psychological

and social realism: the former reflecting 'the behaviour of ... the individual ... as an autonomous entity', the latter taking 'the whole breadth of society as its subject matter and examin[ing] how the customs, conventions, social institutions and individuals inter-relate' (Gakwandi: 1977:126).

The decision nevertheless to discuss the changing 'social' consciousness of the South African English novel after World War II is based on the recognition that when writers feel obliged 'to record and criticize [their] times' (Gross: 1980: vii), their work 'offers [people] a critical image' of themselves which 'reveal[s], demonstrate[s], represent[s]' (Sartre: 1974: 25) and will have some characteristics of the sociological document. A discussion of the changing social consciousness of a society as non-homogeneous as that found in South Africa will, of necessity, take into account the effect the political, historical, economic and ideological consciousness has on writers' attitudes, their characters, their audience, their self-perception and their style. In the context of this discussion, 'social' should, therefore, be understood in its widest possible sense as reflecting the consciousness of society as a whole, as well as the consciousness of groups or individuals within that society.

The definitions in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1964) of 'conscious' as meaning 'to be aware, knowing', and of 'consciousness' as the 'state of being conscious', 'the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings', only partly reflect the changing consciousness evident in the South African English novel after World War II. While it is possible to trace a change of awareness involving 'the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings', any definition of the term 'consciousness' within the context of the South African novel should include Sartre's perception that individuals give meaning to their lives when they acknowledge that they are not distinct from the epoch in which they live and accept co-responsibility for a particular era. Defining this responsibility as the 'consciousness [of] being the incontestable author of an event or object', Sartre argues that 'a community event which suddenly involves me in it does not come from the outside' (Sartre: 1957:52-57). As society is no static entity, it follows, that if South African novelists take this commitment to their own responsibility seriously, one can trace a change in both the authors' and their characters' sense of involvement in and responsibility for the situation in South Africa.



It is, furthermore, likely that a writer's changing consciousness also implies a change of consciousness on the part of the reader. David Patterson, discussing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogical dimension of the novel, states that 'consciousness situates the world "out there" and makes it a realm into which we venture and to which we respond'. Novelists exploring this world enter, so to speak, into a dialogue with their characters, thus exploring both their own and their characters' consciousness. Readers in turn 'sift through not only the author's word but those voices that echo in the author's word as well as in their own ideology' (Patterson: 1985:132-136). Exploring a novel's changing social consciousness involves an awareness of novelists' own changing perceptions, how these are manifested in the novel, the reading public's attitude, as well as the quality and content of the 'dialogue' taking place.

Although 'consciousness' is defined in the *Dictionary of Philosophy* as 'a designation applied to [the] conscious mind as opposed to a supposedly unconscious or subconscious mind' (Runes: 1983:80), it nevertheless includes the subconscious. Thus, Sartre distinguishes between writers' 'actual' and 'virtual' reading public. Novelists, ostensibly addressing an 'actual' reading public, enter into a dialogue with readers who probably belong to the privileged members of a society. On account of their function as writers they share the values of this society even when they do not belong to the same social class as their readers (Clingman: 1986:213). The more polarised the society they portray, however, the more aware novelists may become of their 'virtual' reading public. The latter, present in their subconscious, represents the "absent" world', the population outside the 'actual' reading public's social class, which can only be addressed indirectly (Sartre: 1978:ch.3).

Stephen Clingman (1984:169) interprets this distinction historically, linking it to specific social and historical events as well as to the prophetic nature of the novel. Yet, one should remember that many of the existentialist philosophers were influenced by Freud and the discoveries psychology had made, and a discussion of the virtual and actual reading public should include some reference to the subconscious. This becomes obvious when one examines Sartre's use in 'Flaubert' of 'a double tool: on the one hand, Karl Marx's concept of history and class, and on the other, Sigmund Freud's illuminations of the dark recesses of the human soul' (Desan: 1986:461). Sartre claims 'there is no technique that can account for the

character in a novel as one can account for a real person, who has existed, by means of a Marxist or psychoanalytic interpretation' (Sartre: 1974:49). His aim 'to demonstrate [both] the development of the person as psychoanalysis has shown it to us, and the development of history' (Sartre: 1974:44), implies that an exploration of individual psychological development within the context of historical reality, as well as an awareness of a 'virtual' reading public cannot merely be interpreted historically; the 'virtual' public also reflects the subconscious thought-world of the novelists, their novelistic characters and their readers.

Thus, for example, one of the primary concerns of the South African English novel, this country's racial problems, occupies people's conscious and subconscious thought-world. It involves so many often unidentified fears and prejudices, that novelists who are serious about portraying the reality of the South African scenario, must of necessity find a way of dealing with a 'subconscious reality' which, to a large extent, determines society's actions and decisions. Consequently, when the 'virtual' public poses questions and presents threats with which novelists and the society in which they live are unable to deal directly and on a 'conscious' or 'rational' level, but which are very much a part of their subconscious thought-world, they may approach them indirectly and may even allow them to become part of their characters' subconscious<sup>4</sup>.

The decision to discuss a 'change' rather than a 'development' or 'evolution' of consciousness in the South African novel, is based on the perception that writers' changing attitudes are partly due to, but should not merely be ascribed to a maturing of technique and style. Nadine Gordimer, for instance, gives examples of thematic, conceptual, attitudinal and vocabulary changes which go beyond the maturation process. She says of her writing: 'I find that the changing subject-matter and even the changing vocabulary in these books reflect the changes in relationships between black and white over these decades, against the background of political events. This came about subconsciously in my work' (Gordimer: 1976b:i). Similarly, Patterson, speaking of the novel as being 'open-ended and ever-changing, liv[ing] in the tension of speaking and response', argues that it 'is a polyphonic voice that responds to a world of voices, and not a mirror that reflects a standing reality' (Patterson: 1985:137). Novelists thus need to find or even invent forms which will adequately reflect their interpretation of the ever-changing 'totality of human experience'

(Gordimer: 1976:119).

Novels by black South African writers offer a clear example of how form and content will be affected both by the changing relationship between writers and their readership as well as by the changes in their perception of themselves and of the society in which they function. Black intellectuals, frequently isolated from the community from which they come but to which they continue to belong by virtue of their racial heritage, often experience a split in their own identity which affects both their self-awareness and their focus. Originally, such a dichotomy frequently resulted in an attempt to explain themselves to a white reading public. Today, however, pleas for understanding and acceptance have generally given way to often rather aggressive assertions of these writers' individuality and a new solidarity with their own communities. Thus, even autobiographical novels which were once conciliatory and explanatory in tone, are today less concerned with the direct and tangible effects of racial discrimination, than with the search for a new future and a new identity. The novelistic form adopted reflects these changes.

With the exception, perhaps, of Nadine Gordimer, a change in novelistic form is not usually as dramatic in the work of white English novelists. While their changing consciousness is no less apparent, it is in Gordimer's white characters that the increasing sense of white people's alienation first reaches a climax. As her characters contemplate their own demise, there is a sense that the Adamastor myth, first postulated by Luis de Camoens, has come full circle, and the fate of whites and 'of the system [they] represent - is eventually ... to be left like so much detritus on the ancient surface of Africa'<sup>5</sup> (Clingman: 1984:167). Often the emergence of one-dimensional characters reflects the impossibility of growth in a society where dialogue became almost non-existent as writers were silenced either by the laws of the land, or because they were 'gagged by the silence of others'. As 'one does not write for slaves' (Sartre: 1978:47), repressive laws affect both the oppressor and the oppressed, curtailing the inner freedom and personality development of both.

Sartre claims that 'the art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy'. Thus, in an authoritarian society, a day may come 'when the pen is forced to stop' (Sartre: 1978:47). This day certainly came for black writers, most of whom were silenced for many years under the

provisions of the Internal Security Act of 1950 (Clingman: 1986:239). White South African novelists, on the other hand, never completely stopped writing. Yet, their novels do reflect their feelings of estrangement as well as their inability to form the worthwhile relationships which would give meaning to their existence in the southern part of Africa. Thus, for example, early liberal humanists espouse the 'justificatory myth' (Gordimer: 1976:108) which seeks a solution to the country's racial problems in personal relationships between black and white people<sup>6</sup>. Later this myth is increasingly replaced by visions of the self-destruction of whites and their society while the black society portrayed, especially in Paton's and Gordimer's novels, retains a certain cohesion which allows it to survive white oppression.

My main criterion in choosing Peter Abrahams, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and Es'kia Mphahlele to discuss the 'changing social consciousness in the South African English novel after World War II' has been their ability to 'penetrate deeply into the great universal problems of their time and inexorably depict the true essence of reality as they see it' (Lukacs: 1972:13)<sup>7</sup>. While other South African novelists have written important novels of social purpose during the twentieth century, few have done so over a period of time both before and after 1960<sup>8</sup>, and even fewer have any experience of South Africa before the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948. These four novelists give some form and continuity to the South African English novel after World War II<sup>9</sup>. Their works also provide important landmarks in tracing the historical development and changing consciousness of a literature which has often been the victim of South Africa's censorship laws and has consequently suffered from erratic output as well as from problems of identity.

As the work of these novelists is 'written *from* a given situation *in* a particular historical moment' (Clingman: 1984: 162), it has, inevitably, been influenced by the fractured nature of the society it portrays. The danger inherent in such a 'dual delimitation' is that these novelists can be accused of writing about South Africa in order either to 'pander to the world's interest in apartheid conditions' (Essop: 1969:229), or to voice their own sense of moral indignation at the situation prevalent in South Africa. In either case, there is the danger that their novels would then become mere documentaries.

It is, however, equally self-defeating to state that though 'racial categories are part of the reality of apartheid society', they should be rejected because of the racism implicit in such categorisation and be replaced by the term 'black' to refer collectively to all racially oppressed groups in South Africa: Africans, Indians and Coloureds (*South African Review* 4: 1987:xiii). The omission of adjectives such as 'black' and 'white' is desirable when their use merely perpetuates the artificially created divisions of South African apartheid society. Yet, the social limitations inherent in South African society cannot merely be ascribed to the apartheid laws. While the latter have increasingly stratified South African society and restricted novelists' line of vision by confining them to the social class from which they originated and to which they belong by virtue of their racial classification, there are also very real differences between people from different racial and cultural groups. Furthermore, as people struggle to learn to live together with those 'other' than themselves, there is always a human, and not only a legal and political element to racial tension.

In this context it is important to remember that factors such as enforced class affiliation, which determine the novelist's vision, are not only of an external nature. Often writers' self-perception is a matter of choice or even a reaction to a certain situation. Thus, for example, Peter Abrahams defines himself as a 'black' rather than a 'Coloured' writer, the classification applicable to him under the South African racial laws (Barnett: 1983:117). Similarly, Sol Plaatje, aware of the Eurocentric perception of African history, chooses in *Mhudi* 'to write of a particular historical episode from an African, and more particularly, a Barolong viewpoint, rather than from the more familiar white perspective' (Willan: 1984:353), and tries 'to interpret to the reading public one phase of "the back of the Native mind"<sup>10</sup> (Plaatje: 1930:21). According to Nadine Gordimer, 'no black could ever have written *African Farm* (sic)' (Gordimer: 1976:103), and Richard Rive speaks of the 'very special situation' of 'being a writer who is also black in South Africa' (Rive: 1980:21).

The importance of recognising differences in the development of the work of black and white novelists should, however, not obscure that which unites them. The authoritarianism inherent in the apartheid system has often encouraged the opposite of what it intended to achieve. There are many who attempted

to break through artificially created barriers, who tried to discover the specifically human in a world where laws had become more important than individuals. This is true of each of the four novelists discussed here. In their concern about the negative effects of the all-encompassing apartheid laws dominating all aspects of South Africa's social consciousness, they portray a society where meaningful human interaction often becomes nearly impossible<sup>11</sup>. Yet, perhaps because of their experience of South African society before the systematic restructuring that took place after 1948, they nevertheless respond primarily to the basically human element of that society's problems.

Thus, for example, categorising either Alan Paton or Nadine Gordimer merely as white South African novelists would be far too limiting for any discussion of their literature. As 'white' writers from the liberal humanist tradition, they both utilise similar novelistic traditions such as, for example, the 'justificatory myth'<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, both share the white writers' increasing sense of alienation, as well as their uncertainty *vis-a-vis* the demise of white society. Yet, with black novelists they share the tendency to portray characters on the other side of the colour bar in the rather distorted and superficial manner in which such people are experienced in a society where normal social interaction has become practically impossible.

Similarly, while Abrahams and Mphahlele both share black novelists' concerns for the situation of black people within a white-dominated society, and both initially utilise the autobiographical genre, their work should also be discussed within the broader framework of South African English literature. Affiliation to the same racial group does not necessarily mean that novelists' changing consciousness will be identical: the latter will be affected by differences in experience and personal decisions. Thus, in his later novels Mphahlele, although an exile for many years, continues to focus specifically on problems in South African society and interprets his experiences in independent black Africa in the light of events in that part of the continent which still has to free itself from white domination. Abrahams in his later works, however, is more concerned with problems common to black people world-wide than with those specific to the black community in South Africa. Likewise, whereas Mphahlele, who left South Africa in 1959 after a long struggle with the apartheid laws, never really considered settling permanently anywhere else, Abrahams who left in 1939, before the institutionalisation of apartheid, eventually decided to put down roots in

Jamaica. Both Mphahlele and Abrahams naturally share white writers' concerns regarding the structure of post-apartheid South African society. The vision all these novelists have of the future, forms an integral part of their changing social consciousness. Based on the historical realities of independent Africa and attempting to assess the future development of the country, this vision also reflects the personal choices each has made with regard to the conflicts, anomalies and injustices in South African society.

As similarities between novelists often make differences in approach or stance all the more noticeable, each is discussed separately. Any comment on these novelists' changing social consciousness should take a number of factors into account: the latter's classification as a 'black' or as a 'liberal white' writer, as an 'exile' or as 'one who has returned from exile', as well any other circumstances and experiences which could have influenced the manner in which racial and social conflicts and tensions have been dealt with in their work.

Society is not static. A study of factors which influenced the social consciousness apparent in the different novels, will help interpret the changes taking place in society. Wellek and Warren point out, however, that 'causal study can never dispose of problems of description, analysis, and evaluation of an object such as a work of literary art', and warn of the dangers inherent in a causal approach when

literary history [is] so preoccupied with the setting of a work of literature that its attempts at an analysis of the works themselves has been slight in comparison with the enormous efforts expended on the study of environment (Wellek and Warren: 1982:73,139).

Thus, while Clingman's contention that examining literature which has been written in 'a fractured society' presupposes 'a social basis to literary criticism' (Clingman: 1976:119) is used as one of the premises in this discussion, an analysis and evaluation of the works themselves is equally important. Furthermore, as content is closely related to form, thematic comparisons should not exclude an analysis of the form used by authors, their characterisation or their style. Thus, for example, indications of a change of consciousness are to be found in a change of genre such as an author's abandoning of the autobiographical novel in favour of an allegorical work of fiction, a change in subject matter or in the manner in which a specific theme is approached, differences in the use of vocabulary, as well as changes in characterisation or the

autonomy granted to characters within the novel.

It is important to remember that while social reality and personal choices will inevitably affect a novelist's work - 'the concrete result of these extrinsic causes - the work of art [in this case the novel] - is always unpredictable' (Wellek and Warren: 1982:73). We should not fall into the trap of imposing either the results of our own analysis of the socio-political situation - however objective we may believe it to be - or our own moral value judgements and premises on a literary work which, for all its dialogical character, should be allowed to speak for itself.



## ENDNOTES

1. The printer used does not accept accented characters and vowel modifiers. Consequently, these have not been included.
2. Prof. Partridge's article 'The Novel of Social Purpose in South Africa' (Partridge:1956:59-64) and the distinction between social and psychological realism made in *The Novel of Contemporary Experience in Africa* (Gakwandi:1977) have both been invaluable in defining the scope of the 'novel of social purpose' as it is used in the context of this thesis.
3. Gordimer: 'English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa', Christopher Heywood (ed): *Aspects of South African Literature*.
4. The distinction between the 'actual' and the 'virtual' reading public is most apparent in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*. By creating a situation in which Mehring 'dialogues' with a dead black man whose corpse was hastily and unceremoniously buried on his farm, she demonstrates both her own and her main character's awareness of black people who make up her 'virtual' or 'listening' reading public 'waiting in implicit silent judgement on everything [s]he wrote' (Clingman: 1986:214). Black novelists' 'actual' and 'virtual' reading public is not as easily identified. And here there is in fact an ironic twist, as is apparent in the discussion of Abrahams's and Mphahlele's works. While these writers, at least initially, appeal to white people, they do not belong to the same social class as the audience they address, nor do they necessarily espouse the latter's values. Their own people are part of the 'absent' world they try to bring to the consciousness of a white reading public and can consequently be called the 'virtual' reading public. Yet, as black novelists' concepts of black identity change, they distance themselves from whites and address a black audience. Whites then become the 'virtual' reading public, often conspicuously absent from the work of black novelists, part of a society from which Abrahams's characters, for instance, feel they have to escape.
5. Adamastor, the last of the Titans, first appeared in Camoens's *The Lusiads*. He symbolises the 'older but defeated [African] culture' which threatens 'to sink the new European enlightenment' (Gray: 1979:27). In Roy Campbell's poetry the Adamastor myth returns to South African English literature as the giant awakens to rid himself of those who have exploited him. His reappearance in Gordimer's *The Conservationist* signals the return of African autonomy and the end of foreign exploitation.
6. The implications of the 'justificatory myth' are discussed within the context of Gordimer's work.
7. Gordimer's attempt to define her own work both as a critic and as a writer was greatly influenced by her understanding of Lukacs's historical and 'critical realism' (Clingman: 1986:9,227)
8. The Sharpeville killings of 1960, the subsequent banning of the ANC and PAC, as well as the decision that South Africa become a republic and leave the Commonwealth, mark a turning point in South African social awareness.
9. Gakwandi's perception that 'the present in South Africa means *apartheid* and this is bound to be a major preoccupation of literature for both white and black writers from the republic' (Gakwandi: 1977:8) is true for most novelists. However, here too there has been a change of consciousness: an examination of Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and Smith's *The Beadle*, for example, shows that the evils of racism were not always central to South Africa's social consciousness.
10. Sol Plaatje's novelistic achievement lies in his relatively early recognition of the racial conflict which was to polarise South African society. Written in 1917, but only published in 1930, *Mhudi* reinterprets white history, and more especially the Great Trek, and places this within the wider context of black African history.
11. Even though the apartheid laws have in recent times been largely removed, their effect continues to be

felt: South African society has none of the utopian characteristics once envisioned in a 'post-apartheid' era. History has shown that the mere changing of laws does not guarantee peaceful co-existence or fruitful human interaction. This is true, for example, in the United States today following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and in the countries of Eastern Europe which have recently freed themselves from Soviet domination. Similarly, three hundred and fifty years of history, and more especially forty years of apartheid, which have shaped the consciousness of several generations of South Africans cannot be undone by a mere Act of Parliament. Unfortunately, the process of healing and renewal may be as painful and take as long as the process of destruction which led to the present state of affairs.

12. Interestingly, in *Mhudi* Plaatje adopted the 'justificatory myth'. The end of the book shows that he, like Paton and Gordimer, considered this no solution in a society where 'fraternizing with a black couple ... grievously offended [white] people's susceptibilities' (Plaatje: 1930:186). Despite this similarity between Plaatje and white liberal novelists, however, it is possible the latter had not read *Mhudi*: Plaatje had 'largely been forgotten by his own country' (Couzens and Willan: 1976:1) and his work has only been given prominence fairly recently. The liberal humanist consciousness thus pre-dated and survived the war years but, in both periods, it was threatened by the social consciousness of which Plomer was uneasily aware in *Turbott Wolfe*. Millin's racist attitudes in her works, and the apartheid laws merely confirmed this uneasiness. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH NOVEL BEFORE WORLD WAR II: The Emergence of Dominant Themes in South African English Fiction.

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As one of the main themes of the South African novel of social purpose has always been that of racial conflict, criticism of this genre is concerned mainly with 'the interaction between peoples of diverse origins, languages, technologies and social systems meeting on South African soil'<sup>1</sup> (White and Couzens: 1984:1). South African English literature<sup>2</sup> reflects the search by different groups for an identity, as well as the apparent inability of members of this society to accept a common humanity. Geslin points out that already 'before World War II, all the predominant themes in South African fiction had been set in motion, what followed ... consists of variations on these themes' (Geslin: 1981:27). This chapter traces the development of the novel of social purpose in the early 20th century before World War II. The works discussed include: Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* (1911), Plaatje's *Mhudi* (written 1917, published 1930), Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924), Schreiner's *From Man to Man* (1926), Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926), Smith's *The Beadle* (1926), Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928), van der Post's *In A Province* (1934). The themes discussed include the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century Western world's fascination with race and blood (Coetzee: 1980:42), the problems associated with the de-tribalisation of black people, the process of urbanisation which affected all South Africans, as well as the rise of liberalism<sup>3</sup>.

Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), is not primarily concerned with racial issues as these do not really feature in her characters' consciousness<sup>4</sup>. This work can, nevertheless, be seen as an early example of the novel of social purpose, as she explores the interaction between members from different cultural and linguistic groups. Schreiner devotes attention to a satiric portrayal of the communities living in the Karoo, to the role of women in this society, to a description of the Karoo landscape, and to the general violence and brutality characterising its inhabitants. This brutality and violence, which seem to be part of the human condition, are not restricted to any particular group, as is evident in the black labourers' exploitation of Otto's kindness, the Hottentot maid's fickleness, Bonaparte's evil manipulation of basically naive people, as well as his and Sannie's cruelty to the children and to Otto.

For Schreiner, as for Pauline Smith in *The Beadle* (1926), racial oppression is only another aspect of already flawed characters, a commentary on people themselves rather than on what Ursula Edmunds calls 'a drama played out in a tense multi-racial society'<sup>5</sup> (Edmunds: 1969:45).

The centrality of racial issues in Schreiner's posthumously published third novel, *From Man to Man* (1926), indicates her own changing consciousness<sup>6</sup>. In contrast to many later novelists, she continues to explore the human rather than the political aspects of racial interaction. It is obvious, however, that personal contact between the races has become more problematic than was the case in *The Story of an African Farm*. While Rebekah finds it harder to deal with her husband's infidelities<sup>7</sup> than with the fact that he has been unfaithful with a black woman<sup>8</sup>, her lengthy discourse on 'The Inferior Races' who have been displaced and enslaved by a supposedly superior race, explores the idea of whether equality is possible when one race denies the humanity of the other (Schreiner: 1926:418-423).

The rejection of black people's physical appearance, apparent in Schreiner's work, is already present in Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* (1911). Neither Gibbon nor Schreiner hide their revulsion for the physical features of blacks. In *From Man to Man* the 'thick lips' of Sartje, Frank's 'Coloured' child (Schreiner: 1926: 418), set her apart from the other children. Frank's white children are embarrassed at being seen with their half-sister, who is called a 'black nigger' by her father and by the neighbours. Similarly, Rebekah, who accepts the child as her own, nevertheless points out she 'is not a black nigger any more than she is a pure white child' (Schreiner: 1926:417). In *Margaret Harding*, Kamis, superior to many whites because of his education, behaviour and personality, is initially judged, also by those who become his friends and who recognise the spirit 'caged in a black skin', by his 'gross' features (Gibbon: 1911: 16). Gibbon's own prejudice is apparent in Margaret's attitude: although she publicly defends Kamis for kissing her hand, she cannot reconcile 'the strong spirit that drove him' with her perception of the 'humble and grateful' person who 'suffered behind blubber lips and a comical nose'<sup>9</sup> (Gibbon: 1911:229). Even his education, which allows him to communicate with Paul and Margaret, does not make him acceptable to white people<sup>10</sup>.

In *Margaret Harding* there is a general acceptance of social and racial inequalities. This is reflected in Fat Mary's lack of compunction in betraying the 'mad Kafir' (Gibbon: 1911: 282). And Margaret herself speaks of a future time when 'the Kafirs are all as civilized as we are' (Gibbon: 1911: 187) and might, therefore, become acceptable to white society. Kamis himself, educated yet rejected, and well aware of the hardships he suffers, seldom questions his status as second-class citizen. He even seems to enjoy the irony of his situation when, though he is under arrest, he treats Margaret by proxy because Dr. Jakes is too drunk to do so (Gibbon: 1911: 289-299). Though the system is implicitly criticised in *Margaret Harding*, it is only in Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe*, written fifteen years later, that revolutionary social change is considered.

Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, written in 1917, but only published in 1930, touches on issues similar to those dealt with by white English-speaking novelists who wrote in the period before World War II<sup>11</sup>. Yet, his perspective is very different from theirs, as is, for example, apparent from his perception of the African landscape. The essentially hostile South African landscape portrayed by white writers, becomes a refuge for both Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, even though it is filled with dangerous animals. Once they flee the destroyed village, they neither mystify nor personify the continent and the dangers endemic to it; instead, it becomes the ideal setting for a pastoral, fairy-tale romance. Any threat to the couple comes from either a specific animal or has a human source; unlike in much white writing, its origin is not an unidentifiable, autonomous force. Given this difference in perception, it is, perhaps, not surprising that editors wished to change the original *Mhudi* text to appeal to a contemporary white reading public's perception of 'darkest' Africa. Gray points out that

whenever Mhudi has an 'experience' [the Lovedale editor] turns it into an 'alarming adventure', as if the wilds of Africa represent some melodramatic backdrop for thrills and spills and not what Plaatje meant the landscape to be for her, a normal and integral part of her life of fortitude and endurance (Gray: 1979:181).

While the African landscape presents no identity crisis to black people<sup>12</sup>, the conflict, contradictions and ambiguities resulting from the clash of cultures does. The often futile attempt to reconcile traditional and Western-Christian values is exacerbated by increased urbanisation and 'legislation that regulated land, labour and urban life' (Mphahlele: 1980:5), and excluded black people from the white way of life which

was, nevertheless, presented as highly desirable.

Thus, in *Mhudi*, Plaatje describes the traditional way of life of the Barolong before the Matabele raid, and by implication, before the arrival of whites. He illustrates that black people have an autonomous tradition based on a well-developed culture: their history and their system of justice pre-dates the arrival of whites on the African subcontinent. He places white South African history within the wider context of black African history. The newcomers thus become part of African history, and African history is not seen, as is more commonly the case, merely as being a part of European history. Yet, after the institution of the Native Land Act of 1913, black people begin to lose their traditional identity, and the Boers, to whom they offered hospitality and to whose assistance they came when the latter were threatened by the Matabele, dehumanise them and rob them of their land, making them aliens in their own country<sup>13</sup>.

Emphasising those aspects of African, and more especially Barolong culture, now threatened by the imposition of white laws and customs, Plaatje tries to fit historical facts into his ideological mould. The Barolong, and by implication black people in general, are portrayed as brave but peace-loving. Yet, Plaatje cannot avoid the internal irony that the Matabele's violence and blood-lust, so similar to that of the Boers, devastated the Barolong village. Similarly, while he prophesies that whites, like the Matabele, will ultimately suffer the consequences of their cruelty and injustice, even the cruel Mzilikazi finally emerges as the leader of a people who merely wish to protect their culture and their traditions.

And so Mhudi, instinctively mistrustful of the Boers, insists that her and Ra-Thaga's life should never be linked to theirs. The 'inexplicable dread that lingered in her mind' (Plaatje: 1930: 115) is justified when she witnesses the cruelty shown to a Hottentot maid. Inevitably, however, her way of life changes: she leaves the Voortrekker camp in her own ox-wagon. Even though Mhudi resists Hanneltjie's wish that she become the 'ayah' for the Boer woman's children's, the process of acculturation has begun. Rather ominously this process is mainly one-sided: the Boers cannot tolerate any 'fraternizing with a Black couple' (Plaatje: 1930:186). The friendship between Mhudi and Umnandi, Mzilikazi's favourite wife, and between Ra-Thaga and de Villiers, could have seen the beginning of greater understanding between the different

groups; yet, their ultimate separation suggests that the future scenario is one of conflict and misunderstanding.

Attempting to explain traditional norms and mores, Plaatje emphasises that while black people may have been at war with each other when Europeans came to southern Africa, they were not uncivilised savages with no judicial system of their own. Plaatje's reservations concerning the justice of European law becomes obvious in his comparison of black traditional with European legal systems. Thus, he shows, for example, how Chief Moroka is more concerned with the well-being of his people than with upholding the letter of the law. In a 'wife-swopping' case where two couples change their legal partners for their childhood love, Chief Moroka refuses to force spouses to stay together merely because they are married to one another. He rules that those who love each other should stay together even though they have changed their legal partners. Celliers, on the other hand, comments that the Boers 'would ask the woman to cling to the husband she is married to, and forget all about her childhood's love' (Plaatje: 1930: 123).

As far as Plaatje is concerned, European law itself is suspect: arbitrarily administered, it does not seem to have as its goal the people's well-being. This is most obvious in the Boers' dealing with those other than themselves. Hottentot servants, for example, are given an excessive number of lashes and have no right to mercy. Similarly, the Boers use legal agreements to trick their allies into accepting deals detrimental to the latter's survival. Thus, after the war against the Matabele, the Boers offer their allies, the Barolong, a 'just division of the spoil': the Boers would take the land, whereas the Barolong receive the cattle, but with no land on which to graze them (Plaatje: 1980: ch.17)<sup>14</sup>.

In contrast to much of white South African literature, the conflict surrounding miscegenation is seldom raised in black writing. In *Mhudi*, members of different tribal and racial groups co-exist at Thaba Nchu and the question of inter-racial sex is, ironically, only referred to by Mzilikazi in the context of his chilling prophecy that whites would take away the Bechuana's sense of human dignity by humiliating their women. The problem of identity as Plaatje sees it is thus not one of keeping the blood line pure. It is, instead, concerned with the selfishness, greed and cruelty of dominant groups, as well as with their inability to treat

people from other races with respect or to accord them some semblance of human dignity. *Mhudi* contains the warning of history that oppression may force people to form alliances, not because of mutual admiration, but because of shared hatred.

During the 1920s several novels of social purpose appeared. With the exception of R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928), all were by white novelists. Both Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924) and William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926), reflect a theme which permeates most of South African English literature: the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century Western world's fascination with race and blood (Coetzee: 1980:42). Aware of white people's need to establish and maintain their identity in seemingly hostile surroundings, both authors explore the question of miscegenation as well as their perception of the role to be played by whites in a multi-ethnic society.

In *God's Stepchildren* Millin seems to have no doubts regarding the undesirability of miscegenation: white blood should be kept 'pure', it should not be 'tainted' by black blood. Any mixing of the two is a sin that will be visited on the heads of the children of those who commit it (see Coetzee: 1980:46). Thus, Millin's half-caste characters belong neither to the father's nor to the mother's racial group. Grotesquely one-dimensional, they are, with the exception of Barry, either senile or totally degenerate. Unable to control their lusts, they disregard 'the sanctities of race' (Millin: 1924:209) and become social outcasts as society isolates and expels that which threatens it with defilement. According to Coetzee, this ostracism foreshadows the legal codification after 1948 of the apartheid laws<sup>15</sup> (Coetzee: 1980:51).

Ironically, the biological determinism with which Millin tries to legitimate racial separation is subverted in the character of Barry Lindsell, whose history proves that the flaw of blood is socially determined. While in England he forgets the 'stain' of his black blood. Returning to Africa, he is made aware of his 'sin' and makes 'reparation' by resolving never to see the child his wife has conceived and to send them back to live a 'normal' life in England. Even though Barry is never so strong and noble as when he returns both to serve the people from whom he came and to terminate what can never again be a 'healthy' bloodline, it is clearly 'the consciousness of people around him rather than biological endowment that makes a person



'black' or 'white" (Coetzee: 1980:56).

In *Turbott Wolfe*, by contrast, Plomer explores the ideals of liberalism, and the issue of miscegenation in the African context. 'Young Africa', a group of liberally-oriented people who subscribe to the liberal values of tolerance and heterogeneity, apparently accepts black people, as well as the idea of miscegenation. Ironically, however, they suffer from similar fears and anxieties as those who openly reject their values. Thus, both Friston and D'Elvadere claim that South Africa can never be anything but 'a coloured man's country' (Plomer: 1926: 56,64), and the 'Credo' they draw up together with other members of 'Young Africa', states that 'miscegenation is the only way for Africa to be secured to (sic) the African' (Plomer: 1926:70). Yet, both Wolfe and Friston's principles prove somewhat inadequate when they are confronted by the reality of a romance between a white woman, Mabel van der Horst, and a black man, Zachary Msomi. Wolfe realises

it was one thing to talk glibly about miscegenation, to fool about with an idea, and another to find oneself face to face with the actual happening,

and he cannot accept that

this girl could ... really mean to give herself to an African (Plomer: 1926:69,85).

Friston's drug-induced, delirious dreams likewise reveal that his 'prophecies' concerning the new coloured world belong in the 'actual world of dreams', they are 'not a rational matter, but an emotional [one]' (Plomer: 1926:66). Even Caleb, who once made a fool of himself because Wolfe did not correct his newspaper article so as not to destroy his 'illusion that he could talk and write English', admits he is 'afraid of this miscegenation' (Plomer: 1926: 71,85). So, Mabel and Zachary are the only signatories of the 'Young Africa' Credo to put the ideal of miscegenation into practice.

Unable to face reality, Friston, like Wolfe, seeks refuge in the 'illusory' world of politics. Neither grows or achieves much. Friston dies and Wolfe leaves Africa, bitterly advising Caleb to settle among his own people and 'propagate the species, which any fool can do' (Plomer: 1926:110). His departure and his lonely, childless death, which foreshadows the end of the liberal tradition, is in sharp contrast to the fate of

Caleb, Mabel and Zachary, as well as of Nhliziyombi, who are all able to reproduce. The field is now left wide open to the Bloodfields and the Fleshers who condemn 'nigger kissers', yet themselves father illegitimate coloured children, thus, ironically, helping to fulfil the prophecy concerning a 'future coloured world'<sup>16</sup>.

A comparison of the reception given *Turbott Wolfe* and *God's Stepchildren* in the 1920s, and the subsequent differing responses to these two books, indicates the changing social consciousness of both the reading public and of the society within which these two novelists wrote. Millin's novel, initially 'well received critically and ... popularly' (Voss: 1986:11<sup>17</sup>), was 'recognised by South Africans as a plausible and articulate ejaculation of their racial nightmares' (Rabkin: 1976:79). This novel, for which she is best known, is not just 'a hotchpotch of colonial prejudices' (Coetzee: 1980: 42,43), but 'reflects the racial theories of the time' (Rabkin: 1976:82) when 'meditations upon blood had occupied both writers and scientists for decades before 1920' (Coetzee: 1980:42). Today, it 'seems a prejudiced, ignorant and vulgar piece of work' (Voss: 1986:11). By comparison, *Turbott Wolfe* was initially 'greeted by a furor of protest and vituperation' (Rabkin: 1976:79), and Plomer later claimed that nothing had changed: 'the book made a row 40 years ago & would make another now' (Plomer: 1965:130). Today, however, a more liberal reading public echoes the values of its time, reacting with revulsion to Millin's novel, yet treating Plomer's work, whose popularity is following a 'steadily ascending ... curve' (Rabkin: 1976:79), with unmitigated praise.

Both these novels reflect the general inability of South African novelists, both before and after World War II, to create plausible, autonomous characters, and more especially their difficulty in portraying people on the other side of the colour line. Thus, Millin's physically and psychologically unattractive half-caste characters in *God's Stepchildren* do not develop independently. Reacting only to the accident of their birth, they are merely vehicles for a particular ideology. Plomer's characters in *Turbott Wolfe* similarly represent types rather than individuals<sup>18</sup>. Van der Post's comment that black people in *Turbott Wolfe* 'take their place in their own right as individual human beings beside the white persons in the story' (Van der Post: 1965:148<sup>19</sup>), thus needs to be qualified.

It is true Plomer's characters are not 'merely used as an incitement to adventure and romance'. Yet, compared to central white characters, Caleb, Zachary Msomi and Nhliziyombi are caricatures. They are seen mainly through the eyes of Turbott Wolfe, who very obviously does not belong to black society, and are used primarily to give readers a bird's eye view of Plomer's perception of South African white society. Plomer's own ambivalence concerning the African landscape, to some extent accounts for Turbott Wolfe's inability to come to terms emotionally with his professed beliefs. Like many white characters in South African English literature he feels threatened by Africa's vastness and mysteriousness and swears 'that Africa should never master [him]' or defeat him as it did Nordalsgaard the Norwegian missionary (Plomer: 1926:59). Yet, despite the perceived 'encroachment of Africa' and 'the constriction of the great open spaces' (Van der Post: 1965: 153), he is aware of the beauty and fascination of Africa (Plomer: 1926:52,59), especially in the figure of Nhliziyombi who closely resembles the Rousseauesque image of the 'noble savage' (see: Plomer:1926:31). Thus, with the possible exception of Zachary Msomi, Wolfe's Africa is filled with 'rare savages' (Plomer: 1926:30), innocent victims of the white man's degeneracy, who need protection and help, yet are creatures who can never really be uplifted to the level of whites (Plomer: 1926:64). Even on his deathbed this ambiguity haunts him<sup>20</sup>.

Turbott Wolfe's attitude to black people and to miscegenation touches on one of the most important themes and influences in South African English literature: that of liberal humanism. Adherence to this ideology implies a belief in the values of equality, freedom and justice, as well as a commitment to non-violent social change which will come about through individual human interaction<sup>21</sup>. Plomer's novel 'presents a critique of liberalism, and explores the threatened failure of the liberal ideal in Africa' (Lockett: 1987:30). Plaatje, in *Mhudi*, and Van der Post, in *In a Province* (1934), on the other hand, both explore what Gordimer later called the 'justificatory myth': the means whereby racial tensions can be ameliorated through a friendship between black and white people. Like many novelists after them they realise that friendships between black and white individuals must fail when an ideology becomes more important than individual human beings.

After 1948 liberalism is generally linked to opposition to apartheid. Its apparent failure after the

dissolution of the Liberal Party in 1966, and the unrealistic popular impression that the abolition of the apartheid laws would allow South African society to return to 'normal' almost immediately, seem to justify the ambivalence Plomer felt as early as 1925. Yet, the early emergence of liberalism in South African English literature suggests a different perspective: the legal encoding of laws enforcing racial and group segregation brought about a dilemma in the liberal subconscious. The quandary faced by liberals was that their faith in the ideal of peaceful social change was constantly threatened, both by the intolerance of those who did not hesitate to use legalised institutional violence to enforce their beliefs, as well as by black revolutionary aspirations. Although many novels in the 1950s tell of the demise of liberal humanism in the face of the almost suicidally foolish laws propagated by the Nationalist Party in the cause of the sanctity and survival of the white race, most agree that the real 'solution' to the problems facing South African society will ultimately be on a human rather than on a political or 'revolutionary' level<sup>22</sup>.

Nadine Gordimer ascribes the alienation and the contradiction most liberals experience as they try to adhere to their ideals in an increasingly violent society, to the institution of the apartheid laws (see Clingman: 1984:162). There can be no doubt that these laws contributed much towards creating the present situation. Yet, as Gray points out, 'literature and politics interpenetrate uncomfortably for far longer than the term "apartheid" has been in use' (Gray: 1979:13), and the institution of the apartheid laws does not adequately account for the romantic view of many white writers that everything pertaining to black society is near-perfect, whereas anything associated with white society is suspect, if not totally objectionable.

Thus, Gordimer comments that as Turbott Wolfe is

unable to see the Africans as ridiculous and ugly, animal-like, as the other whites do, [he] has no choice but to see them as noble and beautiful, god-like. There is no plane of normality on which he can meet them simply as fellow-humans (Gordimer: 1965: 167<sup>23</sup>).

She claims that

Turbott Wolfe spikes on a flaming sword every piece of cant by which the white man has lived and - despite his hospitals, schools and mines - failed, in Africa (Gordimer: 1965: 166),

but does not mention that Turbott Wolfe, himself a victim of the colonial society he regards as obscene, is

aware he has also failed. Nor does she take into account that exploitation and oppression alone cannot account for common human weaknesses, failings and imperfections. This view is supported by David Brown's comment that

it is easy enough to remember the wrongs of Europe's incursions into Africa - the slave trade, commercial exploitation, racial contempt, and social injustice: but it is as well to remember that the wrongs done by Africans to Africans, out of greed, cruelty, callousness, superstition, and ignorance, are beyond computing (Brown: 1979:191).

The tendency by some writers to portray societies discriminated against by whites as nearly perfect, is similarly discounted by Laurens van der Post, who supports his claim that 'the coloured'<sup>24</sup> people themselves [are not] free of racialism' by saying that

the collective conflicts and individual tensions, the mechanisms of self-deception, hypocrisy and abuse of power sketched so vividly in *Turbott Wolfe* are not peculiar to South Africa. They are a fundamental part of the human spirit and everywhere play the same sorry role in the turbulent story of our time (Van der Post: 1965:163).

Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* was written in the same year as Millin's and Plomer's novels, yet, unlike the latter, is not primarily concerned with inter-racial relationships. As in *The Story of an African Farm*, black people only exist on the periphery of the community's awareness, as do foreigners like the Englishman and the Jewess who 'had suffered much at the hands of Christians' (Smith: 1926:11). The social awareness of the small and isolated Afrikaans community portrayed by Smith centres on its religion and its attempt to make a meagre living out of the very poor soil of the 'Aangenaam Valley'. Racial relationships are determined by the same benevolent paternalism evident in *From Man to Man*. Thus, when 'the native servants, crowding in the doorway without entering in the room and squatting down there on the floor', partake in the evening service, their children pray to be obedient and eager to please their masters (Smith: 1926:137).

The only English novel written by a black writer during the 1920s is R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy*<sup>25</sup> (1928). It was published two years before Plaatje's *Mhudi*, which appeared only in 1930. While Plaatje wrote *Mhudi* so as 'to interpret to the reading public one phase of "the back of the Native mind"'<sup>26</sup> (Plaatje: 1930:21), *An African Tragedy* documents both the problems experienced when traditional and Western values clash, as well as the tremendous changes in black society where these two ways of life

uneasily co-exist in people's consciousness. Thus, Jane's father insists on an outrageously high traditional 'lobola' payment. This drives Robert to the city where the (Western) evils of liquor and prostitution lead to total moral decay and the eventual destruction of the tribal family unit. Interestingly, the 'Nyanga' cannot deal with venereal disease which, as it has been brought by whites, cannot be treated by traditional medicines<sup>27</sup>.

In *An African Tragedy*, which uses the 'Jim-goes-to-Jo'burg' theme<sup>28</sup>, Robert's decision to go to the city seals his fate. His escape from the beneficial controls of tribal tradition to the impermanence of the city, the white man's creation, leads to a loss of identity which can only be reversed by a return to a rural way of life<sup>29</sup>. The restrictions imposed on him by the pass laws result in his ultimate destruction. Dhlomo's social consciousness, apparent in his contention that this tragedy could have been averted if Christian values had been adhered to, is rejected by later black writers who see Christianity merely as a tool for further Westernisation.

Laurens van der Post's novel, *In a Province* (1934), explores and develops several of the themes already touched on. It is apparent from this novel that by the 1930s racial intolerance was increasing. Racial conflicts often eclipse common challenges and threats: white people are so concerned with racial issues, they hardly seem aware that drought and poverty are threatening the country. Thus, whites in a bar in Port Benjamin are told of a ritual murder committed by black people who try to deal with their plight by sacrificing one of their members. They speak of the hopelessness of trying to 'civilise those bastards in Bambuland' (Van der Post: 1934: 188), yet make no attempt to understand the reasons which led up to such an action: the extreme poverty caused by drought and the unfair taxes imposed by the white authorities. Instead, they make the desperate situation in which many of their countrymen find themselves, and from which they are protected only by their privileged position as whites, the butt of their drunken jokes (Van der Post: 1934: 189,191). The magistrate, who is unwilling to impose European laws on people not permitted to be part of the latter's way of life, is condemned for being a 'negrophobolist' (sic). Thus, the rain which comes at the end of the book brings relief from the drought but does not signal a new beginning. It only promises temporary relief, washing away 'for a time' the memory of what has been (Van

der Post: 1934:254).

The primary cause for the influx into the city is the effect of the drought. As this is exacerbated by the tribal reserve system, the misfortune mainly affects black people. Yet, the depiction of Port Benjamin as 'an indescribable mixture of peoples, thrown together only by a common misfortune, held together by a common defencelessness' (Van der Post: 1934: 126), suggests that drought is not the only cause of poverty and suffering. The repetition of the song '*Vat jou goed en trek, Ferreira*', points to the irony that the Boers, whose cruel treatment at the hands of the British is the subject of the song, are now themselves the intolerant ones who oppress black people<sup>30</sup>.

Van Bredepoel's friendship with the revolutionary Burgess on the one hand, and the migrant Kenon on the other, leads him towards increased social awareness as he makes an honest attempt to come to terms with the situation in which he finds himself. He realises, however, that while he adheres to the ideal of individual accountability, people like Burgess do not. Aware of his own inadequacy, Van Bredepoel says to Burgess:

Everyone wants to improve the system under which he lives and not himself, and as he, or a collection of people like him, makes the system, it all ends in no improvement, no responsibility. Take you yourself ... I haven't heard you utter a word of reproach against your share in it, all you've done is to come back howling about the system again! ... Your enemy and mine in this country is not the system but the heart of every white man. You can't legislate a man's heart away (Van der Post: 1934:243).

Van Bredepoel's tragic defeat and Burgess's refusal to take responsibility for his actions, leave the field wide open to people who are more interested in imposing their political ideologies on society, than on promoting real understanding or in encouraging people to act responsibly<sup>31</sup>.

Lockett points out that whereas many of the early novels reflect 'a world which was stable and, if not acceptable, at least knowable, ... Plomer's world was different: it was one of uncertainty, in which Africa was alternately beautiful and destructive, dark and life-giving' (Lockett: 1987:34). By the time *In a Province* was written, South Africa was moving towards increasingly stringent laws designed to safeguard whites. Ironically, these laws made the world even more uncertain, both for black and for white people.

As novelists grapple with the reality of socio-political developments, their own and society's changing social consciousness is not necessarily indicated by a change of theme, but rather by the different ways in which they approach the social realities they are exploring. Both characterisation and style, as well as the novelistic form used, reflect the changing perceptions of reality.

Whereas white novelists' insecurity reveals itself in an ever greater feeling of alienation, black novelists, who once appealed to the understanding and compassion of whites, later often become aggressively self-assertive as they try to both salvage and re-create their tradition, while attempting to become part of a world denied them by law. In either instance, often unacknowledged subconscious fears and prejudices are as relevant a reflection of the changing social consciousness as the more easily discernible political structure. While these fears and prejudices will be manifested differently in the perceptions of the various groups and individuals, their existence knows no racial boundaries. Both the similarities and differences form an integral part of the changing social consciousness of the South African English novel.



## ENDNOTES

1. Often literature which does not deal specifically with racial tensions is regarded as 'irrelevant', as is apparent in Gordimer's criticism that Olive Schreiner raises 'irrelevant' feminist issues in a country where no black has a vote (Gordimer: 1983:17).
2. The designation 'literature' is used here because, although several English 'literatures' emanated from the various traditions and nationalisms in southern Africa, this body of literature is contained within a single South African geographic and economic context. The use of the English language, for whatever reason, is one of the unifying factors (White and Couzens: 1984:1).
3. Works with similar themes written during the nineteenth century are, with the exception of Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), beyond the scope of this discussion, as is the 'Rhodesian Novel' reviewed by Snyman in *The South African Novel in English: 1880-1930*.
4. Schreiner uses both 'Kaffir' and 'nigger' when referring to black people. P.D. Williams points out that in South Africa 'Kaffir', 'Kafir' or 'Caffre', the Arabic word for infidel, originally referred to non-Muslim blacks. It only later became a derogatory term, similar to the word 'nigger' as it was used in India and the U.S.A. (Williams: Introduction to *Margaret Harding*: 1983: viii). In both Schreiner and Gibbon 'Kaffir' is a designation for a black person. 'Nigger' is the more derogatory term. The word 'Kaffir' also refers to the Xhosa, as distinct from, for example, the Zulu. This is apparent in the designation 'British Caffraria' for that part of the country where the Xhosa lived.
5. Stephen Gray points to the element of farce in Schreiner's work. He gives the example of Blenkins, in *The Story of an African Farm*, who has terrified so many others, yet is scared out of his wits when an ostrich pecks him on his bald head (Gray: 1979:156). Similar incidents include Tant' Sannie's discovery of Blenkins' unfaithfulness and the latter's undignified retreat from the farm covered in pickle-water with a shoulder of mutton aimed at the small of his back; Piet van der Walt's marriage proposal after Tant' Sannie interprets as a message from 'the Redeemer' his dying wife's wish that he marry somebody fat, over thirty, who had had two husbands, and did not have a mole. The young Piet remembers his wife's jealousy of her younger sister who had not been married, was not fat and didn't have a mole (Schreiner: 1883: 120,190). While humour is present, for instance, in Mphahlele's work and in that of Herman Charles Bosman and Stephen Blackburn it is, unfortunately, often absent in South African English fiction. It seems South African novelists generally reflect the consciousness of a society which takes itself very seriously.
6. Schreiner's novel, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), is not discussed (see endnote 3), even though its criticism of colonial expansionism and imperialistic values touches on central issues in South Africa's development. Furthermore, while these themes re-appear in the novels of J.M. Coetzee, and in several other novels of the 1970s and 1980s, they are otherwise not central to the post-World War II novels of social purpose under discussion here.
7. The change of consciousness evident in definitions of 'Immorality', 'European', 'Native' and 'non-European' would later give Frank's infidelities a political relevance they do not yet have in this novel. The *Immorality Act, No. 5 of 1927* forbade 'illicit carnal intercourse' between 'European' (the term is not defined here) and 'Native' ('any member of any aboriginal race or tribe in Africa'). Immorality here, thus refers to extra-marital relations of Europeans with Natives and not to those between members of their own or other groups. Sexual relations in and outside of marriage between Europeans and Coloureds ('a person ... not a white person or a native') would thus still have been allowed. The *Immorality Amendment Act, No. 21 of 1950* substituted 'Native' with 'non-European' ('a person who in appearance obviously is or who by general acceptance and repute is a non-European') and made sex, both in and outside of marriage, between Europeans and non-Europeans illegal. 'European' was now defined as one who 'in appearance' or 'by general acceptance and repute is European' and became synonymous with 'white'. Inter-racial marriages were allowed till *The*

*Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, No. 55 of 1949* made marriages between Europeans and all non-Europeans invalid (for definitions see Suzman: 1960).

8. As South Africa's social consciousness changes, perceptions of inter-racial sexual relationships and their 'sinfulness' are re-interpreted. In Schreiner's *From Man to Man* Frank's infidelity with Mrs Drummond is as much a desecration of the marriage as that with the black servant girl. His ultimate degradation is not his affair with a black woman, but occurs when he attempts to settle matters by giving her money. In Millin's *God's Stepchildren*, however, the Rev. Flood's sin is similar to that committed by Pieter in Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*: it is an offense against the white race and not against the theological sin of adultery, so important to Rebekah in *From Man to Man*. In Paton's society this is punishable by the state rather than the church. Shifting perceptions are evident in Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature*: having a black child makes Hillela more acceptable in the new non-racial South Africa.
9. Williams points out that though 'Gibbon senses his attitude is illogical and prejudiced', his 'ambivalent feelings towards the black physiognomy: fascination and awe, yet also repugnance and revulsion for the black face' are conditioned by his European culture's fascination with classical Hellenism's ideals of beauty as well as with the association of purity and good with 'white', and 'bad' with 'black' (Williams: Introduction to *Margaret Harding*: 1983: xi). While the former perception changed in later years, the latter has largely remained.
10. Interestingly, because of his education, Kamis is also alienated from black people, who regard him as mad. This problem of the educated black person, accepted neither by whites nor by his own people, re-emerges in Abrahams's *The Path of Thunder* (1948), where Lanny's education makes him a threat to whites. Likewise unacceptable to his own people, he is unable to help them. There is an interesting variation on this theme in Ethelreda Lewis's *Wild Deer* (1933), when an educated black American, in search of lost innocence, returns to his 'roots' in Africa, but realises that the black person's identity will continue to be threatened both by the encroachment of Western civilisation and by racial injustice.
11. Like Plaatje, other writers had problems having their work published. One of the consequences of this state of affairs was that during the 1920s and 1930s several newspapers, many of which were multi-lingual, appeared. *Voorslag*, 'devoted to the Life and Art of South Africa and the development of the South African people' (*Voorslag*: June 1926:3), published by Roy Campbell, William Plomer and Laurens van der Post, catered to a sophisticated audience. Unable to face the questions posed by *Turbott Wolfe*, white South Africans refused to be challenged by *Voorslag*'s 'dangerously revolutionary talk' (Alexander: 1980:54). According to Gardner and Chapman, the reading public's attitude had changed little by 1985: 'Some of the challenging statements in *Voorslag* would produce today, unfortunately, in many white South African readers almost the same angry and guilty explosion as they did when they were first written' (Introduction: *Voorslag*: 1985:11). In the field of black writing, newspapers such as *Abantu Batho* (founded in 1912) and *Umteteli wa Bantu* (founded in 1920) catered for a black audience, publishing authors who wrote in the vernacular languages but whose work was not published elsewhere because the reading public they commanded was too small. As black literacy and political awareness increased, it became economically and politically important to control these newspapers. Yet, though authors were pressured to adapt their style to suit the policies of the paper they worked for, they continued to provide 'a forum for opinions and protest and ... [were] instrument[s] of education'. Here the 'seeds of African nationalism' were first sown (Couzens: 1976:94,95) and prominent journalists like John Dube, Sol Plaatje, Ngazana Luthuli and Selope Thema became important political figures whose ideas influenced their own and later generations. While political reporting was considered to be an abuse of the 'privilege and freedom' of the press, 'journalism has continued to be a major vehicle of expression for black writers' (Visser: 1976:43). Thus, in the 1950s, *Drum* was responsible for several exposures of 'social and political evils' at a time when even short stories were considered unsuitable for those whose reading needs were ostensibly 'sex, crime, and love stories' (Mphahlele: 1959: 187; 1971: 148).
12. Interestingly, white English literature portrays the same harmony between black people and nature.

Thus, in Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* and Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, black people co-exist with nature in a way impossible for whites.

13. When parents, evicted after the enactment of this law, cannot bury their child, Plaatje realises: 'every man in this country, we thought, ... has a claim to at least six feet of South African soil as a resting place after death, but those native outcasts, who in the country of their birth, as a penalty for the colour of their skin, are made by the Union Parliament to lead lives like that awarded Cain for his crime of fratricide, ... might ... be even denied a sepulchre for their little ones' (Plaatje: 1916:146).
14. While Plaatje questions the efficacy of European law itself, Van der Post, in *In a Province*, queries whether European law can be enforced in an African context. Thus, the magistrate, unwilling to punish people in the name of a law which discriminates against them says: 'We forbid them the sort of life their law demands, and give them our law without the sort of life that our law demands' (Van der Post: 1934: 191). Abrahams, in *This Island Now* (1966), and Paton, in *Ah, but your land is beautiful* (1981), examine the apparent arbitrariness of a judicial system which is changed to suit the ruling party's ideology.
15. The sanctity of the white race, symbolised by the white woman, recurs throughout South African English literature, and remains a basic theme, even after the abolition of the 'Immorality Act' and the 'Mixed Marriages Act' in 1985. In *In a Province* (1934) the 'Doctor's' reference to white women causes his death (p.155); in *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) Liz van den Sandt speaks of 'white ladies in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed' (p.25) and in Coetzee's post-modernist novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), inter-racial sex is as problematic as in *July's People* (1981) where Maureen Smales's fascination with July and her disenchantment with her emasculated husband revolves around the unresolved problem of 'sex across the colour bar'. In *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1990), white women's sexual relationships with black men are an indication that they no longer belong to their own society, but are acceptable in 'the struggle' and in black society.
16. The theme of the literal and metaphorical sterility of white liberal society recurs, as does the latter's tendency to fall prey to its own type of stereotyping. In Van der Post's *In a Province*, for example, Van Bredepoel, who tries to come to terms with his reality, sees in the liberal Burgess an example of those whites who have developed 'a prejudice against their own colour' (Van der Post: 1934:153). And in Gordimer's novels 'sterile' white liberal society often demonstratively accepts other racial groups, yet ignores fellow whites, and generalises its conception of the purely positive nature of those patronisingly referred to as 'you black people'. Often Gordimer treats characters belonging to this part of society with greater contempt than those who may be more repulsive, but openly admit their prejudice.
17. Voss: Introduction to 1986 edition of Millin: *God's Stepchildren*.
18. All names in this novel have important connotations: Caleb reminds one of the Biblical figure who, as a reward for his faith and courage, alone accompanied Joshua into the promised land. The names 'Bloodfield' and 'Flesher' speak for themselves, and 'Soper' is probably the Afrikaans word for a drunkard.
19. Van der Post: 'The *Turbott Wolfe* Affair', in 1965 edition of *Turbott Wolfe*.
20. The theme of white people's love-hate relationship with Africa consistently reappears in white South African English literature. Camoens's Adamastor myth first identifies the latter's perception of the African landscape as 'menacing and inimical', likely to 'sink the new European enlightenment if allowed within its purlieu' (Gray: 1979:27). Thus, while Van Bredepoel, in *In a Province*, experiences Africa as a sleeping giant who will one day awake to free himself of all oppression (Van der Post: 1934:163), his aunt regrets having left Holland to settle in Africa. Gibbon's Margaret Harding and Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* return to England. More recently, Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* presents a landscape which overwhelms its inhabitants, and in Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, Mehring experiences Africa as a continent which will reject him and the others it has defeated, even as the water-logged earth has

rejected the remains of the black man whose corpse was unceremoniously buried on his farm.

21. The implications of liberal humanism are only mentioned briefly here, they are more fully discussed in Chapter 3.
22. In Gordimer's vision the political and revolutionary eventually seem to eclipse the human. Yet, even in *A Sport of Nature* and *My Son's Story*, she is unable to deny the importance of human interaction in helping to create a new society.
23. Gordimer: 'A Wilder Fowl', in 1965 edition of *Turbott Wolfe*.
24. In South African English literature 'Coloured' usually refers to people of mixed - mainly black/white - racial origin. Some writers, however, and this is probably how van der Post uses it here, use this term to refer to those who under the apartheid laws would be classified either as 'black' or as 'non-white'.
25. The earliest writings by black people were hymns: a direct response to Christianity. Few of the works written either in English or in the vernacular after this initial period have survived. Those that have been re-discovered lately, are being published both in the original languages and in translations.
26. The need of 'the African writer in those early years ... to give an account of himself in relation to traditional mores and beliefs' (Mphahlele: 1980:6) later gave way to autobiographical novels appealing to white people's sense of justice and compassion. And more recently, novels written by black writers tend to aggressively assert the latter's new sense of identity.
27. The implied accusation that Europeans brought syphilis to Africa periodically recurs in white South African English literature, *Turbott Wolfe* being only one example.
28. In white South African English literature this motif is used extensively and explores the question of black people's initial encounter with Western civilisation and their subsequent loss of identity and innocence in an urban setting (see Chapter 3). These elements are also present in black South African English literature, but here the focus is not so much on black people's loss of childlike innocence, as on their rejection by white society.
29. Only after the Sharpeville shootings of 1960 did the black writer assert 'his sense of permanence in an urban ghetto life where he was being told he was a mere migrant worker with no hope for security of tenure in his municipal boxhouse' and manage to give 'literary expression' to the new 'township culture' (Mphahlele: 1980:7). *Down Second Avenue* (1959) is an early example of this new approach.
30. The moral dilemma of Afrikaners recurs in both Abrahams's and Gordimer's novels. In *Wild Conquest* Paul van As, like Johan van Bredepoel, is caught between loyalty to his own people, his knowledge of the latter's inhumane treatment of black people, and the possibility of a friendship with a member of the 'enemy'. As is the case with van Bredepoel, his death indicates the apparent futility of his actions. Gordimer's *The Lying Days* and *Burger's Daughter* similarly portray Afrikaners whose liberal ideals make them 'disloyal' to their own people.
31. The question of the accountability of the political system versus that of individuals for the injustices in society remains unresolved in much of South African English literature. Often the social system becomes a convenient scapegoat for individuals who, wishing to be absolved from personal responsibility, forget they may be both victims and culprits with regard to the continued existence of oppression. The institutionalising of the apartheid laws, which put an end to the limited social interaction possible before 1948, only partly explains why many novelists allow their characters to take less and less personal responsibility the more repressive the system becomes.

## CHAPTER 2

### **PETER ABRAHAMS : Exile and Freedom**

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Two world wars, countless regional conflicts, the re-drawing of political borders and repressive political systems have displaced thousands, making this, 'the century of the exile'. Increasing numbers of people in search of freedom experience both political and cultural exile. For many the attempt to reconcile their new liberty with the reality of a remembered homeland results in a sense of alienation. Ideally, the 'rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home' (Said: 1984:49) during exile, is healed when exiles return home to a more emancipated society. Yet, modern history shows that temporary exile, primarily intended 'to restore identity, or even life itself, to fuller, more meaningful status' (Said: 1984:53), often continues indefinitely. Consequently, permanence and meaning are sought within a state of rootlessness and disorientation: exiles become part of a new society without, however, having relinquished their attachment to their native country.

Political exiles are not the only ones who, as part of a 'third culture', incorporate elements of two worlds in themselves, yet belong to neither (Green: 1977:12-13). Modern means of travel have brought foreign countries and cultures within easy reach of most people. Consequently, many seek greater psychological, personal or economic freedom in an alien country. Through a process of acculturation the lifestyle of these 'metaphorical exiles' changes: their sense of integration with the home community is lost as they try to become part of the political, economic and traditional system of their adopted country.

The theme of exile is already evident in the South African English novels discussed in Chapter One, but it is Peter Abrahams, himself an exile<sup>1</sup>, who through his characters' lives and thoughts first explores the changing social consciousness resulting from the instability, restlessness and migrations of the post-World War II era. In Abrahams's novels, exile involves a separation from a traditional background, either as a result of urbanisation and industrialisation, or because of political displacement. While black characters in his early novels experience the 'Jim-goes-to-Jo'burg'<sup>2</sup> type of exile, he later focuses on black people's

psychological and cultural alienation in a world dominated by European values.

Abrahams's personal search for freedom and his departure from South Africa in 1939 so as 'to be psychologically free of the colour bar' (Abrahams: 1953:14) are interconnected. *Return to Goli* (1953), a documentary of a visit to South Africa, and his autobiography, *Tell Freedom* (1954), speak of his yearning to be 'a human being first' (Abrahams: 1948:227), of his attempt to conquer his bitterness and of his conviction that he could only develop his creative talent if he lived in surroundings where human relationships were not primarily determined by racial identity. When he realised that if he had stayed, he would have become just as bitter and felt just as misunderstood as those who in South Africa had grown 'to manhood in spiritual and material want and misery' (Abrahams: 1953:201-2), his exile became permanent.

In 1956 Abrahams decided to settle in Jamaica where he felt 'Jamaicans had lived out the multiracial problem and were now reaching a stage where race and colour did not matter, only a person's worth as a person'<sup>3</sup> (Abrahams: 1957:xiv). Although the problem of the 'plural societies' remained with him, and his writing continues to be 'the result of a persistent struggle to discipline the raw experience of his life in South Africa', 'conflict within a multiracial society' (Ogungbesan: 1980:196) is not his central theme. Instead, he attempts to purge himself of anger and hatred, to find his own identity so as to 'fight for light against darkness for all humanity' (Abrahams: 1953:26-27).

Abrahams's initial concern is that all individuals in a multi-racial society should be given the opportunity to develop to their maximum potential. He regards political sovereignty as a pre-requisite for personal and spiritual emancipation. Yet, the latter can only be regained through a sense of personal worth and integrity. Using his new-found liberty to explore aspects of freedom not specifically linked to South Africa's racial and political problems<sup>4</sup>, Abrahams increasingly focuses on possibilities to help release black people from what he calls the 'colonisation of the mind' (Abrahams: 1985:433) which threatens their personal dignity and freedom in heterogeneous societies.

Abrahams espouses several elements apparent in the works of the Negritude writer Césaire who, according to Irele, has as his 'dominant theme'

his sentiment of frustration and tension within an imposed culture, his sense of deprivation and of the division in his self-awareness ... [and who explores the] personal sentiment of loss and exile [which] appears ... as the corollary of the alienation of his race (Irele:1979:70<sup>5</sup>).

Whereas Abrahams rejects Negritude when it merely replaces white racism with black racism (Abrahams: 1953:27), his latest novel, *The View from Coyaba* (1985), reflects Rastafarian and Negritude ideology which seeks black people's roots in the 'collective subconscious' of their African culture. Trying to find a synthesis between traditional cultural and Christian values, he explores the religious aspect of Rastafarianism's preoccupation with a return of all black people to Africa. Eventually, his concern for the latter's political and spiritual freedom has priority over his original wish to 'fight for light against darkness for all humanity'. This shift in focus is evident in both Abrahams's definition of freedom and in his change of novelistic setting.

In his first four novels<sup>6</sup>, set in South Africa, Abrahams tries to define freedom within the context of this country's society and history. *Song of the City* and *Mine Boy* recapture the atmosphere of the 1930s in the racially mixed townships of Vrededorp and Malay Camp on the outskirts of Johannesburg. In these two novels the 'Jim-goes-to-Jo'burg'<sup>7</sup> experience depicts the realities of urban life as increased taxation forces Dick and Xuma, both from traditional tribal backgrounds, to work in the city. The land no longer holds them, and in the city, alienated from their tribal roots, they experience intense conflict. When they find urbanised girlfriends, their break with tradition becomes permanent: they adopt the city's social and political realities.

Despite these early novels' preoccupation with traditional African life, however, the latter is not presented as an alternative to the city as it is, for example, in Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* or in Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Similarly, in *The Path of Thunder* and *Wild Conquest*, the political, educational and historical aspects of the search for freedom are explored, rather than the conflict caused by black people's urbanisation and their consequent alienation from their tradition. And even in *A Wreath for Udomo* and

*The View from Coyaba*, both of which explore traditional African culture, black people's conflict is with Western European values, not with city life itself.

Despite the South African setting of his early novels, Abrahams's own exile soon removes him from the immediacy of life in this country. Consequently, his characters are often no longer part of their setting. Thus, while the intimate knowledge of the life and idiom of people living in and around Johannesburg is reflected in his cameos in *Song of the City*, it recedes in the more didactic *Mine Boy*. In *Song of the City*, for example, the brevity and dry humour of a conversation between 'two sweating native members of a street mending gang' on the effects of the coming war speaks for itself, making further comments on black-white relationships unnecessary:

'Maybe most of the police will go and fight and leave us in peace'  
'Maybe ... And maybe fly-machines will come and lay some eggs on us.' (Abrahams: 1945:42).

In Abrahams's subsequent works, however, he no longer seems to have as intimate a knowledge of the setting he uses. Consequently, his writings increasingly become novels of ideas which explore his overriding concern: black people's inability to define themselves in any but their oppressors' terms, and the need for them to free themselves from 'the colonisation of the mind'<sup>8</sup>. This stylistic and ideological change is already evident in *Mine Boy*, where didactic and repetitious conversations, rather than the setting and the actions of characters within this setting, are used to make a point. Thus, Paddy's admonishment that Xuma 'be a man first', appears to be responsible for the latter's decision to face the police:

You must think as a man first. You must be a man first and then a black man. And if it is so you will understand as a black man and also as a white man. That is the right way, Zuma. When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them (Abrahams: 1946:173).

The lack of interaction between characters and their geographical setting is even more evident in *Wild Conquest* where, despite his descriptions of the African landscape, Abrahams's characters seem alienated from their surroundings. Thus, in Abrahams's earlier work, *Mine Boy*, for instance, the physical and psychological pain and anger expressed by Xuma when he rejects Paddy's sympathy after whites have



robbed him of all he loves, is expressed in short, staccato sentences -his only means of conveying his anguish:

You are a white man. You do not carry a pass. You do not know how it feels to be stopped by a policeman in the street. .... Did your woman leave you because she is mad with wanting the same things the white man has? Did you know Leah? Did you love her? .... You say you understand. Did you *feel* these things like I do? .... You understand with your head. I understand with pain. With the pain of my heart (Abrahams: 1946:172).

This speech contrasts sharply with the emotional, yet almost detached reaction to tragedy of several of the principal figures *Wild Conquest*. Thus, despite the hysterical reaction of the people around him, the old slave's response to his son's death, for example, is totally controlled:

He has bought those rifles with his life. The life of a free man has paid for those rifles (Abrahams: 1951:44).

The atmosphere of detachment brought about by his characters' lack of emotional involvement in the geographical setting of the novels apparent in *Wild Conquest* and *A Night of their Own* increases in *A Wreath for Udomo* and *This Island Now*. In the first two novels the sense of alienation is evident in the disappearance of the South African idiom. The linguistic character of the individuals portrayed no longer reflects their membership of a nation which, because of its hardening vision, is becoming different from any other. Martinus van As, for instance, refers to Elsie as 'a pretty lass' (Abrahams: 1951:144), probably an unsuccessful translation of *oulike meisie*, and in Paul's confrontation with Jansen, after the latter has raped Elsie, only the word *papbroek*, reflects the speakers' linguistic character (Abrahams: 1951:139).

In *A Wreath for Udomo* and *This Island Now* the sense of distance from South Africa increases.

Furthermore, Abrahams's use of fictitious settings suggests he is no longer merely concerned with South African racial issues. With the mythical country of Panafrica and the neighbouring Pluralia, or an imaginary Caribbean Island as his background, he outlines a world vision which accommodates, but is not limited to the South African conflict and its eventual resolution. Unfortunately, however, as he deals increasingly with general, rather than specific issues, his rather stereotyped characters react predictably to their situations, becoming mere vehicles for his ideas. Finally, in *The View from Coyaba*, Sarah, David and

Emma are almost too good to be true. As they no longer develop through interaction with their surroundings, their actions and thoughts are perfectly controlled, even in times of great stress and pain. Thus, David, faced with angry, wounded youths destroying themselves in a senseless conflict, reacts very philosophically to their question as to what they should do:

How do you answer? What do you say? You are caught in an historic trap ... (Abrahams: 1985:418).

This growing detachment, evident in the actions of Abrahams's characters is apparent even in love relationships. The trauma associated with an inter-racial love affair in a country where prejudices run deeper than in most other places, is virtually ignored. Thus, in *The Path of Thunder*, the poignancy of a moment which speaks for itself when a young couple's love overcomes racial and social barriers is lost in a comment which, despite its lyrical beauty, detracts from the significance of the situation:

O earth! Tell thy stupid children to love. Tell them for they are in need of telling. In need of the simple things. In need of sympathy and understanding and brotherliness. In need of a love stronger and bigger than country and race, a love that embraces all countries and all races, the ultimate love of man for man .... (Abrahams: 1948:246).

In *A Night of their Own* even such comments disappear as Richard Nkosi summarily dismisses Dee Nunkhoo's memories of the massacre of Indians by Zulus, as well as her fear that their children will never be accepted by society. Nkosi's idealistic conviction that 'being human is more important than being either Indian or black or white or South African' (Abrahams: 1965:50), takes little cognisance of the brutal reality of the society in which they live<sup>9</sup>.

It would appear that in *A Night of their Own* Abrahams's awareness of a 'foreign' audience, to some extent determines the manner in which he analyses the historic processes leading both to the polarisation of South African society and to a state of revolution. Nkosi's actions, which reflect those of Mandela and Sisulu, for instance, are imbued with a romanticism totally out of proportion to their practical relevance. Like Mandela and Sisulu, Nkosi for a long time manages to avoid arrest. Yet, his practical achievements do not go beyond his bringing foreign money to the embattled revolutionary organisation. Similarly, the undoubtedly heroic victims of apartheid are credited with a nobility and singleness of purpose which

ignores possible doubt or conflicts. Thus Dee, left by the escaping Nkosi, 'casually, without words of comfort, without ringing declarations to ennoble and to sustain' (Abrahams: 1965:269), shows no real grief or inner turmoil as she faces the future with almost superhuman courage.

Abrahams's own search for inner freedom which challenged him

as a writer and a man [not to] become so blinded by prejudice that [he] could [not] ... see a person of a different colour in the round and as a whole human being (Abrahams: 1953:18),

could be partially responsible for the increased detachment in his novels. At the same time, his wish to portray people of different race groups equally well has made Abrahams very critical of his first novel, *Song of the City*, in which he feels he

made the most awful mess in [his] attempt at white people. ... They had come out unreal pasteboard figures with no life or feeling to them (Abrahams: 1953:18).

Abrahams's self-criticism, however, needs to be seen in the context of his own changing perceptions: by 1953, eight years after he wrote *Song of the City*, his lifestyle and horizons had altered so radically that he could re-visit the country from which he had escaped. Thus, just as it is 'hard [for us] to judge this work now' (Ogungbesan: 1980:193), so Abrahams should remember that his changing views, like those of his critics, are continuously determined both by personal ideology and the trends of the time.

A similar example of changing perceptions is to be found in the differing criticism of Abrahams's *Wild Conquest*. Abrahams himself feels that in this novel he objectively portrayed the racial conflict in South Africa, the novel's tripartite division reflecting the increasing compartmentalisation of this society (Abrahams: 1953:18). Mostert, a white critic, however, claims only Abrahams's 'Native' characters 'assume a convincing shape' (Mostert: 1955:139), and Ogungbesan comments on black characters who 'are extremely wooden, more so in fact than the whites' (Ogungbesan: 1980: 193). Similarly, Mostert's opinion that Abrahams's adoption in *The Path of Thunder* of Shelley's ideal of an 'equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless' society would lead to 'the total disintegration of Western civilisation', and his belief that Lanny and Sarie's love is 'morally unjustifiable since it threatens the very foundations of civilisation' (Mostert:

1955:138), is counterbalanced by Mphahlele, a black critic, who comments rather dryly that 'we anticipate disaster, if the action of the story must be played out in South Africa: it could not be otherwise (Mphahlele: 1962: 181)<sup>10</sup>.

Ironically, Abrahams is most severely criticised for lack of objectivity in his portrayal of post-independence black Africa. Ogungbesan observes that Abrahams's objectivity was seldom questioned 'until he wrote about power politics among black Africans' (Ogungbesan: 1980:192). This point is borne out by Lewis Nkosi's comment that in *A Wreath for Udomo* Abrahams has 'succumbed to the white man's myth of the "primitive Negro"'. Nkosi, blames Abrahams's condemnation of 'tribalism and witchcraft [as] the main obstacles to modernism and development' on the latter's 'lack of familiarity with African tradition' (Nkosi: 1981:50).

Such criticism of Abrahams's supposed lack of objectivity concerning black traditional customs, ignores his attempt to rediscover the positive elements of traditional African values, and also fails to recognise his honesty in acknowledging the unfavourable elements. Condemnation of Abrahams's attitude to tribal customs is, thus, perhaps more an indication of modern readers' inability to reconcile what has often become a rather nostalgic search for the past, with the 'unacceptable' reality that all cultures and traditions carry in themselves both positive and negative tendencies, than of Abrahams's 'lack of familiarity with African tradition'. Thus, in *A Wreath for Udomo*, for instance, tribal customs which enhance human dignity and counteract the dehumanising effects of modern Westernism are encouraged, while those which themselves dehumanise, are rejected. And so, Maria's feminine skills, learned in tribal 'schools for young girls' are welcomed, while the custom of Mhendi's people to 'circumcise' women is rejected (Abrahams: 1956:196). Similarly, Mabi repudiates the 'ritualistic code of fear and authority' associated with tribalism, yet acknowledges the 'sense of community and cohesiveness which is the basic strength of traditional African life' (Leeman: 1978:91). Udomo's actions and his brutal end, seem to be the outcome of his inability to assimilate Western and traditional African values, rather than a manifestation of Abrahams's rejection of these traditions<sup>11</sup>.

Similar problems of interpretation are apparent in commentators' attempts to locate the fictitious countries portrayed in *A Wreath for Udomo* and *This Island Now*, and to ascertain Abrahams's ideological affiliations<sup>12</sup>. There are parallels between the events of these two novels and those in independent black Africa. Yet, Abrahams's use of Old Testament, prophetic and Christ-like figures<sup>13</sup>, whose vision of freedom transcends the moment of political liberation, indicates that his primary concern is not to give a documentary appraisal either of events which led to political changes in Africa during the 1960s, or of the people who brought them about. Instead, he explores the ideologies behind the different liberation movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and develops his own concept of freedom.

*The View from Coyaba* most obviously assimilates the political and Christian interpretations of revolutionary freedom, exploring the influence each has on the other. Like their biblical namesakes, Sarah and Jacob are the spiritual and physical parents of the new chosen race who seek a promised land so as to separate themselves from a hostile world. Their exile to Africa under David's leadership would see the creation of a new kingdom from where the message of liberty will spread to a fallen world. Although Abrahams does not regard freedom as the exclusive right of black people, the latter will be at the centre of the new dispensation.

Abrahams feels such a development is necessary as, even though black people have repeatedly fought for and attained political liberty, they have not necessarily recovered their individual human freedom and dignity. The fairly obvious need to be free of the physical enslavement portrayed at the beginning of *The View from Coyaba*, is commensurate with a more insidious bondage: 'the colonisation of the mind'. The process resulting in the 'colonisation of the mind' already begins when black people leave the protection of the tribe and its tradition, and in the city accept white people's values. In *Song of the City* and *Mine Boy*, for example, black men, assigned the permanent role of servants and minors, become 'boys', a term which symbolises the emasculation and degradation of people never allowed to attain full manhood<sup>14</sup>. Despite their responsibilities as men, they are no longer dominant in their families and communities. As a result, black women take on an increasingly important role, caring for men who have been emasculated in a society whose women are freely available to the illicit desires of white men, while white women are taboo

to black men.

Consequently, Xuma, the 'boss boy' in *Mine Boy*, has consciously to reject the servile role assigned him before his lost manhood is restored. Only then, alongside Paddy, a white man, can he accept responsibility for his actions<sup>15</sup>. And in *The Path of Thunder*, Lanny likewise has to free himself from a defeat similar to that suffered by Fieta and Mad Sam, both of whom pay the price for Sam's illicit love across the colour bar<sup>16</sup>. Lanny and Sarie's death is in some respect a repetition of what happened to Mad Sam and his Sarie. Yet Lanny, imprisoned in the perception others have of themselves and of him, tries unsuccessfully to emancipate himself and his people through education<sup>17</sup>. On the one hand, his new awareness of his dignity as a human being and his moral superiority to white characters increases the latter's paranoid resentment. Members of the 'Coloured' community, on the other hand, who feel superior to black people because of their small percentage of white blood, nevertheless regard themselves as being inferior to whites, and are convinced Lanny is only 'almost' as good as whites. Black people's resentment of 'Coloured' people's sense of superiority, means they too reject Lanny.

In his three pre-1948 novels Abrahams thus explores the longing for freedom evident in people 'groping to a view of life that transcended [their] own personal problems as member[s] of one oppressed group of humanity' (Abrahams: 1953: 17). Descriptions in *Song of the City*, *Mine Boy* and *The Path of Thunder* of the indignities suffered by blacks in white-dominated South Africa support, to some extent, February's view that 'the covert apartheid of the late 1930s was no less obnoxious or painful' than its 'true and vicious face' revealed after the victory of the Nationalists (February: 1981:142) when laws, already on the statutes, but seldom enforced, were ruthlessly implemented<sup>18</sup>. In *Wild Conquest*, however, the focus changes as Abrahams examines the evolution of a society where latent and implicit racism becomes part of a national ideology. Tracing the history of both the Matabele and the Afrikaners, Abrahams hopes to 'see the whole scheme of things with the long eye of history ... [so as] to fit the problems of [his] own group into the general human scheme' (Abrahams: 1953:17).

It is ironic that in *Wild Conquest*, the warring groups both flee to freedom: the Matabele from Chaka's

tyranny and the Boers from British rule. The freedom each seeks, however, makes conflict inevitable: they fight for the same land and neither realises that liberty can never be bought at the expense of another's dignity or survival. The Matabele oppress and then massacre those to whose country they flee. When they in turn refuse to be subjugated, they are all but annihilated. The celebrations in the Boer camp after their victory over the Matabele, reminiscent of the latter's reactions to the humiliation of the Barolong, indicate a repetition of history: those who secure their freedom by oppressing others are already sowing the seeds of their own destruction.

'Super-patriotism and fanatic nationalism' (Abrahams:1953: 26) increasingly define both groups' new-found freedom, blinding them to all human and moral values. Relationships are destroyed. Only rare individuals escape the creeping spiritual and emotional death gripping the two nations. Thus, for example, in the Boer camp Kasper and Anna's marriage is sacrificed on the altar of racial hatred. Anna questions the morality of those who only think of killing, yet Kasper 'locks himself away in a world of his own, a hard cold world of hatred' (Abrahams: 1951:132). Even the birth of their child cannot re-unite them. In the Matabele village, internecine strife similarly threatens to drive a wedge between Mzilikazi and his people and nearly destroys his marriage to Mnandi.

Despite these similarities, however, Abrahams indicates possible differences in the two groups' future development. When Paul and Gubuza die at each other's hands, the latter is survived by Dabula who rejects his people's bloodlust and accepts Moshesh's dictum that cunning is often the more effective weapon. Leading the young Lobengula away to the north, Dabula's presence 'guarantees' a future where people who no longer live by the spear will be free to develop their individual human dignity. Paul, however, dies without spiritual heirs. His last wish, that Elsie should teach their child his values, is futile: she has not understood his conversation with the dying Gubuza and has not known Paul long enough to have assimilated his views. Her child, like that of Kasper and Anna which is born at the very moment the battle begins, inherits the anger and bloodlust which inevitably lead to increasing racial polarization and confrontation<sup>19</sup>.

In his novels prior to and including *Wild Conquest* Abrahams appeals mainly to whites, his virtual and

actual reading public, to become aware of the destructive effects of racial inequality and injustice. In *A Wreath for Udomo*, however, his tone changes, as does his choice of audience: he now writes almost exclusively for black people, encouraging them to find the inner resources and courage which will lead to their own and their community's freedom. While he does not espouse Negritude (Ogungbesan: 1979:5), 'the objective fact of the race question in general and the colonial situation in particular' (Irele: 1979:69) becomes central to his exploration of black emancipation. Rejecting what he perceives as the sterility of Western society, he now seeks answers to his quest for freedom within black African tradition. While such a rejection may be necessary, it raises moral questions. Thus, in Udomo's Africa, black men are not permitted white wives and Udomo treats Lois, his white girl friend, very cruelly. Similarly, Tom Lanwood, his former mentor, and a white man, whose writing formed the philosophical base of the African independence movements, is rejected and goes back to England a broken man: a social prophet who hoped to return home in triumph (Said: 1984:53) becomes a permanent exile. In the same way, in *The View from Coyaba*, Emma, raped by a white man, becomes the symbol of all those who, violated by decadent Western society, have lost their dignity. There is the suggestion that real healing will only take place when black society not only re-absorbs those who have been hurt but also no longer allows its value-systems to be determined by others.

Ironically, Udomo and his friends, exiles in the capitals of Europe where they plan the freeing of 'mother' Africa, imagine a 'symbolic Africa' (Cashmore: 1979:234) which has little resemblance to the political and economic realities of the Panafrica they return to. Notwithstanding their political freedom, Panafricans are still enslaved by witchcraft and tribalism. To gain both political power and the time needed to guide his people to economic independence, Udomo pays lip-service to a tribal tradition he secretly rejects. The ensuing post-independence freedom struggle has none of the euphoric headiness that accompanied the fight against colonialism and his triumphant return from exile. To secure economic and industrial progress, Udomo allows a limited form of neo-colonialism and sacrifices his friend and former comrade, Mhendi. He himself dies a frightened, lonely man whose only hope is that his vision of economic independence will eventually be realised.



Like Udomo, Josiah, in *This Island Now*, discovers that political independence is only the first step towards attaining psychological freedom. His challenge, however, is to abolish the economic neo-colonialism which threatened to follow an era very like that introduced by Udomo in his industrialisation programme<sup>20</sup>. Through a rather brutal enforcement of 'black power', Josiah seeks to liberate people who for three hundred years, and despite their recent political freedom, have been 'exiles' in their own country. He believes they will only be free once those who oppressed them are exiled as they once were (Abrahams: 1966:212). Ironically, like Udomo, he replaces an old bondage with a new one. Silencing all opposition, he deprives his people of the very sovereignty he wishes to give them. As dictator in a one-party state he loses the love and loyalty gained by his first bid for freedom.

*A Night of their Own*, written between *A Wreath for Udomo* and *This Island Now* and set in South Africa, likewise speaks of millions who are exiles. Here the disenfranchised are not only exiles in the country of their birth, but are themselves divided by racial prejudice and violence. Thus, Indians align themselves with the black liberation movements, yet fear the Zulus who have been guilty of massacring Indians<sup>21</sup>. In the love between Dee Nunkhoo and Richard Nkosi, the common hero of those fighting for freedom from white domination, new possibilities for political and personal liberty are presented. While Nkosi accepts that 'each will tend to want to stay within his own group', he insists

you measure the goodness of a society by its attitude toward the minorities who do not conform and who associate and have intimate relations and friendships and loyalties outside the group (Abrahams: 1965:96).

Nkosi's attitude, which suggests freedom is a synthesis of rather than a choice between mutually exclusive alternatives, is indicative of Abrahams's own changing consciousness. He once envisioned dramatic political and social changes, expecting a whole country to rise in protest and demand freedom when its colour policies were condemned by the international community (Abrahams: 1953:220). Yet, in *A Wreath for Udomo*, *A Night of their Own* and *This Island Now*, personal and political emancipation are closely related: harmonious inter-personal relationships are as important as political freedom to people who are aware of their own dignity and who wish to be free of prejudice.

Abrahams's latest novel, *The View from Coyaba*, further develops the idea of the relationship between personal, political and economic autonomy. Here carefully planned economic self-sufficiency ensures a community's freedom from outside interference and from a dictatorship, both of which were problems in the previous two novels. To further guarantee its sovereignty, members of the new community accept the need for weapons to protect themselves. Thus, Emma and David Batari assimilate the ideological aims of several revolutionary movements, yet also plan the new community's physical and material security.

As Abrahams traces the painful search of black people for equality and self-realisation in *The View from Coyaba*, he argues that only a withdrawal from 'the negation of [the black] race by the white' (Irele: 1979:70), and a questioning of both European and African values, will allow individuals to re-establish their identity. Emma reflects Abrahams's own feelings when she speaks of her unwillingness once again to face 'the pain of ... generations of black people trying to escape to be themselves' (Abrahams: 1985:439). Yet this seems to be the only way to avoid both the large scale anarchy already predicted in *A Night of their Own*, and the externally induced internecine strife tearing apart Jamaican society in *The View from Coyaba*. In both novels the black communities portrayed are being destroyed by their dependence on outsiders, and only exile will give their members the possibility of re-discovering their own identity.

Abrahams's belief both in the validity of Du Bois and Garvey's dream of an emancipated Africa to which all black people will one day return<sup>22</sup>, and in the Rastafarian and Negritude ideology of 'counter-acculturation and ... establish[ing] a truly black cultural tradition based on Africa' (Cashmore: 1979:239), does not blind him to the danger of replacing white racism with black racism. Thus, in *The View from Coyaba* David is to prepare the exodus of the chosen few who will 'point to a new way of seeing our world, ... to co-operate instead of compete, to share instead of grab' (Abrahams: 1985:439-440).

This new value system is contained in the Bishop's letter, which outlines the Christian socialist values he believes will ensure the stability and continuity of the new community:

we have blended the traditional ways of our people with the universal teaching of Our Lord. So we

accept that the land is the people's as a collectivity to be worked and shared together<sup>23</sup> (Abrahams: 1985:370).

Ideally, thus, individuals, protected by the community which owns the land, are able to develop to their full potential within a cohesive group structure.

Abrahams explores his vision of freedom by comparing the historical development of two original slave escapee groups. The first, led by Maria and Samson, adopts a rigidly socialist policy where even the women are shared. The second, led by Sarah and David, also advocates collectivism, yet allows for a much higher degree of individualism. While the first group is ultimately destroyed by its exclusivism and its inability to change, the relative openness of the second group allows its members to survive persecution and later to re-group and re-establish structures which will protect their 'need to worship in freedom and in their own way' (Abrahams: 1985:437). Thus, the second group retains its autonomy and its economic and political power. As it is centred around the church, which protects both the people and their possessions, its members have the inner liberty to refuse to pander to an unjust system (Abrahams: 1985:361).

The new community to be established on the foundations of Jacob's church is to incorporate traditional African cultural values: the communal ownership of land and the respect given to older members of the society being two of the most important (see Abrahams: 1985: 341,424). Unfortunately, however, this journey into a mythical Africa, 'symbol of the inscrutable forces in man', is in many ways little more than 'nostalgia for what seems a lost innocence' (Ramsaran: 1979: 209,214), and an escape from the 'spiritual malaise' engendered by Western civilisation<sup>24</sup>. The exclusivism recommended by David is not possible in a world where countries and communities are inter-dependent. It could, in fact, turn out to be as suicidal as the course taken by Samson and Maria's group.

In his early novels Abrahams hopes freedom will result from the oppressors' awareness of the effects of their actions. He later realises that the sterility of Western culture prevents white people from hearing him, and in *Wild Conquest*, *A Night of their Own* and *This Island Now* it becomes obvious that they

themselves first need to be freed from their false values. In *The View from Coyaba* he thus no longer tries 'to show the white man that he [is] equal to him' (Mphahlele: 1959:129). Instead, he explores social models which will enable black people to free themselves from the manipulative power of those who saw

the terrible usefulness of colour difference as a power tool [by which especially] the sub-Saharan African mind ... was so completely colonized that [they] ended up as the principal instruments in [their] own continued domination by others, even after most of [them] gained political independence (Abrahams: 1985:433-4).

While Abrahams compromises neither his basic tenet that all men shall be free, nor 'his abiding faith in the future' (Ogunbesan: 1980:203), he now accepts that this dream may remain elusive: for the time being freedom cannot belong to the masses. Thus, in both *A Wreath for Udomo* and *This Island Now*, Udomo and Josiah are ultimately unable to share their vision of freedom with anyone else. And in *A Night of their Own*, only a select few have an inkling of the meaning of liberation and of the sacrifices which will be demanded. Similarly, *Song of the City*, *Mine Boy*, *The Path of Thunder* and *Wild Conquest* speak of a freedom transcending national and racial differences. But *A Wreath for Udomo*, *A Night of their Own*, *This Island Now* and *The View from Coyaba* mainly address the needs of a black reading public who, to be truly free, have to rediscover 'they are their own people ... no longer colonies of other minds' (Abrahams: 1985:437). In order to achieve this goal, black people need to know the history of their exile and of their colonisation, both of which are part of the same phenomenon of oppression.

Thus, in his first four novels Abrahams explores the exile of people who are politically and psychologically aliens in their own country, victims of urbanisation, industrialisation and political displacement. In the other four novels, however, exile refers more to the psychological and cultural alienation of people disillusioned with Westernism's 'loss of faith and direction' (Abrahams: 1985:437). Abrahams initially believed political freedom, synonymous with equality, would create conditions which make co-existence possible. Yet, ultimately, especially in *The View from Coyaba*, he maintains that real freedom is only imaginable when black people, who have re-discovered their spiritual and cultural roots, 'discard [their] own conditioned mental baggage' (Abrahams: 1985:438), the inevitable consequence of a historical-political bondage which has resulted in their personal exile from their own true identity.

Whereas political exile once meant a loss of freedom that could only be restored upon the return to a liberated motherland, the withdrawal suggested in *The View from Coyaba* speaks of an exile which is in fact a return to black cultural roots. The Africanisation of Emma and of David's surname from Brown to Batari, and their subsequent withdrawal to Uganda, becomes the first step in achieving what Lois in *A Wreath for Udomo* calls 'the liberation of the heart and mind from fear' (Abrahams: 1956:40).

Unfortunately, however, if the 'symbolic Africa ... [is only] compounded of centuries of waning memories and vanquished hopes ... translated into myth' (Cashmore: 1979:234-5), it can be no more than a phantom land fostering new forms of exile. This is especially true if David and Emma's community adheres to a new exclusivism.

## ENDNOTES

1. Technically, Abrahams is an expatriate: he left 'voluntarily [to] live in an alien country' (Said: 1984:52). Yet his geographical exile resulted from the 'hard reality' which reserved the term "South African" for those 'who, according to the laws of apartheid, were ... white' (February: 1981:169). As a 'Coloured', Abrahams has roots in at least two racial or ethnic groups. Labelled 'non-white', together with Indians and blacks, he could not attain full human dignity and potential in South Africa. Libraries and other cultural institutions remained closed to him. Though nominally part of the dominating group's culture, his status as a social outcast forced him to leave. (See also Abrahams's sense of homecoming after discovering Black American literature: Tim Couzens, *The New African*: 1985: 106-109).
2. Novels concerning 'the rural black man's encounter with the white-controlled industrialised city' his search for freedom in the city and his alienation from his traditional culture, include Blackburn's *Leaven: A Black and White Story* (1908), Scully's *Daniel Vananda* (1924), Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926) R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928), Van der Post's *In a Province* (1934), and Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) (Gray:1985:61-80).
3. He later modified these views. His disappointment at the development of economically determined, internecine strife in Jamaica, as well as his view that black people should temporarily separate themselves from other societies, could partly account for the disappearance of white people from his novels.
4. Unlike other exiles, Abrahams does not feel guilty that in his leaving he abandons those who, like him, are struggling to gain their freedom. In contrast to Abrahams, Mphahlele never felt at home anywhere else in the world and returned. In Chapter 4 the implications of an exile's guilt and nostalgia and the subsequent return home are discussed.
5. Abiola Irele: 'Aime Cesaire: an approach to his poetry', in U. Beier (ed). *Introduction to African Literature*, pp.69-78.
6. The chronological sequence of Abrahams's novels is: *Song of the City* (1945); *Mine Boy* (1946); *The Path of Thunder* (1948); *Wild Conquest* (1951); *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956); *A Night of their Own* (1965); *This Island Now* (1966); *The View from Coyaba* (1985).
7. This theme is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 (p.63; p.70:n13).
8. One of the consequences of this change is that in his first four novels Abrahams emphasizes a common humanity, regardless of racial background, yet later the idea of 'being black' is paramount. Thus, for example, even though there is a change in tone in *A Wreath for Udomo*, which was written mainly for a black audience, Mhendi's Pluralian revolutionary movement is still non-racial as 'all the people of the world are one' (Abrahams: 1956:285). In both *This Island Now* (1966) and *The View from Coyaba* (1985), however, characters' acknowledgment of their racial heritage as black people becomes the pre-requisite for attaining full human dignity.
9. The love affair between Richard Nkosi and Dee Nunkhoo is a variation on the usual black-white inter-racial relationship. In apartheid South Africa a marriage between a black person and an Indian would be legally possible as both were classified as 'non-white'. Yet, it is clear in *A Night of their Own* that prejudices within the black and the Indian communities would make such a union extremely difficult for the two people concerned.
10. Mostert submitted his MA dissertation to the University of the Orange Free State, one of the strongholds of Afrikaner Nationalism, in 1955. (The Nationalist belief in the sanctity of the race is discussed in the chapter on Paton.) Mphahlele's *The African Image* (1962) was based in part on his 1956 MA dissertation at the University of South Africa: *The Non-European Character in South African*

*English Fiction.*

11. Udomo's predicament is similar to that of Kenyatta during the Mau Mau era. Like Kenyatta, he accepts Western values. Yet, despite his education and his traditional position, he too is given no real authority by the colonial rulers. Consequently, like his real-life counterpart, he 'reject[s] that which was [his] greatest need' (Abrahams: 1954b:306). Turning to the darker side of his cultural heritage to obtain the power denied him, Udomo is destroyed by the tribalism which originally brought him to power.
12. While some label *Mine Boy* a 'proletarian novel whose plot displays a Marxist perspective on life' (Parker: 1978:96), others contend 'Abrahams rejects doctrinaire Marxism, ... he remains a socialist, ... [and] inclines towards the traditional liberal view' (Leeman: 1978:30). Similarly, 'Udomo is recognizable as Kwame Nkrumah' and 'Pluralia could be a composite of South Africa, Rhodesia, ... Kenya' (Leeman: 1978:43,57). 'One reviewer ... [who] ask[ed] ... "Is this meant to be Nigeria ... the Gold Coast with a dash of Tanganyika thrown in? Is he Jomo Kenyatta?"', ended by condemning the novel for lacking documentary precision' (Ogungbesan: 1980: 190,193,195).
13. In *Mine Boy*, for instance, Leah, like Christ, says to the police: 'You wanted me. You've got me. Leave the others.' (Abrahams: 1946:166). In *The Path of Thunder*, Gert and Lanny are blood brothers, thus giving the fratricide between Cain and Abel racial overtones. In *Wild Conquest*, both Boers and slaves are like the Israelites: the Boers seek the promised land, while the ex-slave, Old Johannes, letting his grandson feel his dead father's flesh, echoes God's admonition that each generation shall be told of their freeing from bondage. In *A Wreath for Udomo*, Adebhoy is called 'our John the Baptist', and the message of political freedom is spread 'down near the fishermen's boats, [where] two men walked ... deep in conversation'. In his prison cell Udomo weeps for his country as Christ wept for Jerusalem. Ironically, Udomo later becomes the Judas who betrays Mhendi. And the latter, with twelve men in the inner circle, proclaims with his dying breath: 'They will be free'. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, his girlfriend, Maria, is 'a woman born to sorrow' (Abrahams: 1956: 97,171,180,219,288-9). In *This Island Now* Moses Joshua, who led the people to freedom, is followed by Josiah who seeks to free them from their slave mentality.
14. The colonial terms 'boy' and 'girl' referred to blacks, both adults and children. Ellen Kuzwayo in *Call me Woman*, for instance, resents the paternalism evident in the term 'girl' which implies that while every black woman remains a minor, an eighteen year old white girl is a woman and a madam. In *The View from Coyaba* Abrahams points to the irony that rulers of independent black countries often perpetuate their former masters' condescending attitude by themselves calling fellow blacks, who are their servants, 'boy'.
15. This is in contrast to 'Daddy', a pathetic shell of a man who, once 'strong and ... feared and ... respected' as he led the protest against the pass laws (Abrahams: 1946:81), now has to be cared for by Leah and Ma Plank.
16. Like Dick's sister in *Song of the City*, Lanny's mother in *The Path of Thunder*, has a white man's child, but is given neither protection nor the respect due to her as a woman and as a human being.
17. Abrahams's ambivalent attitude to education changes in the course of his work. In *The Path of Thunder* education is not part of a liberating panacea. Instead, it brings about new conflicts: Fieta tells Lanny that education will give 'Coloured' people greater insight into their misfortune and will increase their dissatisfaction. In *A Wreath for Udomo*, there is a change of focus. Their European education makes it difficult for Udomo and Mabi to re-adapt to traditional culture and results in conflict between Udomo, who wishes to modernise the country, and those who wish to return to a 'pure' form of tribalism. In *The View from Coyaba*, however, Jacob sees education as the way to prepare black people for greater freedom. Here even traditional tribal people decide to give their children the benefit of both a Western and an African education.

18. While Gordimer focuses mainly on post-1948 liberal humanist consciousness, Paton, Mphahlele, and Abrahams refer to conditions and racial laws which existed before 1948.
19. The predictions made in *Wild Conquest* concerning the Boers are historically fulfilled. This is depicted in *A Night of their Own*, where Paul and Elsie's grandchild, the cold, calculating security official Karl, resorts to political torture, deliberately renouncing all that would have helped him preserve his humanity. Abrahams's interpretation of subsequent Matabele history, however, is as idealistic as Plaatje's in *Mhudi*: Mzilikazi did not bring peace. His reign of terror caused 'carnage in Southern Rhodesia [as] the tribes ... buckle[d] beneath the might of the Matabele army'; and Lobengula later became 'the second and last of the Matabele despots' (Becker: 1966:184,186).
20. Like Udomo, Mweta in Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour*, encourages what will hopefully be a temporary form of economic neo-colonialism to bring about his country's eventual economic independence.
21. In *The Conservationist* Gordimer likewise explores the ambivalent position of Indians in South Africa. While Indians, like black people, are classified 'non-white', they are nevertheless rejected by black people. And white people, who similarly despise Indians, benefit by 'helping' them to remain illegally in white areas (Gordimer: 1974:115).
22. Garvey's highly emotional, biblically legitimated dream of 'repatriating all blacks to their native Africa' became one of the cornerstones of Rastafarianism. It led to a re-discovery of black cultural tradition. The reign of 'the living God', Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, heralded the planting of 'the banner of the Red, the Black and the Green on the hilltops of Africa', which is 'the spiritual and material home of all black people' (Cashmore: 1979: 3,235).
23. The African socialist idea of communal landownership adhered to by Abrahams and Mphahlele in their search for possible community models for black people, is, with the possible exception of Shinza's approach in *A Guest of Honour*, largely ignored by Gordimer in her novels which deal with post-colonial Africa. It is likely that the reason for the nationalisation programmes undertaken by black leaders of independent African countries can be traced back to the traditional African socialist idea of communal landownership, and developed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in France in 1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), rather than merely to anti-Western or pro-Communist sentiments, as has often been suggested by critics of these countries. These ideas, for instance, are apparent in a *Sunday Times* article which reported in 1988 that 'eight years ago Anglo American and Mondi thought they had bought Usutu Pulp & Paper, but the late King Sobhuzwa [of Swaziland] contended that, on sale, Usutu's 61 000ha of forest land should become "the property of the people"' (Carte:1988:1).
24. While Mphahlele in *Chirundu* also advocates a return to traditional black African values, he is fully aware that in the modern world it is impossible to escape the 'contamination' of outside influences. He therefore advocates that communities and individuals should find a means of discovering and preserving what is good in their tradition and adapting it to their needs within the current reality.



## CHAPTER 3

### ALAN PATON : The Liberal Dilemma - before and after 1948

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Any interpretation of either Paton's or Gordimer's works depends on some understanding of their position within the social, political and historical context of South African liberal humanism. While the latter has its roots in Renaissance humanism and individualism, as well as in the nineteenth-century European liberal tradition, and shows many similarities to these trends, its history in South Africa has been different from that in other countries. The development within the movement itself has, furthermore, not been monolithic: those who had inherited a Eurocentric vision were not merely foreign onlookers, but active participants in South African history. They thus evolved a diverse Afrocentric perspective which also differed from the European models.

In both European and South African intellectual thought, liberal humanism is characterised by its adherents' faith in the innate goodness of man, a belief in individual rights and freedoms, and by a striving for non-violent social change based on the evolution of people's character within their society. The latter is achieved when reason triumphs over the irrational. Social harmony depends on the possibility of meaningful interaction between autonomous individuals working towards the goal of self-realisation.

Unfortunately, liberal humanism, with its belief in the innate goodness of the individual and the ultimate triumph of reason, often disregards the duality of human nature, and its inherent violence and irrationality. It also seems to forget that concepts such as nationalism, patriotism and religion, often associated with fanaticism and violence, are seldom amenable to reason. Similarly, liberalism often ignores the powerlessness of individuals in the face of group action. Ideologies concerned with the rights of the masses thus threaten the liberal ideal as, despite 'missionary' uplifting of the less-developed, the general populace seldom acts rationally. And when group action is initiated by fanaticism and violence, individuals become increasingly isolated. On the one hand, thus, liberal novels portray individuals in conflict with

their society. On the other hand, there is the irony that, despite the liberal belief in the gradual, peaceful evolution of society, individual efforts to bring about social change often lead to revolution, thus creating a new order which is seldom more rational than the old. However, though such developments and the carnage of two world wars disillusioned many, liberals seldom questioned the value of the liberal ideology itself, only its efficacy within certain social systems.

In South Africa, liberal humanism saw a development similar to that in Europe. It was, however, beset by specific problems of definition. Both Wade and Geslin point out that two popular misconceptions have always been, that in South Africa liberalism reflects people's attitude to the racial conflict, and that it is the domain of English-speaking white South Africans who see themselves as guardians of a freer lifestyle threatened by the extremes of Afrikaner nationalism. Thus, for example, black people espousing liberal ideals are not referred to as liberal, but as moderate if they are not on a direct collision course with authority, and as revolutionary or radical if they insist on socio-political change, violent or otherwise (Wade: 1981:3; Geslin: 1981:13).

Neither of these misconceptions is totally unfounded. They do not, however, take into account that only a relatively small number of English-speaking South Africans actually identify with the ideology of liberalism and that it was an Afrikaner, J.H. Hofmeyr who, besides the liberal activist, R.F. Alfred Hoernle, was 'probably the most prominent liberal in South African history' (Watson: 1980:47). Likewise, the association of liberalism with a person's attitude to racial conflict only partly reflects the historical and social reality of liberalism in South African politics and literature (Wade: 1981:118).

In South Africa, the liberal dilemma is apparent in the differences between Hoernle, on the one hand, and Bishop Clayton and J.H. Hofmeyr, on the other, as well as in what Stephen Watson, citing Hoernle, calls

the greatest moral hunger in the very heart of the liberal spirit itself ... the relation of the well-meaning superior to stricken inferior [which] is apt to become paternalism and condescension (Watson: 1983:120).

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century novels, amongst them Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* and

Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding*, frequently reflect prevalent Victorian colonial attitudes where the perceived importance of 'civilis[ing]' the 'backward nations' encouraged 'relations of paternalism, ... [which] presented white supremacy as part of the natural order of things' (Dubow: 1987:75). During the 1930s Hoernle further develops this idea of trusteeship where white 'parent' races take responsibility for black 'child' races. His argument for liberal segregationism, that is, 'for the accommodation of liberalism with racial segregation on the basis of multiple ethnic groups' (Rich: 1985:57) was opposed by Bishop Clayton and J.H. Hofmeyr, both of whom rejected any form of racial separation. Paton's comment that '[his] heart was with Hofmeyr and Clayton, [and his] mind was with Hoernle' (Paton: 1980:242) indicates the extent of the liberal dilemma<sup>1</sup>.

In more recent times, South African Nationalist-controlled radio and television, as well as government-sponsored newspapers, fostered the image of liberals as uncommitted individuals who give lip-service to liberal ideals but at the first sign of violence, flee into the white *laager*<sup>2</sup>. Ironically, the Nationalist government itself has long presented a liberal image to the world by condemning all forms of violence, and by publicly declaring its commitment to non-violent, peaceful change. Consequently, liberals, whose innate sense of fairness forbids them to criticize anything they can even tacitly support, have often not been strong enough in their condemnation of an unjust political system and have been caught unawares when this was ruthlessly enforced. As the violence and counter-violence characterising South African politics has always made it difficult to identify the immediate aggressor, the position of liberals became almost indefensible. Unable to support state aggression, they continued to believe in the rule of law and order and in democratic change and have thus been in the unenviable position of having to accept the protection of those in power whose racial identity they share, but whose methods of government could not be condoned.

The political liberal dilemma is inevitably reflected in the literature and is even apparent in the lack of consensus amongst critics as to which South African English novelists belong to the liberal literary tradition<sup>3</sup>. Thus, Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, considered by many to epitomise the South African liberal humanist ideal during the 1940s and 1950s, is dismissed by some critics as a 'Christian allegory'

which, in its emphasis on 'Christian compassion and forgiveness ... has a paradoxical effect of denying the complexity of the issues at stake'<sup>4</sup> (Wade: 1980:5-6). Paton is, however, not unaware of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of South African society: his character portrayals provide a panorama of South African reality. He does suggest, however, that the ideals of liberal humanism are only attainable if they incorporate a Christian understanding of love.

It is for this love, which reveals itself in his compassion for the fallibility and vulnerability of all humanity, as well as for his descriptions of the beauty of the South African landscape, that Paton will probably be remembered. Paton's idea of love, however, is not the simplistic, sentimental solution several critics suggest (for example, Wade: 1981:6; Watson: 1980:198). And his understanding of Christian love does not differentiate between 'change from within' and 'change from without' in the way that Watson (1980:198) would imply. As far as Paton is concerned, they are interdependent. The story of James Jarvis's conversion to his murdered son's way of thinking and his subsequent attempt to improve the situation of the neighbouring black community, illustrates the point that any change of heart results in greater awareness and an active, radical changing of one's environment. Paton also indicates that such love would free those whose 'fearful clutching of possessions' causes them 'desperate anxiety' (Paton: 1948:134). It would, similarly, help whites who anxiously protect their privileges with 'iron laws', to regain the humanity they deny both themselves and others. Thus, the South Africa envisioned in the Freedom Charter is only possible if this dream coincides with God's will<sup>5</sup> (Paton: 1981:129).

The consequences of the inability of members of South African society to love is evident in both the individual and group suffering portrayed in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. By making people aware of conditions in South Africa and by offering an alternative to Millin's view of reality, Paton challenged the hold *God's Stepchildren* had on the South African imagination (Gray: 1979:62). Whereas Millin argues that racial harmony depends on total racial separation, *Cry, the Beloved Country* speaks of the harmony possible when good-will and tolerance determine individual relationships. In this novel, which remains one of the best known in South African literature, readers experience vividly the beauty, pain and suffering prevalent in this country. Paton is, however, not so naive as to create the impression that any one side is

either good or evil. Thus, Kumalo's childlike goodness is counterbalanced by his brother's immoral activism, and Arthur Jarvis's attempts at creating a more just society counter the heartlessness of whites whose greed forces black people to erect Shanty Town.

By comparison, and despite its title, *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* (1981) speaks of a radically changed country whose beauty is almost submerged under the pain caused by an unjust dispensation which ruthlessly restructures society to meet the ideological needs of a minority group. The liberal ideals of justice and tolerance become increasingly irrelevant as human relations, subject to the apartheid laws, are determined by fanatical nationalism. Yet, notwithstanding the pessimism with which Paton views political and social developments in South Africa, he can still say towards the end of his life:

If I thought there was no hope, I would get out, old as I am ... [but] the Afrikaner Nationalist ... appears to be coming to his senses after all the years (Rickard:1988:7).

Such faith toward the end of Paton's life, to some extent contradicts Watson's claim that Paton's optimism in *Cry, the Beloved Country* stems from his growing up 'in an era before South African racial politics had hardened into their present intransigence' (Watson: 1980:186). It is apparent from both *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* that Watson over-estimates the freedom of the pre-Nationalist era. Paton was well aware of social and political injustices, 'of the hates and fears of our country' (Paton: 1948:150), both present and past<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in *Cry, the Beloved Country* he points out, for example, that it is

not permissible ... to keep men unskilled for the sake of unskilled work ... to go on destroying family life when we know that we are destroying it ... to develop any resources if they can be developed only at the cost of the labour (Paton: 1948:126).

And in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, he makes it clear that he always knew that the reason for the 1946 election of Chief Lutuli to the Natives' Representative Council was 'the white man's reparation for the taking away of the common-roll vote in 1936'. He also realises that 'the council ... [was] called the toy telephone' (Paton: 1981:147).

Despite the clarity with which he analyses South African reality, Paton never quite loses hope that there will be a change in the hearts and minds of all South Africans. He realises though, that with the increasing

hardening of political and legal perceptions, a conversion to a more just system becomes much more difficult. Thus, the hope reflected in his first novel that oppressive laws will eventually be revoked, is less obvious in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* when, after 1948, apartheid became the national ideology and these unjust laws were, instead, ruthlessly enforced. Yet, here too, he continues to portray a world which need only accept the redemptive power of love to be saved from its own excesses. His concern in the later novel stems primarily from the realisation that the greater demand for freedom by black people after World War II was matched by the increasing paranoia of a small but powerful minority intent on retaining racial supremacy. A comparison of similar incidents portrayed in these two novels is an indication of Paton's changing consciousness<sup>7</sup>.

In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, for instance, black education is discussed in terms of its social and economic desirability:

And you think, Mr de Villiers, that increased schooling facilities would cause a decrease in juvenile delinquency amongst native children?

- I am sure of it, Mr Chairman.

- Have you the figures for the percentage of children at school, Mr de Villiers?

- In Johannesburg, Mr Chairman, not more than four out of ten are at school. But of those four not even one will reach his sixth standard. Six are being educated in the streets. ....

- Who do you think should pay for this schooling, Mr de Villiers?

- We should pay for it. If we wait till native parents can pay for it, we will pay more heavily in other ways.

- Don't you think, Mr de Villiers, that more schooling simply means cleverer criminals? (Paton: 1948:68-9)

Paton adds:

Some people said there must be more education, but a boy with education did not want to work on the farms, and went off to the towns to look for more congenial occupation (Paton: 1948:113).

In *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, however, dialogue concerning this important issue has disappeared. The government's authoritarianism and inflexibility illustrate that education has become a powerful instrument in implementing the apartheid dispensation:

[The] Department of Native Affairs will become the most powerful department of all. This year all Native schools will be handed over to him [Hendrik Verwoerd, then minister of Native Affairs]. He is determined to destroy the missionary hold over the Native schools by the non-Calvinist churches.

He maintains that Native Education is first and foremost an instrument of policy, and only thereafter an educational affair (Paton: 1981:41).

Similarly, the descriptions of the bus boycotts in *Cry, the Beloved Country* and in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, illustrate the evolution of different perceptions during the years between the two incidents. In the first novel, those who enforce the law during the earlier bus boycott are not above prosecution, and whites helping black people taking part in the boycott are acting within the parameters of the law (Paton: 1948:47). In the last novel, during the bus boycott of 1957 (Paton: 1981:173), however, compassion and community awareness have become punishable offences when the recipient of help does not belong to the same racial group. The law is a means of enforcing blind support and people are asked to 'first stop the boycott' before their grievances can be addressed (Paton: 1981:177).

The increasingly authoritarian nature of South African society leaves very little room for human relationships to develop. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Jarvis and Kumalo's suffering becomes a form of catharsis: through a better understanding of themselves and their communities they are able to relate more meaningfully to each other and to society in general. In *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, however, human relations become totally dependent on the whims of a totalitarian government. People interact with the apartheid laws, which develop a life of their own, rather than with each other. Attempts by individuals like Mansfield, Nene and Nhlapo to bring people together are no longer successful, and their own relationships are severely strained under the pressures imposed by a society no longer tolerant of individualism or of freedom of association. Ironically, despite their apparent cohesion as a group, Afrikaners too live in a state of alienation, even though they do not seem to realise it. This is apparent in the character of Van Onselen who, despite the greater humanity which distinguishes him from his Nationalist colleagues, and his compassion for Dr Fischer's bereaved mother, is unable to change 'into something rich and strange' (Paton: 1981:203). He remains isolated, the perfect public servant obeying immutable laws.

Paton's changing consciousness of South African society is perhaps most evident in his attitude to the legal system. In *Cry, the Beloved Country* the law, only as just as those who formulate it, is society's means of

eradicating crime and violence. Stephen Kumalo accepts his son's death sentence despite the unfair acquittal of the latter's accomplice, because the law is essentially in the service of those wishing to control crime and violence. In *Too Late the Phalarope*, however, the sole purpose of the law seems to be to ensure white racial purity by enforcing both the Immorality and Group Areas Acts, the cornerstones of apartheid policy. A further shift in legal perceptions takes place in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* as the ruling National Party restructures the legal system to accommodate its ideology of racial purity and segregation<sup>8</sup>. It makes a travesty of the rule of law and order, changing the composition of both the Senate and the Appellate Court to eliminate opposition (Paton: 1981:138). The law no longer serves the people but is a vicious instrument in the hands of those who care little about human values. Thus Fischer, who once justified the law of which he has fallen foul, expects no mercy either in the legal or the societal context. And just as Pieter van Vlaanderen, in *Too Late the Phalarope*, was guilty of 'an offence against the race' (Paton: 1953:247) when he had sexual relations with a black woman, so Fischer realises his actions were 'not a small sin of the flesh but a great sin against the nation' (Paton: 1981:198). He commits suicide rather than face the legal process and his fate as a traitor.

While Paton rejects South Africa's unjust legal and political system and the suffering it causes, he does not indulge in recriminatory mud-slinging: no one sector of South African society is held solely responsible for the situation. He acknowledges the increasing culpability of Afrikaner Nationalists in enforcing and perfecting laws designed to entrench white domination. He does not, however, exonerate English-speaking white South Africans who pride themselves on being more liberal than their Afrikaans-speaking counterparts. Nor does he regard black people merely as innocent, helpless victims of circumstance. Each group is represented by those striving for greater justice and by those serving their own interests.

In *Cry, the Beloved Country* there are, for instance, both English and Afrikaans-speaking people more concerned with retaining their privileges than with ensuring equality and justice, as well as those working towards a better society. Thus, Arthur Jarvis's document speaks of contradictions in the lives of white people who

believe in the brotherhood of man, but ... do not want it in South Africa ... believe in help for the



underdog, but ... want him to stay under (Paton: 1948:134).

Yet at Ezeneleni, the reformatory for blind people,

it was white men who did this work of mercy, ... those who spoke English and those who spoke Afrikaans came together to open the eyes of black men that were blind (Paton: 1948:80).

Similarly, *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* unambiguously exposes the excesses of Afrikaner Nationalism.

Yet, Paton also points out the irony that the Liberal Party, an embattled organisation struggling to survive in the face of Afrikaner fanaticism, is forced to heed the warning:

If you want to fight white elections and get white voters, then you mustn't take away white pleasures and arouse white fears (Paton: 1981:104).

This is in sharp contrast to Arthur Jarvis's resolve:

I shall no longer ask myself if this or that is expedient, but only if it is right. ... I am lost when I ask if men ... will approve (Paton: 1948:151).

In both *Cry the Beloved Country* and *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* black people too are guilty of complicity when, for their own benefit, they help the white government. Thus, in the first novel, the perception that Absalom's murder of Arthur Jarvis can be partly ascribed to the dehumanising effects of the city, is counterbalanced by the selfishness of John Kumalo who saves his own son at the expense of his brother's child. Similarly, while Emmanuel Nene in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* pleads for the retention of 'blackspots' where pastoral people 'do not murder or rape', black Security Police enforcing the Group Areas Act, threaten those to be evicted, taking their possessions for themselves (Paton: 1981:86,88). And a black policeman allows the authorities to use his daughter to trap a white man into contravening the Immorality Act (Paton: 1981:190).

The Immorality Act, the legal basis of white racial self-definition, allows Paton to focus on the alienation apparent in the psyche of white South Africans when 'racial purity' is enforced. He is, thus, not primarily concerned with love across the colour bar. When Paton wrote *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the Immorality Act, first published in 1927 and amended in 1950, was not yet really being enforced. It was, therefore, more important, for instance, to examine the social problems associated with detribalisation than to

explore the implications of an inter-racial love affair. In his next novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*, the Immorality Act is, however, of prime importance. Yet, here too, his interest is not the relationship between Pieter and Stephanie, but the bigotry of a God-fearing people so obsessed with their own survival that any inter-racial sexual contact is a sin against the nation<sup>9</sup>. What in a different society would have been portrayed as the adultery of a man married to a frigid wife, becomes a national issue; and Stephanie, poor, black and simple-minded, driven by love for her nameless child, plays an almost incidental role. She becomes the prototype of the noble savage who awakens in Pieter memories of childhood innocence:

In a moment he was in the bush, where the *singsingetjie*, the shrill cicada, made its piercing song in the coolness. Here was what lay in the store of memory, the water running over the stones and the sharp-tasting water-plants and the mosses and ferns. Then suddenly ahead of him, under a little fall of water, he saw the girl Stephanie (Paton: 1953:53).

Pieter's subsequent feelings of disgust are only partly related to his having committed adultery. More important is the fact that Stephanie is black. This is apparent when, in contrast, his flirtation with Anna, who 'adores' him but is white, is not taken seriously - he can even joke about it to Japie and his wife (Paton: 1953: 131,144,176,). Tragically, neither Pieter nor those around him question either the correctness of their perceptions, nor the justice of the law. Thus, Aunt Sophie, partly responsible for separating Stephanie from her child and thus bringing about the ensuing tragedy, excuses his behaviour because, under the influence of liquor, he 'was two men' when he 'possessed' a black woman (Paton 1953: 9,146). Even the English police captain, whose son is condemned to death after murdering the black girl with whom he had committed adultery (Paton: 1953:37-42,246), seems to regard the Immorality Act as a divine institution when he says that 'if man takes unto himself God's right to punish, then he must also take upon himself God's promise to restore' (Paton: 1953: 247)<sup>10</sup>.

Other trespassers against the Immorality Act likewise never doubt they have committed an act of treason for which they cannot atone, and in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, white South African society's obsession with racial purity is shown to be akin to mental derangement. Thus, Fischer admits his guilt by committing suicide before he can be tried, and his mother laments that he was destroyed by his perverse desires and not by an unjust law:

My son was two men, and one was clever and good, and considerate of his mother. But the other was a doomed man. He never looked at a white woman, ... (Paton: 1981: 202).

Likewise, when a woman discovers her husband, classified white, is in fact 'Coloured', she leaves him, taking their children with her (Paton: 1981:246). Neither questions the justice of the law itself, and neither they nor the authorities seem to realise that her children are now also 'Coloured'. Similarly, the poison pen letters of 'Proud White Christian Woman' to Robert Mansfield and Father Trevor Huddleston, like the actions of 'The Preservation of White South Africa League', indicate the workings of very sick minds.

Paton's portrayal of the racial dilemma in South Africa was received differently in various parts of the world and has changed over the years. In *Towards the Mountain*, Paton speaks of the encouragement he received when, while travelling in Britain and America, he wrote his first novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The impact this novel made on the British and American reading public supports the view that through his writing he wished to tell those he met on his travels more about South Africa. Yet, while readers in England and America experienced a certain catharsis when they read *Cry, the Beloved Country*, this novel's reception in South Africa was very different. The Afrikaans critic Mostert, for example, interprets Paton's descriptions of large-scale abuse of human dignity, as well as of the horrors of overcrowding and poverty in black areas, simply as an example of 'the exploitation of Natives by Natives'. Commending Paton for making the 'Native' come alive in all his childlike dignity (Mostert: 1955: 145-158), he ignores Paton's portrayal of white selfishness and greed.

The attitude of modern South African critics, on the other hand, is very different. They censure Paton for his paternalism and for creating simple, childlike black characters, over-awed by white superiority, humbly accepting the humiliations of life<sup>11</sup>. They further criticise him both for 'bypass[ing] the emerging black culture of the townships and slums of the Witwatersrand' (Rich: 1985:56), and for taking it for granted that black people will inevitably return to the land from which they have been alienated<sup>12</sup>. Thus, even though Kumalo is an adult, a priest and a leader in his community, he never questions the justice of his situation, and is flattered by the attentions of a white child he calls 'inkosana' - little master (Paton: 1948:212). His

return to Ndotsheni with his new daughter-in-law is a sign that the tribe is being rebuilt. Similarly, though the success of James Jarvis's dam-building and agricultural project depends on both the chief and Kumalo's active support, they are portrayed as rather foolish men. Both have to persuade people to change their traditional customs, yet neither is taken into Jarvis's confidence. Instead, they are left guessing as to the mysterious activities of benevolent but omnipotent white men (Paton: 1948:206).

Similar criticism of *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* concerns the characterisation of the black activist, Emmanuel Nene, a rather unsophisticated individual, and of Father Huddleston, committed to Sophiatown because it was

the place where old men and women came into the great church of Christ the King on their hands and knees. The humility and faith of it smote him in the inward parts. It was the place where small black children ran out from the houses to hold the hand of the father (Paton: 1981: 111).

Despite some similarities in characterisation, however, there are very important differences between the characters in Paton's first novel and those in the last two. These differences can probably not only be ascribed to changing social perceptions, but also to the nature of the audience for whom Paton was writing. In contrast to the first novel, written before 1948 and with a European and American audience in mind, the last two were written with a white South African audience in mind and try to make some sense of the situation which developed after 1948. In *Too Late the Phalarope*, for instance, Paton writes for a white South African reading public which fanatically adheres to laws ensuring racial purity and which isolates itself from the rest of the world. And in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, he attempts to interpret the events of the 1950s in the light of later developments during the 1970s. Here he writes almost exclusively for a South African audience that does not seem to hear him anymore.

Thus, when Van Onselen speaks of 'the year 1976' when 'the world will admit that we [the Nationalist Party] were right' (Paton: 1981:140), the irony is not lost on the reader of the 80s and 90s that this was the year of the Soweto uprisings and the beginning of the end of apartheid. It also becomes clear, that white South Africans' obsession with politics means they no longer hear the call of the birds or the sound of the waterfalls described so beautifully in his first two novels, and Paton's poetic descriptions of the land all but

disappear. Politics becomes the only reality in a country where ideological absolutes replace human feelings, and protest is silenced.

Similarly, Paton is criticised for creating pastoral characters who, according to Mphahlele, 'are nearly all flat' and can therefore be neatly summed up: they are fairly static and one-dimensional, the good become better, and the bad become worse (Mphahlele: 1962:131). Although this criticism is not totally incorrect, Paton, despite the overwhelming nature of South African politics, effectively portrays the courage of those who, for example, resist the system by drawing attention to their suffering through their overnight erection of Shanty Town. Using the 'Jim-goes-to-Jo'burg' theme, he presents the encounter of rural black people with the white-controlled industrialised city, and illustrates that once they are 'in Jo'burg, [they] never stop learning how to beat the system' (Gray: 1985:63). Thus, in Kumalo's journey from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg, Paton focuses simultaneously on several of the five historical phases Gray identifies in black people's urban settlement<sup>13</sup>. Kumalo and his new daughter-in-law's return to Ndotsheni suggests that, for Paton, it would be preferable if all black people were to re-discover their tribal roots. Yet, like Kumalo, he accepts the land would not 'hold all the people of [the] tribe if they all returned' (Paton: 1948:228).

It is ironic that, despite the separation enforced by the apartheid laws, Paton's Afrikaners are similar to the black people they reject. While little reference is made to Afrikaners in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, in *Too Late the Phalarope* they are naive, humble, and nature-loving. Their rural and tribal background denies them the sophistication needed to meet the challenges of the twentieth century. Like the black people from whom they separate themselves, they belong to the land, unquestioningly accepting authority's dictates<sup>14</sup>. The change in Paton's Afrikaners in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, is due to an inner contradiction only partly evident in his second novel. In this last novel, a people who deeply cherish their pastoral roots are in power, determining the structure of a sophisticated, industrialised country. Paton is not always successful in bringing together these two aspects of the Afrikaners' personality. Thus, the latter's emotional attachment to the land conflicts with the technical and economic advances made in South Africa during the last half-century. Accordingly, the sophistication demanded of those who are both governing an industrialised mining country and developing the apartheid system, makes some of the rather

naive statements made by Afrikaans characters in *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* somewhat unbelievable.

It is, for instance, difficult to believe that Aunt Sophie, the rather worldly woman whose analysis of Pieter is reminiscent of Freud, should speak of the Kruger National Park as 'the great park where the lions are' (Paton: 1953:104). There is a similar contradiction in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*. Van Onselen, naive and unable to use grammatically correct English, is nevertheless a senior civil servant, president of a University Convocation and deputy for the Minister of Justice (Paton: 1981: 170,200). His ability to quote poetry by Clough and Campbell (Paton: 1981: 151,272) and his astute analysis of South African politics, clash sharply with his artless description of the march led by Helen Joseph to the Union Buildings (Paton: 1981:150).

While the naivety of Paton's characters, both black and white, often makes them unrealistic, the author's changing consciousness is, nevertheless, evident in the differing effects this naivety has on society. Thus, in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Kumalo's lack of guile is an indication of his goodness. His suffering increases his gentleness, and despite the destruction of his people's culture, he does not seek to destroy. It is left to the authorial voice to question the justice of his son's hanging. The naivety of the Afrikaners in *Too Late the Phalarope* and in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, however, is much more dangerous. In both these novels their refusal to question the justice of their ideology results in large scale suffering. In the second novel the Afrikaners primarily inflict this suffering on their own society, but in Paton's last novel, the whole of South African society has to bear the consequences of what he portrays as their naive blindness.

By contrast, Arthur Jarvis, in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, is the prototype of the ideal South African. He represents the enlightened - those aware of the situation in their society. He is so nearly perfect that his destruction in a debased society is inevitable. Speaking several languages, he could be a powerful instrument in bringing together the different people within the country. His human qualities and the redemptive nature of his death, which results in his father's almost miraculous conversion, as well as his own son's exceptional maturity and intelligence, allow the reader to hope that his death will not be futile

but will mark the beginning of a new era<sup>15</sup>.

Unfortunately, this is not to be. The promise of a new humanity glimpsed in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, is not fulfilled in Paton's later novels, as neither holds out much hope that any form of reconciliation is possible. The increasing rigidity of South Africa's socio-political system, the Afrikaners' belief in the divinity of their mission, the lack of importance accorded to individuals by Nationalist ideology, and eruptions of violence, anger and hatred, negate all attempts to bring about a more just society. In *Too Late the Phalarope* a sense of tragic determinism affects the lives of those who, unaware of their own prejudice, nevertheless suspect they are 'not as other people anymore' (Paton: 1953: 249). In *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* the tragic gives way to terror as the brutalising effects of apartheid become apparent. There is no longer any place for characters like Arthur Jarvis and, consequently, Robert Mansfield leaves South Africa when he is unable to defend himself against life-threatening violence. Pieter van Vlaanderen, the misguided but likeable hero of *Too Late the Phalarope*, is replaced by Van Onselen who, despite evidence of the ugliness and inhumanity of his government's actions, resolutely clings to Verwoerd's idea of a 'golden era' after complete racial segregation has been achieved.

Despite the changing consciousness apparent in his characterisation, Paton never quite loses sight of his vision that love, which has now become more a theoretical potential, is, ultimately, the answer to South Africa's social problems. He says the Nationalist victory on 'May 26, 1948 ... condemned [him] to a struggle between literature and politics' (Paton: 1980:304). Yet, he never abandons his search for a humane rather than a merely political solution. His involvement in politics and the publication of the Prohibition of Improper Interference Act which resulted in the disbanding in 1968 of the Liberal Party, of which he was President, convince him that those ruthlessly enforcing the apartheid policies are incapable of responding to the values he upheld in his first novel. He, nevertheless, focuses on the human rather than the legal aspects of the struggle for domination. While human relationships no longer transcend political affiliations in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, as they did in his first novel, Paton is still primarily concerned with the people affected by apartheid, not with the system itself. Thus, he notes that those opposing apartheid are increasingly isolated from each other and from their society in general. Similarly,

the laws of racial segregation, designed to ensure the unity of the group they are protecting, in reality become 'a power ... destroying the future of [the Afrikaners'] own society' (Paton: 1981:121).

While *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, written in retrospect, has none of the immediacy characterising the first two novels, and reflects a much more vicious society than the latter, Paton still manages to preserve a sense of humour, which, as has been noted, is rare in South African English literature. Thus, he uses the political idiom of the 1970s and 1980s to comment on the absurdity of both the socio-political scenario of the 1950s, and on contemporary events. The similarity between the political posturing of the 1950s and that of the 1970s is obvious when Van Onselen writes to his aunt that

the Prime Minister was going to enlarge the Appellate Court so that the Government would be able to expect a more enlightened attitude towards its constitutional legislation. ... but he still was unable to get a two-thirds majority of both Houses sitting together, ... Therefore it was decided to reform the Senate (Paton: 1981:137).

Words like 'reform' and 'enlightened', references to a change in the constitution and a 'dismantling' of the system to accommodate government policy, are part of the political jargon of the 1970s and the 1980s as well as of the 1950s. Their use here highlights the folly of a system whose policy of 'reform' has always only implied a re-forming of society in accordance with Nationalist ideology, increased alienation and the entrenchment of white domination. Similarly, references to issues such as sanctions, sport boycotts, the crossing of the Rubicon, the cry of 'liberation before education' and the ludicrously paranoid banning of 'politically offensive and subversive clothing' (Paton: 1981: 29, 61, 218, 220, 252), are as much an indictment of government policy during the 1980s, as a comment on the latter's actions during the 1950s. The mistakes of the past have not resulted in a positive learning process. On the contrary, change mainly takes the form of further social regression<sup>16</sup>.

Paton's proposal that practical Christian love and the rejection of selfish desires would solve the overwhelming nature of South Africa's political problems, remains essentially the same in all three novels. As his society changes, however, the form of the love advocated becomes different. In the first two novels, for instance, love is shown through close interpersonal relationships. In *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*,



however, it is allied to active opposition to the apartheid laws. *Cry, the Beloved Country* speaks of the possibility that people of all races will unite to restore the land and bring about a more just society, but in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* interracial cooperation becomes impossible. The novel ends with the chilling words:

Black man, we are going to shut you off .... We mean nothing evil towards you (Paton: 1981:272). Thus, in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a restoration of the tribal land and tradition to black people is a way for white people to make reparation (Paton:1948:228). Yet, in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, the rehabilitation of the tribal tradition, as it was realised in the National Party's homeland policy, is a means for white people to exercise greater control over black people. In this novel, being 'freed from [the white man's] commandment', and being given political 'independence', in actual fact implies the taking away of black people's freedom to determine the course of their own future. Love, however, according to Paton, means restoring freedom of choice with regard to where people will live and with whom they will associate, and no longer asking 'if this, or that is expedient, but only if it is right' (Paton: 1948:151).

Paton's changing consciousness, evident in his descriptions of the land, in his characterisation and in his interpretation of love, has as its chief concern his anxiety that South Africans do not destroy both themselves and their country. The increasing urgency of his warning mirrors the extent of the polarisation taking place in South Africa. The persuasive tone of *Cry, the Beloved Country* changes to one of tragedy in *Too Late the Phalarope*. While there are still elements of the persuasive and the tragic in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, these all but disappear. Instead, Paton here holds up a mirror to his society, hoping that when its members catch sight of their distorted images they will change. Despite the similarities between *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, the hope and optimism which determines Paton's writing in the first novel, is much more subdued in the last one. It does not, however, completely disappear. Love could have healed the wounds of the society portrayed in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. It will, however, be much more difficult for the regenerating power of love to heal the injury caused by the attempt at total exclusion which threatens to rip apart the society depicted in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*.

## ENDNOTES

1. Although Hoernle's views seem to foreshadow the Nationalist era, there are significant differences in these two forms of segregation: Nationalist segregation was concerned with the protection of white racial purity, liberal segregationism sought to protect the identity of black people. Thus, in *Song of the City*, the Ashes and Timbata, the educated black man they associate with, see parallel development and a type of 'homeland' policy as an alternative to the equal rights neither the 'European section' nor the government are prepared to grant (Abrahams: 1945:40).
2. The *laager*, associated with the Afrikaners' trek by ox wagon to the South African interior, away from British rule, became a metaphor for whites' withdrawal into group safety. South African liberals were accused of having a *laager* mentality when they were alienated from the black freedom struggle after *Umkhonto we Sizwe's* acts of sabotage during the early 1960s. The latter stemmed largely from black people's helplessness and frustration at not being heard by the white government and was, ironically, partly responsible for the Nationalist Government's decision to ban the Liberal Party.
3. Watson, for instance, includes Schreiner, Paton, Jacobson and Gordimer in this tradition (Watson: 1980); Cooke, sees Paton as 'the chief spokesman for South African liberalism in the early fifties' (Cooke: 1979:42); Wade, however, includes Millin in his study of literary liberalism, yet excludes Paton (Wade: 1981:6)
4. Despite Mphahlele's claim that 'there is something sinister about white liberalism in this country that feels constrained to operate from a Christian base' (Mphahlele: 1983:9), and despite references to 'our Christian civilisation' (Paton:1948:134), Christianity can not necessarily be equated with liberalism. It should also be noted that Paton's understanding of Christianity differs from the Nationalists' Calvinist interpretation of this religion. It could, furthermore, be argued that critics' frequent reference to the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of South African society, and their consequent rejection of Paton's understanding of Christianity, could be an excuse for inactivity: Paton's idea of Liberalism and Christianity makes change dependent on individual effort.
5. In 1955 the Congress of People adopted the Freedom Charter. In *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* Paton deals with what some people would call the 'Utopian vision' of the Freedom Charter. He realises that the ideals of brotherhood and of justice proclaimed in the Charter are not attainable unless the God who promises 'a new heaven and a new earth' in the Book of Revelations comes to the aid of those in South Africa who yearn for justice and peace. The insertion of the verses from the Book of Revelation after the text of the Freedom Charter is an expression of the longing of those who have had to come to terms with their human fallibility, but who nevertheless believe in a vision of love and equality for all people.
6. Like Paton, several other authors refer to pre-1948 discriminatory practices which became the forerunners of later apartheid laws. Thus, Innes, for instance, claims it was the 1895 Pass Laws, 'designed to increase the mine owners' control over black labour movement so as ... to curb the high rate of desertion on the mines', which already 'laid down the broad legal framework for present-day apartheid South Africa' (Innes: 1984:61-69). Plaatje and Abrahams's pre-1948 works support this point. Similarly, Cronin says 'much oppressive legislation had found its way onto the statute book ... before Afrikaner Nationalism came to power, and ... Smuts's United Party was essentially as illiberal ... as Verwoerd's National Party came to be' (quoted in Watson: 1980:186). And Mphahlele claims the United Party was no better than the Nationalist government: 'In 1945 the Smuts government had sent armed troops to quell a riot ... where Africans wanted better living conditions ... [It also] started to rebuild Johannesburg station so that whites and non-whites should enter segregated platforms through segregated entrances' (Mphahlele: 1959:164). Paton too speaks of segregated entrances being used for different races and of the dishonesty of setting 'aside one-tenth of the land for four-fifths of the people' (Paton: 1948:144, 127). Paton also makes reference to Plaatje's unsuccessful protest in 1914 against the 1913 Natives' Land Act which led to the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act that 'gave the

Government the power to take away the title deeds from ... blackspots' (Paton: 1981:88). As Innes points out, the 1950 Group Areas Act and the homelands policy, both of which were brutally enforced, follow logically from the previous Acts.

7. *Too Late the Phalarope* (1955) is discussed later in this chapter: here a comparison of Paton's first and last novels, similar with regard to style, characters and incidents portrayed, most evidently reflects his changing consciousness.
8. Ironically, Paton's description of Judge Olivier's opposition in the early 1950s to the restructuring of South Africa's legal system, and his victimisation (Paton: 1981: 146) is similar to Abrahams's portrayal in *This Island Now* of Judge Wright's resistance to Josiah's actions (Abrahams: 1966: 228). In both cases judges are forced to legalise government policies. While Judge Olivier opposes a white government intent on depriving black people of their freedom, Justice Wright refuses to deprive black people of their rights in the name of the freedom imposed by a black ruler. In both cases the people's voice is silenced when judiciaries serve the ruling party's philosophy.
9. Paton's main concern in portraying Pieter's feelings in *Too Late the Phalarope* is to show how these relate to the perceptions evident in the larger societal context. In contrast, Abrahams, in *The Path of Thunder* and *A Night of Their Own*, also examines the social aspects of 'love across the colour bar', yet he is equally concerned with the lovers' personal fears, hopes and prejudices.
10. The offending white male character's destruction in Paton's second and third novels is a variation on the more common theme of white women's inaccessibility to anyone but white men. While white men's sexual access to black women is accepted though frowned upon, white women, bearers of future generations of white children, are taboo to black men. Thus, a 1905 Appeal Court ruling on the racial classification of children of 'a European father [and]... a coloured wife (her father being a European and her mother a native woman)' stated: 'believing, as these whites did, that intimacy with the black or yellow races would lower the scale of civilization, they condemned intermarriage or illicit sexual intercourse between persons of the two races. Unfortunately, the practice of many white men has been inconsistent with that belief, but the vast majority of Europeans have always condemned such unions, and have regarded the offspring of such unions as being in the same racial condition as their black parents' (Suzman:1960:344). In Coetzee's post-modernist novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, this attitude changes: though the actions of the white male with a married black woman as his lover are accepted by society, they are unacceptable to his daughter. After killing her father she becomes the largely unwilling lover of Hendrik, the man whose wife committed adultery with her father. Hendrik, on the other hand, is more afraid of being accused of murder than of being found guilty of having a relationship with a white woman.
11. Dennis Brutus, for instance, comments: 'One must not think in colour categories, but it is very difficult to resist thinking of Alan Paton as a white man, a sympathetic white man standing outside the South African society with all its complexities and dynamic tensions and reducing it to what is almost a parable, a simple little tale told with a certain lyricism which I think is sometimes false ...' (Brutus: 1969:95-6).
12. Vrededorp, Malaycamp, Sophiatown and Alexandria are today an embarrassment to white South Africans, partly because the latter feel guilty at the sordid and tragic conditions under which people there live. Yet, long before black people's permanence in the urban areas was accepted by whites, and despite their poverty, these areas inspired much that is vital and alive in black literature. Both Abrahams and Mphahlele, who wrote about the same time as Paton did, depict emerging township life. And later, 'Soweto' poetry, which developed in the 1960s and 1970s, similarly has its roots in the experience of township life, in 'the music and dance that had a distinctive flavour and beat, the rituals of birth and death and marriage and church activity, the pass laws, the violence, shebeen life which became such a cult that ... it still survives' (Mphahlele: 1980:7). While the social problems in the urban areas are not ignored, black people's recognition of their permanence in the city gives rise to an exuberant 'township culture' which defies the obvious suffering and pain.

13. In phase one, the 'compound phase', blacks are accommodated in mine-built dormitories; in phase two, blacks sub-let their accommodation in the city centre or the suburbs to other blacks; in phase three, townships with a freehold system are the centre of life; phase four sees the development of totally segregated white and black areas; phase five, that of illegal squatting, is related to and part of the other four (Gray: 1985:62-3) and is the phase described most graphically by Paton in the story of the erection of Shanty Town.
14. Paton's transcription of Afrikaans idiom into English makes his Afrikaners similar to Pauline Smith's rural characters in *The Beadle* whose 'virtues lie in their helplessness, their clinging to the past, and their defeat by an 'English'-dominated industrial society (Gordimer: 1976: 106). Yet Paton makes no mention of this phenomenon, identified by Gordimer, nor does he take into account the Afrikaners' memory of their defeat during the Anglo-Boer war, as Van der Post does in *In a Province*.
15. Arthur Jarvis's character and fate is similar to that of Paul van As in Abrahams's *Wild Conquest*. Paton's later characters seem to fulfil both the prediction made by Paul that white South Africans lose themselves in their battle to win their own identity, as well as his premonition that it will one day be impossible 'for hard hearts to turn soft again' (Abrahams: 1951:155). It is important to note that Jarvis's enlightened attitude in *Cry the Beloved Country* is not to be confused with the *verligtes* referred to in *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*. The latter, more flexible than the radical elements in the ruling Nationalist Party, do not oppose government policy.
16. Malan, for example, refused to 'make himself ridiculous by punishing people for wearing a [white Gandhi] cap' (Paton: 1981:29) as a sign of protest during the Defiance Campaign. Yet, the Nationalist government's consciousness changed to such an extent that during the 1970s and 1980s there was a rather ludicrous over-reaction when people wearing T-shirts with slogans of the banned ANC printed on them, were imprisoned. Though wearing T-shirts with slogans printed on them might well be seen as a more overt protest than the wearing of a Gandhi cap, the hysterical reaction to this basically peaceful form of protest was in sharp contrast to Malan's earlier reaction.

## CHAPTER 4

### **ES'KIA MPHABLELE : A Protest Writer Returns from Exile**

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Ezekiel<sup>1</sup> Mphahlele, born in 1919, is a contemporary both of Peter Abrahams, with whom he attended St Peters School in Johannesburg during the 1930s, and of Alan Paton. While he has much in common with both these writers, his development as a novelist and his changing consciousness are different from theirs. Like Abrahams, he experienced the claustrophobia of a system which condemned him to physical and spiritual poverty. Unable to live with what was happening in South Africa, he too went into exile, but, unlike Abrahams, only after he had lived through the early years of Nationalist rule<sup>2</sup>. While Paton chose the way of liberal humanism, and of evolutionary social change, Mphahlele became one of South Africa's early protest writers: unlike Paton, and other whites liberals, he could not wait for gradual constitutional change to save him from the excesses of the Verwoerdian era<sup>3</sup>. He realised, furthermore, that his role as teacher and writer was incompatible with the goals of the Bantu Education Act where 'African teachers were going to be used for training children to be slaves' (Mphahlele: 1959: 201). Yet, whereas Abrahams soon accepted he would not return to South Africa, Mphahlele felt guilty about abandoning other victims of apartheid and hoped the break would be temporary (Mphahlele: 1959:210).

Mphahlele's definition of himself as a protest writer who attempted to transcend the limitations of mere protest (Mphahlele: 1959: 210,217), should be seen in the broader context of South African protest politics and writing. Both Lewis Nkosi and Cosmo Pieterse, for example, seek the roots of South African protest in the early twentieth century. Nkosi regards both Vilakazi and Herbert Dhlomo's anxiety concerning the sociological problems surrounding newly-urbanised African workers, as the beginning of South African protest writing (Nkosi: 1981:112). Pieterse, on the other hand, sees 'the germ of protest ... sharply crystallized in the words and identity of Turbott Wolfe' (Pieterse:1969: 3), yet comments that while Plomer's novel 'indicates the variety of possible collisions that can occur', its solutions are 'not as single as those one finds in the protest tradition later in South Africa' (Pieterse: 1969: 16,22).

Early South African protest writing was mainly concerned with the sociological problems encountered by black people after their first experiences with white civilisation<sup>4</sup>. After 1948, however, protest is directed against apartheid, which entrenches white privilege but circumscribes black people's lives. Forced to accept unfair working conditions, blacks could not escape the squalid conditions in which racially biased laws forced them to live. The deep resentment triggered by these injustices and the humiliation, implied in terms such as 'non-white' and 'non-European', were to some extent offset by the emergence of Black Consciousness during the 1960s. While the latter incorporated aspects of the Negritude movement of French-speaking West Africa, it was inspired mainly by Afro-American literature and identified closely with American Black Consciousness. Humiliated by white people's perception of them as inferior beings, black people proudly asserted their identity in 'a deliberate exploration of what it meant to be black and a newly-found pride in all that differentiates black peoples from the white' (Anderson: 1969:66). Adopting slogans such as 'Black is Beautiful', they rejected 'all value systems which reduced their human dignity and degraded them to the position of foreigners in the country of their birth' (Grobler: 1988:164).

Black Consciousness, which, initially, was not necessarily anti-white, was, for instance, adopted by the South African Students' Organisation as an affirmation of black people's human dignity. Grobler points out that SASO rejected the Pan African Congress's exclusion of whites from the liberation struggle. Instead, it affirmed that 'South Africa was a country in which Black and White people had always lived together and should continue to live together'. SASO's recognition in 1970, however, as an all-black student organisation, ended its 'traditional role as the champion of non-racial liberalism' (Grobler: 1988: 163,164,168). The Sharpeville crisis in 1960, the subsequent banning of the ANC and the PAC, the decision of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the armed wing of the ANC, to use force against the South African government since negotiations had failed, and the 1976 Soweto uprisings, meant that protest became increasingly violent.

Protest literature, rooted within a specific historical context, inevitably reflects politically relevant issues. Yet, it should also transcend the circumstances out of which it was born. Unfortunately, however, much of

South African protest writing is merely

the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature ... a type of fiction which exploits the ready made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, inter-racial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction (Nkosi: 1967:222)<sup>5</sup>.

Mphahlele similarly claims that

the main weakness in South African writers is that they are hyper-conscious of the race problem in their country, ... [and character and plot] must subserve an important message or important discovery they think they have made (Mphahlele: 1959:195).

While the mention of politically relevant events gives protest novels historical credibility, heroic actions and the suffering of those opposing the system should be incorporated into the wider fabric of human life and experience. Greater insight into characters' hopes, fears and anger would 'combine protest with art' (Obuke: 1979:197), thus avoiding the 'ready made plots', which so easily become mere vehicles for authors' messianic messages of racial harmony.

The lack of vision evident in much of South African protest literature is partly the result of enforced social alienation under the apartheid system and the consequent lack of communication between members of different racial groups<sup>6</sup>. Stereotypes often arise when people, unable to communicate with each other, can neither solve current problems nor think about possibilities for a new reality. Thus, white writers who, for example, have themselves never directly known the indignity of a pass raid or the frustration of being born into a position where one cannot rise above a certain level, can easily be accused of creating black characters who lack credibility. Their automatic membership of the oppressive ruling class, furthermore, often discredits even the most sympathetic white writer. As Mphahlele points out:

When white people invite us blacks to their suburban homes, we are the ones who are exposed to road blocks, to humiliating police orders for us to undress, to assault by white hooligans (Mphahlele: 1987:49).

Conversely, black authors often have little insight into white people's hopes and fears, as their direct acquaintance with laws enforcing racial segregation in South Africa often destroys their inclination to understand their white counterparts. It may be true that 'culturally, ... African[s] never feared assimilation

into the white minority' (Mphahlele: 1987:50), and therefore did not have to isolate themselves as whites did. Yet, when all doors are closed, they are thrown back on their 'blackness', on whatever culture they either remember or have created in their new environment, and white characters remain 'no more than cardboard or caricature'<sup>7</sup> (Gordimer: 1976:119<sup>8</sup>).

Mphahlele's response, for instance, to being a nameless, uneducated 'Jim' or 'John', is that he doubts whether certain whites are human enough to 'fondle a child or wife' (Mphahlele: 1959:173-4). This perception changes later. Yet, despite his perceptive portrayal of Steven Cartwright's subconscious fears and fantasies in *The Wanderers* (1971) and his admiration for Norah Taylor, who helped him during his early years, he does not really transcend the psychological barriers imposed by the segregation ethos. He admits whites 'continue to be shadowy figures or ready-made portraits in [his] fiction' (Mphahlele: 1983: 15). Only after returning to South Africa does Mphahlele try to abandon his anger, the 'crutch that had given [him] an identity' (Mphahlele:1984:21). Much remains the same in South Africa, yet he contains the immobilising bitterness, trying to 'harness it to reinforce [his] creative energy' (Mphahlele: 1984: 203,207,248), rather than letting it continue to distort his perceptions<sup>9</sup>.

Ironically, the concern of black protest novels with the effects of racial segregation, often limits their scope as novels of social purpose, confining them to a mainly affluent liberal white audience<sup>10</sup>. These novels are seldom read by those in power whose outlook needs to be changed, nor by black people who, though they are the subject of these works, have no access to them as they are often either too poor or lack the necessary intellectual sophistication. Protest writers' concern with the current political situation, furthermore, often excludes a vision of the future, and characters are subject to the 'terrible cliché' of the South African situation which allows one 'hardly a moment to think of human beings as human beings and not as victims of political circumstance' (Mphahlele: 1959:210).

As South Africa's politically defined censorship laws regarded most protest writing as communist inspired propaganda, they limited the contact writers had with their audience<sup>11</sup>. Black South African authors managed to escape the stringent censorship laws by writing autobiographies and autobiographical novels,



both of which can be regarded as 'South Africa's most singular contribution to black literature' (Visser: 1976: 50). Although these two genres are similar in content, they should be distinguished from each other. While autobiographies report 'the thoughts of the writer long after the narrated events', autobiographical novels record 'the thoughts of his younger experiencing self at the time of the experiences' (Visser: 1976: 51). Thus, for example, in his autobiographical novel, *Down Second Avenue*, Mphahlele manages to give the impression that he still belongs to the scenes and atmosphere of his youth. By remaining part of 'the physical and social environment of the urban slum' to which he is restricted by law, he thus 'provide[s] an inside view of a life virtually unknown to ... middle-class readers'<sup>12</sup> (Visser:1976:51). By contrast, Abrahams writes as a person who has escaped (Abrahams: 1954:1). His autobiography, *Tell Freedom*, relates the author's experiences from the perspective of hindsight<sup>13</sup>.

In *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele re-creates the feelings and sensations of a child growing up, and traces the stages of his own early changing consciousness as he recounts his physical and intellectual maturation. The interplay between the perceptions of the child in the narrative parts of the novel, together with the questions of the adult in the 'Interludes', gives the book its impact as a protest novel. As a child, for instance, he accepts the 'ordinariness' of his life as he stands guard and is beaten up by the police while his family hastily bury the illegally brewed beer on which they depend for survival (Mphahlele: 1959:42). As an adult, however, he wonders about his grandmother's acceptance of the white man's code of justice (Mphahlele: 1959:143) and her respect for those who taught her how to cook, yet are responsible for her suffering (Mphahlele: 1959:60).

By 're-living' his childhood experiences Mphahlele manages to avoid painting a picture of a society ennobled by poverty: as in every society, there is both good and bad. Yet, the child who accepts the squalid conditions of Marabastad, later admires those who, despite their poverty, refuse to abandon standards which allow them to retain their status as human beings. As an adult he realises that even with the removal of the apartheid laws, the damage to the psyche of a child growing up in such a situation can perhaps never be repaired. And now his protest against the police, the regime and the country's laws, is also directed against those who, by accepting unquestioningly, helped entrench the system.

Similar in content to *Down Second Avenue*, Mphahlele's second novel, *The Wanderers* (1971), is much more an intellectual reflection on his life than his first work. Despite the introduction of fictive elements and his claim that the novel is fiction, it has none of the immediacy of the first book. Its style more closely resembles the autobiography than the novel. Incidents dramatised in *Down Second Avenue* are merely recounted and commented on in *The Wanderers*. Characters, who in the first book are vibrant with a life of their own, now exist only in relation to the main character, Timi. The latter, a poorly disguised self-portrait of Mphahlele himself, gives a running commentary on everything and everybody. In *Down Second Avenue* the narrative focuses directly on situations and characters, with the author reflecting on the events portrayed in the 'Interlude'. In *The Wanderers*, however, readers are told a great deal about events and characters, yet never really get to know them. Thus, while characters in *Down Second Avenue* learn to cope with, but are never immune to pain, both Timi and Karabo in *The Wanderers* confront fear and grief with remarkable detachment and lack of emotion. Ironically, despite his characters' increasing lack of emotional interaction with their surroundings, and his attempt to appear more detached by using a third person narrator in his second novel, and not a first person narrator as he did in *Down Second Avenue*, Mphahlele now seems so caught up with intellectually analysing himself and his feelings that he can no longer stand back and objectively watch his surroundings.

These changes in Mphahlele's style and consciousness are apparent if one compares the two descriptions of his mother being abused by his father. In *Down Second Avenue* we sense the fear and pain and suffering of a child who has to learn to transcend these early experiences:

When he thundered in we knew he had been chasing after my mother. She kept on her knees, clearly hurt. ... 'This is the day you're going to do what I tell you!' He limped over to the pot on the stove. In no time it was done. My mother screamed with a voice I have never forgotten till this day. Hot gravy and meat and potatoes had got into her blouse and she was trying to shake them down. He caught hold of her by the blouse and landed the pot in the middle of her skull with a heavy gong sound. She struggled loose from his grip and fled through the door, crying. Only then did I have the wits to go and ask for help. ... (Mphahlele: 1959:28).

In *The Wanderers*, however, the portrayal of the same incident gives the impression that Timi was always in

perfect control of the situation and of his feelings and it becomes a rather hackneyed description of black suffering:

Timi's father had left his family when the eldest son was thirteen. He had simply disappeared after brutally attacking his wife, Timi's mother; after emptying a pot of boiling stew onto her and hitting her head with the pot. ... Right from the age of thirteen, Timi had learnt to be self-reliant. He had studied and obtained his university degrees at home while working and raising a family, like so many other blacks in South Africa (Mphahlele:1971:198).

Thus Timi, Mphahlele's alter ego in *The Wanderers*, becomes a self-righteous character who can do no wrong. As his every action and thought is minutely recounted and analysed and his minor faults are all lovable and excusable, we are given a rather stereotyped description of the life of an exile from racist South Africa. The novel, 'a prolonged bout of self-justification and self-worship' (Nkosi:1981:94), loses the element of protest. Mphahlele seems to have escaped the 'terrible cliché' the South African situation became for him, only to pander to the clichéd reactions evoked by words like 'South Africa', 'apartheid', 'racism' and 'exile'. Only in *Chirundu* does he once again free himself, and both critically and constructively demystify concepts which have become almost sacrosanct in the consciousness of modern journalism. As Mphahlele re-examines ideas such as 'freedom', 'independence', 'African tradition', and 'trade-unionism' within the practical framework of modern-day Africa, and with reference to the lives of individuals interacting with one another, his characters become more vibrant than any he portrays in *The Wanderers*.

In Chimba Chirundu, for instance, Mphahlele creates a character who is in many ways typical of emergent independent black Africans and even of modern educated black South Africans - a person both fascinating and repulsive. Chirundu's defiant anti-British, anti-colonial, anti-white repertoire once pointed to the incompatibility of British law and traditional African customs. His behaviour has, however, become inappropriate now 'a new day has dawned' and he can no longer blame his own inadequacies on the system. Thus, he blatantly uses the conflict of cultures in Africa to justify and excuse his own self-centred weaknesses, and his wife says he is 'a man who chooses which law to recognize and which to ignore' (Mphahlele: 1979:75). Chirundu's inability to bring about a meaningful synthesis of the old and the new bodes ill for the future of Africa, especially when we realise that for all his limitations, he is a lot more

honest in his actions than many of his compatriots.

Unfortunately, the other characters in *Chirundu* are not as successfully portrayed. While Moyo represents Mphahlele's ideal African, who brings together 'the two selves' of colonized people, 'the indigenous self and the one that's superimposed by the new culture' (Mphahlele: 1981:24), he, like Timi in *The Wanderers*, is just too good to be true. Instead of allowing his characters to develop through their interaction with their surroundings, their history, and with one another, Mphahlele explores his idea of the perfect composition of emergent African society by practically isolating Moyo and Tirenje, Chirundu's first wife, from the rest of their society. Their interaction with others and with one another is almost exclusively determined by their conscious grappling with the relationship between traditional black and Western post-industrial culture.

Despite these limitations in characterisation, however, *Chirundu* represents a major shift in consciousness with regard to Mphahlele's own attitude to black African tradition, if we remember that in *Down Second Avenue*, for example, he is of the opinion that

the tribal umbilical cord had long ... been severed and all the talk about Bantu culture and the Black man developing along his own lines was just so much tommy rot (Mphahlele: 1959: 203).

Mphahlele's attitude in his first novel to some extent can be explained by his rejection of apartheid which saw in the retention of black traditional culture a means of excluding black people from South African society<sup>14</sup>. In *Down Second Avenue* his main concern thus seems to be that black people have outgrown their tradition and are capable of taking their place in Western-dominated society. Consequently, he says both he and Rebecca detest having to observe traditional pre-marriage rituals which he feels are no longer relevant and degrade marriage to a 'business transaction' (Mphahlele: 1959:161).

In *Exiles and Homecomings* Mphahlele's change in attitude is obvious as he now remembers only 'the symbolism, the poetry' of the rituals preceding his marriage (Manganyi: 1983:87). Similarly, on his return from exile to the 'tribal umbilical cord', his ancestral home which is now part of one of South Africa's black

'homelands', he realises that, ironically, apartheid has made black people culturally more self-reliant. He proudly relates that a letter addressed to him, but with no town name on it, nevertheless arrives, as it is forwarded to his traditional home (Manganyi: 1984:147). Describing himself as 'a confirmed African humanist', he claims that West Africa, independent of colonialism and free to re-discover its culture, 'gave Africa back to [him]' (Mphahlele: 1984:249).

Mphahlele's changing cultural consciousness is likewise apparent if one compares his use of traditional African proverbs and his portrayal of black people's traditional customs in his last two novels. Reflecting on the sayings of the African sage (Mphahlele: 1971:344) in *The Wanderers*, for instance, Mphahlele gives no sense of their being anchored in reality, for he seldom shows how they can be applied to the lives of individuals. His portrayal of black people's hospitality and sense of community is not very successful either. Thus, Timi gives us a rather sentimental glimpse of the traditional faith, lifestyle and sense of community of black people living on Glendale Farm who help him search for Naledi's husband on the prison farm. He does not, however, seem to share their sense of communal responsibility. He fails to consider the fate of those who helped him, and takes no steps to protect the Dzivanes who passed him off as their nephew and who will be in grave danger after his story is published. In *Chirundu*, however, picturesque traditional African proverbs are accompanied by Tirenje and Moyo's practical application of the traditional sense of community. When Tirenje miscarries, for instance, she says she has '[broken] the calabash [she] carried from the river' (Mphahlele: 1979: 63). Likewise, relying on her family for the hospitality and support tradition prescribes, she expects them to mediate between her and Chimba when she can no longer solve her marriage problems (Mphahlele:1979:77,89).

Tirenje compares *Chirundu* to *nsato*, the python who, as the messenger and avenger of the ancestors is the link between past and present. He has unequivocal power and his great strength allows him to destroy at will. In this way Tirenje tries to come to terms with her own traditional past<sup>15</sup>. When *nsato* becomes unpredictable and runs amok, destroying his own house, he has to be smoked out of his lair before she can 'build a new house'. As 'neither traditional customs nor those of former colonial rule are adequate to the present situation' (Kossick: 1980:65), she first uses traditional customs to win back her husband and, when

these fail, resorts to Western-style law courts. Here, too, she hopes the traditional privilege of speaking to the accused will save her marriage (Mphahlele: 1981:107). Yet, while she honours customs enabling her to 'work towards an integrated personality' (Mphahlele: 1981:24), she rejects polygamy, a traditional concept she feels is no longer relevant in modern Africa. There is thus the hope that Tirenje will ultimately be stronger than Chirundu's second wife who, despite the benefits of a British education, cannot bring together her traditional and her colonial past.

Like Tirenje, Moyo, who is respected by the tribal elders because he 'is not a man without a shadow' (Mphahlele: 1979: 112), recognises the value of returning to traditional, ancestral customs, one of the cornerstones of black African freedom. He respects his grandfather who gives him access to 'the people's epic poetry [which] still talks about the migrations of three hundred years'<sup>16</sup> (Mphahlele: 1981:119), primarily because the latter is soon to become one of the ancestors. He is, however, also aware of the possibilities for social and economic change inherent in a powerful Western-type trade union movement. Ironically, the latter was once a means to wrest power from the colonial authorities, yet is now rejected by the new rulers who resent any criticism. Thus, values which once motivated those taking part in the liberation struggle, are no longer operative within the new system, and workers' demands for just working conditions are seen as a betrayal of the newly established black government. Moyo, who rejects Chimba's eclecticism, suggests that a knowledge of their history and tradition will enable black people to modify the function of essentially Western institutions like trade unions. The latter should thus not be exclusively political, but should accommodate the community's social and cultural needs, involving themselves 'in schooling, medical care, and the general social welfare of the workers' (Mphahlele: 1981:139).

Mphahlele's changing consciousness regarding black African tradition is partly due to his rejection of Christianity. In *Down Second Avenue*, he tells of his early experiences where members of the same tribe were divided into Christians and 'pagans'. He recounts how 'non-Christians' resented social change, and how he, a Lutheran, became an Anglican. Later, he rejects the Church as an institution guilty of aiding and abetting an unjust system. He feels that despite the enormity of black suffering in South Africa it has simply preached love, acceptance and passive resistance. Accusing the Church of having destroyed African

cultures, he no longer says, as black Christians usually do, 'I'm a Christian but I still believe in the ancestors'. He increasingly turns to the spirits of the ancestors and eventually creates his own brand of African humanism. Mphahlele, however, never really explains his concept of African humanism except through reference to a Supreme Being and ancestors 'who are a vital part of our humanism'<sup>17</sup> (Mphahlele: 1984:209).

Despite his disillusionment with Western and Christian values, Mphahlele does not eulogise the quality of freedom found in independent black African states. Furthermore, as was the case with Abrahams, Mphahlele's understanding of freedom gradually evolves. For instance, in *Down Second Avenue*, his idea of freedom is linked to his wish to be free of white domination. The 'Hertzog Bills', which resulted in black people's exclusion from the common voters' roll, the Native Representative Council, which excluded black representation from parliament, and especially the institution of the 'Bantu Education Act', as well as his own children's growing fear of white people (Mphahlele: 1959:138,206), led to the conviction that he had to leave South Africa. In both *The Wanderers* and *Chirundu*, however, it is clear that the freedom he yearned for in *Down Second Avenue* is almost as elusive in black Africa as it is in South Africa. His search for intellectual and cultural freedom drove him into exile. Yet, when it is discovered that, despite political oppression in South Africa, he is better educated than black people in the rest of Africa, he is ostracised.

In *The Wanderers* and in *Chirundu*, his protest is, consequently, directed against those who misuse their political independence, who despite their freedom do not develop their full potential and who have succumbed to the new bondage of neo-colonialism. He is, for instance, not employed at a West African University because it is claimed patronisingly that his M.A. thesis, written at the University of South Africa, 'simply wouldn't have been passed' at a British University (Mphahlele: 1971:238). Thus, on the one hand, 'Nigeria restored Africa to [him]' (Mphahlele: 1984:28), for here he again learnt to value his traditional and cultural heritage. On the other hand, he discovers that for 'a foreign Negro [on] ... the African continent ... common colour is by no means the same thing as common identity, and he has to face the deep forsakenness of being a stranger in the very place where he had expected to feel fully at home' (Anderson: 1969:67).

*The Wanderers*, consequently, becomes the story of the exile whose flight into freedom makes him homeless and rootless. The pain of this situation is compounded by the realisation that Timi's vision of freedom, which alienated him from the land of his birth, is not shared by people in independent Africa<sup>18</sup>. The latter, furthermore, do not understand his situation:

"You have university in Sout' Africa?" B asked.

"I'm a graduate."

"But we hear you're oppressed," said C. " Why don't you vote?"

"Yes, why don't you vote, like us," D suggested, "and replace the white man in parliament and govern yourselves?" (Mphahlele: 1971:272).

His attempts at countering the effects of Westernisation and re-creating typically African culture in Nigeria are not successful<sup>19</sup>. His wife returns 'home' to South Africa for the birth of their child as, despite their alienation, this is where they belong. Mphahlele's often self-important tone in *The Wanderers* cannot hide the pain and anger he feels at being rejected in black Africa where he is the object of stereotyped cliches, just as he was in South Africa.

Mphahlele's critique of freedom in Africa transcends the specific problems experienced by black South Africans who will eventually have to find their own definition of freedom. Certainly, African independence as it is portrayed in both *The Wanderers* and *Chirundu*, is not an enviable commodity. It does not, for instance, allow the 'Peacemaker of Iboyoru', who is responsible for freeing the West African state described in *The Wanderers* from European control, the personal freedom to marry the woman of his choice. His love for the daughter of an Arab oil magnate transgresses his people's tribal code and is seen by his country-women as a denigration of their beauty<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, in *Chirundu*, Pitso, a South African freedom fighter, is told he should be grateful for the sanctuary offered him in a Zambian prison. Here Mphahlele points out that, ironically, Pitso and other South African exiles are resented in black African countries because, even after forty years of 'Bantu Education', they have a superior education, and because of their vision of African freedom, and their greater sophistication which stems from their coming from a more industrialised and urbanised environment than black Africans in the north.



Pitso's decision to return to South Africa, his 'giving himself up to the Boers' (Mphahlele: 1979:156), not only signals Mphahlele's acceptance of the end of the Pan-African dream of black unity and uniformity of ideology and purpose, but also his changing consciousness with regard to the nature of freedom in South Africa. In *Down Second Avenue* white domination is seen as the chief source of black people's lack of freedom, and Mphahlele's anger at whites, most obvious in *The Wanderers*, never quite disappears. Yet, in *Chirundu*, he accepts that, unlike in countries to the north, the struggle for black emancipation in South Africa will be determined by the relationship between black people and whites, who can no longer be regarded as colonists but as natives of the country. By returning to South Africa, Pitso, who like Mphahlele, 'long[s] for [his] people so badly it seems to drain [his] blood', hopes to re-join those who alone can 'decide when they've had enough of tyranny' (Mphahlele: 1979: 69,97).

At the end of *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele hoped his leaving South Africa would benefit his creative ability. In *The Wanderers*, however, it becomes apparent that despite his intellectual freedom he has become rootless, and his creativity has thus been inhibited. Consequently, he re-lives and re-tells experiences in the most minute detail, hoping they will lose none of their relevance and immediacy. Yet, he has forgotten what it feels like to be part of the situation he portrays. Mphahlele himself claims his rootlessness 'cheats' him out of an audience, as those who read his books have, at best, only an academic interest in his work, and as an exile he will 'never know the reaction of those whose concerns [he] share[s]'<sup>21</sup> (Mphahlele: 1984:130). His inability to commit himself to a country other than South Africa, as well as his wish for 'a measure of involvement, ... to work *with* people, not *for* them' (Mphahlele:1971:313), throws him back on his 'South Africanness'. He decides 'the best thing might be to touch base again' ('South African Writers Talking': 1979:3) and in this way place his work in a more meaningful political and geographical context.

*Chirundu*, with its characters modelled on Mphahlele's own personal experiences, but not revolving around his person, seems to confirm this observation. Written just before his return to South Africa, it manages to capture the atmosphere of post-colonial Africa without, however, ignoring the concerns of black South Africans either in or outside the country. In *Chirundu*, furthermore, some of the humour which

characterised *Down Second Avenue* and all but disappeared in *The Wanderers*, is evident again. This sense of humour much more effectively conveys the seriousness of the situation in which his characters find themselves than Timi's self-important portrayal of his mission does<sup>22</sup>.

Interestingly, despite Mphahlele's conviction that a return to South Africa would revitalize him as creative artist and novelist, no new novels have appeared. Works published since his return are *The Unbroken Song* (1981), a miscellaneous collection of prose, *Afrika My Music: An Autobiography 1957-1983* (1984), which tells the story of his life in exile and of his return to South Africa, and children's literature. The last mentioned is openly didactic, reflecting his view that

if our education system is based on [the philosophy of African humanism], it will truly express our independence of mind, a decolonised mind ... we should get to know ourselves, our continent, through a study of African history, religion, cosmology, literature and the arts, before we move to other world areas of knowledge, through a combination of our cultural resources and others at the higher levels of education (Mphahlele: 1984:209).

Mphahlele's interest in and attitude to education is apparent in all his novels. In *Down Second Avenue* it is partly his despair as a teacher and as a parent after the introduction of Bantu Education that forces him to leave South Africa; in *The Wanderers* he uses his educational skills in various schools and universities in Africa and in the United States. He then realises:

I must get back and help in educating our young people, to subvert what they had been taught through Bantu Education. ... if I came back to teach, I'd help to purge its effects (quoted in Haarhoff:1981:185).

And in *Chirundu*, Corkery, Chimba Chirundu's teacher in *Principles of Education*, reflects Mphahlele's view that education should be related to the specific cultural needs of the community, and 'should begin where [the] elders left off' (Mphahlele: 1979:29). As black people need to find their 'way to the ancestors who are a vital part of [their] humanism', their culture should

continue to absorb and redefine the technological, economic and political systems, which [they] must master if [they] are to participate effectively in international business and politics (Mphahlele: 1984:209).

Though Mphahlele complains that 'English fiction in South Africa is obsessed with race relations'

(Mphahlele:1962:108), there is a preponderance of political issues in his own works, he too has not escaped the truism that 'when you write about South Africa ... you write about politics. It is less a choice than a dilemma' (Hope: 1985:41). The extent of this dilemma increases in the course of Mphahlele's writing. In *Down Second Avenue*, for instance, the young Mphahlele, unaware of the political forces shaping his life, unquestioningly accepts the effect they have. Towards the end of this book and in *The Wanderers*, however, this changes as political developments within South Africa make it impossible for him to stay in this country without compromising his own integrity (Mphahlele: 1957:202). Yet, his inner attachment to South Africa does not allow him to put down roots anywhere else. Similarly, whereas *Down Second Avenue* focuses on the individual and his community, *The Wanderers*, almost exclusively dominated by political considerations, illustrates the effects of political rootlessness on the individual's psyche. In *Chirundu* the conflict between the political necessity which determines an individual's life and the latter's perception of the future envisaged, is to a degree resolved. Just as Tirenje realises that Chimba will have to be stripped of his political power if he is ever to come to his senses, so political solutions have to be accompanied by personal involvement and commitment<sup>23</sup>.

While Mphahlele's return to South Africa signals his own re-commitment to his people living in 'the painful south' (Mphahlele: 1971:345), he neither underestimates the enormity of the struggle ahead, nor does he believe, as he once did in *Down Second Avenue*, that the end of apartheid will automatically bring his people meaningful freedom. His experiences in independent black Africa, described in *The Wanderers* and in *Chirundu*, have taught him that neo-colonialism - the economic power of the Western world and Christian civilization - can be very real threats to African self-realisation. If his people wish to 'confront the tyranny of [their] local setting and deal with it' (Mphahlele: 1987: 58), they will have to harness these forces as they move towards personal liberty.

Ironically, *Chirundu* was first published in South Africa, where much of Mphahlele's work was only later unbanned - Western countries would not publish anything that 'criticizes African states' (Manganyi: 1983:295), in case it jeopardized their relations with black Africa<sup>24</sup>. The unbanning of Mphahlele's books in South Africa was, however, not necessarily an indication of greater openness in the white South African

consciousness. It is more likely that, by comparison with more radical modern black authors who no longer appeal to white audiences for understanding, but instead rather aggressively assert their own identity, calling for violent revolution and destruction of the *status quo*, his writing was regarded as comparatively harmless.

Mphahlele's own attitude as a protest writer is that

a setting that generates so much pain as South Africa does, claims all our physical and emotional responses. ... You feed on the poison it releases: it drains much out of you, but you love it for all that. And always you feel it absolutely necessary to give an account of yourself .... You dare not let up, because you dare not forget. ... Your writing must stay at a high pitch of passionate intensity (Mphahlele: 1987:53).

While *The Wanderers* provides evidence that his writing did not always 'stay at a high pitch of passionate intensity', nobody can accuse Mphahlele of forgetting. Channelling the poison -the bitterness and the anger the South African situation has generated in him - has influenced his changing consciousness. Both his bitterness and his anger now incorporate an element of despair. Thus, he expresses his fears 'about the direction our aesthetics may take for both those inside South Africa and those outside' if cultural and political conflicts are not soon resolved (Mphahlele: 1987:57). Like Pitso in *Chirundu*, Mphahlele returns to an uncertain future in South Africa. Yet, like Moyo, he nevertheless hopes to help build a new society based on a synthesis of traditional African humanism and all that is positive in Western civilisation. Mphahlele's decision 'to look for a physical, and a social and cultural commitment' is his response to the call of the ancestors: 'the living dead who are the spiritual dimension of [his] reason for returning' (Mphahlele: 1984:9,10-11).

Returning to South Africa, Mphahlele discovers that the white reading public, which often closed its ears to his protest, now seems ready to listen. His black audience, however, is incapable of listening. They regard him 'a traitor to the cause in ever having returned' (Mphahlele: 1984:212). In the idiom of modern protest, Mphahlele is not radical enough. His humanistic approach is rejected by those whose only aim is to abolish the apartheid laws and topple the white government which upholds them. Yet, while he, too, claims that South Africa is 'a fragmented nation ... a nation refusing to be a nation because Afrikaner

tribalism will not let it be' (Mphahlele: 1987:58), he returns. He no longer dreams of a society in which whites will be won over to non-racialism. Instead, he seeks to strengthen the 'African consciousness at the deeper levels of culture where it is felt as a spiritual necessity' (Mphahlele: 1984:255). Thus, while he does not approve of the concept of the homelands, he accepts that they, like the urban township areas, have developed a distinctive culture. Both these cultures now form part of the black South African consciousness. What is positive in either should not be rejected merely because they are in part creations of the white South African government.

Mphahlele says of his own changing consciousness that 'idealism has given place to cynicism' (Mphahlele: 1983:11). His writings and his actions, however, show that his protest has indeed changed 'to something of a higher order, which is the ironic meeting between protest and acceptance in their widest terms' (Mphahlele: 1959:217).

## ENDNOTES

1. Mphahlele's Africanisation of his name to 'Es'kia' indicates his changing consciousness. During the time of the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1960s many black people rejected the Westernisation and white domination implied by the use of 'Christian' names. In *Bury Me at the Marketplace* Manganyi notes that 'the first time [Mphahlele's] new identity is expressed in this collection' is in a letter dated August 24, 1979 (Manganyi: 1984: 179,197). It is perhaps worth noting that in *Down Second Avenue* the young Mphahlele is called 'Es'ki' by his girl friend Rebone (Mphahlele: 1959: 140) and that while 'Ezekiel' Mphahlele is given as the author of *The Wanderers* when it is first published in 1971, the name 'Es'kia' appears on the 1984 edition.
2. Mphahlele's exile was both literal and figurative. As a black person he was excluded from white South Africa's intellectual and cultural privileges, yet his superior education separated him from his own people. His physical exile separated him from the land of his birth.
3. An accusation made by the Black Consciousness Movement against white liberals, that 'even whites who claimed not to be part of white supremacy nevertheless lived in conditions of privilege, and drew their ideological assumptions from that position' (Clingman: 1986:146), pinpoints a possible reason for the different approaches adopted by Paton and Mphahlele in the face of South Africa's racial problems: his privileged position allowed Paton to wait patiently for change, while Mphahlele felt he was unable to do so.
4. Even Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, emphasises mainly the social, and not the political injustices brought about by the destruction of his people's culture and tradition.
5. The main weakness of Rive's *Emergency*, for example, is seen as 'the constant insistence on the apartheid situation and the manipulation of incidents and characters for the sole purpose of protest' (Obuke: 1979: 196). Sepamla, in *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, focuses especially on the 'children's revolution' of 1976 where teenagers were in the forefront of the armed resistance. Like Serote in *To Every Birth its Blood*, he details the horrors black people face under apartheid. Yet, like Rive, much of their work seems to 'almost rest content with protest' (Obuke: 1979:196).
6. An anomaly of the apartheid dispensation was that economic interdependence prevented the total racial separation envisaged by its ideologues. Mphahlele's portrayals, in his first two novels, of contact between the black 'boy' and the 'Missis' or 'Baas', however, show how these socially circumscribed encounters at the workplace further helped to distort the image each has of the other.
7. On this subject Nkosi comments that Enver Carim's novelistic representation of a wide spectrum of South African society is exceptional. He commends Carim for evoking a township atmosphere, for realistically portraying the ambiguous situation of white women as part of 'an 'oppressed group' within a ruling class', and for giving a vivid picture of the feelings and reactions of whites in a situation in which they refuse to acknowledge they are threatened (Nkosi: 1981:82-91).
8. Gordimer's 1976 article 'English-Language Literature and Politics' appears in Christopher Heywood's *Aspects of South African Literature*, pp. 99-120.
9. His increasing objectivity, however, does not allow Mphahlele to accept black poverty and suffering. This is in sharp contrast to what happens to Paton's characters. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, for instance, Kumalo's visit to the mission station for the blind at Ezenzeleeni, helps him come to terms with many of the injustices in South African society. A similar visit by Mphahlele, described in *Down Second Avenue*, has a very different effect on the young Mphahlele who now sees his own poverty 'against the bigger canvas of non-white suffering' (Mphahlele: 1959:155). The immediacy of his own experiences precludes intellectualisation of the pain caused by apartheid. While his insider's view of black society is characterised by humour and compassion, we are always aware of the painful reality of

deprivation and his rejection of the concept of the nobility of suffering.

10. While McDowell describes Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* as 'everybody's protest novel' (McDowell:1966:41), Cornwell applies the adjective 'protest' only to black writing. Like Rive, he further distinguishes between 'protest proper', that is the 'appeal by blacks to the conscience of whites', and protest 'informed by the ideology of Black Consciousness, its primary objective [being] the politicization of the black reader' (Cornwell: 1980:61). The term 'protest' is here used in both of the contexts suggested by Cornwell and Rive, and refers only to the work of black writers. White writers' objections to the system cannot be seen in the same light as those of black writers who, because of their racial group membership, are more directly affected by the apartheid laws.
11. Lionel Abrahams, for instance, welcomed the 1979 publication of Mphahlele's *Chirundu*, as 'the first rehabilitation of a victim of that "gagging" clause which ... affect[ed] several scores of South Africans' (Abrahams: 1979:16). Although many works of black and white writers were unbanned during the 1980s, censorship laws continued to deprive South Africans of the opportunity of facing their fears and prejudices in literature.
12. The readers referred to here probably belong to the white, liberal middle-class. Black South Africans readers, who in a different society would be regarded as middle-class, could probably relate to Mphahlele's experiences more easily than whites can.
13. It should be noted that the autobiography and the novel are as foreign to black tradition as concepts such as 'democracy, liberty, freedom [which] would not have been used at all in traditional African society' (Mphahlele: 1981:32-3). Traditionally, the oral praise poem extols the virtues of another person, for example, the chief and his predecessors, and comments on current events (Opland: 1983:57-89), thus ensuring continuity from ancestors to descendants. T.A. Ndungane, editor of the University of Fort Hare 'Xhosa Dictionary Project' and author of several books on African culture and tradition, told me, for example, he has never come across black traditional prose writings where individuals speak directly of themselves. According to Mr Ndungane, it was either left to another to assess individual achievements and failures within the context of the community, or individuals spoke indirectly of themselves as, for example, is apparent in Mqhayi's work. The autobiography and the novel, essentially Western forms of portraying reality, thus had to be re-defined in black South African writing. Reflecting the different aspects of a non-homogeneous, changing cultural reality, they yet cater to the traditional African understanding of man who, 'as a product of historical process, ... [is] accountable to history' (Mphahlele: 1983b:30). Thus, in *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele relates the impressions and experiences he had as a child yet considers these primarily in the context of the community.
14. Apartheid emphasised the autonomy of each culture: ideally each nation resident in South Africa retains its cultural tradition, language and religion and develops along its own lines. In practice, this applied only to blacks, and led to racial segregation: black nations, separated from whites and from each other, 'developed' separately.
15. In several African traditions a person who dies becomes an ancestor, a mediator between the living and the Supreme Being. The ancestors' influence over their immediate family, either as beneficent or as malevolent beings, encourages the latter to appease them. Appropriate offerings remind the ancestors that the clan's prosperity is of mutual benefit. Ancestors appear to the living in dreams or in the form of animals. Thus, Brownlee was told by Zulus that evil would have befallen him if he had killed a python, 'the spirit of one of the original inhabitants of the country' he was travelling through (Opland: 1983:135). Similarly, amongst the Mpondomise the 'Majola snake' or *nkwakhwa*, regarded as the spirit of the chief himself, is greeted with the recitation of the 'traditional praises of the House of Majola' (Jordan: 1980:183-4). The *Domba* python dance of Venda female initiates likewise symbolises ancestral fertility.
16. Mphahlele shares Plaatje's and Abrahams's perception that Africa's history and traditions have a life of

their own. The coming of white people to the African continent should, thus, not merely be seen as just another extension of European history, but as a part of Africa's own history. He likewise endorses the view that land, a gift from the ancestors, belongs to the people and not to individuals (Mphahlele: 1981:119).

17. Although Mphahlele says that terms such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' are Western concepts (Mphahlele: 1981:32-3), he never admits his indebtedness to Western philosophy concerning the term 'humanism'. Western and African humanism are in many ways contradictory. The former, for example, emphasises the value of the individual, the latter values the community. Although Mphahlele claims he has rejected Western Christian thinking, his almost obsessive preoccupation with the superiority of African humanism makes one wonder if he has really come to terms with his own 'defection' from the Christian church which once meant so much to him. It seems more likely that he still seeks a synthesis between these two philosophies, as he did between other aspects of Western and black African culture. Thus, his anger is often rather petty as, for instance, in his challenge of the 'Christian' values of a doctor who treats him after he has hurt himself and jokingly says: 'That will teach you to mow lawns on Sundays instead of going to church' (Mphahlele: 1984:204).
18. Timi and Mphahlele's experiences are here congruent.
19. Peter Abrahams in *The View from Coyaba* speaks of similar experiences and, like Mphahlele, comments on the fact that there is relatively little 'African' culture on the African continent. Yet Jacob is a little more successful than Timi when he and John Chitole implement their idea of creating a radio station that will broadcast African programmes (Abrahams:1985).
20. Udomo, in *A Wreath for Udomo*, similarly had to marry within his culture, even though he and his fellow exiles in Europe fell in love with white women who supported their struggle (Abrahams:1956).
21. Ironically, 'those whose concerns he shares' are traditionally not his 'actual reading public'. Even when his books are freely available in South Africa, it is more likely they will be read by English-speaking white liberals than by black South Africans. And even then 'too few people read [his] works to constitute a book-conscious public' (Mphahlele: 1984:219). *The Wanderers*, which was written in the United States, furthermore, refers to 'blacks in South Africa' (Mphahlele: 1971:198), suggesting Mphahlele does not have a black South African audience in mind but is writing for a non-South African reading public.
22. In *Down Second Avenue*, for instance, the account of Aunt Dora's confrontation with the Indian who cheats her out of what she considers her right, 'Ma-Janeware's' derogatory reference to others as 'you Black people', the children's 'souring' of the milk to avoid being punished for having spilled this valuable commodity (Mphahlele:1959:19,30,108), are told with a light-heartedness which emphasises rather than disguises township poverty and squalor. Similarly, in *Chirundu*, Mphahlele's description of conditions inside a Zambian prison where the regularity of bowel movements is paramount in the consciousness of those in the sanctuary of detention, appears to belie the seriousness of the situation. And Chieza and Pitso's deceptively trivial conversations provide valuable commentary, both on characters, as well as on the socio-political situation in the country where they sought refuge. It is interesting to note that Nadine Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour* is probably also set in Zambia, yet her approach to this country's post-independence problems is very different to Mphahlele's.
23. Abrahams similarly believes political freedom alone will not resolve a people's need to regain their liberty. Political independence may be a pre-requisite, but never a substitute for the inner freedom which can only be achieved when there is a real commitment to a new vision.
24. The reaction to Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udomo* was similar: it was criticised by those who are quick to condemn white South African prejudice, but unable to accept any implied criticism of black Africa, even when such criticism originates from the pen of a black person.



## CHAPTER 5

### NADINE GORDIMER: The Alienated Liberal<sup>1</sup>

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Chronologically and thematically Nadine Gordimer's writing falls within the liberal humanist tradition discussed in Chapter 3. The importance of the role played by individuals within an oppressive society which needs to evolve towards a more just social dispensation, remains one of the main themes in her work. Her first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), was published the same year as Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*, and like Paton, she is mainly concerned with South Africa's racial relationships. There are, however, important differences between Gordimer's liberal humanism and that espoused by Paton. The evolution of these differences, as well as her increasing departure from traditional perceptions of liberalism, reflect her own changing consciousness.

Whereas Paton has been accused of over-simplifying complex issues, Gordimer is generally commended for what is often referred to as her 'realistic' portrayal of South African society<sup>2</sup>, as well as the prophetic nature of her writing (Clingman: 1986:164/8; Rich: 1985:47). Her representation of a society torn apart by the racial hatred engendered by apartheid and her criticism, especially of white English-speaking South Africans, gives readers what Clingman calls, an authoritative view of 'history from the inside' (Clingman: 1986:1). And it is largely this that led to her novels being perceived as 'realistic'. As Gray points out,

the liberal tradition and realism go hand in hand ... for realism in the novel implies a certain capaciousness that can admit a variety of styles, from the symbolical and allegorical to the naturalistic, which is felt to be necessary to deal with the stresses of the liberal debate (Gray: 1979:136).

Yet, the perception of Gordimer's novelistic realism was, ironically, also largely fostered by the South African Board of Censors, and not primarily by literary critics. Banning her work, because it was believed to be a threat to the government in power, involuntarily 'proved' the relevance and authoritative nature of her reconstruction of South African reality<sup>3</sup>.

There are, however, critics who would not necessarily place Gordimer's work in the category of novelistic

realism. Ogunbesan, for example, is of the opinion that *A World of Strangers* is 'more like a tract than a work of art' (Ogunbesan: 1980:142), and Harber says

Miss Gordimer at her best has an intelligent journalist's flair. She knows the topics, politics, mannerisms, attitudes generated by racialism; .... She produces the expected reaction. But her characters lack a distinctive personality<sup>4</sup> (Harber: 1976:64).

Given this divergence of views concerning Gordimer's work, what then, is literary realism? And in which way can her work be regarded as 'realistic'?

A brief look at the development and self-definition of realism might be appropriate here. Novelistic realism claims it describes situations 'in a faithful, accurate, "life-like" manner' (Stern: 1973:40), and attempts to convey 'a strong sense of things actual in experience and within the range of the average life' (Myers: 1927:2). An accurate portrayal of historical facts would thus seem to be indispensable in any delineation of reality. In Britain, furthermore, novelistic realism has, since the second half of the nineteenth century, been influenced by naturalism. Whereas Greek and Roman realism portrayed the lives of the aristocracy and seldom dealt with the everyday except on the level of the comic, naturalism opposed 'typification or idealization' (Myers: 1973:23), it portrayed an objective reality, no social class was excluded, nor was any emotion. The commonplace became all important. As individual characters became more autonomous, criticism of the forces effective in society as a whole played an increasing role in the naturalist-influenced realist novel. Society was flawed and the individual was portrayed as the victim<sup>5</sup>.

In this context Stern points out that interaction between individuals and society is not one-dimensional, and that one of the weaknesses of socialist realism is that individuals are automatically in conflict with an exploitative society (Stern: 1973:40). Furthermore, while the 'moving force [in realism] seems to be a desire for the final and utter truth about life' (Myers: 1927:4), it should be remembered that the novel is essentially a work of fiction and an interpretative, not merely a mimetic medium. Those seeking to make sense of certain socio-historical situations, inevitably discover the need for interpretation. And it is precisely here that literary realism breaks down: 'realism' and 'realistic'

have no meaning at the catastrophic margins of existence or in the realm of Grace, where "the

system" breaks down and "a man's time is no more" (Stern: 1973:139).

It could also be argued that even when writers stick to 'the bare truth of the documentary', their most realistic representations are subjective and variable, 'distanced from direct apprehension, always mediate rather than immediate' (Ermarth: 1983:34). Despite their life-likeness, these depictions of reality often sacrifice an overall meaning which can only be captured in symbolism or in the recreation of a remembered reality (Stern: 1973:122). Furthermore, the choice of facts and their arrangement depends on individual perspective. For what audience was the novel written? What are both readers' and writers' definitions of realism? What is their distance in time and geographical space from the events and people portrayed?<sup>6</sup>

The audience's role in determining the definition of realism is apparent in the English realist tradition as well as in the South African English novel. In both cases the genre caters primarily to the needs of a middle-class reading public. In South Africa, furthermore, the latter has always been mainly white, even when the writers were black. Since 1945 the reality reflected in the South African English novel of social purpose has been closely linked to the country's political and racial development. South African novelistic realism, thus, inevitably, became a literature with a cause<sup>7</sup>, as it attempted to raise the level of white consciousness. And in more recent times black novelists, asserting their own identity, have written for black audiences. Their depiction of both black and white society differs radically from that represented by white writers. This relationship between novelists and the cause they espouse, has forced South African literary realism to move beyond liberalism toward socialist realism and, finally, to the fractured narrative characteristic of postmodernism (Rich: 1985:47).

Although the relationship of individuals to their society remains a central concern in her novels, and this continues to place her in the category of being a writer with liberal concerns, much of Gordimer's work lies somewhere between socialist realism and postmodernism, and could perhaps be characterised as 'revolutionary realism'. Such realism violates one of liberalism's basic tenets: social change should be evolutionary and non-violent. For instance, *A Guest of Honour* (1970), in its exploration of socialist realism, could be classified as realistic. *The Conservationist* (1974), on the other hand, could be regarded

as postmodernist as it abandons the objectivity characteristic of realism in favour of post-modernist perceptions of interiority and fragmentation of consciousness. Neither socialist realism nor post-modernism, however, can account for the revolutionary aspect in all but Gordimer's first three novels<sup>8</sup>.

As South African apartheid politics have long determined every aspect of life in South Africa, it is hardly surprising that the political is an all-encompassing reality in Gordimer's work<sup>9</sup>. Yet, even in her early works, before the apartheid laws had fully come into their own, racial politics and perceptions govern all spheres of her characters' lives. Similarly, her prophecies concerning post-apartheid South Africa<sup>10</sup> are based almost entirely on political considerations, and her characters define themselves almost exclusively in terms of the political reality of apartheid.

In *The Lying Days*, *A World of Strangers* and *Occasion for Loving*, this involvement is part of the liberal humanist ethic that social change can be brought about through interpersonal contact. In the first novel, Helen Shaw, trying to break through social barriers, befriends Mary, an 'African girl' and fellow student, and works with her lover Paul, a social worker in the Johannesburg Native Affairs Department. In *A World of Strangers* and *Occasion for Loving* English-speaking liberals defiantly maintain their social contact with black people. Toby Hood's association with Steven and Sam, and the part played by Jessie Stillwell in helping her friend Ann and her black artist lover, are seen as challenges to apartheid<sup>11</sup>.

It is soon apparent, however, that these personal, inter-racial friendships belong to a 'justificatory myth' which allows people 'to escape the ugly implications of a society in which such apparently transcendental private relationships are in fact pretty meaningless, trapped in political determinism' (Gordimer: 1976: 108). Gordimer realises that liberalism in South Africa needs to mean more than adherence to the 'inevitable fashion' of having inter-racial parties, of having a 'pet African' whose name one could drop in company (Clingman: 1986: 54), or even of being able to call on one's friends in the township as Toby Hood does<sup>12</sup>. Being liberal in South Africa means facing a brutally enforced system which tolerates no deviation from its norms. Subsequently, thus, Gordimer explores 'the moral status of action' (Wade: 1978:228).

In *The Late Bourgeois World* there is a significant departure from the tenets of liberalism as Max van den Sandt, disillusioned by the 'moral sclerosis' of his society's dishonest liberalism (Gordimer: 1966:32), turns to violence. Realising Max's suicide stems from the ineffectualness of his romantic idealism, his wife Liz decides to utilise her grandmother's bank account, a symbol of her society's power and privilege, to help Luke Fokase, a member of the Pan African Congress, bring about revolutionary change. She knows the PAC will probably create 'a black capitalist country' (Gordimer: 1966: 45), yet action becomes more important than 'dabbling in ideological niceties'<sup>13</sup> (Clingman: 1986:107).

Whereas Liz acts from the 'imperative of revolution' (Clingman: 1986:107), Bray, in *A Guest of Honour* reassesses liberalism's insistence on non-violent change and considers the alternatives presented by socialism. Both he and his wife Olivia actively supported Mweta and Shinza in their country's bid for freedom from the colonial powers, and were deported because of their support of the People's Independence Party. Bray is faced with the liberal paradox that the change in government he helped bring about does not usher in the utopia he envisioned<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, while the 'first revolution', which resulted in independence from the colonial power, was brought about with the minimum of violence, the liberal ideal of peaceful change becomes an unacceptable luxury during the 'second revolution'. Whereas Max, in *The Late Bourgeois World*, speaks of the ideological consequences following a Marxist revolution (Gordimer: 1966:47), Bray is concerned with social abuses which have arisen since the new government has come to power. Shinza, once part of the original revolutionary process, persuades him that socialism teaches 'the people ... to cry "Stop thief!"'<sup>15</sup> (Gordimer: 1970:273), and that violence may be the only way to put an end to the emerging neo-colonialism, to right the wrongs associated with the uneven distribution of the country's resources<sup>16</sup>.

Despite Bray's association with Shinza, however, it is not certain whether he will ultimately be able to 'put aside [his] "own nature"' and like Liz van den Sandt use his privileged position to support violent change. While he ultimately sides with Shinza and decides to go on a mission for him, Bray, on his fateful journey to the capital considers going to 'see Mweta one last time', hoping the latter will 'seize upon Shinza, not the enemy but the only chance' (Gordimer: 1970:488). And Mweta, believing 'Bray was a conciliator',

posthumously publishes his educational report<sup>17</sup>.

Clingman maintains that Gordimer's movement towards 'African socialist realism', in *A Guest of Honour*, identifies her as an African, rather than a European writer' (Clingman: 1986:127). Despite her references to Fanon and Nkrumah (Gordimer: 1970: 273; 395), however, the socialism adhered to by Gordimer is as firmly rooted in European tradition as liberalism is<sup>18</sup>. Both are imported from nineteenth-century Europe and depend on capitalism and on the help of sympathetic European countries for implementation. Thus, Shinza's socialism in *A Guest of Honour* and Burger's Marxism in *Burger's Daughter*, while partly based on the communal structures characteristic of African socialism, are, nevertheless, essentially as foreign to African culture as the liberalism which Mehring, in *The Conservationist*, realises 'is contained within the power of capitalist society and is dependent upon it'<sup>19</sup> (Clingman: 1986:145).

While Gordimer's focus is geographically African-oriented, her pre-occupation with Marxist socialism, its emphasis on the power of the worker and its insistence that trade unions protect the population against foreign capitalism, ignores many of the basic differences between Marxist and African socialism. Thus, for instance, Shinza stresses the communalism characteristic of African socialism, yet simultaneously adheres to concepts such as 'peasant' and 'worker', class distinctions which are essentially foreign to African socialism. Similarly, whereas communist socialism believes in the equal distribution of all material goods, including the land, amongst the people, African socialism emphasises that the commonality of land is based on black people's understanding of themselves as part of the tribe, both dead and alive, and precludes any ownership of the land, either privately or by the government<sup>20</sup>.

It is only in her latest novel, *My Son's Story*, that Gordimer questions the viability of socialist ideology which, instead of bringing new freedom, has 'perpetuated misery and poverty' (Gordimer: 1990:212). Sonny is worried that South African revolutionaries are adhering to an obsolete philosophy which is being rejected all over Eastern Europe. Yet, neither he nor Hannah is capable of envisioning any alternative. Sonny continues the struggle and Hannah becomes the United Nations High Commission's Regional Representative for refugees in Africa, a prestigious position which may alleviate human suffering for a

while, but which cannot really solve the continent's post-independence, post-colonial problems.

This lack of future vision is evident in much of Gordimer's writing. While she is acutely aware of the harm done by oppressive Nationalist rule, her long theoretical discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of a particular economic or political system and a 'preponderance of moral debate about revolution and violence' (De Kock: 1988:46) do not allow for dialogue with black people either. She neither explores long-term consequences of past policies in South Africa, nor questions the practical effects and ambiguities of possible new political decisions and systems<sup>21</sup>.

Thus, for instance, in a euphoric futuristic depiction, in *A Sport of Nature*, of the celebrations marking the birth of 'the new African state that used to be South Africa', she takes it for granted that racial and social harmony will replace and ignore historic tribal and political differences. A diverse yet united society under the gold, green and black flag of the African National Congress will signal the end of inter-personal conflict<sup>22</sup> (Gordimer:1987: 337-9). It is ironic that Gordimer criticises precisely such a rather simplistic attitude in white society when, in *My Son's Story*, written shortly before the release of ANC leader Nelson Mandela, 'white industrialists, churchmen, academics, liberals and lawyers' go to Lusaka to confer with the African National Congress, confident that

there is surely no deal so difficult, so unlikely, so obscured by tear-gas, punctured by gunshot wounds, so bedeviled by the explosion of land-mines and petrol bombs, by the preparation of lifetimes of imprisonment, the documentation of nights of interrogation, by the thundering of trucks moving thousands from their homes -no deal that, in the end, cannot be clinched in the course of a business lunch (Gordimer: 1990:268).

Gordimer's absorption with an exclusively political solution to the country's racial problems affects both her portrayal of South African society and her characterisation. She minutely analyses a society dehumanized by apartheid, and her characters are defined according to the political role they play<sup>23</sup>.

Recurring throughout her novels, they often represent types, not individuals. The evolution of these character types and their changing consciousness is linked to the country's political scenario.

Consequently, Gordimer often ignores individual contradictions and ambiguities unless they derive from a

character's political situation.

The first character-type is modelled on the liberal humanists of the 1950s. Liz van den Sandt, in *The Late Bourgeois World*, Flora Donaldson, in *Burger's Daughter*, and Maureen Smales, in *July's People*, all recur in the character of Pauline, in *A Sport of Nature*. Genuinely concerned for the well-being of black people, they yet remain outsiders who will never become a part of the black society they are championing. Thus, Liz van den Sandt realises she has nothing to offer Luke Fokase 'except the footing she keeps in the good old white Reserve of banks and privileges' (Gordimer:1966:94). Maureen Smales, taking refuge in July's village, discovers she never understood the servant to whom she felt so close. Her flight to the helicopter which could be carrying either friend or enemy, and her willingness to leave behind her husband as well as her children who seem to have adapted to life in the black African village, signal her acceptance that she is unable to adapt to the way of life adhered to by July and his family. Only Pauline, a more committed and radical version of those who appeared in the earlier novels, proves the 'essential gesture' of solidarity was justified. It seems likely that she will be part of the emerging post-revolutionary, almost utopian black society which Gordimer predicts will replace white supremacy.

Characters belonging to the second group represent those who, comfortable in their privileged white existence, refuse to change their 'European' lifestyles and are destined to become totally irrelevant in the new society. Olga, in *A Sport of Nature*, is almost a caricature of this type. Like Cecile Rowe and the people from the High House, in *A World of Strangers*, and Graham, in *The Late Bourgeois World*, she refuses to acknowledge the reality of what is happening around her and hides behind often phoney values.

The third group is more consciously aware of racial and social tensions. These characters try to come to terms with themselves and their surroundings, yet are unable really to commit themselves. Thus, Helen Shaw, in *The Lying Days*, rebels against her parents' values by associating with black people from the township and with Jews from the 'Jew stores' (Gordimer: 1953:18). Yet, unable to live with the conflict in her society, she leaves for Europe, not sure when she will return. Jessie Stillwell, in *Occasion for Loving*, helps her friend Ann, who is unfaithful to her husband and embarks on an 'adventurous' love-affair with



Gideon Shabalo, a black artist. Refusing to take responsibility for what has happened, Ann returns to her husband and leaves South Africa. Jessie recoils when Gideon calls her a 'white bitch' as she is incapable of understanding that he does not differentiate between her and Ann. Despite his friendship with black people in the township, Toby Hood, in *A World of Strangers*, likewise cannot make up his mind whether to stay or leave South Africa. After Bray is killed, Rebecca, in *A Guest of Honour*, leaves Africa, although it is the only home she has ever known. And Mehring, in *The Conservationist*, deserts his farm panic-stricken after the Adamastor-like reappearance of a black man's hastily buried corpse. These characters all try to become part of Africa, yet are driven away by events beyond their comprehension.

In *A World of Strangers* and in *Burger's Daughter* there is a fourth group: Afrikaans-speaking characters who have their English-speaking counterparts in *A Sport of Nature* and in *My Son's Story*. Both Anna Louw and Rosa Burger are from Afrikaans backgrounds, and are painfully aware of the suffering caused by apartheid. They act, despite their membership of the ruling minority, and because they are unable to ignore the effects of apartheid. They are the 'minority-within-the-white-minority' (Clingman: 1988:254). Ironically, their suffering and questioning, their caring attitude, both personally and professionally, their proximity to black society and the personal risks they take to secure black people's freedom, somehow seem to redeem that section of society to which they no longer belong. Their English-speaking counterparts, Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* and Hannah in *My Son's Story*, represent the white women at home in Europe and in Africa. Committed to the freedom struggle and trusting in their sexuality, they become the lovers of black freedom fighters, living a life which allows them to survive the demise of white rule<sup>24</sup>.

Mehring, in *The Conservationist*, James Bray, in *A Guest of Honour*, and Sonny, in *My Son's Story*, are the only convincingly realised male characters in Gordimer's novels<sup>25</sup>. All three characters are, however, merely a means of exploring certain ideas<sup>26</sup>. Thus, in *The Conservationist*, there is a definite change in style. Through the fractured narrative and the skilful development of the stream-of-consciousness which reflects Mehring's rather confused thought-processes, Gordimer explores the conflict facing whites who have made their home in Africa and even own the title deeds to a piece of land yet, like the European

chestnut trees Mehring plants (Gordimer: 1974:211), never really belong<sup>27</sup>. James Bray, in *A Guest of Honour*, faces a similar inner battle as he feels at home in Africa, and through Shinza remains involved in African conflicts, yet his wife, his children and his grandchild remain in England. The only real access he has to African culture is that of an outsider. Asked to assist, first Mweta and Shinza, and then Shinza himself, plan a revolution, he realises that after independence he is only 'Mweta's guest'. As 'a white man in Africa [he] doesn't know what to see himself as, but mentor' (Gordimer: 1970: 135;139).

In *My Son's Story* there is a change of focus as Gordimer turns away from the interaction between white and black people and takes a look at the dilemma facing 'Coloureds' in South Africa who, though often having identified with whites, eventually join black people in the freedom struggle<sup>28</sup>. Even though Sonny, as a 'Coloured', theoretically has access to both white and black society, his story is told from the perspective of the black freedom struggle. Yet, with Shakespeare and Kafka as his guides, his actions are determined primarily by Western intellectual thought. As with so many of Gordimer's other characters, his very real failings are overlooked because of the nobility of the cause he espouses<sup>29</sup>.

Commenting on *My Son's Story*, Gordimer says she does 'not expect to be criticized for writing from a black person's point of view': though she was 'brought up in a white enclave' she has 'mixed with black people all [her] life, and they with [her]' (Coles: 1990:1). Her attitude here is definitely a departure from the view she expressed in 1961 when she explained that her inability successfully to portray black characters was due to the rigid compartmentalization of South African apartheid society which makes it nearly impossible for people of different races to get to know each other, and places 'unscalable limitations' on 'the writer's potential'<sup>30</sup> (Clingman: 1986:207). Despite this changing perspective, however, Gordimer's black characters remain unrealistic. And whites, no matter how intimate their personal involvement with black people, remain spectators of black society.

The thread of white alienation from black society runs consistently through Gordimer's novels. In her first three novels there are whites who have a great deal of contact with blacks - Helen and Paul, in *The Lying Days*, work in the township, Toby Hood, in *A World of Strangers*, is at home with Steven and Sam, and

Jessie, in *Occasion for Loving*, has close contact with her friend's black lover. Yet each of these characters discovers, as Liz van den Sandt, in *The Late Bourgeois World*, does, that black people, coming 'with the smell of the smoke of braziers in [their] clothes' remain an enigma to whites (Gordimer: 1966:79,94). This is also the experience of Rosa who, in *Burger's Daughter*, discovers that the black child she grew up with and always thought of as 'Baasie' is, in fact, Zwelinzima Vulindlela, a person she does not know. Similarly, in *July's People*, Maureen Smales realises her liberal attitudes, which forbade her to learn the despised Fanagalo<sup>31</sup>, were based on a delusion, and she understood neither the black man who had been her servant for so many years, nor his language and customs<sup>32</sup>.

*A Sport of Nature* seems to signal a change of consciousness in Gordimer's novels. Through her relationship with black people, Hillela appears to become part of black society. This is, however, not the case as, though she identifies with the cause of the man she loves, and is overwhelmed by the suffering of the black masses, she seems to be more fascinated by Whaila's skin colour than by his character. He becomes a symbol whose love absolves her from the sins of her white ancestors (Gordimer: 1987:178;208). Despite being called by her African name, Chiemeka, (Gordimer: 1987: 303), and despite her traditional African clothes, she never learns the language of either of her black husbands, whose whereabouts she can often only guess at. Likewise, the daughter who 'came out black', grows up in the capitals of Europe, speaks mainly English, and knows little of her father's traditional culture (Gordimer: 1987:189,196). Furthermore, despite Hillela's personal commitment to black society, the 'documentary ... yet unmistakably omniscient' style of the narrative (De Kock: 1988:47) gives the impression that she, like the reader, is a spectator rather than a participator in the action of the novel. For Hillela, as for Hannah, in *My Son's Story*, identification with black people is limited to participation in the revolutionary process and the sexual intimacy which seems to be an integral part of involvement in the struggle. Similarly, even though Hannah meets Sonny's wife and children, she knows him only in the context of the revolution. She, like Gordimer's other white characters, tends to remain a spectator and an outsider.

The perception of white people's isolation from black society is exacerbated by Gordimer's constant awareness of a virtual reading public. As indicated in the Introduction, her white characters seem to be in

continuous dialogue with a black society with which they are, in reality, unable to communicate. The most striking example of a white character's interaction with and alienation from Gordimer's virtual reading public is found in *The Conservationist*. Mehring, identifying with a dead black man buried on his farm, keeps up a constant interior monologue. He similarly engages in an imaginary conversation on New Year's Eve with Jacobus, a black farm worker. Both become symbols for Gordimer's virtual reading public. Mehring convinces himself he and Jacobus 'are getting along fine', even though they never really communicate except on a very superficial level. Mehring tries to ignore the fact that because they have been there 'forever', it is immaterial to his workers which white person owns the title deeds (Gordimer: 1974:196). But this is a false identification. Ultimately, Mehring may be denied even the right that both Jacobus and the dead black man have, which is to be buried on the land he 'owns'<sup>33</sup>.

Mehring's interior monologue and his struggle to come to terms both with his isolation from black society and his increasing alienation from his own people, highlights Gordimer's perception, that in contrast to the inner harmony and cohesion present in black society, white society is, with few exceptions, sordid and sterile. This is apparent in her characterisation, where her black male characters exude a virility absent in white male society and where, with the exception of Hannah and Hillela, who manage to be accepted by black society, white women tend to be rather pale characters when compared to black women<sup>34</sup>. Empty, passionless sexuality becomes a metaphor for the sterility of white civilization, whereas passionate, fulfilling sexual relations characterise the vibrancy of black society. In *Occasion for Loving*, for instance, Gideon Shibalo never loses his charm and sensuality. Even in situations where he is humiliated or endangered by his relationship with Ann, he never becomes as emotionally helpless as Ann's husband Boaz. Similarly, in *A Guest of Honour*, Bray's lover, Rebecca, does not conceive, while Shinza, the aging black revolutionary, 'casually' fathers a child.

In *A Sport of Nature* and *My Son's Story* there is a shift in Gordimer's approach when sexual fulfillment and participation in the revolution are closely linked. Thus, Whaila and Reuel, Hillela's black husbands, combine political astuteness with physical courage and tremendous sexual energy which can never be matched by any of her white lovers<sup>35</sup>. Through their black lovers both Hillela and Hannah attempt to

identify fully with the struggle, and 'sexual happiness and political commitment [become] one' (Gordimer: 1990:125). For Hannah, being in love means the 'temperature and atmospheric pressure of shared tension' present in the struggle (Gordimer: 1990:90), and when their roles in the struggle change, her and Sonny's love affair ends.

By portraying black society as almost exclusively vibrant, Gordimer's black characters are disturbingly like Rousseau's 'noble savages'. She seldom admits the possibility that there are those amongst the politically oppressed who are less than admirable. Thus, much conflict, personal or public, is explained away, including the bitter wars between citizens of newly independent black African states. In *A Guest of Honour*, these wars are ascribed to the new leader's continuing dependency on the old colonial powers, and in the case of Reuel's country, in *A Sport of Nature*, to the interference of the CIA. There is seldom any suggestion that these new leaders may have inherent weaknesses and failings.

This inability to admit that members of black society have any real faults is most apparent in *My Son's Story*, where the imperative of the struggle replaces the tyranny of apartheid. All characters owe unquestioning allegiance to the leadership which determines their every action. Consequently, apartheid is seen as the cause of Sonny's adultery and his daughter, Baby's drug addiction. Yet Baby's

youthful self-centredness is all too readily redeemed by an abrupt marriage, exile, and a turn toward her own kind of radical activism against South Africa, though from the relative safety of Tanzania (Coles: 1990:1),

and Sonny's integrity within the revolutionary movement exonerates him from the pain he causes his family. White society, on the other hand, is, for the most part, portrayed with unmitigated disapproval. There are no redeeming features, no indication that any attempt at change could be the result of an honest search for new possibilities and not merely a reaction to fear and pressure. This attitude is already apparent in the early novels, but is most obvious in the last two when only a few white characters escape the stigma of being part of a dehumanised white society.

In her attempt to portray such a society, Gordimer in fact presents a picture where both black and white

society have been dehumanised. Each is obsessed with only one goal as whites suppress all human feelings so as to maintain the *status quo*, and black people's every thought and action is geared to destroy it.

Ferretting out every personal and social blemish apparent in white society, Gordimer contrasts this with the nobility of black people who courageously pit their weakness against a merciless tyrant<sup>36</sup>. In doing so, however, a reification takes place and Gordimer increasingly ignores the multilayeredness of reality and of people's motives, her characters become both one-dimensional and unrealistic. While her white characters are deprived of beauty and nobility, her black characters can do no wrong.

Thus, in *July's People*, for instance, Maureen and Bam Smales's loss of dignity is apparent when, after his gun is stolen by Daniel, who 'only took what he had a right to' (Gordimer: 1981:153), Bam lies face down on his bed and Maureen

looked down on this man who had nothing, now. [And] there was before [their] children something much worse than the sight of the women's broad backsides, squatting (Gordimer: 1981: 145).

The contradictions in July's character, however, are explained away. As the apartheid laws were responsible for separating men from their families, it is presumed that it is now difficult for him to find a synthesis between the life of the tribe and the life he led in the city. As Maureen points out:

he's been mixed up with us for fifteen years. No one will ever be able to disentangle that, so long as he's alive ... (Gordimer: 1981:128).

Similarly, in *Burger's Daughter*, Vermeulen's willingness to help Rosa Burger get a passport, is dismissed as a mere show, a rather dishonest attempt to prove 'the regime was ... showing signs of moving in the direction of change'<sup>37</sup> (Gordimer: 1979:193). But 'Baasie's' unkind behaviour towards Rosa is permissible as it is only part of 'a squabble between [Lionel Burger's] children' (Gordimer: 1979:330)

The actions of Gordimer's revolutionaries, whether black or white, are even less ambivalent. Rosa never questions the fact that she is expected to be a revolutionary<sup>38</sup>. Sonny, in *My Son's Story*, similarly suppresses all emotions, living a life of obedience to 'the leadership' as 'his life belonged to them' and 'he had no existence without [the struggle]' (Gordimer: 1990:198-9). Gordimer's characters, not allowed to

develop in reaction to a whole spectrum of experiences, are thus portrayed with what Dennis Brutus experiences as a 'kind of impersonality that you find in a microscope'<sup>39</sup> (Brutus: 1969:97).

The impersonality with which Gordimer represents her characters' motives is in sharp contrast to the sensitivity and detail with which she describes individual scenes, places and events. Thus, for instance, her portrayal of the relationship between Joel and his parents and between Helen and her parents, in *The Lying Days*, tells of the difficulty with which young people relinquish the values adhered to by the older generation so as to find a new reality. Equally compassionate are her descriptions, in *The Conservationist*, of Mehring's passionate involvement with the veld which makes 'his fingers curl up into his palms', a feeling absent in his passionless affair with Antonia<sup>40</sup> (Gordimer: 1974:100-1). Similarly, the precise reportage evident in individual scenes, in *Burger's Daughter*, makes the horrors facing those who dare challenge apartheid come alive:

Sipho said how when the police were loading the dead into vans he had to ask them to take the brains as well - the brains of a man with a smashed head spilled ... they sent a black policeman to pick up the brains with a shovel (Gordimer: 1979:44).

Equally graphic descriptions in *July's People* of Maureen Smales's bitter confrontation with July, the black servant who saves her and her family from destruction, show that despite the change in their situation, the two will never be able to meet on any 'but the lowest category of understanding', that of mistress and servant (Gordimer:1981:71). Liz van den Sandt and Rosa Burger's discussions of their feelings and ideas with an invisible listener, in *The Late Bourgeois World* and in *Burger's Daughter*, as well as the fragmented perception of society evident in the stream-of-consciousness reflecting Mehring's turbulent and confused emotions, in *The Conservationist*, highlight the anomalies of the situation created by South African politics.

Gordimer's use of detail effectively depicts moods and scenes. In her early works this allows the reader to become part of the society she portrays. In *A World of Strangers*, for example, Toby Hood's awareness of his surroundings gives the reader greater insight into the contrasts between the different segments of the divided society within in which he moves. In her later novels, however, the amount of detail included can sometimes be rather overwhelming, making it difficult to identify with a character or situation, especially

when the reader already feels alienated from the society being portrayed. Thus, in *Burger's Daughter*, for example, the inclusion of Burger's speech from the dock, and the debates on Kierkegaard and Hegel tend to slow down the action and often do not contribute to an understanding of either the situation or of the characters involved<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, in *A Guest of Honour*, Gordimer tries to deal with every aspect of post-independence Africa: politics, economics, agriculture, education, plus the change in personal lives, especially of the country's new leaders. The result is that the reader is not really given an idea of the complexity of life in post-independence Africa, but is left with the impression that the new African reality has become impenetrable<sup>42</sup>. Thus, for example, her brilliant portrayal of the confrontation between Mweta and Shinza, who together fought for their country's independence, yet now face each other as rivals at the Congress of the Party they established, is lost in the dense descriptions which surround it (Gordimer: 1970:360).

Despite the shifts apparent in Gordimer's style, her changing consciousness is reflected primarily in the evolution of her ideology. Although the individual's position in relation to society remains central to her work, her characters' allegiance moves from that of liberal humanism to Marxist socialism and revolution. As the political situation in South Africa becomes increasingly oppressive, so her stance becomes more radical. In *My Son's Story* however, she is faced with a new problem. The circumstances against which revolutionaries have traditionally pitted their strength have changed, yet there is no corresponding transformation in their own consciousness. Thus, despite political and legal changes within South Africa, they seem to be caught in the 'socialist revolutionary mode'. This is all the more alarming because the ideology they adhered to since the late 1950s is being rejected by socialist Marxist countries around the world. Does this mean that Gordimer's work, with its emphasis on the struggle against apartheid, has suddenly become dated and perhaps even irrelevant, as Kossick suggests in her review of *My Son's Story* (Kossick: 1991:54)?

Recent events in countries around the world have shown that political freedom does not guarantee that historic enemies will automatically relinquish their traditional perceptions of one another. Thus, newly independent societies in Eastern Europe, faced with problems they did not suspect would come their way



after they had overthrown socialism and opted for democracy, find some comfort in challenging the familiar enemy: communism. It will, similarly, take a while for black African societies to admit that not all problems can be blamed on colonial oppression. Despite the historic announcements of 2 February 1990, and the subsequent release of Nelson Mandela, works written before that date mirror a reality still very much alive in the consciousness of thousands of South Africans, a reality which will have to be reflected on and worked through if the hurts of the past are not to become the premise on which the future is built.

## ENDNOTES

1. Even though Gordimer's works during the 1970s and later explore the imperative of revolution in the face of political oppression, the main thrust in her novels is still that of the liberal who grapples uneasily with the necessity of violent dissent, even though. In her latest novels it seems to be the only possibility, yet central characters like Liz van den Sandt, in the *Late Bourgeois World*, and Bray, in *A Guest of Honour*, for example, only act very hesitantly. One of Gordimer's main concerns thus remains the future relevance of the liberal ideal in post-independence Africa. Her uneasy alienation from the liberal ideal is apparent in her exploration of the necessity for revolution.
2. The term 'realism' is discussed later in this chapter. It is interesting to note, however, that Stephen Clingman, for instance, points to correlations between events portrayed in Gordimer's novels and political and historical events. He says that like Tolstoy's, her novels offer 'not so much an historical world, but a certain *consciousness* of that world', and that like James Joyce she is a 'great clarifier of exact positions' (Clingman: 1986: 2, 130, 164, 168). Paul Rich speaks of *The Late Bourgeois World* as a 'prophetic novel' (Rich:1985:47); Edward Callan recognises his 'own haggard face staring back from the mirror of her art' (Callan: 1970:292); and Sheila Roberts claims  
the [white] South African reader, ... finds his and her own splintered faces in them. The protagonists ... while certainly unpleasant at times, are also eminently comprehensible and disturbingly familiar, my understanding of them being of the secretive nature of that which I bestow on myself, knowing that no one not a white South African can perceive much beyond greed, racism and an anachronistic historical insanity in the situation (Roberts: 1980:21).
3. The paperback edition of *A World of Strangers*, banned in 1962, was unbanned in June 1976; *The Late Bourgeois World*, banned upon publication, was unbanned in July 1976 (Clingman: 1986:95,240); *Occasion for Loving* was embargoed but not banned in 1963; *Burger's Daughter*, banned in 1979, was unbanned in 1980 (Clingman: 1988:49,203).
4. Ironically, Gordimer herself warns black African writers they 'will have to take care not to take advantage of the easy opportunity to use their talents to satisfy curiosity; this sort of writing, however interesting, may make a competent journalist, but does not make a creative writer' (Gordimer: 1961:522)
5. The development of naturalist realism should be seen in the context of the evolvement of individualism and liberalism as discussed in Chapter 3.
6. Time and geographical space inevitably remove 'the oneness or the invariant structure by which we recognize a thing, by which we judge it under varying conditions to be the same' (Ermarth: 1983:5).
7. Some novelists would deny this. Gordimer for instance says 'one cannot put one's writing "at the service of a cause"' (quoted in Lomborg: 1976:1).
8. As the focus of the present discussion is primarily on the ideological, the form of Gordimer's novels is only briefly dealt with.
9. It should be remembered that Gordimer's reconstruction of South African society reflects primarily her interpretation of English-speaking white South African perceptions.
10. Only *A Guest of Honour* is situated entirely in a post-independent black African country. Yet, here too the political scenario completely determines the lives and thoughts of all the characters.
11. In both novels Gordimer touches on themes similar to those in Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*: it is Afrikaners who first come into serious conflict with the Immorality Act, one of the cornerstones of apartheid. Ironically, Anna Louw, the Afrikaans-speaking white woman,

once married to an Indian, is imprisoned for her part in the Defiance Campaign in *A World of Strangers*, and not either Toby Hood or his socially defiant friends. And *Occasion for Loving*, like Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*, reflects the anomalies of a society in which the moral implications of adultery are less problematic than the racial ones.

12. Toby Hood can not really be seen as a courageous character as he does not take responsibility for, nor does he face the consequences of his actions, as, for instance, Anna Louw does when she is arrested.
13. Similar motives determine the actions of Rosa in *Burger's Daughter*, Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* and Sonny and his family in *My Son's Story*.
14. As in Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udumo*, the revolution in the central African country portrayed in Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour* is steered and masterminded from Europe. In both novels, black leaders are actively supported by white liberals.
15. The people of newly-independent black African nations have often been censured for the chaos that frequently followed independence. Amongst their chief critics have usually been those whites who, in the process of independence, have had to forfeit many of the rights and privileges they once took for granted, and who have seen their property taken away from them. It is interesting that in *A Guest of Honour*, many of the whites remaining in the country after independence feel wronged. Yet, they are not the ones about whom Shinza is speaking when he says the people have to learn to cry 'Stop thief!' While Bray, a white person, is asked to help Shinza, 'Stop thief!' can really only be the cry of those to whom the country now belongs, who have been wronged by their new leaders, and who have to 'give up their too-simple conception of their overlords' (Gordimer: 1970:310).
16. In contrast, in Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udumo*, the second revolution is spearheaded not by socialist ideals, but by those who insist on a return to traditional tribal values. Yet here, too, violence is unavoidable.
17. Although, emotionally, Bray belongs more to Africa than to England, he still has deep roots in European society which might ultimately have made it impossible for him to 'go against his own nature'. His death 'interrupts' the decision-making process (Gordimer: 1970:492) and we are left in doubt as to the final outcome as 'no one could say for certain whether, when Bray was killed on the way to the capital, he was going to Mweta or to buy arms for Shinza' (Gordimer: 1970:525). Several other incidents point to the uncertainty of his final decision. Ironically, the people who discover his body know him only as 'the Colonel', his title as a British civil servant in the days before independence; Emanuelle, like many others, continues to see him as a 'nice white liberal', even though she is of the opinion he might be prepared 'prepared to accept apocalyptic solutions'. Furthermore, Rebecca is unable to bear his child, therefore his only descendants belong to the 'house in Wiltshire' which he once rejected as 'part of an interesting death cult', and where he felt he would be 'acquiescently buried alive' if he returned; he is probably not even buried in Africa as his English wife has the right to claim his remains (Gordimer: 1970: 138; 495; 497; 524; 525).
18. In a similar vein, Gray argues that in *The Story of an African Farm* the 'characters may be born in Africa, and are put to death by Africa, but that is not the same thing as being African' (Gray: 1979:153). The same can be said of many of Gordimer's white characters. The process of becoming 'African' requires a continual change of consciousness which involves a conscious turning away from Europe not really evident in Gordimer's work.
19. The irony of the situation of those who espouse both liberalism and socialism in Gordimer's works is apparent in *The Conservationist*. Here Mehring, an industrialist with 'four hundred acres of arable land' bought 'for tax purposes' and as a place to bring a woman, is derisively labelled a capitalist and accused of 'collusion' with the white supremacist regime by his mistress. Yet, Antonia, a self-professed 'liberal', is herself guilty of collusion when, after her detention, she unhesitatingly utilises Mehring's position and money to procure the services of a good lawyer. Having 'proved herself' she leaves the

country and avoids having to live with the consequences of her actions.

20. Both Abrahams and Mphahlele differentiate between these two forms of socialism, and examine their viability in African society. In *The View from Coyaba* Abrahams summarises African socialism: the land is the people's as a collectivity to be worked and shared together: it is not the government's to buy or sell or give away in exchange for favours; it is not even one man's to do so outside the collectivity. For land is the life of a people, a trust which each person enjoys and benefits from and serves and safeguards for the generations to come ... But what is on the land, what a man has built up from his own sweat and effort ... that should not be taken from him except for fair and honest compensation (Abrahams: 1985:370). And in *Chirundu* Mphahlele seeks a synthesis between traditional African socialism which emphasises the coherence of family and tribe, and the need for a modern work force which, through the activity of a strong trade union movement, would involve itself in social welfare. In Gordimer's work, however, Rosa, in *Burger's Daughter*, re-affirms Gordimer's view that 'they [those who like her father are Communist activists] are the ones who matter' (Gordimer:1979:163-4;195). She thus disregards Duma Dhladhla's accusation that whites regard Black Consciousness as 'racialism that sidetracks and undermines the struggle', that they do not credit blacks 'with the intelligence to know what [they] want' and that they see in Communism 'what [whites] want ... for [themselves]'. Similarly, in *A Guest of Honour*, Hjalmar points out that Shinza's ideas would be rejected by the West, which means 'the East would be the ones to get him' (Gordimer: 1970:398). It is ironic that Gordimer rarely sees a third possibility, thus imposing an essentially foreign structure on black African society. In another context Mphahlele calls this 'the stale, boring and now well-known ... image of Communists [which suggests] Africans [are] incapable of an uprising without Russia's intervention or as if there must be a Communist about wherever there is an African uprising' (Mphahlele: 1962: 157).
21. Mphahlele, on the other hand, explores the personal implications of the conflict between political parties and both he and Abrahams recognise the need also to free people from 'the colonisation of the mind'.
22. In contrast, Van der Post in *In A Province* examines the long-term destructive effects of past grievances. Van Bredepoel's family, for instance, is unable to forget the harm Afrikaners suffered under the British during the Anglo-Boer war.
23. As Gordimer challenges the relevance of liberalism within the African context, she inevitably questions the credibility of English-speaking white society popularly believed to be closer to this ideal than their Afrikaans-speaking counterparts. The protagonists of her works tend, accordingly, to be white. Her black or 'Coloured' characters, with the possible exception of Sonny in *My Son's Story*, are only important insofar as they interact with whites.
24. Unlike Lois, in Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udumo*, Gordimer's white heroines do not really get hurt by the black people they help and manage to at least physically be part of the new Africa. Thus, even Rosa Burger's quarrel with Zwelenzima Vulindlela is seen merely as a 'squabble' (Gordimer: 1979: 330).
25. In contrast to these three, Gordimer's other male characters are little more than peripheral to the action in the novel. Toby Hood, a central character in *A World of Strangers*, remains a colourless individual. Whaila, in *A Sport of Nature*, never emerges as a character except in the mind of Hillela and he, like Lionel Burger, in *Burger's Daughter*, remains an ideal.
26. Rosa Burger's inner conflict, in *Burger's Daughter*, is similarly utilised, as Gordimer discusses the positive and negative aspects of Marxism.
27. It is only in *A Sport of Nature* and *My Son's Story* that Gordimer acknowledges whites may themselves have become 'Africans' and may have more than an activist role to play in post-apartheid South Africa.

28. The predicament of Coloureds is first touched on in *The Conservationist*. Although he does not want to admit it to himself, Mehring realises in his encounter with a female hitchhiker, a 'sallow-skinned' Coloured woman (Gordimer: 1974: 246-250), that his mistress, Antonia, is probably not the sophisticated, olive-skinned beauty of Romany or Spanish origin she claimed to be (Gordimer: 1974: 73), but a Coloured 'playing for white'. Her surname, Mancebo, is more likely of Zulu or Xhosa, than of Jewish origin. This explains her anxiety when she hears that one of Mehring's 'farm boys', probably the illegitimate son of a white man and a black woman, is called 'Witbooi' [White boy] (Gordimer: 1974: 40). Mehring's remark that 'blacks wouldn't want her on their side any more, but would prefer her to be a "white bitch"' (Clingman: 1986:146), points to the irony that, despite the Black Consciousness movement's contention that white liberals perpetuate the aims of white supremacy, Antonia is more likely to be accepted in white liberal than in black society. In *My Son's Story* there is a change in attitude as Sonny, a Coloured, is accepted by the black leadership of the freedom struggle.
29. In *A Wreath for Udomo* Abrahams questions this tendency to gloss over the failings of those leading the freedom struggle. Thus, Mabi challenges the concept of the 'perfect' revolutionary when he says of Udomo: 'I know the wrong he did you and Mhendi. But I also know the good he did Afrika. Was he a good man? A great man? And is greatness beyond good and evil?' (Abrahams: 1956:309).
30. Clingman points out that already in the 1973 Appendix to 'The Novel and the Nation', Gordimer corrects her original statement, when she says 'there is little reason why a straightforward novel of events in which the protagonists are black men should not be written just as authentically by a white writer as by a black one' (Clingman: 1986:252).
31. 'Fanagalo', a type of pidgin Zulu, was often the only means of communication between white and black people who did not speak each other's languages. It was seen by many as an insult to black people. Like many English-speaking liberals, Maureen Smales rejects the Afrikaners' attitude to black people. She realises too late, that while the speaking of Fanagalo might have been seen as patronising, knowing it would at least have helped her attain some measure of communication with July's family.
32. Her characters' inability to speak a black language is a reflection of Gordimer's own sense of being 'cut off' from blacks with whom she otherwise 'feel(s) so connected' (Sampson: 1987:17). Wishing she 'spoke an African language for [her] own sake', she nevertheless claims that 'knowing the language doesn't necessarily mean understanding between yourself and those who speak it; identification with them is the real understanding, the real connection' (Sampson: 1987:17). Unfortunately, she does not say what form, apart from the party political, such identification takes when the basic means of communication are limited to a language which is not the mother tongue of those who will presumably one day wield political power. Her and her characters' experience of black society thus becomes rather unrealistic and nostalgically romantic, as is evident from her description of a visit to a 'circumcision retreat' in the Transkei where she experiences 'the yearning faculties of communication and comprehension' amongst those with whom she was 'so fully human, there together' (Clingman: 1988: 199). Ironically, despite the overt identification of English-speaking white liberals with the cause espoused by black people, apart from Bray, in *A Guest of Honour*, only her Afrikaans characters speak either Fanagalo or a black African language.
33. Gray points out that alienation from the land and the black people living on it is apparent in 'a struggling but implacable fatalism ... in the fore of the South African English mentality, an uneasy lack of identity which ... can only die on the land to prove that it has lived above it' (Gray: 1979:154).
34. In *Burger's Daughter*, for instance, Rosa is overshadowed by Marisa Kgosana, who is 'a queen of some prototype, extinct in Britain or Denmark where the office still exists', 'the Ruritanian pan-Africa of triumphant splendour and royal beauty that is subject to no known boundaries of old custom or new warring political ideologies in black countries' (Gordimer: 1979:134,139). In *A Sport of Nature*, Hillela, in African dress, is described as 'a beautiful woman - at least, the splendid outfit makes her appear so' (Gordimer: 1987:340). And in *My Son's Story* Hannah's features are compared to those of a pig,

- whereas Aila's 'oriental beauty' and 'her coiled river of shining black hair' are mentioned with awe (Gordimer: 1990:7;19;93).
35. Here, as in *The Late Bourgeois World* and *July's People*, there is an ironic twist. Whereas apartheid once sought to emasculate the black man (see chapter 1, endnote 15; chapter 2, endnote 16), the white woman, once taboo to black men, now discovers the white man has, in fact, been emasculated and is attracted to a black man.
  36. Auerbach's observation that historic realism often makes 'concessions to the technique of legend' could be applied to Gordimer's approach here. Auerbach maintains that historians often portray 'only clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives ... the continuity of [their] feelings and actions remains uninterrupted'. Thus, in representations of modern history, as in the stories of martyrs, 'a stiff-necked and fanatical persecutor stands over against an equally stiff-necked [or totally demoralised and helpless] victim'. Unfortunately, such a presentation disregards the 'multilayeredness' of individual characters and situations (Auerbach: 1968:15-20).
  37. Ironically, Gordimer's attitude here is similar to the one she herself condemns in *Burger's Daughter* when 'surveillance' are unable to imagine that Rosa's actions can be ascribed to anything but her fanatic adherence to orders issued by those promoting revolution (Gordimer: 1979:176). And in her last two novels, blind obedience is in fact the reality by which her characters live.
  38. Gordimer's unrealistic attitude, in which children never question their parents' perceptions that they too should be part of the revolutionary movement, becomes apparent when one compares it to a 'real life' situation. Thus, for instance, Shawn Slovo, daughter of Ruth First and Joe Slovo, angry at her activist parents for involving her in their struggle, and at her mother's attempt to commit suicide, can say to her mother, 'You tried to leave us ... you shouldn't have had us' (Bagley: 1988:120).
  39. Brutus goes on to say that 'though Nadine Gordimer would say that she is condemning South African society for being dehumanized, I would say that Nadine Gordimer, who is one of our most sensitive writers, is also the standing, the living example of how dehumanized South African society has become - that an artist like this lacks warmth, lacks feeling, but can observe with a detachment, with the coldness of a machine. There is in her, herself, no warmth and feeling' (Brutus: 1969:97).
  40. Alan Lomborg points to the change in Gordimer's use of metaphors. The water imagery, in *The Lying Days*, and the animal imagery, in *A World of Strangers*, allow for both reflection and analysis. In *Occasion for Loving* there is a change in style and Gordimer uses more abstract analogies to mirror a world where emotions and responses are becoming increasingly blurred (Lomborg: 1976:5-7).
  41. Gordimer might have done well to heed Henry James's advice that 'one has to choose ever so delicately among one's difficulties, attaching one's self to the greatest, bearing hard on those and intelligently neglecting others. If one attempts to tackle them all one is certain to deal completely with none' (James: 1971:xviii).
  42. Peter Abrahams, similarly portraying the confusion facing newly-independent African States, creates coherence by centering the action on Udomo in *A Wreath for Udomo*, Josiah in *This Island Now*, and the descendants of the 'freed' American slaves in *The View from Coyaba*. In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head centers the racial conflict in South Africa and the ambiguities facing independent African communities on a woman's battle with mental illness.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE END OF AN ERA or THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ONE? -----

The changing social consciousness evident in the novels of Peter Abrahams, Alan Paton, Es'kia Mphahlele and Nadine Gordimer is closely related to the historical and political events which determined South Africa's history during the twentieth century. As was mentioned in the Introduction, these novelists are primarily concerned with the question of the relationship between the different races in South Africa. Since World War II this relationship has been determined almost totally by the apartheid system which sought to regulate every aspect of human and social interaction<sup>1</sup>. The response of the novelists discussed, as well as the reactions and decisions of the society within which they lived or about which they wrote, changed over the years. The changing social consciousness apparent in the works written by these novelists, reflects the tensions of a society in which groups and individuals have become alienated from from themselves, and from each other.

As has been the case in many other countries around the world, historical and political developments in South Africa during the late 1980s and early 1990s, seem to have caught everybody unawares. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and in Russia, and the re-unification of Germany were no less surprising and dramatic than the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, the subsequent negotiations between the white South African government and formerly banned black political parties, and the lifting of the apartheid laws. These startling events inevitably affect the consciousness of all South Africans and will, consequently, be reflected in the literature, which is challenged to find new styles and metaphors to portray and interpret this changing reality.

Any discussion about the future development of South African literature, however, should take into account that, though political and historical changes may be radical, both past events and anticipated happenings throw long shadows, and do not occur in a vacuum. While especially the events following the

release of Nelson Mandela have re-directed the course of South African history, they did not suddenly create a new reality<sup>2</sup>. All that went before will somehow have an impact on the events that follow. The hurt, the pain and the struggles of the pre-1990 years will not simply disappear<sup>3</sup>, nor will the exploitative economic system which underlies the ideology of apartheid. Furthermore, despite the dramatic nature of recent political events, the questions and the reality reflected in South African literature in the future, may well be in an area of human existence which at first does not seem directly related to the melodramatic and the sensational which often characterise the arena of public politics.

As South Africans struggle to give shape to a new political dispensation which will accommodate the many diverse philosophies and expectations, the country is, ironically, thrown into increasing turmoil and people appear to be making less and less sense of the situation. One of the most distinguishable characteristics of such a state of affairs seems to be what Roger Rosenblatt, in another context, calls the 'inescapable need to blame' (Rosenblatt: 1991:1). Rosenblatt argues that the effort to 'reach a rational understanding of an inexplicable calamity ... [often] takes the form of assigning blame'. Thus, when events seem to be beyond the control of individuals or societies, an attempt is made to identify the 'culprit', and in this way to bring life once again 'under human control' (Rosenblatt: 1991:29).

This tendency to assign blame is very apparent in present-day South African society. Despite new possibilities for dialogue, accusations and counter-accusations largely determine the interaction between groups and between individuals. It is possible that this is indeed part of an attempt to gain the illusion of control over a situation which is no longer definable. It is, however, also possible, that what often seems like a witch hunt, the wish to find the 'guilty party' who can be held responsible for the current turmoil, is part of an endeavour both to avoid admitting personal culpability and to refuse taking responsibility for what has gone before<sup>4</sup>. If this is indeed the case, then the interpretative task of the novel of social consciousness, for the time being, could well be in the realm of the psychological, rather than of the socio-political.

What indications, other than those discussed so far, are there in South African English literature, of an



early awareness of these conflicts which have become so much a part of modern South African reality? And what expectations can readers of the novel of social purpose have in a time when many of the external obstacles to social, racial and political harmony addressed by Abrahams, Paton, Mphahlele and Gordimer are being overcome through the abolition of the apartheid laws, through the unbanning and freeing of political dissidents, and through the 1992 Referendum in which whites gave white President F.W. de Klerk the authority to negotiate a new political dispensation on their behalf? How will South African literature reflect the fears and prejudices which are a result of the wounds and scars that South Africans have inflicted on each other and on themselves over the centuries? Are there any indications that the 'second revolution' will not be more bloody than the process which led up to the first<sup>5</sup>? In this chapter the works of Miriam Tlali, J.M. Coetzee and Bessie Head are discussed, with a view to identifying and predicting possible future trends in the South African English novel. Lack of space prevents the discussion of other interesting and provocative novels.

Much of the literature that has appeared since 1960 has been a variation on the themes already discussed<sup>6</sup>. Relatively few novels by black writers were published. One of the chief reasons for this was that the latter had either been banned or had left the country. Those who remained and were able to publish, produced mainly autobiographical novels or poetry, both of which had as their chief concern the situation of black people in apartheid South Africa. These works escaped the censure of the Board of Censors, primarily because the latter did not regard them as inflammatory enough to warrant banning. An exception to the usual autobiographical and protest novels written during this time are Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) and *Amandla* (1980).

In her autobiographical novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan*, Tlali, like other black novelists, deals with the reality of black people's lives in apartheid South Africa. Yet, in contrast to most other novelists, she does not portray the sensational and the tragic. Instead, she focuses on the humdrum, everyday reality of apartheid. Her protest against this life includes a representation of the problems and possibilities of black traditional beliefs, as well as a rather humorous look at white society from the viewpoint of black people.

Thus, for instance, Johannes, Muriel's co-worker at 'Metropolitan', says of the white women working in the office:

The things are all so spoilt. Sit on their backsides the whole day and call *Johannes Johannes*. No wonder their husbands don't pay lobola for them. They're worth nothing. Lazy! (Tlali: 1975:21).

While Johannes is only a 'boy' in the eyes of the 'madams' who send him on errands, he does not even regard them as women. Muriel, on the other hand, refuses to let Johannes run errands for her as

according to our custom a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place for our men!<sup>7</sup> (Tlali: 1975:21).

Despite its apparent matter-of-factness, Miriam Tlali's criticism of white South African society is scathing. This is apparent especially in her portrayal of Jewish and English-speaking societies whose members were traditionally perceived as being more liberal than Afrikaners from whom they distanced themselves. Their complicity in a system they ostensibly condemn is apparent when Mrs Kuhn, sister of her Jewish employer, Mr Bloch, insults Muriel and calls her a 'baboon' and a 'champanzee' (sic!) (Tlali: 1975:44). As far as Muriel is concerned, if she

had been insulted and abused by Mrs Stein, it would have been easier for [her] to take it. You always know what to expect from the Boers<sup>8</sup> (Tlali: 1975:44).

Similarly, Mr Bloch and his white employees have very little real education and do not speak a black language, yet criticise black people for their 'stupidity' and their inability to speak English. Their disrespect for customs other than their own is not only apparent in their ridicule of Jonas, who is respected by black people because of his knowledge of traditional medicines, but also in the way they use these beliefs to cheat and intimidate their black customers.

Tlali's ability to portray the complexity of people's perceptions of South Africa's social problems is apparent in both *Muriel at Metropolitan* and *Amandla*. She realises that black people are divided in their attitudes and that many can also be charged with complicity. Thus, Muriel's job at 'Metropolitan', where she checks on black people's passes and protects her white boss from legal action, forces her to become a traitor to her own people. And in *Amandla*, a novel about the 1976 Soweto riots, written in a documentary

and anecdotal style, there are black people who recognise positive elements in the development of the 'Homelands'<sup>9</sup>. Families are divided as some join 'the struggle', while others are in the employ of the white-controlled South African police force. In Tlali's work political change is not a panacea for freedom. Instead, she tries to understand the historical process which led up to the present situation and also explores the possibilities inherent in a return to black traditional values<sup>10</sup>.

The ambivalent attitude of black people to their situation, apparent in Tlali's works, is an indication that in future black South African writers will no longer be able to benefit from traditional assumptions that they 'in all circumstances write with immediate insight into the lives of other black people' (Sole: 1983:38). As black politics in South Africa moves from protest to parliamentary participation, black people will have to come to terms with their own strengths and inadequacies. United action will become more difficult without the uniting force of a common enemy, and it will no longer be possible to blame all failures on 'the system'. Like other South African novelists, black writers will in future probably 'have to face the challenge of [South African society's] dangerous ordinariness, its unexceptional banality' (Hope: 1985:45).

Similarly, as Hope points out, English-speaking white South African novelists, in particular, will have to accept they are no longer the knights in shining armour, ready to do self-righteous battle with and ultimately defeat Afrikaner nationalism and its policy of apartheid. According to Hope, the 'dangerous ordinariness' of South African society will force these novelists to face the fact that they live in 'a world where there are no certainties and where no-one is uncompromised' and can therefore no longer lay claim to 'always being right'<sup>11</sup> (Hope:1985:46).

J.M. Coetzee's post-modernist novels seem to bear out the validity of Hope's prediction. While his first four novels, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Foe* (1986), see a return to themes familiar in white writing, the focus has changed. Thus, for example, the question of colonialism is central to each of these works. Yet, in contrast to pre-World War II novels dealing with this issue, the roles of the protagonists are no longer clearly defined<sup>12</sup>. For the white characters in Coetzee's novels, Europe has become the 'Other'<sup>13</sup>, yet there is no harmony in their

rather uneasy relationship with 'the natives' with whom they interact.

The inability to communicate with people other than themselves is apparent in the absence of any real dialogue in Coetzee's novels. Thus, Magda, in *In The Heart of the Country*, has as her sole companions a black couple, Anna and Hendrik. Yet, she is condemned to a life of solitary monologues. Neither her attempts to befriend Anna, whose sexual relationship with Magda's father forces his daughter to shoot him, nor her own attraction to Hendrik who rapes her, can penetrate the desperate isolation of a woman who says of herself:

I have nothing to give him. I am beyond being persuaded, even the tears can find no way out from behind these knotted eyelids, .... I am as hard as shell (Coetzee: 1977:107).

Similarly, both the magistrate, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Susan Barton, in *Foe*, try to discover the story behind the disfiguration suffered by the 'barbarians' in their care. Yet their questions remain unanswered. The magistrate never finds out what the woman who was blinded when she was mistreated by the colonial 'interrogators' looked like before. And Susan Barton receives no answer as to how and why Crusoe's man, Friday, lost his tongue. Later, when she returns to civilisation, after being rescued from Crusoe's island, she tries to tell her story to Foe. Yet, despite Foe's professed wish to record Susan's story, the two never really communicate except on the plane of the unreal.

Likewise, in *Life and Times of Michael K*, the disfigured Michael, who dreams of creating a garden, remains an enigma. The people he meets seem incapable of transcending their own limited perceptions for long enough to try intuitively to understand this skeleton of a man. Consequently, like the characters in Coetzee's other novels, Michael never quite manages to escape from either the literal or the metaphorical prisons created by people of various ideologies. The characters in Coetzee's work are, thus, all products of a society that did not understand that those who turn human beings into mere objects suffer distortion of their own personal centre<sup>14</sup> (Tillich: 1964:32).

The inner distortion so apparent in the characters portrayed in much of South African English literature,

and which reaches a climax in Coetzee's novels, takes a different direction in Bessie Head's trilogy: *Where Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1972), and *A Question of Power* (1974). In each of these novels the main characters are victims of political injustice, yet have to deal with their own personal inner chaos before they can come to terms with the world around them. Thus, Makhaya, in *Where Rain Clouds Gather*, climbs the fence which separates Botswana from apartheid South Africa. Yet, he can only expect an 'illusion of freedom' (Head: 1969:7) until he finds himself. And in *Maru*, Margaret, a Masarwa who is rejected by all, and is 'a representative of all racial oppression everywhere' (Ravenscroft: 1976:181<sup>15</sup>), is loved by both Maru and Moleka. Moleka realises that marrying her would mean the end of his political career, and chooses not to go against the *status quo*. Maru, though, abdicates political power to marry Margaret. Yet, paradoxically, it is his marriage, a private affair and the culmination of his own inner journey, that frees the Masarwa as it awakens them to a new sense of their own humanity, and forces the Batswana to re-evaluate their attitude:

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race .... They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said: "We are not going back there."

People like the Batswana [whose attitude to Maru's marriage is summed up by the comment of a diseased prostitute: "He has married a Masarwa. They have no standards"], who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached people of the Masarwa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would be no longer possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting killed yourself (Head: 1972:126-7).

In *A Question of Power* there is a similar tension between the abdication from political involvement, the resolution of a person's own conflicts, and the subsequent restoration of social and political harmony.

Thus, in Elizabeth's journey through insanity,

one finds an intimate relationship between an individual character's private odyssey of the soul and public convulsions that range across the world from one civilization to another (Ravenscroft: 1976:183).

Like Bessie Head's other exile-figures, Elizabeth tries to escape from mere protest at her situation as a

social outcast and move beyond the loneliness and despair of that situation, to try and understand not only the effects, but the causes of prejudice. These she seeks in her own soul. As a 'Coloured', and herself a victim of South African apartheid policies, she knows of the 'powerful willing of the total extinction of the white man [who has] aroused a terrible hatred'. Yet, she has to admit she too hates, not only whites, but 'Africans ... the African hair ... the African nose' (Head: 1974:48;83). Motabeng, the Botswana village to which she has escaped, is no Garden of Eden. But, as she struggles with madness, Elizabeth frees herself from the prison of her own feelings of hatred and injustice. In the garden which she and Kenosi are tending as part of the Motabeng 'local-industries project', she realises that she can become part of the 'Other', those who have rejected her and whom she has in turn rejected, and is, finally, able to succumb to a sense of belonging (Head: 1974:203-6).

As South Africans of all races stand aghast at the wanton destruction which seems to have the country in its grip, South African literature might do well to put aside some of the questions which have been important in the past, questions such as "Who is to blame?" or "Who is 'more' or 'less' responsible for bringing about the present situation?" It is, instead, in Elizabeth's painful journey through insanity that there could be the key to dealing with the angers and anxieties present in the South African 'collective subconscious', especially as the idea recurs in different guises throughout the development of the novel of social consciousness that there is a need for a reality beyond the one of assigning blame.

And so Peter Abrahams and Es'kia Mphahlele's novels speak of the de-colonisation of the mind; Nadine Gordimer's work moves towards a new identification of people with those who are 'different'; and like Alan Paton, Bessie Head speaks of the freeing power of love, a love that is not mere sentimentality, but which, in its acceptance of its own weaknesses, is prepared to take responsibility for the situation in which people find themselves. In the acceptance of that responsibility, the awareness of the other as the 'Other' is transcended and, given the austerity hinted at in *A Question of Power*, the political reality may one day reflect the inner harmony attained by Bessie Head's characters in *Maru* and in *A Question of Power*. As Ravenscroft points out, there are no certainties, and Maru, for instance, 'remains a man with doubts' (Ravenscroft: 1976:182). Yet, our literature, and more especially the novel of social purpose, shows that

the South African consciousness might benefit from, and is perhaps already changing its focus from the socio-political to one where there is no 'relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. [Because if] man [is] not holy to man, he [can] be tortured, [amongst other things], for his complexion, he [can] be misused, degraded and killed' (Head: 1974:205). However, if human beings learn to regard themselves and each other as sacred, and are willing to make the necessary sacrifices as they take responsibility for their situation, then the power of love can indeed transform their political and social institutions and bring peace and healing to a torn and bleeding world.

## ENDNOTES

1. The goal of the apartheid ideologues was primarily to regulate inter-racial communication. Yet, as has been pointed out in this discussion, the effects of the apartheid ideology did, in fact, go much further. The laws, and the societal constraints these brought about, had far reaching implications, not only for the relationship between the races, but also for the composition of the different groups themselves whose personal, psychological and communal lives were equally affected by what was happening in the larger society.
2. The euphoric sense of expectation which followed Mandela's release is somewhat reminiscent of the mood portrayed in Gordimer's *The Lying Days* when Helen Shaw says of the time following the unexpected victory in 1948 of the Nationalist government, that she and her friends 'had braced [them]selves' for what was to come, but  
Nothing happened. Of course nothing happened. We wanted a quick shock, over and done with, but what we were going to get was something much slower, surer, and more terrible: an apparent sameness in the conduct of our lives, long periods when there was nothing more to hurt us than hard words in Parliament and talk of the Republic which we had laughed at for years; and, recurrently, a mounting number of weary battles (Gordimer: 1953:255).
3. In Van der Post's novel, *In a Province*, such an attitude is apparent in the Afrikaners' inability to forget the ravages of the Anglo-Boer war and the influence this has on their actions for many generations.
4. Sartre's comment in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, discussed in the Introduction, that responsibility is a person's 'consciousness [of] being the incontestable author of an event' (Sartre: 1957:52), is important in this context.
5. For a definition of the concept of the 'second revolution', see the discussion of Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udomo*, *This Island Now*, *The View from Coyaba*; Mphahlele's *Chirundu*, and Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour*.
6. 1960 is taken as a pivotal year as several events during that year reflect the country's changing perceptions: the Sharpeville shootings took place, the ANC and PAC were banned, and black parliamentary representation was ended. Internationally South Africa moved into increasing isolation as the country left the British Commonwealth and became a Republic.
7. In several black African cultures the bridegroom traditionally gives the father of the bride a certain number of cows as *lobola*. In Western perception the *lobola* system was often seen as a de-humanisation of the black woman. Yet, Johannes's interpretation of this custom, as well as Muriel's remark on the status of men in black African society, gives an ironic twist to the usual manner in which the themes of traditional customs, the status of women and the emasculation of black men by white society are dealt with.
8. Mphahlele makes a similar point in *Afrika My Musik*:  
The English have that deceptive, genteel and aloof manner about them that makes you think that they are accessible at any time. Watch it. Your dignity is likely to run into a wall and come away with a bleeding nose (Mphahlele: 1984:207).
9. Ironically, despite his criticism of the 'Homeland' system, one of the cornerstones of apartheid, Mphahlele too admits that there are positive aspects. One of these is that black traditional customs have remained alive in these areas, and it is here that he does research into oral poetry and re-discovers his ancestral roots (Mphahlele: 1984:204-5).
10. Tlali's use of Sotho proverbs is reminiscent of a similar feature in Plaatje's attempt to explain black



thinking to whites. And like Abrahams and Mphahlele she advocates a return to positive black traditional values as, for example, in the involvement of the whole family, both dead and alive, in the resolution of the conflicts between a young married couple (Tlali: 1980: 43; 202-204).

11. As has been pointed out, the role of English-speaking white South Africans, who have generally prided themselves on being more liberal than Afrikaners, has always been ambivalent. Distancing themselves from Afrikaner Nationalist politics, they have, nevertheless, shared the privileges accorded whites. Though their focus in recent years has become more Afrocentric, Europe has remained their cultural home. Consequently, they have not really become part of Africa as, for instance, Afrikaners have. During the present time of transition English-speaking whites are increasingly moving away from their European roots, but many have not yet found their identity in Africa.
12. In Olive Schreiner's works, in Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding*, and in William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe*, for instance, the colonial system is criticised by people who nevertheless belong to it and who are, generally speaking, no more than spectators of the world that has been colonised. Coetzee's characters, however, no longer belong to the colonisers, yet they are never quite accepted in the society outside their own.
13. I am indebted to David Lloyd (1989) for his analysis of the shifting perspective in the white South African novel from Euro- to Afrocentrism. Regrettably, lack of space allows only for a brief mention of this central issue in the South African English novel.
14. Peter Abrahams makes a similar point in *Wild Conquest* when Paul van As realises that the once beautiful Anna, who has grown ugly during the *Trek*, is 'the first fruit' of a people who feel they have to 'harden [their] hearts' in order to win against the 'Kaffirs,' and he wonders: 'would it be possible for hard hearts to turn soft again?' (Abrahams: 1951:154-5).
15. Arthur Ravenscroft: 'The Novels of Bessie Head', in Christopher Heywood (ed): 1976: *Aspects of South African Literature*, pp.174-186.

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