

Rudyard Kipling and a "new" literature of abandonment and exile:

the writer as outcast from paradise

tanya barben

This paper is written from a dual perspective. I am the Rare Books Librarian at the University of Cape Town and curator of its Libraries' extensive Kipling Collection. I have, consequently, renewed and extended my acquaintance with some of Rudyard Kipling's work and with books about him. I am also a child of politics, the daughter of political activists who left South Africa without their children and returned after 25 years of exile in 1990. I am also a parent who has found parenthood a challenge as well as a joy. These are the main focuses of this paper, although there are other patinas, overlays, that add some insight to the formation of the title to this paper, and of the paper itself. That said, however, this is a reader's response to Kipling and a literature of abandonment and exile.

Although no apologist for a writer who has been described as "often mean-spirited" (Howe 1987:36) with considerable literary skills unsupported by intellectual and emotional depth, I was often deeply moved by much of what he wrote. But I was as often repelled as moved by what I read. Kipling's work is

very often shot through with the evils of cruelty, violence, hatred and lustful revenge, “too often, alas, with a certain authorial relish” (Wilson 1987:48) writes one critic. Much of it makes uncomfortable reading. I wondered why this was so, why it was necessary for him to write of such things, and found some explanation in the moving accounts of his unhappy childhood experiences which appear in the biographical and critical works which we have in our collection. The more I read about him the more I learnt that in his life there was much tragedy.

Rudyard Kipling was an abandoned child. This is certainly what he perceived himself to be. He also suffered the experience of exile – many exiles, in fact. These psychological wounds affected him greatly although they did not dampen his creativity, for he was one of those writers who was able to overcompensate for their unhappiness by excelling later in life in ways that would bring them admiration and praise. But (and there always seems to be a but) I wondered why he was not, like other classic writers of literature – children’s literature – who also had unhappy childhood experiences – able to move beyond his pain and use his wonderful creativity as an healing balm.

Let me put Kipling, a writer primarily for adults (largely short stories and verse) who also wrote some classics of children’s literature, into some sort of perspective. He was born in 1865 and died in 1936, so he has his feet planted squarely in both the 19th and the 20th centuries – but perhaps not very comfortably in either. He is best known to children today as the writer of *The Jungle books* (*The Jungle book* and *The Second jungle book* which this year and last celebrated the centenary of their publication) and the *Just so stories* through the medium of television and film.

These stories, although much mangled, are loved as much now as they were in an earlier age. Youthful readers of *The Jungle books* seem to spit out what is indigestible and revel in the author's brilliant mastery of words, while the *Just so stories* still create a wonderful sense of conspiratorial warmth between the storyteller and the listener against the rest of the world. The story of Mowgli which appears in *The Jungle books* is a masterpiece of imagination, in it he created an entire mythology for boys and girls. Yet it contains elements of surprising cruelty and "lustful revenge". And some of the *Just so stories* "often betray a good deal of snobbery towards animals and racism toward other people" (Sale 1982:85), and also unnecessary cruelty. Why, for example, is it necessary for the Elephant's Child to be beaten repeatedly on account of his "satiabile curiosity" – surely a commendable characteristic in children – and why must he so joyously avenge this punishment with his newly acquired trunk?

Kipling's output as a poet and writer of short stories was prodigious. He shares with Shakespeare the status of an English writer whose works are constantly in print (it is said that they are the only poets to have captured the English imagination – whatever that might mean). This apparent popularity is intriguing, because, unlike Shakespeare, Kipling is not an establishment writer, his works are not studied at schools and universities today. And yet there is a revival of interest in his life and work.

Very little, in fact, is known about his inner life because many of his personal and family papers were destroyed by his widow and his surviving daughter. So a new breed of critics, psycho-biographers, is attempting to solve the Kipling conundrum by reexamining his writing.

For Kipling's readers are repeatedly struck by the discrepancies and contradictions in his work, his writing is ambiguous, one often has difficulty trying to establish what exactly it is that he is trying to communicate to his reader. His talents as a descriptive writer are considerable – his powers of description are remarkable and his literary skills (although very uneven) when good are considered to rank with those of almost the best – but there is always a sense that these very talents are used to mask the real meaning of his writing, to brush away anything that might shed light on the true personality of his characters and that might explain the inner personality of their creator. There often seem to be a sense of many things left unsaid.

In the last two lines of the last poem to appear in the *Definitive edition of Kipling's verse* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), entitled *The Appeal*, he writes the following:

Seek not to question other than
The books I leave behind

And it is from the books he left behind, particularly his autobiography, *Something of myself*, published posthumously, which conceals as much as it reveals and the short story "Baa, Baa Black Sheep", an auto-biographical account of his childhood disguised as fiction (in *Wee Willie Winkie*, first published Allahabad, A H Wheeler, 1988) that we learn about his crippling childhood experiences. The reminiscences of his younger sister, the talented Trix, are also a valuable source of information.

He was born in Bombay, the son of John Lockwood and Alice Macdonald Kipling. He was a precocious child, displaying his enormous creativity very early on in life. His parents were loving and intelligent, but were rather pre-occupied

with their own lives (not unlike the parents of Mary Lennox in *The Secret garden*). Perhaps the Kiplings shared with all other parents in their inner life a universal characteristic of ambivalence: what takes precedence, the job of caring for the child or meeting one's own needs? This has been described (Hoyme 1988:32) as the "abandoning impulse" which stands for "the multitude of forms and intensities which the hostility, resentment, fatigue, indifference, and selfishness of parents may take". Alice Kipling was, furthermore, a fiercely independent woman.

The young Rudyard grew up in a bungalow surrounded by a large garden and the ministrations of a team of loving Indian servants. He learnt to speak Hindustani and had to be reminded to speak English to his parents and their visitors.

This Edenic existence was interrupted briefly when his mother travelled to England with him to await the birth of her daughter. A rumbustious and uninhibited child – the antithesis of English children – he created havoc in the homes of his relatives and negative reactions to her child on the part of some members of her family might have explained Alice Kipling's later behaviour. Parent and children returned to India and Paradise was regained. In fact Paradise (he looked back upon those early years in India as absolute bliss) was enhanced by the presence of his adoring and adored sister. All this ended rather abruptly when Kipling was five and a half, his sister two and a half years younger, for their parents took them to England. He was told, not by them but by his *ayah*, that he was going to leave India and go across the sea in a big ship" (Kipling 189:261). Six months later, again with no explanation and no real goodbyes, Alice and Lockwood Kipling left their children in the care of unloving, unsuitable and often brutal strangers – as paying boarders.

Trix described the experience thus:

[We] were left by our parents, who were going back to India, to face a cold world alone. And it was a *very* cold world, without one familiar face. And we were left with strangers who were very unkind to us ... As it is we felt deserted – everything had gone at once, Mama, Papa, our home in a garden full of sunshine and birds. Dear Ayah who was never cross All gone at one swoop – and why? “Aunty” – as we called the woman we were left with – because she was no relation – used to tell us we had been left because we were so tiresome and she had taken us out of pity.

She added:

No kind and loving parents would leave their children for years without giving them any preparation or explanation (Fleming 1947:3).

It was the practice for Anglo-Indian children, older than Ruddy and Trix, to be transported to England to get away from the unhealthy climate (and the apparently even unhealthier influence of the indulgent Indian servants).

This was the explanation given later to the children by the much kinder husband of “Aunty”. The children knew better. Trix wrote that they “had been to Nassick, the Hill Station of Bombay. So what could be the real reason? We couldn’t think – and it worried us terribly” (Fleming 1947:3). What seems very odd is that they were not left with relatives who were willing to look after them, despite their exuberance. And why no proper goodbyes?

The evangelical Mrs Holloway was particularly cruel to the boy and the years he spent in her cheerless, gardenless home in Southsea – “The House of Desolation” he called it – were a torment to him. He says that he howled until his nose was red, his eyes sore and his head ached (Kipling 1895b:269) He was punished

repeatedly for “showing off, even when his eyesight deteriorated so badly that he became nearblind. His mother came hotfoot from India (her first visit to England for more than five years) at the request of the attending doctor, and the boy remembered that on the first night that they were together, when she went up to kiss him goodnight, he flung up an arm to ward off the cuff he had been trained to expect (Kipling 1895b:296; see also Kipling 1937:17).

Critics and psycho-biographers have pored over Kipling’s account of his life in Lorne Lodge. Some have tried to minimise the unhappiness of the experience. Kipling, after all, spent one happy month each year at The Grange, home of his beloved Aunt, Georgie Burne-Jones, who was “never, *never* angry”. The children were visited at Southsea sometimes by their aunts and they never complained. (In *Something of myself* Kipling explained their silence thus: (“Often and often afterwards the beloved Aunt would ask me why I had never told any one how I was being treated. Children tell little more than animals, for what comes to them they accept as eternally established. Also, badly treated children have a clear notion of what they are likely to get if they betray the secrets of the prison-house before they are clear of it” [Kipling 1937:15].)

One wonders how these two children survived – Trix says that they created a play that ran on and on for months in which they played all the parts and had wonderful adventures – not unlike the Brontë children who, practically deserted by their indifferent father, created the Gondal and Angria cycle. Rudyard retreated into the world of books.

Surely things could not have been so bad, and if they were so how could Kipling have written about them? Some biographers have tried to minimise the unhappiness

of the experience saying that Kipling's descriptions of his life in Southsea are an imaginative exaggeration of what was, admittedly, a difficult time for the children (exacerbated by the fact that the child Kipling was very difficult to handle) while Trix's reminiscences were merely myth-making. Others are less sceptical and see these experiences as a spur to his natural talent and his remarkable creativity.

The fact is that the children's memories of this time were stark and horrific – they were victims of an attempted “soul murder” (“the killing of the instinct for love”, the “killing of the love-life in a human soul”) (Shengold 1981:204) according to one psycho-biographer. Rudyard was saved by the love given to him by his *ayah* and those other servants – and his months at the Grange, a “paradise” he called it. And, like many victims of psychological battering, he used his creativity to conceal, if not heal entirely, his wounds. But he was not left entirely unscathed: these years in Southsea, it is thought, left him confused about his own sexuality, affected his attitude to women and turned him away from organised religion.

Trix was not so lucky. For much of her adult life she was severely mentally ill, a bright candle snuffed out, deprived of the ability to love.

Alice took her children away from Lorne Lodge. After a holiday with them in Epping Forest and, briefly, in London, she again displayed what can only be described as a shocking lack of judgement. She returned Trix to the care of Mrs Holloway.

Her son she placed in a “second-rate” public school in Devon, established to prepare boys for the armed services. He had just turned 12. He was small for his age, friendly and cheerful, the only boy in the school to wear glasses (he commented that spectacles were uncommon in those days, having to wear them

had been the one thing that diminished the happiness of their stay in Epping Forest [Kipling 1937:17]). It was his experiences at the United Services College at Westward Ho! that are described in *Stalky and Co* (London, Macmillan, 1899), in which the schoolboys' irreverent pranks are aimed at the schoolmasters and become practice sessions for their actions later in the front line of battle.

But Kipling was never to be military material. Three months short of 17 he returned to India and the parents he barely knew to be assistant editor on the *Civil and military gazette* in Lahore (his father was now principal of the art school there). Thus began the "seven years hard", as he described his time on that newspaper and on the Allahabad *Pioneer* which he joined in late 1887. It took him some time to settle down, to get to know those unknown parents. To his surprise "the Mother proved more delightful than all my imaginings or memories. My Father was not only a mine of knowledge and help, but humorous, tolerant and an expert fellow-craftsman" (Kipling 1937:40). This must have confused him the more, for how could these "delightful" people have deserted him so cruelly when he was so young? When Trix arrived in Lahore in early 1884 the "Family Square" consisting of four people who were close, loving and open with each other was completed. Not even clashes with his strong-willed and acerbic mother marred their happiness.

During these years he spent in India Kipling won fame as a writer of short stories and verses. He returned to England in 1889 to receive the adulations of the literary world. There followed much travelling – America, Canada, Australasia, South Africa – and some intense periods of depression associated with hard work. He returned to India once again, in December 1891, to say goodbye to Lahore, and to have a last look round at the only real home he had known. He found the time to visit his old *ayah* in Bombay and left India, the

country of his blissfully happy childhood, before rushing back to London to marry a sister of his recently deceased dearest friend and sole literary collaborator, Wolcott Balestier.

The marriage of Rudyard Kipling to Caroline Balestier, an American, was a puzzle for family and friends. Henry James wrote:

She was poor Wolcott Balestier's sister and is a hard devoted little person of whom I don't in the least understand his marrying. It's a union of which I don't forecast the future ... (as quoted by Carrington 1955:193).

Whatever the reasons for the marriage, it was, on the surface a happy one, certainly in the early years before her depression and their many tragedies marred their lives. Carrington (1955:193–194), the “official” biographer, suggests that it was bound up with his devotion to Wolcott and that he was carrying out Wolcott's death-bed request, others for example, Mason (1975:98,303); Cross (1992:142); Seymour-Smith (1989:200–201); *contra* Wilson (1977:277–278) feel that it had something to do with Kipling's guilt about his love for Wolcott, or that the sister was a substitute for her dead brother. Carrie with a fierce possessiveness (for a portrait of Carrie Kipling see “Epilogue: memoir by Mrs George Bambridge (formerly Elsie Kipling)”, in Carrington (1955:516) protected her husband from the world, built a laager around him and scrutinised any visitors who came to call. In all the homes in which they lived her work space was always situated outside his study door. She was an efficient, no-nonsense manager who kept the household running smoothly so that her husband's literary genius could not be disturbed.

The couple travelled extensively – this was the pattern of their early years together – on an extended honeymoon and finally found themselves in Carrie's

home territory in Brattleboro, Vermont, living in a rented house, Bliss Cottage. And it was bliss. Kipling was very happy and very productive. It was here that his beloved Josephine was born and that some of the stories that make up the two *Jungle books* were first written. Work on their home, to be named after the book he had written with Wolcott, commenced.

The happiness and productivity of their life in Vermont was interrupted only by more travels. In 1886 their second daughter, Elsie was born. This idyll was shattered by a ridiculous quarrel with Carrie's brother, the mad, bad Beatty Balestier, and the Kiplings fled America to return to England. Exiled from Vermont and Bombay, the two places in which he most wanted to live, the two places that were most closed to him, he found the rented house in which they lived cold and grey, the weather miserable (cold English weather was often a symbol in his writing of his longing for India). Finally a home was bought in Sussex and here their youngest child, John was born. Here, too, he began to write down the stories he had told Josephine in Vermont – these were later to be published together with others written in Cape Town, which the Kiplings visited for the first time as a family in 1898, in the *Just so stories*.

The following January, instead of visiting South Africa, the family travelled to New York to attend to, among other things, business affairs. Kipling and Josephine (just six), who had had a cold for a while, came down with double pneumonia. Father and daughter were critically ill, but Josephine's condition was further complicated by something akin to dysentery. But Kipling was the world's best-known writer and Josephine was moved away to the home of a friend, out of reach of the press. Kipling, to everyone's delight and surprise, recovered. He was told some time later that Josephine had died. From this he never recovered. He always had the sense that all energies were concentrated on his recovery, if he

had not been so famous perhaps she would have survived. Henry James referred to her as that “dear little surrendered, sacrificed soul” (Carrington 1955:291).

To Kipling, Josephine’s death was another exile and abandonment. She was his “Best Beloved” of the *Just so stories*, the little Taffimai Metallumai or Taffy (the pet name he had given her) of “How the first letter was written”, “How the alphabet was made” and “The Tabu tale”, three stories in which the relationship between a father and daughter are beautifully described. She was “the daughter that was all to him”.

The Kiplings returned to England to take up the threads of their lives and in January of the following year travelled to Cape Town to live in the Woolsack, the house built for them by Rhodes. Annual visits to the Cape continued until 1908, and there Kipling tried to recapture the Eden of his early years in India and the years in Vermont. But to no avail, the South African War had spoiled that and there was little feeling for the country and its people in his writings. The incomparable *Kim*, a tale of spy adventure and spiritual quest, was completed and published in 1901. It is considered the only one of his books which is not filled with violence and hatred. It was planned with his father, lovingly portrayed in the novel as the Curator of the Lahore Museum. Kim, was another one of Kipling’s characters who was an abandoned child, both his parents were utterly unsuitable and left him orphaned. He was fortunate that he had a foster parent, more loving, more present than his own. This was the Tibetan lama, travelling through India along the Grand Trunk Road in search of a certain River into which had fallen an arrow shot by Buddha himself. Kim joins him in this search, while pursuing his career as a spy for the British Secret Service. In this book Kipling is able to pour out his love for India, the scents, sounds and smells of the Paradise he knew before he was six and had seen a

little of again when he was a young man. But Kim, too, is confused, a child caught between two cultures which generated utterly conflicting loyalties.

Some peace came when the Kiplings moved to a new home in Sussex. Bateman's was to be his home until his death and it was here that the guardian angel that gave him inspiration from outside, his Daemon, helped him to create *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and fairies*, those two books that had to "be read by children, before people realized that they were meant for grown-ups" (Kipling 1937:190), and in which Elsie and John feature as Dan and Una.

The Kipling family, always rather exclusive, became more and more reclusive. He in his writing and his wife in her running of the household, her jealousy and nervous tension fenced him in "not only with the delights and warm magic of life and remembered innocence but also with his dread of the 'shadow of ancient regrets'. It was probably one way of keeping in the past while avoiding too close a scrutiny of the future" (Scheerer 1987:84). Life continued to be unkind to him. His politics and beliefs were unpopular, out of step with the rest of society. Tragedy was to strike again. War was declared and his young son, John, no scholar who closely resembled his uncle Beatty, attempted to obtain a commission in the army just before his 17th birthday. He was rejected on the grounds of his poor sight and his age. Kipling pulled some strings and the boy, striving to be the soldier his father wanted him to be, was given a commission in the Irish Guards. He went to France when he turned 18 and lasted but a month on the Front. He was one of the 20 000 British soldiers lost in the Battle of Loos. His body was never found in his parents' lifetimes, it was probably blown to bits. Two years later they received confirmation of his death.

The Kiplings were utterly broken. They retreated behind the laager once more and mourned alone. He had been devoted to their children and had wanted them to grow up happier than he had. Now two of them were dead. As before, he sought comfort in work, preparing a history of John's regiment, the two-volume *The Irish Guards in the Great War* which was published in 1923. In it John Kipling's name appears a few times in brief, largely repetitive entries. Kipling spent the rest of his life in pain, fearful that the duodenal ulcer that had long troubled him was, in fact, cancer.

I feel that it has been necessary for me to describe in some detail Kipling's life of tragedy and precarious existence, for all these factors influenced his writing and explain why it is that much of what he wrote is suffused with sadness – despite its great vitality. He seems to be saying that however exciting and Edenic the world might appear to be at the beginning it is bound to disappoint. As his life disappointed. But in addition to the sadness, the poignancy, there is also the anger, the unnecessary cruelty, the lust for revenge that occurs in his writing (apart, again, from *Kim*) and (as shown above) pervades the stories of Mowgli in *The Jungle books*.

Perhaps at this point I should examine *The Jungle books*. The theme of abandonment and exile appears over and over again in these stories. Mowgli is surely a classic case of an abandoned child. His parents leave him in the jungle when they are confronted by Shere Khan, the tiger. "Its parents have run off" (Kipling 1894:7), Shere Khan reports. Surely most parents would sacrifice their own lives in order to save that of their child? Mowgli was fortunate, for he found in the jungle (and again in the village) foster parents more loving, more present than his own. Mother Wolf says that she loves her Little Frog more than she ever loved her cubs. Descriptions of Mowgli's life in the jungle are idyllic

and Baloo, the bear and Bagheera, the black panther, are wonderfully loving and tolerant mentors.

But after Eden comes the Fall and Mowgli is cast out of the wolf pack and the jungle, although it is difficult for him to cut loose his ties. He is neither of the jungle or the village, but live in the village with the Man-Pack he must. His final departure from the jungle and his farewell to his friends is heart-breakingly told in "The Spring running". Here we have the end of childhood described.

The powerful images of hatred and lustful revenge that occur throughout *The Jungle books* are clearly visible in a story entitled "Letting in the jungle". In it Mowgli persuades the animals against their better judgment to destroy entirely the homes and produce of the villagers who have attacked the woman Messua, who believed Mowgli to be her son. Mowgli frees Messua and her husband, now he seeks revenge. "Messua had been kind to him, and, as far as he knew anything about love, he loved Messua as completely as he hated the rest of mankind" (Kipling 1895a:73). Mowgli's endearing characteristics, his ingenuity and, courage, are somewhat tarnished by this hatred and desire for revenge – he is driven by more than a need to survive. The reader understands him all the better for knowing something of his creator, but the account of his life cannot really be accepted as just a delightful set of children's stories.

There is no doubt that the traumatic events of Kipling's childhood made him the adult he became and affected the choices he made. His life choices – his home, friends, the causes he espoused, his contempt for intellectuals, his values – had a stranglehold on his writing and his personality. Particularly significant was his choice of mate. His wife was a controlling, possessive woman who barricaded

him from friend and foe alike. There seems to have been no moderating influence in his life – except that he was most comfortable in the company of children whom he loved unreservedly and understood completely. Perhaps the greatest choice he made was that he was unable to shake off the burden of his past and create stories in which these same burdens could be transformed into triumphs of the spirit.

The above covers the Kipling aspect of this paper. What is this new “literature” that is mentioned in the title and what is the connection between it and Kipling – a writer whose views are abhorrent to many of us today? I saw a linkage when I read in Hilda Bernstein’s remarkable *The Rift* the interviews with the children of political exiles. I remembered how moved I was when I saw (and later read the script of) Shawn Slovo’s *A World apart*. I identified in some ways with the children whose lives are described in the book and on film. I could see a connection between their – our – experiences and those of Kipling, although of course the experiences were utterly different. All these children suffered the pain of abandonment and exile, although in some cases the abandonment was not a physical one.

Children need to know and feel that their existence is important to their parents, that they are the centre of their parents’ universe, it is from this knowledge and these feelings that they acquire a self-esteem. To know that they are “loved” does not seem to be good enough. Bernstein quotes the following, taken from interviews with the children of political exiles:

“There were times when I felt I was competing with 30 million blacks for my parents’ attention”, and “I knew he was on the side of good... but I didn’t really understand why he was putting his politics before us” (Bernstein 1994:434), and “They should have thought about us as children. You make a decision about what you’re going to do; you have children, and you are aware that you’re bringing other people into the world, so therefore you have to think of them first” (Bernstein 1994:469).

In *A World apart*, Molly, the daughter-character says to Diana, the Ruth First/mother-character, “*Your* friends, Your friends, your work, that’s what’s most important. That’s all you care about” (Slovo 1988:108).

I know of one parent who said that she thought it enough that her children had a roof over their heads, clothes on their backs, food on the table and parents who came home at night. Compared to what other children in South Africa were getting, that might seem to be enough, and the complaints of these children churlish, but children, in fact, should have, need, are entitled to more. They need, above all, to be aware of how much their parents value their existence.

Apart from the sense of abandonment and the anger that many of the children feel about their parents’ choice of political commitment above family, there is also a sense of loss and a more personal exile, the loss of South Africa, of being an African and growing up in an African environment, and the exile from childhood and the extended family, as well as a sense of hopelessness, of not being able to fit in anywhere, of not being really accepted in an alien environment. The psychological wounds suffered by these children affected the choices they made in later life, in respect of relationships, education, lifestyle, family responsibilities. Some spoke of being damaged because of their childhood. Of course, once the families were in exile, the parents were lost to their children again, either because they were able to continue their political activities without fear of harassment by the South African security system or because that same system tracked them down and they died for their cause. The stories of the many children who were left behind in South Africa while their parents pursued their political objectives, who were abandoned physically as well as emotionally, remain to be told.

What all these children share in common is an ambivalence and a confusion. They are proud of their parents' involvement in the struggle for freedom in South Africa and that their actions were driven by morality and a profound sense of justice. Their parents were, after all, heroes fighting the evil empire of Apartheid. But in addition to this pride is the resentment that they, their needs, the daily round of their lives, became insignificant when ranged against the other priorities of their parents' lives, against the needs of all those "other" children. Were not the political parents, by putting the needs of their children on the back burner so they could pursue their own, simply following the seemingly irresistible "abandoning impulse" that Hoyme has identified and I described earlier? And if this were so could we not forgive them? At least their actions were not guided by selfishness, but rather by self-sacrifice (albeit, according to their offspring, a self-sacrifice that was misdirected). These parents cannot, after all, be equated with the parents (mother, in particular – mothers often seem to have a bad press – see Apseloff 1992a:106) of Hansel and Gretel, those classic abandoned children of Western literature.

The effect of exile from the country of one's happy childhood, before that childhood is completed, can also be profound. Such an experience is poignantly described in Eva Hoffman's account of her exile from Poland at the age of 13 (*Lost in translation: a life in a new language*. London, Minerva, 1991). She writes of the loss of Paradise and the sense of alienation she felt and the difficulties she endured when settling in a new country with an alien culture and a foreign language. Assimilation into the new society was difficult – and not always desired, as the links with home were thereby weakened and familiarity with the mother-tongue was lost. Some of South Africa's involuntary exiles describe this feeling exactly.

What have the experiences of the children of South African political exiles got to do with children's literature? Well, I would like to think that a "new literature"

about the experiences of these children of politics will emerge from the horrors of Apartheid. It must, in fact, be written not only, but also, because these are stories that need to be told. (I know of only one South African children's book that deals with exile and a longing for Africa. This is Patricia Pinnock's *Thobile's dream* (1992). In this book the chief character is a third generation South African – not a political exile – living in London who dreams of the animals of Africa. The animals step out of his dreams and he and his grandmother, who came to England as a young woman, determine to satisfy their longing for Africa.) Shattering experiences occurring in our own century have been described in children's books. In some of them the sufferings of the chief protagonists are used creatively to bring forth images of the good in human nature and to celebrate qualities of ingenuity and courage.

I believe that these children have something in common with Kipling. Although their backgrounds are utterly different from that of the controversial and enigmatic "poet of Empire", they share with him unhappy childhood experiences. I believe, too, that, just as Kipling's childhood experiences were a spur to his creativity, in the lives of South Africa's involuntary exiles there is much meat for a children's literature. These stories must be told so that they become part of a healing process. I trust that the writers of these yet-to-be stories will not follow the example set by Kipling and allow the triumph of the human spirit to be overshadowed by past hurts. It might take some years for personal experiences to emerge as part of a popular children's literature, as if they have to be chewed and digested before they can be rendered suitable for children. They must present the truth without traumatising the reader and it will be impossible to write of these children's experiences without also describing the horrors of Apartheid. Although comparisons of this kind are odious, it is for this reason that a true children's literature has taken so long to emerge from the Holocaust, as most of these books appeared in print only in the 1970s and beyond (Kimmel 1990).

Our writers of the future can learn from the children's literature of the Holocaust. In many of these books the protagonists have to endure horrifying and inhuman experiences. They face a loss of innocence when confronted with the behaviour of their fellow man and with what they must do in order to ensure their own survival. Survival is their only goal, so that they might bear witness to the horrors of war and man's inhumanity to man (Apseloff 1992b:78), and so that what has happened will never happen again. Particularly noteworthy is Uri Orlev's *The Island on Bird Street* (London, Hutchinson, 1984). The author, himself a victim of the Holocaust, who lived through the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, writes about Alex, a lone Jewish boy, living in the ruins of the ghetto of an unnamed city. He is awaiting the return of his father who has left him for months to fend for himself. Alex survives like Robinson Crusoe, taking what he can from the environment around him. He witnesses or participates in many horrors and has to cope with situations utterly beyond his control. He is, however, filled with hope that his father will return for him: he is a child who has triumphed over adversity, despite the loss of his childhood and his innocence. He has been created by an author who has dug into the sewer and dredged up the good, and who tells a story with insight and humour.

How our stories will be told is a matter of choice. I do hope that they will be told with such humour and insight. I hope, too, that we will choose to dump the baggage of our past and rejoice without rancour at what has been achieved in our country thanks, *inter alia*, to our parents' commitment to the Struggle. We owe it to them and to ourselves that the truth of the past be told to South Africa's children, so that this past will never be repeated. Our choice must be that in the telling of our stories we will reject the example set by Rudyard Kipling. Our stories should not be suffused with hatred, confusion and a desire for revenge. They should be ones in which the human spirit triumphs over many

adversities and there is a striving to make things better. In a metaphor that is appropriate for our land and this province, we can excavate the earth and find a lode of gold. In this way our protagonists – who could be ourselves – will triumph in life.

Note

This paper could not have been written without the insights of many people who broadened my knowledge and understanding – to them I give thanks.

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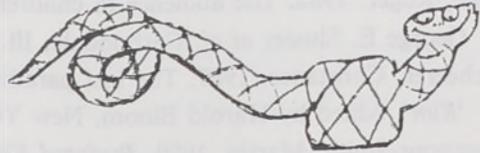
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Discovering one's African identity:

two Kenyan voices speak

jenny janisch



Come and listen to the voices of Deborah Masters and Joseph Kituku, two young people living in pre-independence Kenya. Listen, as through their narration they chart their course through the emotional upheavals of adolescence and in the process reveal something of their identities.

Here is Deborah responding to a “lesson” in history given by Benjamin, who grew up with Deborah’s father and who is now a lawyer in Nairobi:

And the land, the soul. He said the soul. We’ve taken their soul. We must give it all back. We must go away. But we can’t go to England. Where do we belong then? Where do we belong? (165).

Us and them. White coloniser and black colonised. The dilemma of later-generation colonists. Where does Deborah, a farmer’s daughter born and bred in Kenya and closely in touch with the land, belong? Her whole concept of her self is rooted spatially in the farm Taratibu. As Linda Warley (1993:28) writes: “the particularly ambivalent position of the settler in what has always been occupied, not empty space, forces the issue of belonging.” Deborah certainly does not regard herself as a colonist, particularly in the way Memmi (1990) speaks about colonists whom he describes as people who do not identify with the country they

live in and regard the mother country as “home”. She eventually realises that she truly belongs in her African environment.

Now listen to Joseph Kituku after the funeral service for Kyanzo, who is the Master in the title of Mulwa’s novel:

As we left, I puzzled over what the Reverend had said, and why it was that we always waited till it was too late before we had compassion and love for one another, why we hated, betrayed, killed and subjected one another to misery if the end result of all the evils of this body was this grave? Why didn’t we see even a year ahead of us? (201).

Being a black Kenyan he would seem to be talking about the way the colonised are treated by the coloniser, but this is not entirely so. He is pondering a more general truth about humanity and his use of the pronoun “we” is not exclusive but inclusive. His African identity, however, has certainly been affected by his colonial position as his name clearly shows.

Both Kituku and Deborah are adolescents at that crucially pivotal stage of transition from childhood to adulthood, discovering their identities and establishing their personal moral codes. Both go to school away from home and both experience major emotional upheavals which materially affect their orientation in moral space.

Deborah is in her final year of primary school. She and her younger brother are boarders because they live on a farm in the Highlands area of Kenya. This is 1952, the time of the Mau Mau uprising when the white farming community is in a particularly vulnerable position and so she tells us: “Every time I go back to school nowadays I keep thinking what if.. what if.. Oh please, God, don’t let

anything happen. Please God!”(2) But the inevitable does happen: her father is killed, her mother badly burned and the farmhouse destroyed through the agency of Kamau, a man who had worked for the family for many years. He was approached by the “fighters of the forest” and given an ultimatum – “unless he took the oath to kill the white man, he Kamau would see his children killed before him” (154).

Deborah is profoundly affected by these traumatic events. But she courageously seeks to understand a very different point of view in order to come to terms with the loss of her father, especially in the light of her Christian belief in a kind and caring God, and her position as a white coloniser. Eventually she and her family return to the farm to start again. As Deborah walks up to visit the wife of Kamau she says:

... the further I walk up the hill through the grass paddocks the happier I feel. Just the smell of the molasses grass and the dust and the dung and the fir trees of the timber plantation and the white helichrysums with bitter herb smells. I realize how I've been longing and longing for it ... Now I'm home. I'm really home (176).

The young Kituku spends his Standard Six school year at the Dickensian establishment called Kyambe Primary School because his father believes that there “he will receive the best education possible and the best Protestant upbringing possible” (3). As the school is far from his family home he is put under the care of his father's friend, Kyanzo, who has a home near the school which is looked after by his servant, Hamad. During this formative year Joseph (to use his “Christian” name) is exposed to the harsh discipline of the school and Kyanzo, the loving care of Hamad and to the adult world of corruption and powerful emotions. Through Hamad he learns about the position of the colonised in Kenya and the value of the individual, and through the school he learns about

the value of education and book-learning. Caught up unwittingly in the triangular relationship which develops between Hamad, Kyanzo and Eileen (Kyanzo's wife), Joseph is forced through Kyanzo's jealous machinations to betray Hamad to the authorities and this leads to Hamad's arrest. Hamad had killed the exploitative white farmer he once worked for in an emotional reaction to the callous flogging to death of a young girl. Afterwards he sought sanctuary with Kyanzo who, in turn, exploits him as a virtual slave. Shortly after manipulating Hamad's removal, Kyanzo dies in what appears to be an accident and it is his funeral which leads Joseph to moral musings about human nature and identity.

Identity implies a concept of self as an inner, spiritual being. The answer to the question: Who am I? is not simply a name and a genealogy, although the names of both protagonists are particularly telling. Kituku has an English Christian name attached to his African name. This indicates a dichotomy in his concept of self which his narration confirms. Deborah's surname is Masters – a clear reference to her family's position in Kenya.

The answer to the question of identity must include the way a person is oriented in moral space, "a space," says Taylor "in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary" (1989:28). Moreover, identity is not static; lives are constantly in a process of becoming or evolving. This means that identity involves not only who we are but where we are going. Our lives and selves are grasped in a narrative and our identities expressed through language.

The identities of Kituku and Deborah emerge through their positions as first person narrators. A narrator's manner of expression (the surface structure) as

much as the content (the deep structure) allows the reader to construct an image of the narrator of that particular work. The narrator's choice of surface structures from the many possible alternatives for expressing the deep structure enables the reader to derive the tone, rhythm and thought patterns of the narrator. This distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self may be termed "mind-style". The I-figure or narrator is constructed via a consistent set of options in which the presented world is cut to one pattern which creates an impression of a particular mind-style.

Joseph Kituku, the narrator of *Master and servant*, begins his narration in the present tense:

A hot afternoon. Not a cloud not even a wisp of it crosses the sky. I am standing under the eaves of our mud house, looking at a pillar of dust spiralling on the plains from earth to sky and wondering if Moses would have used *this* for guidance in the desert when I hear murmurs on the path down the hill. Two men are coming up this hill towards our home. One of them is familiar, so familiar that I wince. Everytime he comes up that hill (which has been very often) and finds me at home without a book or scraps of paper, indicative of a young scholar, in my hands, I get a thorough beating on my buttocks (1).

The boy reveals how his thinking has been conditioned by the Old Testament and his father's harsh discipline. Education is a painful, but absolutely essential enterprise. As Western-style education in a so-called Christian environment of the "spare the rod and spoil the child" variety is what his father sees as advantageous, this is what Kituku must get.

Having drawn the reader into the immediacy of his childhood, Joseph moves back and narrates the story mostly in the past tense. Thus, his childhood self is seen from his adult perspective. This distancing allows Joseph to generalise and

draw conclusions which would not have been available to him as a child. It also allows him to use vocabulary and concepts in a language he was not very familiar with as a young boy, but most importantly it allows him to use a child's naivety, literal understanding and limited viewpoint to humorous effect. Humour of the Dickensian type is a marked characteristic of his style.

For example, after Hamad has given him a thorough scrubbing in preparation for his first day at his new school he says sardonically:

Thus, washed clean, I emerged from the pond, not without some hope that a voice would waft down upon us from the forest up above and proclaim that the Lord was very pleased with me (16).

Then the headmaster initiates him into the school rules:

... we delved into the narrow and intricate pathways of school rules, religious rules, hygienic rules and, in short, I was so harassed by the rules of Kyambe School that I didn't make any movement without being conscious that there was some rule against it. And by the end of the day ... I felt as if I was carrying a huge placard with the inscription THOROUGHLY RULED on my back (26).

He attends the morning parade and observes:

At the centre of the courtyard was a flagpole and beside it and holding the flag, stood a most unusually disciplined schoolboy whose only difference with the flagpost was that he had two legs to his credit and the post had none (27).

After raising the flag "the specimen of discipline":

... walked backwards, faced the flag with satisfaction, [and] stamped both his legs like an impatient he-goat at the sight of an insoluble mystery (28).

The child Kituku is suitably impressed by the Coketown style of Kyambe Primary but the adult Joseph is able to satirise it.

Through his school education he learns to become as he says “a very monument of facts and theories” but because his schooling is not truly educational he is unable to understand or explain to Eileen and Hamad its value. When Eileen, Hamad and Joseph were out working the lands Eileen:

... once taunted me and asked me if I thought I was a good scholar? I said I believed I would be. Then she asked me, “Scholar-that-is-to-be. Tell me; when will they ever teach you how to work upon the land – how to use the panga and the hoe?” I replied that I would learn that art by and by, although I knew little of it and hoped that there was a lot of that intelligence high up in the academic tree. Then she said, “It’s a false hope, scholar. Those white people are all scholars like you. Yet they know very little about basic things” (118).

Upon another occasion she asked:

... whether I didn’t think theirs a better occupation than all the books on earth. I was not ashamed then, but now that I have grown much and read much and have become a very monument of facts and theories, I *am* ashamed to say that I agreed with her and forgive myself because I was only a child who could be easily swayed by the smallest argument (134).

This, in spite the way he portrays Hamad as the ideal farmer who produces harmony both in the land and in those who work with him. Hamad is his role model and loving teacher, yet Joseph opts for the questionable values of the education being offered to black children at that time. Interestingly, though, when Joseph goes to organise his transfer to a school closer to home he finds that Hamad’s influence has affected his Arithmetic mark. The boy got the processes right but all the answers wrong because “I felt I was ... solving the wrong problem” (202).

Earlier in the year, Joseph was teaching Hamad to read and do sums until Hamad questioned the arithmetical process by which individual items are reduced to mere numbers, relating the concept to “this colonial government” and its treatment of the black people it rules as “a *mass*, a number of objects that count for nothing” (92). At the time Joseph does not understand his argument and even later he says, “I did not understand it or his hatred of what he called an ‘idea’. And I must say that up till now I have not been able to follow his argument” (94).

Puzzled as the boy is about the two kinds of education he experiences, he has no doubt about his moral dilemma because of the role he is forced to play in Hamad’s arrest and removal from their lives. There is no way that he can avoid betraying Hamad and he knows this when he says:

The white man stopped and grabbed me – suddenly. Then, from the inside of his breast pocket he whipped out an old newspaper cutting ... Still holding me, he flapped the paper in the wind to unfold it. “Look at this picture,” he snapped. And in the dying light of that Saturday evening, Hamad’s face stared at me. It could have been the face of a dead man but for the eyes that pierced and reproached me for what I was about to do.

But Hamad does not. Instead he says:

“Little teacher, do not blame yourself. Even without you, Kyanzo and this white man would have found me ... They *must* win. And that’s why I must go. But wherever I am, I will remember you. I shall remember my little teacher” (188).

Then he leaves Joseph Kituku a mission:

“Continue to teach always. And always strive and learn to teach the way to bridge the gulf between men” (188).

By the end of the novel, the reader is not at all sure that the adult Joseph Kituku has been able to do this. He seems to have opted for the morally dubious benefits of White education, although the *author*, David Mulwa, wants the reader to be influenced by Hamad's views. In fact, Joseph ends his narration, indicating that he has not yet found where he really belongs:

... many of us still spend our lives in our houses and out of them – Looking for home (206).

The reader of *Flowers of the thorn* is also immediately drawn into Deborah's worldview and, because the narration is mostly in the present tense, is able to follow her closely as she struggles to understand those inevitable realities of life – change and death. As a corollary she seeks to gain a clearer understanding of the socio-political situation which led to her father's death.

Deborah's language is characterised by its poetic intensity, its frequent use of images and symbols, and its accurate, precise descriptions. She is intensely aware of her surroundings and records sounds, sights and smells vividly and personally. Going back by train to her final year at primary school she reveals some of these characteristics:

I try and read again but suddenly the train goes roaring into a patch of forest. Dark, bitter earth smelling. I hate forest now. They say that's where they're all hiding. All around. Just waiting Oh Lord, I hate forest (1).

A little later, however, the train goes through a cutting and:

Clouds break apart in the west and sun pierces through, with rays like bright windmills. Blinding! White! Heavenly ... And slowly across the clouds comes a long flock of egrets; white, flicker-white, grey underwing, floating, flickering across the sun, across heaven (3).

Deborah's growing-up experiences are closely linked with spiritual growth and so are often couched in religious terms.

Her upbringing, like Joseph's, has been Christian – but of the New Testament sort: her view of God is of a caring father who loves his children and watches over them constantly. So when her father is killed her faith is severely shaken. On the day of the funeral, hiding away from everyone in the barn, she sees a dead swallow which confronts her with further heartache and disillusionment:

Though it's dead it's very beautiful ... Is it so beautiful to be dead then ... I want to hold it, slide my hand underneath – aaagh! Drop it! Worms! Maggots! ... You liar, God! I hate you, you liar! (142).

Having verbally rejected God she is tormented by a feeling of guilt which is only resolved after she deliberately listens in to her mother's report on the deaths at *Taratibu*. She is so upset by the bald details that she runs instinctively to Leopard's Rock, which she earlier described as a "holy place". She attempts the difficult cliff ascent alone for the first time, without her father's support. As she climbs, a storm, symbolic of the trauma she is experiencing, builds up over the forest; lightning and thunder force her to reach the cliff top quickly to find shelter. While taking refuge in a cave next to a rock pool, she picks up a stone and thoughtlessly throws it at three dassies which have come to drink there. She injures the smallest and has to deliver the *coup de grace*. With hands sticky with his blood, she faces the truth that in all of us there is an ugly, cruel element. She feels that God can never forgive her for her wickedness. At this moment of ugly self-discovery – "I think I'm quite a different person from what I thought I was. I feel sick inside" (171) – she is aware that she is not alone. Then "these words come very clearly into my head, not my ears: I loved you before you were born. I have never left you. Go back and be at peace" (171). For a long time she stands watching the sunset, before taking the forest path downhill.

It is significant that she finds in the forest the “tree with long red thorns on it covered in white blossom that smells like honey” (171). Forest, for Deborah, has been associated with Mau Mau and fear and lurking death; now it provides a symbol of the central concern of the novel. It speaks of growth and the paradox that pain and beauty co-exist on one branch, that nothing and no-one is all good or all bad, that one must understand and accept this truth, in terms of oneself as much as of others.

Complementary to the images and symbols are Deborah’s dreams which punctuate the narration, recording her subconscious linking of the elements of the tragedy. Firstly they foreshadow the death of her father, but later allow her to come to terms with her need to forgive Kamau who was the agent of his death. Her last recorded dream occurs 10 days before Christmas when the visiting priest tells Deborah that to forgive Kamau is “probably the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do” (148). In her dream she tries to protect her father from Kamau.

No! You shan’t have him! No! I’ll kill you! I am strong, very strong, and like a beast I rush at him [Kamau] and his hand comes out like a claw but I twist it off and snap it away and I take his head and smash it open on the rocks and darkness pours out ... there is crying. Crying, only crying ... and the blackness of Kamau’s poring like blood over the stones. Crying. Kamau’s crying, crying (149).

On awakening, she notices the old Indian tea-tin which reminds her of how Kamau once comforted her by filling the tin with fudge and coconut biscuits to ease the pain of going back to school. “If Kamau did that, did he hate us? Why was he crying in my dream? Why did I hear him crying?” (150). She seeks out Benjamin to find out the truth: “I want to know why Kamau could be so kind and yet he killed my father” (151). In response Benjamin says:

“Deborah, if you really want to listen to the truth it will not be easy. Many of your people have hidden the truth. When you hear it, the truth might be bitter. We in Gikuyu say that the more bitter a medicine is, the better it is.” He looks at me hard for a while, saying nothing. Then he says, “When you are crying you only hear the sound of your own crying. Now you have come to talk. Now you must sit up and listen to the crying of others” (151).

And she does, enabling her to make another step forward in her development towards adulthood.

All these linguistic clues lead to an assessment of Deborah as a sensitive, intelligent 13-year-old with a strong aesthetic sense. From the opening page she displays a sense of responsibility as regards her role as a school prefect and as an older sister, and gradually she learns about her situation as a white person in a colonial situation.

Through following the intensely personal youthful learning experiences of these two young people discovering themselves and their place in a colonial society, we, the readers of their narrations, are given an insight into “other worlds, other lives” and are richer for the experience.

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Writing about "others" from the inside

rhonda bunbury

During 1995 to 1996 there is a research project at Deakin University in process and this paper serves the purpose of a preliminary position paper for this project.

The project entitled "Youth confronts racism through literature" received funding this year from the Department of the Prime Minister and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. It will explore the reception of "multicultural literature" with the central focus being the reception of multicultural youth literature by youth. Specifically, orientation around themes of racism was sought by the government of the day as part of its declared "Year of Tolerance". The researchers will therefore be going to centres where racism – of an overt nature – is known to be a problem. Young people will be asked to read selected works, to respond in small group discussions to the literature and the multicultural/racist themes explored through the literature. An outward manifestation of young readers subjective positions will also be recorded through written responses. Here the focus is likely to shift from the published author's position to that of the young people themselves as they write about their experiences of racism from within the multicultural context in which they live and go to school.

Many of the young people being considered for this exercise (from the industrial and provincial city of Geelong as well as within the inner suburbs of the capital

city of Melbourne) will be neither keen readers nor writers. Visits from several published writers are seen as necessary incentive for the young people to become involved. Extracts of the writers' multicultural works will be presented to youthful participants with the aid of "book gigs" which take the form of dramatic interpretations presented by youth. These presentations serve to introduce the writers who then interact with their youthful audience answering questions and encouraging a personal written response. This process in itself is another form of reception to be recorded by the researchers.

The Concept of "other"



The concept of "other" in literary studies is important for the "Youth Confronts Racism through Literature" even though it is an evolving one, and one which a number of scholars have endeavoured to theorise. For the purpose of this paper, the "other" in youth literature draws on the work of those who are endeavouring to establish a theoretical foundation for multicultural literature. The reason for beginning here is that most nations seem to have an element of multiculturalism in their shifting populations and this means that cultural as well as social and political events are obliged to shift their ideological base in order to accommodate "the other" who now see themselves as part of mainstream cultures. These contexts were evident in the paper presented at the 11th biennial congress of the International Research Society For Children's Literature which was held in September 1993 at Geelong under the title, "Crossing the Boundaries: Multiculturalism in Children's Literature" (papers to be published by Greenwood Press in 1996). The concept of "other" was given a different emphasis in the following year at a conference held in Malaysia, 8-10 November, 1994. The topic was "A view of our ethnocentric perspectives in literature", where the emphasis was the indigenous

people in many lands who are producing literary works and who see themselves, not as “other” but as the authentic and even “first” voice in the land – any land. From this perspective, indigenous people and their narratives become the central point of focus and the dominant or majority cultures become the “Other”. These two different starting points help demonstrate the shifting nature of the concept of “other” even before we begin an exploration of the literature before us.

The “Other” in youth literature

There are at least three competing grounds for considering the “other” in Australian literature.

1. The mainstream literature or “ethnic majority” literature where the focus is Anglo-Australian in its origins, aspirations, memory, nostalgia – where everything else is “other”.
2. The indigenous voice which has been barely heard in literature, unless it is the “other” noted by the ethnic majority, acknowledged as partial and given central focus only with reluctance. Fortunately this is changing, particularly since the inception of Mugabala Books.
3. The ethnic minority literatures which are accustomed to being sidelined as “other”, speaking with the voices of migrants newly arrived, nostalgic for the comfort and acceptance of the place of origin yet also beginning to speak through third generation writers of their own experiences “inside” the new country in a place where the dominant ethnic majority become “Other”.

It is this third position which is the focus of this paper. The context is a third generation Italian Australian where the writer speaks directly through a first

person narrative in Melina Marchetta's (1992) *Looking for Alibrandi*. The narrator has lost the nostalgia of the customary position (it is irrelevant to her). She does not call on the memories, the desire or the intimacy assumed in the old country, rather, she exposes this nostalgia seeing it as past – though as relevant to her “Nonna” (Grandmother) and maybe her mother – but for herself it is confining and limiting. This nostalgia she sees in her elders, she acknowledges as her Italian inheritance but it is an inheritance she tolerates rather than embraces – at least initially.

Written in the first person, the “other” in this book is not her Italian self (a member of an ethnic minority) but the mainstream ethnic majority, Anglo-Australian, “Other”. For herself, in her daily life, she fully acknowledges the Italian self, seeing it being reflected in both personal and interpersonal ways, although she does wish to be accepted by the majority “Other”. So the shift is between the inner self and self as “other” (outside the mainstream) with the mainstream becoming “Other”. This may seem a confusing distinction so it is useful to draw on Bakhtin's (1984) idea of the “dualistic subject” (self/other). Another possible theoretical position is that outlined by Kristeva (1989) who refers to “the subject in process” that is, where the deconstructed self in many versions becomes the focus. The separation out of aspects of self/subjectivity helps the reading and reconstruction of the narrative; and in particular, it helps unravel the position of Josephine, the narrator. We are also hopeful that it will provide the theoretical background to the empirical research which is to proceed during 1995 to 1996 for the “Youth confronts racism through literature” project.

The “Self” of Josephine

The self of Josephine is clearly Italian in so many ways: the close bond between members of the extended family; Italian outgoing, emotionally expressive ways;

the community's watchful, reporting eyes; older generational controls on the young. Yet Josephine acknowledges the veracity of her Italian self as perceived by Others; that is, notably the longer term Anglo-Australian others. Examples of the cues recognised by these "Others" include: arranged marriages; false, utopian views of virginity; supremacy of husband's will; the proliferation of pizzas and facial hair (amongst women); a grandmother in mourning black for forty years; big Italian barbeques (not sausages on the "barbie" but left over pizza, schnitzel and egg plant!). Does she accept all this? In a way yes, in a way no. For a time, Josie sees a self as wanting to fight and reject all this, become emancipated, and hence (as she sees it) Australian in the process.

"Me? I'd like to be a rebel Italian. I'd like to shock everyone and tell them to stick to their rules and regulations. If anyone ever died, I'd wear bright colours to the funeral and laugh the loudest" (Marchetta 1992:152).

Yet in her innermost self, she sees that she will always be "other".

"We live in the same country, but we're different. What's taboo for Italians isn't taboo for Australians" (Marchetta 1992:152).

Whatever her aspirations, she sees she will never be as Australian as the majority.

"There is this spot inside me that will always be Italian" (Marchetta 1992:152).

So being Italian, she accepts. What she resents most and what she perceives keeps her the outsider is her illegitimacy. This strikes at the core – both personally and at her Italian sense of community. This is the innermost self which she perceives will always keep her as "other" – even within the Italian community. It is this shifting point of view of the narrative which makes for a

most productive reading of *Looking for Alibrandi*. First person narratives are generally considered to be problematic and they are often seen to be simple outpourings of the author. But once we forget the point of view of the author and trace the point of view of the narrator, responding to the shifting positions, we begin to see the complexity of the “other’s” position.

Multiculturalism as problematic

Multicultural life is more often than not perceived as a “problem”, a mode of existence where there’s a deficit, where the “other” is expected to be part of the mainstream. At least this has been the position historically and Fasil Risvi (1989) reminds us that from a political as well as social point of view, the aim has always been assimilation.

The policy of assimilation was clearly and unambiguously designed to preserve the hegemony of the Anglo-Australian ruling class. Yet it was sold to the immigrants in a language that suggested meritocracy, egalitarianism and equality of opportunity. According to the rhetoric used, immigrant groups were encouraged to assimilate into an homogenous culture so that they too could have an opportunity to take an equal and informed part of the maintenance of Australian society (Risvi 1989:8).

Assimilation is Josie’s initial aim and only gradually does she shift to her acceptance of her difference. Initially in the novel Josie aches to be accepted, to be part of the “in crowd” (152). She sees that her circle of friends, by and large, is drawn together because they are all “other”, all on the outside: Anne because of her hypersensitivity, Sera because she is so overtly brazen and promiscuous, and Lee because she is a middle-class scholarship fellow. These are the underdogs, these are her friends, they need each other.

“I suppose we’ve done well for a group which the elite of St Martin’s says shouldn’t be at the school.” (Marchetta 1992:22).

But the reader does not accept this view, gradually we see her underlying appreciation of who she is – “a wog” – and proud of it. Her aspirations for the trappings of wealth: money, prestige, the new Volvo, and perfect white skin (21) are what the reader comes to see as superficial and not the “real” Josie.

Positioning

What is it that persuades a reader to focalise with Josie the “wog” instead of the wealthy youth from establishment families, such as John Barton, whose family expects him to become prime minister; or Poison Ivy who is destined to be his companion at parties, social events and probably in future life? A reader need only attend to the descriptive language used to present these people, for example, the “pretentious try hards” who are “always laughing in a fake way” (81). This language is a revelation to the reader and positions Josie unconsciously outside their circle though willfully within. She wants to be part of them, to be accepted by them but has not the level of hypocrisy required.

It is Josie’s positioning of herself which provides the thrust for the story and is the clue to the reader’s response. It is here that the work of Stewart Hall (1989) supplies the appropriate theory. He explores the notion of “positionality” and through this means gives shape to the subjective self. He sees that one’s position socially, culturally, historically helps define one ethnically. It is not biology, not geography, it is one’s “position” in a society which gives meaning to one’s ethnic centre of being.

The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and all knowledge is contextual (Hall 1989:29).

Josie's self positioning is not static within the novel and neither does it need to be. Hall (1989) reminds us that absence of a permanent position does not imply the absence of meaning, but rather, because positioning is always temporary, meanings are always provisional (Hall 1989). Her perceived difference as a member of an ethnic minority is at first expounded with regret but later accepted with pride. Several key factors contribute to this.

1. She begins to accept who she is and as she sees the apparently ideal world of John Barton – of whom everything was expected and for whom everything was possible, crash into suicide along with his Nihilist view of his position in the world.

“I am somewhere else, now, outside” (Marchetta 1992:238).

This, from the most “insider” of the lot!

2. As she meets and comes to know her father.
3. And most of all, as she realises that illegitimacy was not her burden, and not even her mother's but her grandmother's.

Thus we see what Hall (1989) means by the concept of identity “as process rather than fact”. As narrator, Josie achieves this by positioning herself both inside and outside “the system of representation” or in Alibrandi's terms, both inside and outside the (ethnic minority) Italianate community; as well as outside, *then* inside the ethnic majority (Anglo-Australian) culture. Using Hall's (1989) emphasis on history, this becomes the important feature of family history conveyed by the narrator which deserves our attention.

The Third generation

The historical perspective is sensitively conveyed via the voices of three generations in the novel: Josie, her mother and grandmother. Each one tells her own story since coming to/being born in Australia. It is significant that Josie is third generation Italian in Australia. No longer is the role of “victim” here – a common feature of ethnic minority adult literature where writers tell of their harrowing experiences of migration. Gunew draws attention to this feature of ethnic minority writing:

In so far this feature of ethnic minority voices at all in Australian writing, we are accustomed to hearing them as victims, doubly enhanced by the first person mode (Gunew 1994:94).

Such a heart-rending position is present in *Looking for Alibrandi* but not in Josie herself. She hears of this second hand (along with the reader) from her grandmother’s personal narrative (her “Nonna” bore a child by another man – an Australian – outside of marriage, while she was married to an Italian man in Australia). At the telling of this experience it is Josie who is “outside” the context and she strives to understand the loneliness, the despair, the impact of isolation, the loss of community. Yet Josie’s ethnicity is no guarantee of comprehension. Initially she sees her grandmother, her “Nonna” as hypocrite, as one falsely seeking sympathy, when the victim’s role was more deservedly her mother’s – or so she thought.

She dominated our lives hypercritically and made herself look the victim when in actual fact it was Mumma who was the victim (Marchetta 1992:220).

The shifting point of view is important for the novel (and for an informed reader response). The compelling catalyst of the book is not Josie’s story and the discovery

of her father at all, nor is it the story of her first love, the uncertainties, the pressures and the jealousies, but rather, it is her Nonna's harrowing confession. Her Nonna's love for the Australian lover, the subsequent conception of Josie's mother, the tacit acceptance of her husband's total domination (basically because of his importance and her perceived "cheating" in the marriage bed), were all exchanged for a position within marriage for a daughter conceived in lonely despair – through unaccustomed gentle and considerate love-making out of marriage. (Remember, these were Italian Catholic values and this was the 1950s in Australia when divorce was both rare and cause of a woman's shame, and an illegitimate child brought her and her family only disgrace and pain).

While Marchetta's (1992) novel still swings on the more conventional migrant story where the immigrant is decidedly "other" its conviction depends on the third generational position of Josie. She does eventually hear and respond sympathetically and lovingly to her Nonna's confession and accepts her version of history. So too does the reader. It is this process which brings the reader "inside" Nonna's first generation migrant story – at least to the extent that Josie (with whom we focalise most) takes her story within so that Nonna – and other immigrants like her – are a little less "other". It is the third generation of ethnic minority writers who see beyond the migrant "other"/outcast and who in the process, force a national acceptance of difference and hence foster a gradual shift in national consciousness.

Prevailing stereotypes of national culture are being interrogated by second generation writers perched strategically and knowingly between cultures (Gunew 1994:10–11).

Class consciousness

Intricately linked with the migrant position is that of class says Gunew (1994:9) and this is endorsed in *Looking for Alibrandi*. Josie desires to be

upwardly mobile and she is resentful of the very “yuppies” she would love to join.

It is only Jacob Coote (her boyfriend, who is self-proclaimed working-class) who recognises the class inferiority which she feels and lives, is fed by herself alone. He sees that it is this inner sense which keeps her as an ethnic illegitimate other.

“Your problems are out there, I believe that. But they’re small. They only grow out of proportion when they climb inside your head. They grow because of insignificant people like Carly and Poison Ivy and Sera who feed on them because they know how you feel” (Marchetta 1992:146).

She achieves her emancipation, as she calls it but it is less than convincing, as given her newfound father who doubles in the role of successful lawyer, the reader sees that she can simply walk away from her former self where she was identified as “other”:

- by her position as (daughter of an) immigrant;
- by her lower middle-class status confirmed by the scholarship position;
- by her illegitimacy;
- by her position as granddaughter/daughter of a “victim”.

Again, it is Joseph Coote, the one “without pretension” (145) who sees that she can walk away from all this and join the mainstream as an Italian barrister (and daughter of a successful and established barrister).

“The rich marry the rich Josie and the poor marry the poor. The dags marry the dags and the wogs marry the wogs. The western suburbs marry the western and the north shore marry the north shore. Sometimes they cross breed though and marry into the eastern suburbs” (Marchetta 1992:144).

Jacob is mainstream Anglo-Australian, not immigrant other, yet because of his class, he recognises that in a sense, it is he who will always be “other”. Even if a form of emancipation is possible for him, he will be the mechanic (not the barrister) hence his class origins will keep him as “other” unless he is with his own kind – and this does not mean Josie. One may well speculate; with whom will young readers focalise most: Josie’s emancipation or Jacob’s realisation?

Conclusion



From within the first person narrative position of Josie, her view from inside the migrant other is ultimately very positive – if not entirely convincing. And it is because the book is both written and narrated by a third generation Italian-Australian writer that cultural difference is represented without being appropriated (Gunew 1994:29). Furthermore, through this novel cultural difference is emphasised and celebrated, not just the more passive position of cultural diversity (Bakhtin 1984:40). In the process the dominant Anglo-Australian, position is opened, questioned and set back on its heels – just a little.

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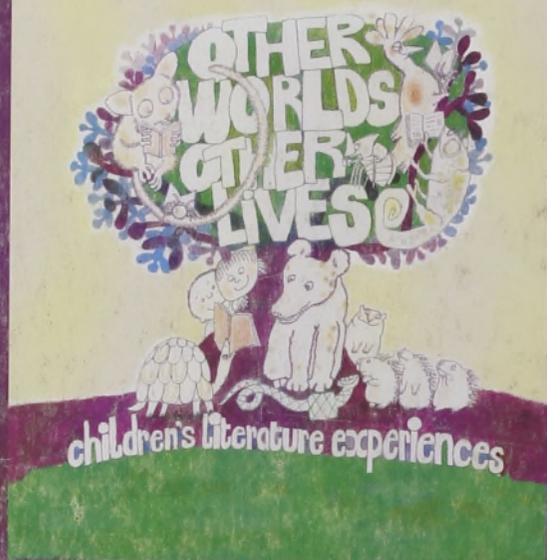
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