

WHITE SKIN UNDER AN AFRICAN SUN:

(WHITE) WOMEN AND (WHITE) GUILT IN
J.M. COETZEE'S DISGRACE, BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S
THE POISONWOOD BIBLE AND DORIS LESSING'S THE
GRASS IS SINGING.

by

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I declare that

White Skin Under An African Sun: (white) women and (white) guilt in J.M.Coetzee's Disgrace, Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible and Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing

is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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4/06/2001
Date

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Summary

In the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa J.M.Coetzee writes of the "system" of guilt and shame, debt and retribution which operates throughout society. He and writers like Doris Lessing and Barbara Kingsolver tell stories which traverse and explore the paths tracked by society's quest for healing and restitution. (White) women too, Coetzee's protagonist (in Disgrace) muses, must have a place, a "niche" in this system. What is this "niche" and what role do the women in these texts play in the reparation of colonial wrong? How is their position dictated by discourses which acknowledge the agency of the (female) body in epistemologies of guilt and power?

This mini-dissertation attempts to trace the figure of the white woman in three late 20th-/early 21st-century postcolonial literary texts, in order to read the phrases of meaning that have been inscribed on her body. The novels read are J.M.Coetzee's Disgrace, Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible and Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing.

Key terms: postcolonial; whiteness; women; guilt; power; literary; bodies; retribution; reconciliation.

Chapter 1: Introduction

(White) women and (white) guilt

The faces of the two men as they stood over (her dead) body, gazing down at it, made him feel uneasy, even afraid....This profound instinctive horror and fear astonished him.

The Grass Is Singing (Doris Lessing)¹

I'll tell him that (my face) is just as ugly, too, and my skin is about that scaly....I need him to insist that I am useful and good, that he wasn't out of his mind to marry me, that my white skin is not the standard of offence.

The Poisonwood Bible (Barbara Kingsolver)²

She would rather hide her face and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame....Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for.
Disgrace (J.M.Coetzee)³

What is the (white)⁴ woman's "place"⁵ in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, in Africa? What are the marks of offence, or horror, that are inscribed on the seemingly blank whiteness of her skin? In the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, J.M.Coetzee writes in his novel, Disgrace, of the "system" of guilt and shame, debt and retribution which operates throughout South African society. He, Doris Lessing and Barbara Kingsolver tell stories which traverse and explore the paths tracked by society's quest for healing and restitution, in colonial and post-colonial Africa. (White) women too, Coetzee's protagonist muses, must have a place, a "niche" in the "system" of reparation.

¹ Lessing, Doris. The Grass Is Singing. Flamingo: London, 1994 (1950). p 20.

² Kingsolver, Barbara. The Poisonwood Bible. Faber and Faber: London, 1999. p 495.

³ Coetzee, J.M. Disgrace. Vintage: London, 1999. p 115.

⁴ "White" is placed in parenthesis in most cases in this text, in order to mark the particularly unstable and provisional nature of this sign in the context of race.

⁵ Coetzee, J.M. Disgrace. Op. Cit. p 115.

This dissertation is an attempt to trace the figure of the (white) woman in three postcolonial texts: J.M.Coetzee's Disgrace, Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible and Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing; in order to "read" the phrases of meaning that have been inscribed on her body. It is, moreover, an attempt to suggest an undeniable refrain within discourses of guilt and power that find their cathexis in her form. Her "whiteness", her "woman-ness", will act as anchoring points in the narrative without claiming essential, universalised identity. Moving through and between space and time (the novels represent different times and different parts of Africa), this dissertation will strive to provoke coherence from the discourses of defilement and dominance which traverse and score her skin. I shall suggest a reading of these marks and ciphers which is not a denial of fluid, layered identity but which nonetheless argues that the corporeal figure of the (white, postcolonial) woman in these texts, is indelibly, textually etched with guilt; that her "place" in the "system" is in fact crucial to the effecting of reparation.

In order to theorise the notion of women's availability for the corporeal inscription of guilt, I draw on the writings of Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, Friederich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. My reading of these twentieth-century theorists is underpinned by a brief but pointed analysis of a fragment of the Biblical text, which marks "woman" (or Eve) - her female body - as guilty. The second identity marker in my reading, "whiteness", I theorise with reference to a number of theorists who have engaged with this notion: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dorothy Driver and Ruth Frankenberg, among others.

"Woman-ness"

Guilt

And the man said, "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate."⁶

⁶ Genesis 3: 12. The Bible. New American Standard Version, 1973.

This extract, taken from a text which lies, coiled and potent, at the core of both Western and Middle Eastern civilisation, provides an insight into the discourse which presents “woman” as ultimately “to blame”. Her vulnerability to deceit and disobedience, her ability to deceive and tempt “man” have led to humankind’s Fall from a state of grace and plenty. As a result of her desire for forbidden knowledge, for awareness, she is led astray by “the serpent”, “eats” and encourages her husband to do the same. But if this verse is pregnant with possibilities, how much more intriguing is the passage which spells out her punishment:

To the woman He said,
“I will greatly multiply
Your pain in childbirth,
In pain you shall bring forth children;
Yet your desire shall be for your husband
And he shall rule over you.”⁷

Alongside the clear and powerful mandate for male dominance that this text seems to provide, an equally significant, complementary, corporeal inscription is taking place. Contrary to the spirit-mind/body Cartesian perspectives later adopted by Western philosophy, this early writer reflects and employs a discourse which acknowledges the immediacy and agency of the body in epistemologies of guilt and power. There is little sense here of “inner sin”, or “conscience” which would direct or drive “future” action. The woman’s punishment - so that she may “remember” her sin - is to be inscribed on, in and through her “natural”, female body. It is in her designated, encompassing role as mother that the woman will bear her fault, in pain “greatly multiplied”. Thus her sentence, and somehow her guilt itself, is as intimately bound up with her “being”(as woman) as it is with her place in society. The writer draws close links between her desire, which is described as centred on her husband, and the perpetuation of her position as one subjugated, guilty and available for continued punishment. With one brief pronouncement, the text thus provides a legitimisation, as well as an explanation, for a central component in Patriarchal dominance and discourse: woman’s essential, primary - and unavoidably corporeal - guilt.

⁷ Genesis 3: 16. The Bible. Op cit.

That this text was most certainly absorbed by the Cartesian, dualist mindset is apparent when a consideration of the close link between woman and weak, sinful flesh is effected. Elizabeth Grosz argues that, at the beginnings of Western philosophy, Plato and Aristotle posit the mother - her body- as mere housing for the unborn, reducing her role in reproduction to that of passive receptacle rather than co-producer. This view, she states, linked to a “profound somatophobia” displayed within Plato’s theories of matter and “forms”,⁸ opened possibilities for a powerful stream of thought in Western philosophy. The mind, or reason, was to be seen as superior to an “interfering”, inferior, physical body. Matter itself, according to Plato, was but a mere shadow, a poor version of the “true” form.⁹ Woman, with her primary role as receptacle for the unborn, clearly existed within the world of material things. Christian teaching, of an immortal soul at peril from a lustful, mortal carnality, simply further entrenched the binarization of the sexes, along with the oppositional division between mind and body within Western thought. Descartes elaborated upon this pattern of thinking with his dualist theory, which rendered mind and body as two distinct, mutually exclusive entities. This theory not only accorded with centuries of thought but extended this so that the mind, or soul, was severed decisively from “nature”. Thus, woman’s “natural” role as mother, her “natural” bodily functions (menstruation, child-birth) which marked her as distinctly female, served to betray her as the justly subordinated counterpart of man, as incorporated rightly within the lesser term in the mind/body, reason/passion, transcendence/immanence, form/matter field of oppositional relations.

To refer to texts like the Judeo-Christian Bible, Plato’s or Aristotle’s works is not to suggest that they in any way instituted patriarchy and the subordination of women’s bodies as objects of defilement. Rather, I would argue that these texts significantly and effectively tap into basic, powerful, universal discourses which wrestle with danger and survival; agency and guilt (defilement). It is my contention that women -

⁸ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994. p 5.

⁹ “ Briefly therefore we may say that the forms are objects of knowledge (as opposed to opinion), are what is ultimately real (as opposed to what appears or seems), are standards or patterns...and are the

their bodies - have been and continue to be inscribed, in a central role, within the discourses of guilt and power, and that this can be traced and examined in modern societies as well as in contemporary literatures.

Abjection

Julia Kristeva, in Powers of Horror¹⁰, a text which draws productively on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas¹¹, provocatively excavates traces of these basic discourses from later, law-based sections of the Biblical text¹². Her initial project is the exploration of an aspect of identity and (universal) subjectivity: the *abject*; but her work carries her into the realm of social complexity and illuminates much that lies at the source of women's inscription as "guilty". Kristeva describes the act of repulsion - abjection - that marks the realisation of self:

I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself* ...they see that I am in the process of becoming an other at the expense my own death. During the course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.¹³

Inextricably wrapped within the process of becoming, of realising the self, is an accompanying process of separation and rejection. In this development of being, this "birth" of subjectivity, what is rejected or abjected is not an identifiable or definable object but rather that which is opposed to "I", to my sense of identity.

Radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A something that I do not recognise as a thing.¹⁴

In order to be, to live, Kristeva argues, "I" must thrust aside that which does not conform to order, which does not obey the rules: that which is not to be expressed. It is that which rests in-between, which denies the rules and borders (of identity), which is declared abject. "I" dispose of what "I" cannot define or restrict to the confines of being, as dictated by the symbolic order. Thus the disorderly, uncontrollable impulses

common factor in virtue of which we give groups of particular things a common name." Plato. The Republic. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1955. p 266.

¹⁰ Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection. Columbia University Press: New York, 1982.

¹¹ Particularly: Douglas, Mary. Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. Ark: London, 1966.

¹² Leviticus. The Bible. Op cit.

¹³ Ibid. p 3.

¹⁴ Ibid. p 2.

and experiences of the very young child must be thrust aside. As “I” of necessity leave behind the semiotic, the seeming chaos and flux of desires associated with the mother, “I” slough off all that is related to “her” and conform to the defined identity of the symbolic, to the Law of the Father.¹⁵

Whilst Kristeva’s theory does not suggest that it is the mother herself that is abjected, this early, formative experience of subjectivity, of abjection, nonetheless links the earliest senses of repulsion and fear with the mother.

There looms within abjection one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat....It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced....a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.¹⁶

From the start, fear and object are linked.¹⁷

Kristeva’s concept of the abject is complex: what is abjected is feared and yet “it” fascinates. When “I” experience abjection, what “I” experience is not a definable object. Rather, the fear that “I” later am able to articulate, which does have a signifiable object, is, Kristeva insists, a “more belated and more logical product that assumes all earlier alarms of archaic, non-representable fear.”¹⁸ Thus the roots of fear remain caught in the realm of the mother, the “semiotic”. Spoken fear (spoken within the realm of “the Father”) is in fact a fetish, a substitution for another “earlier” and inexpressible horror. The discourse of fear, of terror and abjection is encountered “in our dreams, or when death brushes us by, depriving us of the assurance of being ourselves, that is untouchable, unchangeable, immortal.”¹⁹ In the face of fear symbolic activity itself is a means of preservation, a “representative of the paternal function” which in fact substitutes itself for the “maternal object...the good breast”²⁰ and, in abjection, turns away from the “bad object” cleansing itself of it and vomiting it.

...the plane of abjection is that of the *subject/object relationship*....The symbolic “exclusory prohibition” that, as a matter of fact, constitutes

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan’s term.

¹⁶ Ibid. p 1.

¹⁷ Ibid. p 33.

¹⁸ Ibid. p 34..

¹⁹ Ibid. p 38.

²⁰ Ibid. p 45.

collective existence does not seem to have...sufficient strength to dam up the abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine.²¹

Blood, mucus, excrement, urine: flow. Kristeva argues that these discharges are read as that which must be abjected in order to survive. These are the substances of life experience which seem to escape order and form, which defy organisation of solid and liquid, but rather seep, infiltrate - contaminate. The practices of (patriarchal) society in regard to these flows call attention to what it is that men have claimed as signified by the "no-thing" or nothing of abjection: femininity, the female body. Fear of defilement ultimately finds its origins in fear of the female body, the moment of the semiotic. It is at the border of subjectivity, where the "vacillating, fascinating, threatening and dangerous object is silhouetted as non-being" that defilement, taboo and sin become variants of the "possible foundings of abjection."²² Kristeva sees as universal, foundational, the significance of women and particularly the mother within the mesh of behaviour prohibitions which are supposed to protect society and the individual from defilement, from abjection.

That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.²³

Menstrual blood in particular is seen to signify danger, "issuing from within the identity". As Gross comments, "Horror of menstrual blood is a refusal to acknowledge the subject's corporeal link to the mother."²⁴ In addition, fear of the maternal, of women, has reference to fear of the generative power inherent in the feminine. Even excremental defilement, with its threat from "outside"(as opposed to "within" subjectivity) is related to the mother, in that maternal authority is experienced primarily as sphincter training.²⁵ Thus, Kristeva suggests, Oedipus "discovers desire and death in his sovereign being" as he transgresses the boundaries of what is "clean and proper", within the (unknowing) act of incest.²⁶

²¹ Ibid. p 65.

²² Kristeva, Julia. Op cit. p 67.

²³ Ibid. p 70.

²⁴ Gross, Elizabeth, *The Body of Signification in Abjection, Melancholia and Love. The Work of Julia Kristeva* Ed. Fletcher, John and Benjamin, Andrew. Routledge: London, 1990. p 92.

²⁵ Ibid. p 71.

²⁶ Ibid. p 85.

Femininity, its “enigma”, and the “leaky” female body function as sites for abject fear of defilement both within individual identity - here one must assume most particularly and acutely male subjectivity - and society. The roots of discourses relating to fear, guilt, punishment and redemption are pushed deep into the formation of the human psyche, with Woman/Mother/Eve taking up a distinctively guilt-marked place within these discourses.

Punishment

The body, that of the prisoner and of the social subject, is indeed always etched, inscribed. There is no pre-inscribed body; but it is always excessively etched.²⁷

That the body is a suitable site for the inscription of guilt, as well as an apt place for the exacting of penalty, is by no means an unwritten text. Writers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault have provided significant insights in this regard. Nietzsche is particularly helpful in the theorisation of pain and punishment. He sees pain as the key means of inscribing what must be “remembered” in society. The body becomes a tablet, a notepad for the texts which must be obeyed, for debts that must be paid.

“If something is to be remembered it must be burnt in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory” - this is a main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth....blood, torture, and sacrifices...all this has its origin in the instinct that realised that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics.²⁸

Nietzsche understands social order to be founded not on exchange but on credit: the body is not so much exchanged, as held to account, made to pay. For what must not be forgotten a corporeal note shall be made, so that even in the case of seeming bankruptcy, the debt is still retrievable from the body of the debtor.

An equivalent is provided by the creditor's receiving, in place of a literal compensation for an injury...a recompense in the form of a kind of *pleasure*, the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely on

²⁷ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies*. Op cit., p 137.

²⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books: New York, 1969. p 61.

one who is powerless...the enjoyment of violation....In punishing the debtor, the creditor participates in a *right of the masters*...²⁹

The debtor-creditor relationship and its accompanying lust for cruelty is, in Nietzsche's theory, the basis of all other social relations, moral values, and cultural production. Put another way, the concept that "somebody" is guilty, that somebody "owes me" and must be - can be - corporeally made "to pay" is a foundational notion in society and discourse. The act of exacting that payment is simultaneously a source of pleasure (of "festival"³⁰) and an enactment of power: exquisite dominance.

In Foucauldian terms, the body is passively inscribed by "all that touches it: diet, climate and soil"³¹ - and "discipline" or "the disciplinary mechanism". In Discipline and Punish, Foucault describes the exile of lepers and the isolation, organisation and sorting of people during the plagues of the 17th Century. Like Douglas and Kristeva, Foucault sees these activities which mark and analyse the body as serving a need to establish a "pure community".

Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of *separating out their dangerous mixtures*. The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilised by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies - this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city.³² (my emphasis)

Foucault offers provocative views of the control, manipulation and marking of bodies. What his critics have often objected to, however, is his implicit and seemingly unavoidable assumption of a "natural" body: a white, Western male body? Reading Foucault's "tabula rasa" approach to the body provokes Grosz to ask some apt and vital questions:

...do sexually different bodies require different inscriptive tools to etch their different surfaces? Or rather, is it the inscription of power on bodies that produces bodies as sexually different?

And yet more strikingly, she makes the assertion that

²⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. Op cit. , p 65.

³⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich. Ibid., p 67.

³¹ Grosz, Elizabeth. Op cit., p 146.

³² Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish. In Masters by Coursework: Gender, Identity and Embodiment Reader. p 171.

...one and the same message, inscribed on a male or female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text.³³

This presses home Grosz's point that whilst the notion of inscription of bodies may well be a helpful and illuminating notion, the assumption of a blank and passive "original" body is less so. The elision of the sexual and racial specificity of the surface inscribed may in fact effect an elision, a further marginalisation and silencing of those (always) already marked with society's "guilt".

What does this mean for "woman" - for women, corpo-real women, in society? I would like to suggest that Nietzsche's insights, coupled with Kristeva's abject, powerful "horror", present a chilling illumination of the discourses which sanction universal experiences of violence suffered by women: primarily rape, but also for example, abuse, beating, mutilation (including clitoridectomy), disfigurement and murder. Following on from Grosz's statement that the same inscription on male and female bodies may not result in the same text, I would like to add that not only is the resultant (fluid, many-layered) text open to multiple interpretations but that society almost certainly "reads" the bodies of men and women as open to different inscriptions in the first place. It may well be that discourses of guilt and punishment reserve a particular phrasing of guiltiness for women, and with particular conclusions. A recent news report³⁴ of a popular form of violence against women in Bangladesh neatly underscores this point, I believe. "Real Men Don't Throw Acid" is the proclamation made on banners of activists who are trying to counter-act a common Bangladeshi practice. Young men who have been refused as suitors by young women (many of whom wish to further studies rather than take up married life), take their revenge by throwing acid in the faces of the "guilty" women. Thus the women are violently and excruciatingly marked, in a manner "appropriate" to their "crime": the means by which they attracted their suitors is disfigured so that the text they present to society now will be very differently read. "Young, attractive, desirable" has become "horribly deformed - unwanted and of little or no worth". As women have few rights in Bangladesh, the authorities do not regard these attacks as worth prosecution. It

³³ Grosz, E. Ibid. , p 156.

³⁴ BBC 1 Television News: Friday, 14th July 2000.

would be difficult - if not impossible - I would suggest, to inscribe that same message, by the same means, with an identical resultant text, on male bodies. These women - and others - continue to be corporeally inscribed within a discourse that renders them "guilty".

"Whiteness"

If the writing or inscription metaphor is to be of any use for feminism - and I believe that it can be extremely useful - the specific modes of materiality of the "page"/body must be taken into account...³⁵

If the last sub-section appears as an attempt to extrapolate universal value from local effect, then I must move towards making amends. It is to Grosz's "modes of materiality" and their specificity that I will turn at this point. In order to prepare for a tracing of the figure of the (white) woman in postcolonial literary texts and a reading of her inscription into particular phrasings of guilt and power, a consideration of her "whiteness" must be taken into account. The point at which guilt, race³⁶ and sex co-ordinate is to be scrutinised.

Naming "whiteness" displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance...To look at the social construction of whiteness is to look head-on at a site of dominance.³⁷

It is the seeming normativity of whiteness that Ruth Frankenberg critiques in her book about white women living in the USA. She presents race as a lived experience, a material category, discursively produced, and it is the apparent "race-lessness" of whiteness which she interrogates. Because the discourses surrounding race tend to ignore the need to name and thus decentre whiteness, white domination and privilege is perpetuated by the majority population group in Northern America. The employment of skin colour - of any hue - as an indicator of racial identity is, of course, enormously problematic. "Whiteness" clearly cannot be read as a monolithic category and must have multiple meanings and interpretations, which are further complicated by a variety of identity markers like class, history and, crucially, space. Nonetheless, the concept that "whiteness" may be, and should be read; that "whiteness" may be a

³⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth. Op cit. , p156.

³⁶ Perhaps, apparent lack of race: normative blankness.

³⁷ Frankenberg, Ruth. The Social Construction of Whiteness Routledge: London, 1993. p 6.

named (though fluid and unstable) category of identification is central to the concerns of this dissertation.

How has “whiteness” been read? What appears to be, and is presented as colourlessness is in fact marked, signified as “norm”. Anything “else”, any “other colour” skin is discursively produced as “Other”: necessary for the production of the white, Western (Northern) “Self”. In a remarkable collection of her writing, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak demonstrates the manner in which European Man was erected and established as the human norm, against which the “native informant” or Non-European of colonialism was/is measured and “foreclosed”. Kant, Hegel and Marx produced “universal” narratives in which the subject remained unmistakably European - white. The narrative of White cultural self-representation is therefore effectively one of difference, in which Self is created at the expense of the Other. The Self that was produced in this way provided a rationalisation, an “alibi” for “the domination, exploitation, and epistemic violation entailed by the establishment of colony and empire.”³⁸

Assuming Spivak’s perspective, if European (white) man was/is discursively produced as normative “self”, what is the position allocated to (white) woman within a narrative of colonial domination? Spivak suggests that women took up a distinctively feminine role within this story. Within the understanding that the constitution of the “human”, that the “making of human beings” was a central tenet of colonial discourse, (white) European women in the colonies accorded (and were complicit) with this law on two registers: “childrearing and soul-making”³⁹. The idea that (white) women were written into a pivotal place in the imperialist missionary project has been elaborated and expanded by Dorothy Driver in a perceptive article, “Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise.”⁴⁰ She argues that women brought from Europe into South Africa, as child-bearers and nurturers, were regarded as “naturally” equipped to carry the ideological burden of “civilising” the savage of

³⁸ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Towards a History of the Vanishing Present. Harvard University Press: London, 1999. p 7.

³⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Ibid. p 122.

⁴⁰ Driver, Dorothy. *Women as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise* in Journal of Literary Studies. Vol. 4, 1988. p 3-20.

Africa. This effectively cast these women into a problematic set of relations. Driver reads them as occupying a place of mediation between racial groups, a place fraught with difficulty and compromise. Although (white) women were enjoined to align politically with “their own racial group”, and to act as a softening influence in a harsh environment, they were also, paradoxically, signified as of the “same category” as (black) people: a “metaphorical alignment between women and the indigenous, colonised people.”⁴¹

Under the aegis of imperial rhetoric, women and blacks were defined as the natural that had to be controlled, in a double movement that managed whatever threats women and blacks held for the English cultural subject.⁴²

I would like to argue that this problematic and complex set of relations effectively set up (white) women for a Fall. Their “whiteness” placed them simultaneously in a position of privilege and one of vulnerability. Their position may be read as a frantic, and in many ways powerless shuttling, between an impossible set of responsibilities and alliances. The white woman’s burden of culture without its ultimate or essential authority afforded her an appearance without substance, an obligation which would serve only to implicate her in narratives of blame. As the weight of power began to shift in racial discourses in Southern Africa, (white) women were inevitably available for inscription as guilty.

White Guilt

...I can deny (neither) my “whiteness” - in a collective sense - or my collective responsibility for a system which was invented and upheld in my name at the cost of the onslaught on my fellow black South Africans.⁴³

How may “whiteness” be re-read? I would like to suggest that in a post-colonial context, “whiteness” is re-inscribed, no longer unproblematically as “norm”, but as “guilt”. In an article in which the writer repeatedly denies a personal sense of guilt, John Battersby claims that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has effected little reconciliation because of the arrogance and cynicism of the

⁴¹ Driver, Dorothy. *Ibid.*, p 13.

⁴² Driver, Dorothy. *Ibid.*, p 13.

⁴³ Battersby, John. *Admitting White Guilt* in *The World Today*. January 1997. p 23-25.

“confessions” heard by the Commission. Despite his own, personal innocence, he argues that in a post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa, it is collective identity - collective “whiteness” - that marks individuals as guilty. Skin colour (or rather, lack thereof), as much as it has afforded privilege, declares complicity with the earlier evil social systems. As a result, Battersby urges “true” repentance, undeniably marked by open and contrite confession. This, he (perhaps naïvely) claims, “blacks will understand and accept”. And whites will be “healed”.

“White guilt” is not an entirely new term in South African vocabulary. For as long as liberal and radical whites have supported anti-apartheid, anti-racist movements, either actively or passively, “white guilt” has been mooted as their primary motivation. The term may have been used earlier and more freely in the U.S.A.: Shelby Steele notes its appearance in the 1960s⁴⁴. She reads its meaning as a catalyst which “changed the nature of the white man’s burden from the administration of inferiors to the uplift of equals - from the obligations of dominance to the urgencies of repentance”. Steele’s article probes a little deeper into the discourses of guilt and redemption, however, and is somewhat more sceptical about the real social value of the consequences of “white guilt”. Writing from the perspective of one who has experienced racism in America, she points out that fear lies at the core of guilt, and that this can only breed further self-preoccupation on the part of the guilty, and dependency on the part of the formerly oppressed: “bounty from another man’s guilt weakens”. Selfish white guilt is “really self- importance”, she says, “a sort of moral colonialism”.⁴⁵

Whilst it is not the purpose of this narrative to debate the inherent use-value of “white guilt”, it is useful to note that the language of both the above-mentioned articles betrays a discourse that finds its explicit expression in the Biblical text. Steele asserts that in the 1950s and 1960s, in America, whites “underwent an archetypal Fall” and that in the 1960s the need for “white redemption” was a prime motivator in social policy construction⁴⁶. “Confession” and “healing” are central concerns in Battersby’s article. In the earlier mentioned text by Ruth Frankenberg, it is whiteness itself which

⁴⁴ Steele, Shelby. *White Guilt* in *The American Scholar*. v 59, Autumn 1990. p 497-506.

⁴⁵ Steele, Shelby. Op cit., p 506.

⁴⁶ Steele, Shelby. Op cit., p 498.

must be “redeemed”.⁴⁷ It is important to acknowledge that these writers must, of necessity, offer different nuances, varying shades of perspective produced by their different fields of reference: I am by no means attempting to suggest that “whiteness” in the U.S.A. carries identical meanings to “whiteness” and “white guilt” in Southern Africa. I would argue the contrary. Nonetheless, it would seem that the tones of a powerful and pervasive discourse - of guilt and redemption - which I have argued earlier discovers its lexicon in the formation of subjectivity, is at work in the aftermath of institutional racism.

Double X Marks the Spot

“One Settler, One Bullet” is an interrogation and invalidation of whites’ identities as South Africans....White South Africans are being systematically un-settled by these attacks on their bodies and psyches.⁴⁸

Although the genocide apparently recommended by the above slogan has not been effected, I would suggest that Farred’s assessment regarding the “un-settling” of whites in South Africa has validity. This interrogation or destruction is, he insists, of acute necessity, as white South Africans must be “compelled to accept their culpability”. Guilt is a condition intrinsic to whiteness in South Africa and its acknowledgement holds the possibility of “reparation to the nation’s black citizenry”.⁴⁹ Above all,

White South Africans must not be allowed to forget.⁵⁰

Nietzsche’s mnemonics are forcefully brought to mind by Farred’s article. Pain is suggested as the means whereby the text of guilt is written, as a witness to complicity in the crimes of *apartheid*.

Not one of the fictional writers I wish to consider would deny the weight of shame carried by white shoulders in Africa. Each explores the (im-)possibility of precarious

⁴⁷ Frankenberg, Ruth. Op cit. p 6.

⁴⁸ Farred, Grant. “Bulletproof Settlers: The Politics of Offense in the New South Africa” in Mike Hill (ed.), *Whiteness. A Critical Reader*. New York University Press: New York and London, 1997, p 73.

⁴⁹ Farred, Grant. Ibid., p 67.

⁵⁰ Farred, Grant. Ibid., p 77.

white identity in a continent scored with European imperial exploitation and rapacious colonialism. Each acknowledges the burden of debt to be paid by white bodies. What is of interest to my reading is not simply the confession of guilt implicit in the texts, as how the price is to be exacted, how the (impossible?) reparation is to be made. How is it that the (white) women in these fictional accounts are placed in the pivotal roles they occupy? Why is the figure of the (white) woman crucial to the redemptive gestures within the narrative? Is it, perhaps, that the meeting of two powerful sources of shame: her woman-ness and her whiteness, render her flesh irredeemably, doubly inscribed as fit - not for exchange - but for payment of debt?⁵¹

In the pages which follow, I shall offer readings of J.M.Coetzee's Disgrace, Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing and Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible, in which an account of the texts inscribed on the bodies of (white) women will be traced. Though these novels are set in different parts of Africa, I shall seek threads running through the narratives which suggest discourses introduced by the postcolonial theme, woven into (white) writing in the late twentieth century.

In J.M.Coetzee's story, I shall focus primarily on the figure of Lucy, David Lurie's daughter, whose rape and loss of property gestures towards reparation both for Lurie's personal, male guilt, as well as for the greater sins of the white population of South Africa:

...what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?⁵²

Whilst the disruption and discordance of Lurie's life may be accredited to his own, complacent lust, Lucy, it seems, is corporeally held to account for sins beyond her control, but which are nonetheless embedded in her body.

⁵¹ Within the context of *apartheid*, white women were not available for "exchange" (theorised by Levi-Strauss in his theories of kinship) with men of other race groups, but were reserved for the declaration and establishment of kinship within and between white groups only. As Dorothy Driver states, "In terms of the Immorality Act, white women became prohibited to black men, who were thereby defined as not-'kin'. Driver, Dorothy. Op cit., p 16.

⁵² Coetzee, J.M. Op cit., p 158.

Most of all I want to ask Anatole this one unaskable question: Does he hate me for being white?⁵³

Barbara Kingsolver provides the reader with a range of characters who, individually and as a group, suggest perspectives for (white) women in post-colonial Africa. Set in the Belgian Congo, during the dismantling of colonial rule, The Poisonwood Bible allows the women of the American missionary family to tell their stories. Each of the narrators spells out her experiences of her husband/father's misguided mission, its undoing and their separate attempts at redemption. It is Leah Price who most keenly feels the text of culpability written in her skin, although it is the youngest sister, the naïve Ruth May, who is sacrificed early in the story. My reading will investigate the family's negotiations with their whiteness and the terms of their reparation.

Doris Lessing's central figure is not as obviously without personal culpability. Mary's inhumane and incompetent treatment of her servants, her hysterical attempts to exercise power over "the native", mark her with a guilt which prepares the reader for the exacting of justice carried out by Moses in the final pages. What is of particular interest in this novel is the means by which Mary's "Fall" is placed in the context of her attempts to meet the requirements laid down by her position as a (white) woman in a colonial society.

And, at the sight of him, her emotions unexpectedly shifted, to create in her an extraordinary feeling of guilt; but towards him, to whom she had been disloyal, and at the bidding of the Englishman....As the brain at last gave way, collapsing in a ruin of horror, she saw, over the big arm that forced her head back against the wall, the other arm descending. Her limbs sagged under her, the lightning leapt out from the dark, and darted down the plunging steel.⁵⁴

Her "woman-ness" (even though Mary was initially said to be "not like *that*"⁵⁵) and her "whiteness" have doubly inscribed her into a discourse of guilt. In addition, she has failed to keep in balance the civilising expectations placed on her by colonial society in her role as (white) woman in Africa. Her inevitable death provides the necessary letting of blood for a discursive - yet unavoidably corporeal - redemption.

⁵³ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 316.

⁵⁴ Lessing, Doris. Op cit., p 204-205.

⁵⁵ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 187.

Her Place

She sunburns easily
wears layers of cream
a hat when walking on the beach
...
she takes the kitchen knife to bed
and prays her fifteen minutes fame
won't be the television reconstruction
of the scene, the crime, her shame⁵⁶

What, after all, is the text written on the skins of (white) women in post-colonial Africa? How is it written and how does the distinctiveness of the surface inscribed, its vulnerability and implicit colonial complicity, influence the resultant text? What, within the "scheme" operating in post-colonial societies, is (white) woman's "place"?⁵⁷ As Coetzee's protagonist claims,

...there must be some niche in the system for (white) women and what happens to them.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ From "every twenty-six seconds" by Isobel Dixon in Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa, Vol. 5 no 2, 2000. p 43.

⁵⁷ Coetzee, J.M. Op cit., p 115.

⁵⁸ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 98. My parenthesis.

Chapter 2

J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace

White South Africans should be confronted with (black) history....white South Africans must not be allowed to forget.¹

At the heart of Grant Farred's provocative article, *Bulletproof Settlers*, lies an accusation levelled at J.M. Coetzee. Farred, relying on an oral report of a paper delivered at Yale University by Coetzee, vigorously condemns the novelist for reportedly asserting that he "could not take offense" at the political maxim, "One Settler, One Bullet." Reading this comment (not repeated in Coetzee's book on the same subject as his Yale address²) as an offensive dismissal of the efficacy of the maxim - either as ideological or political statement - Farred accuses Coetzee of considering himself above or beyond the constrictions and culpability of "whiteness" in South Africa. This position is deplored by Farred as he asserts that "One Settler, One Bullet" is a necessary and desirable call for the "abolition of whiteness in South Africa", a "pointed reminder that the white community's origins are non-African."³ Coetzee should take note - and remember.

In contrast to Farred's assessment of Coetzee's position, Rosemary Jolly, in her book on colonisation, violence and the writing of André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee, states, optimistically, that South African writers and cultural workers have "moved postcoloniality beyond its North American impasse". In terms of this impasse, the subaltern is unavoidably silenced and the "nonnative" prohibited from speaking for the indigene under threat of being accused of appropriation. These (white) South African writers and thinkers have not only moved beyond this point but have also, she asserts, avoided the "white liberalist" assumption that the indigene requires the "imagination of the settler for the liberation of her or his community." Discussions and writings of white South Africans "may for the first time" include debates over the construction of a space in which

¹ Farred, G. op cit., p 77.

² Coetzee, J.M. Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, London, 1996.

³ Farred, G. op cit., p 72.

...alongside the prospect of other, new formulations, the white South African may hold a subject position whose legitimacy can be earned - without imprisonment - by its ethical apprehension of the evils of the constriction of race to which it, along with black South African subjectivity, has been subject...⁴

In Disgrace, written after the publication of Jolly's critical text, J.M. Coetzee explores the possibilities of that space; or more accurately, the position of the (white) South African within that space, with a little less unfettered optimism. How indeed is a legitimate subject position to be "earned"? Assumedly, by "without imprisonment" Jolly refers to the earlier imprisonment of "white liberals" under the apartheid regime. Coetzee's writing would seem to suggest that the assumption of a legitimate position is not easily attained and that, contra Farred, he is all too aware of the restrictions and imprisoning grip that the past continues to hold, even (and perhaps most especially) on "liberal" whites. In an interview with David Atwell, Coetzee had earlier declared himself "historically complicit".⁵ Disgrace wrestles with the implications of culpability and the consequences of violent colonisation and, without flinching, asks, crucially, how white South Africa may be compelled to "remember".

In the aftermath of the violent crime which takes place on his daughter's smallholding, a pivotal event in Disgrace, Professor David Lurie considers the meaning of this event. He struggles to comprehend it in the context of the broader state of affairs in post-apartheid South Africa, a country as yet tortured by violence.

Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too.⁶

It is primarily the place of the (white) woman in this "system" of reminder and reparation - her "niche" - that I wish to consider in Coetzee's novel.

⁴ Jolly, Rosemary Jane. Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee. Ohio University Press: Athens, Ohio, 1996. p 153.

⁵ Atwell, David (ed.). Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews. J.M. Coetzee. Harvard University Press: London, 1992. p 343.

⁶ Coetzee, J.M. Disgrace. Op cit., p 98.

One Settler

When the commune broke up...Lucy stayed behind on the smallholding with her friend Helen. She had fallen in love with the place, she said; she wanted to farm it properly. He had helped her buy it. Now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all, in a house full of the smell of baking, no longer a child playing at farming but a solid countrywoman, a boervrou....Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they that had produced her: perhaps history had the larger share.⁷

When Lurie arrives at Lucy's small farm, it is as a refugee, fleeing the city and the implications of his own disgrace. He notes her development into capable countrywoman: "boervrou", with approval.

They walk back along an irrigation furrow. Lucy's bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind - this daughter, this woman - then he does not have to be ashamed.

Lucy is described in terms that inscribe her legibly as a link to the colonial past of South Africa. She owns and cultivates land, leaving the print of her foot clearly on the soil⁸. In addition, she is a woman who in many ways is well suited to "settler" life: at once capable and nurturing, independent and yet undeniably "feminine" in her ability to create homely order. She displays "womanly"⁹ traits in her admitted affection for the place she has purchased; she says she had "fallen in love" with it. Sensible to possible threat - deemed unlikely on account of the dogs - she keeps an unused gun. She seems to have the necessary strength to cope with life on the farm, demonstrating her love for and link to the land in the easy, relaxed manner of dress and the freedom of her bare feet. She is naturally "embedded", planted in her environment. An idyllic, pastoral picture is what Lurie paints of his "throwback" daughter: a new kind of settler, repeating yet rewriting "history".

⁷ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid. p 60, 61.

⁸ The image of footprints provides a textual reference to both Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Coetzee's earlier novel Foe (London, 1987). The allusion is certainly that of the colonist or "settler" who marks the land with a sign of his_(her) dominance or ownership.

⁹ I use this adjective with a degree of irony: I am not assuming an essentialist ontology for women, rather that Lucy appears to play the civilising role expected of (white)women in colonial Africa. Cf. Driver, Dorothy. Op cit. Page 13 of this document.

A frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize.
Today, dogs and daffodils....History repeating itself, though in a more
modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson.¹⁰

Not only does Lucy appear to have ameliorated the aggressive thrust of old style colonial advance, but the land which she bought with the assistance of her father is no longer owned in the original way: she shares it with Petrus, her “co-proprietor”. It would indeed seem that “history has learned a lesson”, that Lucy represents a new way for white people to live in Africa. She is able to share her property (it was at first a commune) and appears to have constructed fair and just terms for co-ownership with Petrus, at least a part refutation of an accusation that she is complicit with “real hegemony: white property”.¹¹ Lucy would seem to represent a *postcolonial* “dissenting coloniser, the coloniser who refuses”¹², in that she “refuses” to take up the burdens of the master-slave, owner-worker relationship, fashioning instead a partnership with the black man who is at first employed by her. At this point in the novel she may be read as a sign of (white) hope, apparently secure in her position on the land, while yet undoing the grasping arrogance of the past. Her identity as (white) woman is not irrelevant in this respect, as she not only fulfils the criteria dictated by history in her role as colonial go-between¹³, but also exceeds and thereby refuses the structures of patriarchal colonialism: she is firmly inscribed in the margins of society as a lesbian (white) woman, who has chosen to live alone, independent of (white)male authority. Despite her father’s initial, financial help she has constructed a life entirely separate from him and his life-style, a denial not only of colonial values but also of the male hegemony implicit in what Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality”.¹⁴

¹⁰ Coetzee, J. M. *Ibid.*, p 62.

¹¹ Farred, Grant. *Op cit.*, p 65.

¹² Albert Memmi, quoted in Stephen Watson’s article, “Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee”. Watson argues that Coetzee’s writing is that of a man who is himself a coloniser, but who is also an intellectual and “a coloniser who does not *want* to be a coloniser”. For this reason, he asserts, Coetzee’s protagonists are possessed of an “insatiable hunger...for ways of escaping from a role which condemns them as subjects to confront others as objects”. The pessimism of Coetzee’s novels, he says, lies in the fact that these characters beat against the “shackles of their historical position in vain”. This observation has added resonance in reference to *Disgrace*, a novel which grapples with postcolonial realities and possibilities. Watson, Stephen. “Colonialism and the novels of J.M. Coetzee” in Huggan, Graham and Watson, Stephen(ed.). *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*. Macmillan Press Ltd: London, 1996. pp 13 - 36.

¹³ See p 13 of this document.

¹⁴ Rich, Adrienne. *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. In *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4. 1980.

Lurie, on the other hand, has been deeply embroiled in the structures of modern patriarchy. He is twice divorced and actively heterosexual, with “light and fleeting” preferences in terms of relationships with women. His “disgrace” is that of a professor accused of taking advantage of one of his female students, of having a brief but damaging affair with her. It seems that Lurie has a taste for “exotic” women, having moved on to Melanie after the unfortunate end of a convenient, “satisfactory” relationship with a prostitute, Soraya, who has a “honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun.”¹⁵ Melanie, too, is dark skinned and this narrative detail, together with the nature of his relationship with her, is suggestive of the complex interrelation of colonial and patriarchal hegemony.

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself....Not rape, not quite that but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.¹⁶

The body of the Other: fascinating, desirable and seemingly irrefutably different, becomes a site for the inscription of power. Coetzee’s protagonist is not only a predator in terms of his relationships with women but his pursuit of both Soraya and Melanie’s (black/coloured) bodies mark him as active imperialist. Melanie (Lurie calls her Melanie - dark one) is strangely compliant, devoid of will, in their encounter, despite Lurie’s assertion that she is learning to “exploit” him. The dominant, patriarchal nature of their affair is reinforced by her age and his fatherly feelings towards her.

Despite all, he feels a tingling of desire.

‘There, there,’ he whispers, trying to comfort her. ‘Tell me what is wrong.’ Almost he says, ‘Tell Daddy what is wrong.’¹⁷

He makes love to her one more time, on the bed in his daughter’s room.¹⁸

¹⁵ Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. Op cit., p 1.

¹⁶ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 25.

¹⁷ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 26.

¹⁸ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 29.

Lurie's almost incestuous appropriation of Melanie's body is a crime he cannot, ultimately, escape.¹⁹ Melanie and her father lodge a formal complaint with the University and Lurie is called before a disciplinary committee. His begrudging admission of formal guilt (of sexual harassment and of falsifying Melanie's academic record), is considered woefully inadequate by the committee, who demand a full confession, a publicly available document protesting contrition "from the heart". Lurie refuses to comply.

Jane Poyner reads Disgrace as an "allegory of the Truth Commission"²⁰ in terms of which she understands Lurie's "sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women" as symbolically configuring a "sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally - and of the white writer in particular - for a history of abuse."²¹ I would argue that Lurie's position at this point in the narrative is more accurately a denial of public confession, a refusal to acknowledge either the validity or the efficacy of a (verbal) plea for forgiveness. He seems to reject rather than embrace a path to absolution through "repentance". The "word" will not bring absolution.

Confessions, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? A hush falls. They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off.²²

"I won't do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse."²³

Lurie seeks refuge from the demand for the spectacle of public apology in the Eastern Cape, on his daughter's farm. Driven, in a sense, into the wilderness, he carries with him his guilt, his "disgrace".²⁴ Lucy suggests that he has been made a scapegoat but Lurie continues to deny the religious power that the image holds, insisting instead that

¹⁹ The text suggests that Lurie would be considered at least twice guilty: for desiring (and 'having') a girl 'young enough to be his daughter' and for 'stepping across the colour bar' - a suggestion reminiscent of the restrictions of apartheid.

²⁰ Poyner, Jane. "Truth and Reconciliation in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace in *Scrutiny*2, Vol. 5, No 2, 2000. pp 67-77.

²¹ Poyner, Jane. *Ibid.* p 67.

²² Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 56.

²³ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 58.

²⁴ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 85.

he has simply been “purged” from a society ruled by censors, “watchers”.²⁵ It is immediately after this discussion around society’s apparent need for cleansing, for purgation of “sin”, however, that the attack takes place.

One Bullet

So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning, without fanfare, it is here, and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?²⁶

Coetzee’s protagonist describes his first experiences of the attack that takes place on the smallholding in apocalyptic terms: it is the “day of testing”. Will he be tried and found wanting? As with the Biblical second coming of the messiah, who returns “like a thief in the night”, there is no warning, no “fanfare”. His heart, which he had resisted baring to the academic disciplinary committee, which he kept safely private - how will it hold out now? He perceives himself at the centre of events, at the focal point of the testing, but the text reveals that he is side-lined: locked in the lavatory²⁷, while the real reckoning: the rape and impregnation of his daughter, is taking place. Lurie is impotent, unable to protect her, unable to “do” anything.

His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. But *now* it is not too late. *Now* he must do something.²⁸

His calling for his daughter simply brings one of the thieves, who demands and forcibly obtains keys from him. Words, language will not “save” him in this moment of violent retribution - least of all a language of Europe.

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa.²⁹

Almost as an afterthought, a final gesture, he is doused with methylated spirits and set alight. Thrown back into the lavatory, he puts out the flames with water from the toilet. He is burned, although not seriously; his body, his face, marked casually,

²⁵ The Foucaultian perception of society as being under surveillance - even in, and perhaps particularly in, the “New South Africa” - is unmistakable.

²⁶ Coetzee, J.M. Op cit., p 94.

²⁷ Like the “three old ladies” of the derisory nursery rhyme.

²⁸ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 94.

²⁹ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 95.

painfully but indifferently by the heat of the assailants' attack. Lurie is dis-empowered and rendered humiliatingly defenceless. It is Lucy who releases him from his ignoble captivity and takes charge, resolutely resisting his invitation to comfort and be comforted, insisting above all that when asked he should stick only to his story, his experiences.

"You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me," she repeats.

"You're making a mistake," he says in a voice that is fast descending to a croak.

"No I'm not," she says.³⁰

The events of that day are to become, "Lucy's secret, his disgrace"³¹.

In her book on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Antjie Krog notes Thenjiwe Mthintso's opening words at the "special women's hearings" held in Gauteng:

"Because always, always in anger and frustration men use women's bodies as a terrain of struggle - as a battleground...behind every woman's encounter with the Security Branch and the police lurked the possibility of sexual abuse and rape."³²

But no one will utter an audible word about it...Women who have been raped know that if they talk about it now in public they will lose something again...³³

In the aftermath of apartheid, in the economic and ideological reconstitution of South Africa, Lucy's body is a "terrain of struggle". She is later able to verbalise her experience of this "struggle" and its "anger" to her father:

"It was so personal," she says. "It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was...expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them."³⁴

Lucy is unwilling and unable to report her rape to the police and instead grapples, slowly, with the deciphering of what has been done to her. Lurie offers a reading by which he attempts to comfort Lucy and which outlines a Nietzschean perception of the underpinning of society: Lucy, her body, has been inscribed with the guilt of

³⁰ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 99.

³¹ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 109.

³² Krog, Antjie. *Country of my Skull*. Vintage: London, 1999. p 271.

³³ Krog, Antjie. *Ibid.*, p 277.

³⁴ Coetzee, J.M. *Op. cit.*, p 156.

“history”.³⁵ Her womanly flesh is the notepad on which the debt of colonists is written and payment exacted. Despite the intensity of her experience, the multiple rape is not “personal”.

“It was history speaking through them,” he offers at last. “A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors.”

“That doesn’t make it easier. The shock simply doesn’t go away. The shock of being hated I mean. In the act.”³⁶

Her experience is, of course, intensely personal and Lucy carries the burden of the hate and its inscription of shame. It is primarily this which prevents her from reporting the crime, as she feels it to be, too closely, “her crime”.

“...as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place, it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not....This place being South Africa.”³⁷

It is Lucy’s identity: as a (white) woman, in post-apartheid South Africa; that renders her personally implicated, perhaps complicit, in the conditions which enabled her attack. Her father’s impotence, his inability to protect her either from the attack or its consequences, is his confessed “disgrace”: “ ‘And I did nothing. I did not save you.’ That is his own confession.”³⁸ He is unable to understand, to grasp either her fear or her reluctance to go to the law for help. Despite his perception of “history” and his growing acceptance of white culpability, his daughter insists that he simply “can’t” understand as she can. She rejects his “confession” and thereby his fatherly guilt. “She gives an impatient little flick of the hand. ‘Don’t blame yourself, David.’” Lucy’s experiences provide her with an insight which in fact incorporates her father’s analysis but which leads her to a conflicting, shocking conclusion.

“I think that I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me.”

“Then you can’t possibly stay.”

“Why not?”

“Because that would be an invitation for them to return.”

³⁵ Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* also deals with retributive rape: Magda is raped, apparently as revenge for her father’s sexually predatory behaviour towards an employee’s young wife. Coetzee, J.M. *In the Heart of the Country*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1977.

³⁶ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 156.

³⁷ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 112.

³⁸ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 157.

...
 “What if ...what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?”³⁹

Lucy’s articulated perception reflects much of what her father has said: she is paying, with her body, through its violation, the debts of the white colonists/settlers. She is their “territory” and they will be back to ensure that whites remember “history”. What differs in Lucy’s account is a harrowing, fledgling acceptance of the terms. She suggests a completely new brand of “settler”, one who acknowledges her debts and, rejecting the safety of white hegemony, will attempt to face the price. “Not slavery. Subjection. Subjugation.”⁴⁰

She is un-settled but not un-homed. She refuses her father’s offer to send her abroad and prepares to restructure her life. This “sturdy young settler” is unable and unwilling to leave.

“It’s too much, Lucy. Sell up. Sell the farm to Petrus and come away.”
 “No.”

...
 “I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away.”⁴¹

The text indicates not only a reading of Lucy’s rape as an inscription of white guilt but also a perception that hate, blame and anger may play a role in “universal”⁴² heterosexual relations as well. Lucy’s body has become not only a site for colonial struggle but, despite her own, earlier, alternative sexual choices, is a page on which has been written a more basic discourse of blame and retribution.

“Hatred...When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange - when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her - isn’t it a bit like killing? Pushing the

³⁹ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 158.

⁴⁰ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 159.

⁴¹ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 159 and 161.

⁴² I use the term reservedly, with reference to Kristeva’s theories regarding the development of subjectivity. See pages 5 to 8 of this document.

knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood - doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?"⁴³

The "murder" implicit in rape - and in Lucy's terms, in heterosexual sex - with the resultant issuing of blood from between women's legs, draw together some of the threads of a powerful and deep-rooted discourse. Julia Kristeva comments on the complex semantic or symbolic impact of blood in the following manner:

Blood, indicating the impure, ...inherits the propensity for murder of which man must cleanse himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where *death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality* all come together.⁴⁴

Blood, closely associated with woman/mother, is a reference point, a "cross-roads" in the discursive paths of impurity, power, guilt and survival. In the development of subjectivity, Kristeva suggests, the process of abjection (intimately wrapped in the folds of rejection of the chaotic semiotic) notes blood as a sign of danger and destruction, as well as an indicator of life. In this sense, as many poets have noted, heterosexual sex is undeniably connected with death. Lurie's dreams, after the day of the rape, paint a lurid picture of the horrifying, obsessive and unavoidable links - links of blood - between men, women and procreation.

The demons do not pass him by. He has nightmares of his own in which he wallows in a bed of blood, or, panting, shouting soundlessly, runs from the man with the face like a hawk.... One night, half sleepwalking, half demented, he strips his own bed, even turns the mattress over, looking for stains.⁴⁵

The violence of the attack, its associated fear of destruction and chaos, awakens David Lurie's "demons". His daughter: issue of his flesh, his responsibility and representative of his desire for perpetuity, has been threatened, damaged and "soiled". The manner in which she has been hurt is significant, particularly in terms of Lurie's desire for younger women, women who enable him to perform a denial of his own ageing - his essential mortality. For Lurie, Lucy's rape is in some way an act directed at him; a theft, a destruction of his own grasp on life and youth. In addition, deep in Lurie's subconscious is his knowledge and abjection of ties of blood to his mother

⁴³ Coetzee, J.M. Op. cit., p 158.

⁴⁴ Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror. Op. cit., p 96.

⁴⁵ Coetzee, J.M. Disgrace. Op cit., p 121.

and, inexorably, to all women. He, too, is marked with blood. The “stains” he searches for and profoundly fears lie inscribed in his very sense of self.

But Lucy’s words echo in his mind. *Covered in blood*. What does she mean? Was he right after all when he dreamt of a bed of blood, a bath of blood?⁴⁶

Is it in propitiation for these deep, unspoken and unspeakable stains that Lurie later prostrates himself before Melanie’s mother and sister?

With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor.

Is that enough? He thinks. Will that do? If not, what more?⁴⁷

What more, indeed: Lurie appears to regard himself as ultimately impotent in the process of reparation. His gesture of subjection expressed towards Melanie’s mother and sister, his relinquishing of everything that has held meaning for him (even the lame dog in the closing pages of the novel) - all this counts for nothing in the face of the new “scheme of things”⁴⁸.

The “New” South Africa

The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he wishes he could prolong for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in the field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Wiebliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat....She is flushed from her labours and perhaps a little sunburnt. She looks, suddenly, the picture of health.⁴⁹

In one sense, in regard to Lucy’s position in the narrative, Coetzee’s text has come full circle. The last view of Lucy places her back in the fields, in an idyllic setting. Yet, this is by no means the same picture. Lucy is now no longer a “settler”, but a peasant, a “bywoner” on land owned by a black man. In addition, she is “lightly pregnant”, her body bearing the signature of patriarchy, the mark of her brutally defined place in the structures forming a future South Africa.

What kind of child can seed like that that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog’s urine?⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid. p 159.

⁴⁷ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid. p 173.

⁴⁸ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid. p 216.

⁴⁹ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid. p 218.

⁵⁰ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 199.

Once again it is Lucy who has understood all this; who, despite her father's pleas and offers of emigration has accepted her "place in the scheme"⁵¹ She has chosen to stay on the land on terms which dictate a complete relinquishing of all property, all rights - even her unborn child will belong to her new master and "protector", Petrus.

"Propose the following. Say I accept his protection. Say he can put out whatever story he likes about our relationship and I won't contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be it. As his concubine, ditto. But then the child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his land."⁵²

It is her father who must present the conditions of her offer to Petrus⁵³, her new husband/father. This too is part of his humiliation, his disgrace.

"How humiliating," he says finally. "Such high hopes, and to end like this."

"Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity."

"Like a dog."

"Yes, like a dog."⁵⁴

The postcolonial implications for a white South Africa are spelled out in Coetzee's text, as Lurie is forced to accept the terms of ownership and the conditions for residence in the "new" nation. These conditions are negotiated through the body of the (white) woman in the text, through the body of his daughter. In the light of these corporeal negotiations, in which words weigh light, I would argue, contra Poyner, that *Disgrace* is not an allegory for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - or at least it is not a witness to the efficacy of the Commission's testimonies of confession and repentance. The power of words is not celebrated in Coetzee's novel. Instead, the book may be read as a text which understands that the spoken language of repentance, the "sorry" exacted from men of torture and oppression is desperately insufficient and largely unheard. Indeed, the specificity of South African space, of a land scored red by

⁵¹ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 216.

⁵² Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 204.

⁵³ It is probably significant in terms of the text that "Petrus"- Peter - is understood to mean "rock" or father-founder. Petrus signifies the founding of a "new" order, a new nation.

⁵⁴ Coetzee, J.M. Ibid., p 205.

its history, demands a language which exceeds the archaic strictures of European language.

More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa.⁵⁵

It is the transfer of ownership and the inscriptions of pain on (white) flesh that must, eventually, bring restitution - and more importantly, keep memory brutally alive. In many ways Coetzee's writing finds distinct resonance in the writing of another "Afrikaner", the journalist and poet who writes about the realities and effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Antjie Krog.

We of the white nation try to work out the conditions for our remaining here. We are here for better or worse. We want to be here, but we have to accept that we can no longer stay here on our terms. Therefore I prick up my ears and try to hear what the new conditions for my existence are. Taxes. Mbeki mentioned that - the transfer of resources. Is it that? Is he saying: your money will do, but please dear God, spare us your meagre little white souls?....If there is no forum in which people can think what they want and others worry about what they owe, then both are trapped in anger and guilt. By not determining precisely what is needed, the whites are exposed to constant reproach. If you give specifics they can be met. And should one not also be willing to be available as a punchbag? Can that be part of the deal? Just shut your big mouths while we blame you - for this, after all, is the only bloody thing we ask while rebuilding ourselves, by ourselves.⁵⁶

Most interesting in terms of the enquiries of my text, is the pivotal role that Lucy plays in Disgrace and the novel's "redemptive" gestures towards a future, reconstituted South African society. It is on and through her flesh that the conditions of the New South Africa are to be written. Not only has she borne the burden of shame through rape but she will bear a child whose flesh will also bear witness to her moment of inscription. This is by no means to suggest that Coetzee's text suggests closure, a solution or conclusive redemption. Rather, there is a sense that, like Lurie's opera: the European Love Story, diminished and shrunk into the thin wail of a single string on a child's banjo; the text itself may dwindle and "fail", announcing in its plaintive notes the limits of its own discourse. The crisis on the farm is not truly "resolved". There is no tidy confession-to-redemption sequence any more than there is a sense that if Lucy (and her kind) pay the dues demanded, all will be well.

⁵⁵ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 117.

⁵⁶ Krog, Antjie. Country of my Skull. Op. cit., p 437-438.

Struggle, a violent un-settling and ultimate subjugation and reversal of hegemony is all, it would seem, that is promised for Coetzee's white nation.⁵⁷

Finally, in answer to Farred, I would argue that Coetzee understands with absolute lucidity the implications of "One Settler, One Bullet". His alleged statement: that he is 'not offended by this maxim', is more indicative of his willingness to accept the ontological, collective guilt associated with whiteness in South Africa, than it is testimony to an impervious arrogance. Coetzee is at least one step ahead of Farred and his text spells out a story that may be told to illustrate his (white) grasp of the maxim and its associated mnemonics; mnemonics inscribed upon the (white) bodies of (white) daughters.

⁵⁷ This unresolved conclusion echoes postmodern, metafictional strategies employed in Coetzee's earlier novels, notably *Foe*. Coetzee, J.M. *Foe*. Penguin: London, 1987.

Chapter 3

A Guilty Gospel:

Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible

Colonial relations do not stem from individual good will or actions; they exist before [her] arrival or birth, and whether [she] accepts them or rejects them matters little....

[She] cannot help suffering from guilt and anguish and also, eventually, bad faith. [She] is always on the fringe of temptation and shame, and is in the final analysis, guilty.¹

I wonder what you'll name my sin; Complicity? Loyalty? Stupefaction? How can you tell the difference? Is my sin a failure of virtue, or of competence?²

Kingsolver's multivocal narrative is an epic tracing of the inscriptions of guilt on the bodies and souls of its five (white) American narrators. Brought to the Congo by Nathan Price and his desperate attempts at personal atonement, Orleanna Price and her four daughters are thrust into a context in which the colour of their skins, as well as their gender, marks them as at fault. Despite their "individual good will" they become enmeshed in the colonial and postcolonial discourses of patriarchal power and blame. Their narratives read as confessions: deeply subjective accounts of events that are both intimately personal as well as resonant with national and international significance. Guilt and sorrow are articulated unrelentingly. In contrast to Coetzee's Disgrace, this novel's voices invite judgement and directly demand that the reader participate in the assessment of motives, events and actions. The inscription of guilt and its accompanying texts of reparation and retribution are sketched - not from an omniscient narrative perspective - but from within the "selves" of the (white, female) narrators. In Coetzee's novel, Lucy's story is heard as a "sub-theme": her voice is complementary to that of her father, who witnesses her corporeal inscription (from a position removed) and weeps for his fatherhood. In The Poisonwood Bible the women are no less encoded, no less imprisoned in the demands of guilty discourse, but they speak in their own voices of anguish. Thus, not only are their bodies

¹ Memmi, Albert. The Coloniser and the Colonised. Earthscan Publications: London, 1990. p 104 and 214.

² Kingsolver, Barbara. The Poisonwood Bible. Op cit., p 436.

indelibly (always already) marked with scripts that announce their complicity in African violation, they themselves recite the lines that recount their implication.

Coetzee's protagonist, David Lurie, displays little of the "anguish" described in Memmi's account of the "reluctant colonist", the white settler. He insists that he has nothing of substance to confess. Interestingly, it is Lucy who agonises over the terms of her right to remain in Africa. In Kingsolver's novel each of the (white, female) narrators constructs a story which focuses on her shame, whilst Nathan Price appears to be driven by a desire to obscure his own self-condemnation through the inscription of blame on "Others"³. In both these novels, therefore, there would appear to be a gender-marked response to feelings of guilt.

In a study of gender differences in the organisation of guilt and shame, conducted in the USA in the 1990's, psychological researchers Ferguson and Crowley define and distinguish guilt and shame as follows:

...guilt (is) an agitated negative state, in which the actor feels anxious for perpetrating a wrong-doing, and wishes to change the situation. Shame, in contrast, is seen as a more dejection-based emotional state in which the person's entire sense of self-worth is under attack because of abject failures to present the self in a desirable light....guilt involves warding off internalised images of impending punishment for moral infractions.⁴

An earlier study of gender-linked differences in relation to guilt and shame⁵ argued that "adult White females" were shame-prone, and therefore more easily suffered damage to self-esteem; whereas "adult White males" tended to be guilt-prone and as a result sought outward-focused resolutions to their experiences of culpability. The findings of Ferguson and Crowley suggest that (white, American) women experience guilt equally to men, with an added dimension that translates guilt into internalised, self-directed blame.

³ "Others": women and people of other races, the black people of Africa. It is significant that the punishment that he metes out to his daughters is to compel them to write out 100 verses of the Bible: the 'Word of the Father'.

⁴ Ferguson, Tamara J. and Crowley, Susan L. "Gender Differences in the Organisation of Guilt and Shame." In *Sex Roles*, Vol. 37, Nos. 1/2, 1997. p 20.

⁵ See reference in Ferguson and Crowley to Lewis. *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*. New York: International Universities Press, 1971.

These results suggest that guilt, in females, is an emotion that carries significant affective weight with implications for perceived self-worth, as opposed to being treated as a problem only in the rational assignment or resolution of blame.⁶

Rather than simply experiencing shame more acutely than males,

...females admitted to more intense experiences of *both* emotions than males....To this day, many women are socialised towards a shame-prone orientation, by a society that still gauges a woman's worth *as a person* by her success in establishing interpersonal relationships and in maintaining them, at times, at great cost.⁷

Women are thus prepared, through socialisation, for stories in which they play a "guilty" or shameful role. This is true not only for themselves as individual agents but as members of a sexual and/or racial group. Where relationships fail between individuals, within or between groups of people, women are programmed to embrace the twin burdens of guilt and shame, together with the debts these imply. Barbara Kingsolver's female characters, and in particular Orleanna and Leah Price, tell stories that fall within these psychological parameters. Orleanna's feelings of guilt for her perceived failure as a mother are repeatedly expressed but the texts of all five narrators bear the marks of shame: the shame of failure, the shame of white complicity and, ultimately, the shame of (white) womanhood.

Orleanna

From now on, [she] lives [her] life under the sign of a contradiction which looms at every step, depriving [her] of all coherence and tranquillity.⁸

I want you to find me innocent.⁹

"Woman-ness"

Although the narration of Kingsolver's epic tale is shared by five voices, it is the mother of the four girls, Orleanna Price, whose confessional account frames the story. Whereas Coetzee's novel seems to refute the efficacy of spoken confession, Kingsolver's narrative is composed of admissions of guilt; (white) women's attempts

⁶ Ferguson and Crowley. Op cit., p 39.

⁷ Ferguson and Crowley. Ibid., p 41.

⁸ Memmi, Albert. Op cit., p 86.

⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 9.

to come to terms with their experiences in Africa. With the exception of the last two, each section of the text opens with Orleanna's retrospective assessments of the events described in detail by her daughters. Her words in the opening section of the book, "Genesis", are both a confession and a plea for understanding - to be found "innocent". She does not detail or explicate the crimes for which she seeks absolution, but from the beginning, she marks herself as complicit, shamefully bound up in sins carried into and performed in Africa. Her guilt is that of womanhood, in particular as a mother; as well as that of white European/American colonist. In the opening pages these different guilty strands of identity seem inextricable. Indeed, later in the text, Orleanna herself speaks of how difficult it is to tell one variety of "sin" from another. "How can you tell the difference?"¹⁰ Ultimately, however, it would seem that the categorisation of sin, the specific fault for which she may be blamed, matters little. As the Biblical book Genesis notes, woman's very identity, her corporeal, "natural functions" as wife and mother are marked with guilt and shame.¹¹ For women in Judaeo-Christian traditions, therefore, the links between "what/who I am" and culpability are already forged and are strong. Her "woman-ness" is interpreted by a lexicon compiled within patriarchal, Christian discourse and as such it is fundamentally rooted in the Fall of Eve.

When describing her earlier life as a young, preacher's wife, Orleanna speaks of being "regaled" by the scriptures relating to Eve's punishment: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception...".¹² Indeed, within her marriage relationship, she was openly "blamed" for her womanhood, her motherhood.

He was profoundly embarrassed by my pregnancies....Nathan was made feverish by sex, and trembled afterward, praying aloud and blaming me for my wantonness.¹³

¹⁰ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 436.

¹¹ Please see p 3 of this document.

¹² Kingsolver, Barbara. *Op cit.*, p 218.

¹³ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 225. Nathan's daughters carry this perception of women with them into adulthood. Both Leah and Rachel make references to the spectre of their father, naming them "Jezebel": Biblical figure of a wanton, sexually "loose" woman.

Julia Kristeva describes the “sacred” facet of religion and its accompanying facets of purity and compulsive rejection of defilement, as that which functions in order to “ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the *mother*”(my emphasis).¹⁴ For this reason, the ritualisation of defilement, the recognition of sin, is unavoidably entwined with separation of the sexes and the suppression of the feminine: a “radical evil”.¹⁵ Fundamentalist, formalised approaches to religion will thus tend to create strong bonds between defilement, sin, unworthiness and women. Within the context of an aggressive, patriarchal Christianity, therefore, it is understandable that by the time the twins were born (her second pregnancy), Orleanna had been prepared to accept that it was her “failure of virtue” that had brought Adah’s apparent deformity upon them.

...now I lay awake nights wondering whether my despair had poisoned her. Already Nathan’s obsession with guilt and God’s reproof was infecting me. Adah was what God sent me, either as punishment or reward.¹⁶

Before entering the Congo with her family, as the wife of a passionately fundamentalist missionary, Orleanna Price had been prepared by her husband and his doctrines to acknowledge guilt and embrace shame. The basis for her marriage and the foundations of her motherhood are those of inadequacy and failure. She is in perpetual need of a (hopeless) redemption.

“Whiteness”

With the move to the Congo, Orleanna is schooled further to perceive a different guilt and to take on a new aspect of shame: as white person in Africa. She becomes unsettled and un-homed in a land where whiteness is a sign of illegitimate dominance. The incident in which she is confronted by her own “otherness”, her unwelcome, alien presence in Africa - a moment of “unhomeliness”¹⁷ - is one in which she had expected to discover a universality of women’s experience. She had told herself that “a woman anywhere on earth can understand another woman on a market day”. She was wrong

¹⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Op cit.*, p 64.

¹⁵ Kristeva, Julia. *Ibid.*, p 70.

¹⁶ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Op cit.*, p227.

¹⁷ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge: London, 1998. pp 9-11.

and her “unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence”¹⁸.

However I might pretend I was their neighbour, they knew better. I was pale and wide-eyed as a fish. A fish in the dust of the market place, trying to swim....*stupid ghost! non-person!* A foreign woman and her child assuming themselves in charge, suddenly slapped down to nothing by what they all saw us to be.¹⁹

This humbling and alienating experience in the marketplace is a textual marker indicating Orleanna's place as representative of the (white) “settler's” position in the Congo. It is a turning point for Orleanna. In her humiliation, she perceives her inherent complicity as (white) colonist: her skin marks her as such. Despite “good will”, she is (always already) inscribed within a complex grid of domination and power. Dorothy Driver accurately describes this fraught and problematic set of relationships, referring to (white) women's impossible positions as both oppressor and oppressed in Africa - and thus in some sense caught between groups and enmeshed within power structures - in the following way:

...the mediatory role placed upon and assumed by ...women...involves them in a set of contradictions, ambivalences and obliquities....This entrapment is, of course,...an entrapment within the discourse of imperialism...the discourse of patriarchy.²⁰

“Woman”(white woman), Driver writes, is maintained as a sign within a “signifying system that is intent on creating and reproducing a set of ideal divisions, divisions between culture and nature,...masculinity and femininity,...divisions...which are thrown into sharp relief in the colonial context”.²¹ This system thus effectively writes (white) women into divisions, or positions, simultaneously defined and deconstructed by the terms of its discourse. By means of the sign “woman”, they occupy the lesser, subordinated position in the binary, “man/woman”. However, in as much as they are defined by the sign “white”, they must adhere to the terms and conditions of the dominant group. As a result, in colonised Africa (white) women are “other” and blacks are “more other”.²² Orleanna comprehends her position and grasps her powerlessness within the constructs of (white) patriarchal society. She is, in a sense, a

¹⁸ Bhabha, Homi. *Ibid.*, p 11.

¹⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Op cit.*, p 101.

²⁰ Driver, Dorothy. *Op cit.*, p 13.

²¹ Driver, Dorothy. *Ibid.*, p 10.

²² Driver, Dorothy. *Ibid.*, p 15.

possession: to be dominated and controlled. At the same time she is denied kindred access to (white) colonial man's most distinctive others, even though she may believe she shares "woman-ness" with the women in her village.

Until that moment I'd thought I could have it both ways: to be one of them, and also my husband's wife. What conceit! I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more. How we wives and mothers do perish at the hands of our own righteousness. I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer another in war. Guilty or innocent, they have everything to lose. They *are* what there is to lose.²³

For the unwilling "colonist", for the white person who would prefer to resist the role marked by her white skin, to quote Memmi, "contradiction...looms". She cannot ably fulfil both roles: maintain honest, sound relations with both colonist and colonised. Despite any "good will", she is, "in the final analysis, guilty."²⁴ Orleanna knows this: her words capture her sense of multiply marked, indistinguishable and undeniable guilt. This - as a woman bound further into colonial, patriarchal dominance by her marriage - is her shame.

Maybe I'll even confess the truth, that I rode in with the horsemen and beheld the apocalypse, but still I'll insist I was only a captive witness. What is the conqueror's wife, if not a conquest herself?...It wasn't just me; there were crimes strewn six ways to Sunday, and I had my own mouths to feed. I didn't know. I had no life of my own. And you'll say I did.²⁵

Despite her appeal to be judged "innocent", Orleanna speaks abjectly of her own culpability. She identifies her status as that of possession, of colonised territory (as she points out, "A wife is the earth itself, changing hands, bearing scars"²⁶), but is unable to deny her position of material privilege. Orleanna identifies with both the "profiteer" and the stripped, raped and plundered mother-Africa, who is left "as a husband quits a wife, leaving her with her naked body curled around the emptied-out mine of her womb."²⁷

²³ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 101.

²⁴ Memmi, Albert. Op cit., p 214.

²⁵ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 101.

²⁶ Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 101.

²⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 10.

She therefore believes she has “failed” in her relations with “Africa”: cause enough for shame in women.²⁸ Indeed, she believes that her very “freedom” is proof of her participation in the apocalyptic destruction of freedom and self-determination in Africa.

You’ll say I walked across Africa with my wrists unshackled, and now I am one more soul walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity.²⁹

The Price

“I would be no different to the next one,” she declares, “if I hadn’t paid my own little part in blood.”³⁰ In “blood”: in the early stages of the narrative, the reader is not in possession of all the details but the deal, the price to be paid, is hinted at from the start. The image Orleanna uses of Africa, as a woman robbed of her child is, of course, a reference to the cost of her own reparation. She later asserts that she was irrevocably fated to share the pain of Africa.

In the end, my lot was cast with the Congo. Poor barefoot bride of men who took her jewels and promised the Kingdom.³¹

Once her feet have walked the paths of the Congolese villages, once she has eaten Congolese food, Orleanna is marked, scored in the very cells of her body, with Africa and “her” suffering, as well as “her” texts of blame.

You’ve played some trick on the dividing of my cells so my body can never be free of the small parts of Africa it consumed. It’s the scent of accusation. It seems I only know myself, anymore, by your attendance in my soul.³²

What renders Orleanna’s “confessions” particularly poignant is that the “you” so often addressed is apparently not the reader. Apart from unforgiving Africa “herself”, the “lost small body”, the “fingertips” that still stroke her inner arms, the teeth that “gnaw” at Orleanna’s bones, are those of her dead daughter, Ruth May: her Price paid.

*Oh, little beast, little favourite. Can’t you see I died as well?*³³

²⁸ See Ferguson and Crowley, this document, p 36.

²⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 10.

³⁰ Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 10.

³¹ Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 229.

³² Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 99.

³³ Kingsolver, Barbara., Ibid., p 102.

At the very centre of Orleanna's anguish and self-accusation, the knot that ties all the threads of her guilt together, is the guilt she carries for the death by snakebite of the youngest of her children. Ruth May's death becomes both a payment of debt, the means by which the Price family are "made to pay", for the "sins of the (colonial) fathers"; and that for which Orleanna and her surviving daughters will continue to bear the burden of self-condemnation. The snake, a lethal green mamba, is planted in their hen-house by the village "doctor poet", or *nganga*, Kuvudundu, in an attempt to drive the unwanted and disruptive family away. It is Adah, who like the American poet, Emily Dickinson, sees things "aslant"³⁴, who had noticed earlier that the meanings of the languages of Africa offer no certainty of belonging or consolation for Nathan's family³⁵.

The *nganga* Kuvudundu dressed in white with no bone in his hair is standing at the edge of our yard....He repeats the end of his own name over and over: the word *dundu*. *Dundu* is a kind of antelope. Or it is a small plant of the genus *Veronia*. Or a hill. Or a price you have to pay. So much depends on the tone of voice. One of these things is what our family has coming to us. Our Baptist ears from Georgia will never understand the difference.³⁶

Orleanna *is*, finally, able to tell the "difference", when it is written on the skin of her youngest daughter (this is Leah's voice, describing what Orleanna does not directly relate):

Two red puncture wounds stood out like red beads on her flesh. Two dots an inch apart, as small and tidy as punctuation marks at the end of a sentence none of us could read. The sentence would have started just above her heart.³⁷

The complicity of colonial whiteness and its accompanying, consequential cost, is the text written on Ruth-May's flesh. The Price family pay in blood and, perhaps significantly, immediately after Ruth May's death, the long-awaited rain arrives and the terrible drought is broken.

³⁴ Adah reads Emily Dickinson's poetry and identifies in particular with the speaker in the poem which begins, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant"

³⁵ Coetzee's protagonist in *Disgrace* also notes the disjunction of language in the plight of the (white) "settler" in Africa. European languages fail and African languages confound the "colonist".

³⁶ Kingsolver, Barbara., *Ibid.*, p 200.

³⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara., *Ibid.*, p 415.

In the story told by Orleanna Price, the guilt of her daughter's death is all-engulfing but is ultimately inextricable from the guilt to be carried by the people of Belgium and America that have exploited and stripped the Congo. Her shame is not only that of identity (I am white, I am a woman/mother) or of "failure of virtue". It is also the shame of not acting, not resisting dominance and exploitation, thereby allowing and furthering suffering. In addition, Orleanna reads her "sin" as failure of competence. In her litany of remorse, the "if only I hadn't" of personal grief and failure rolls inexorably into the "if only" of penitent, (white), colonial shame.

If only I hadn't let the children out of my sight that morning. If I hadn't let Nathan take us to Kilanga in the first place. If the Baptists hadn't taken upon themselves the religious conversion of the Congolese. What if the Americans, and the Belgians before them hadn't tasted blood and money in Africa? If the world of the white man had never touched the Congo at all?³⁸

Orleanna's maternal guilt embraces the shame of being white in Africa, so that the two feelings are almost indistinguishable. In this sense, Ruth May becomes "flesh of Africa" and the "you" with whom Orleanna pleads for forgiveness is both her daughter and Africa, "herself".

If you are the eyes in the trees, watching us as we walk away from Kilanga, how will you make your judgement? Lord knows after thirty years I still crave your forgiveness, but who are *you*? ...Are you still my own flesh and blood, my last-born, or are you now the flesh of Africa? How can I tell the difference when the two rivers have run together so? ...I can hardly think where to cast my stones, so I just go on keening for my own losses, trying to wear the marks of the boot on my back as gracefully as the Congo wears hers.³⁹

The death of her daughter - possibly the most significant loss a mother may suffer, given the intensity of this mother-child relationship⁴⁰ - releases Orleanna from her loyalty to her husband so that she is able to walk away from that relationship without shame in doing so. She withdraws completely from Nathan and, at least geographically, from Africa. Her response to the conflict, loss and guilt associated with being a (white) woman in Africa, is in some measure theorised by Antjie Krog, writing about postcolonial responses in South Africa.

³⁸ Kingsolver, Barbara., *Ibid.*, p 369.

³⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara., *Ibid.*, p 438.

⁴⁰ Chodorow writes of this intense mother-daughter link. Chodorow, Nancy. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. University of California Press: London, 1978.

The two nations are both affected, one by injury, the other by guilt, and the first reaction is to withdraw from each other. People withdraw physically or mentally from each other after injury....People are leaving the country or pulling back into their own family or group spaces of language or history. Academics say that this withdrawal may last one second or for centuries, but that it is a necessary and healthy psychological response.⁴¹

Memmi, too, suggests that the “colonizer who refuses” may either withdraw “physically from those [colonial] conditions” or remain “to fight and change them”.⁴² Unlike Lucy, in *Disgrace*, and Leah, Orleanna’s daughter, Orleanna herself has sacrificed too much and suffered too deeply to stay in Africa. She flees the “scent of accusation” with her next youngest child, Adah. Whereas Coetzee’s Lucy faces personal uncertainty, domination and possibly further abuse - her price for remaining in South Africa - Orleanna withdraws to America.

Song of the Three Children: Rachel, Leah and Adah

Look at your sisters now. Lock, stock and barrel, they’ve got their own three ways to live with our history....But which one among us is without sin?⁴³

She inhabits her world, waiting for forgiveness, while her children are planted in or upon the four different nations that have claimed us. ‘Lock, stock and barrel,’ she calls us. Rachel is clearly the one with locks on every possible route to defenestration. And Leah barrels forward, setting everything straight. So I am the one who quietly takes stock, I suppose.⁴⁴

Each of the three surviving sisters finds a different way to “live with (their) history” and each, in a sense, demonstrates a different way of coping with the inscriptions of (white women’s) guilt written on their souls.

⁴¹ Krog, Antjie. Op cit., p 438.

⁴² Memmi, Albert. Op cit., p 85.

⁴³ Kingsolver, Barbara., Op cit., p 438.

⁴⁴ Kingsolver, Barbara., Ibid., p 600.

Rachel

Rachel, the eldest, an almost impossibly white platinum blonde, is intent throughout the narrative in preserving her whiteness and its accompanying privilege. Endowed with a small quota of intelligence and even less sensitivity, she appears unable to conceive of anyone's feelings but her own. The text marks her as the extreme edge of selfish (white) womanhood, a fitting example of the stereotypical, "white woman lounging next to a swimming pool", noted and mocked in Southern Africa.⁴⁵ Her sister, Leah, soon after Rachel has left the Congo with her first partner (a man Leah and Adah suspect of being involved in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba), judges her in the following manner.

Rachel I could only despise more if I knew for sure which way to direct my ire, presumably South Africa, where I guess she's finally hit paydirt with her exceeding whiteness and mercenary husband.⁴⁶

Leah is right: Rachel is in South Africa, a place at the time well suited to "exceeding whiteness" and which Rachel declares she finds surprisingly "normal".⁴⁷ Johannesburg, in 1964, with *apartheid* firmly entrenched, is an ideal society for a woman who has resolved the "contradictions" of colonialism by convincing herself that neither the contradictions nor the "Others" effectively exist. Hers is, in fact, an *apartheid* mentality, in which she attempts to create a world completely under her own control, built on fear of difference and buried guilt.

Rachel later uses her (white) body to gain the use of another man, a friend's husband⁴⁸, and moves to Brazzaville as wife of a diplomat. Here she finally is able to set up her own kingdom, her "own little world", in the form of the Equatorial, a hotel inherited from an elderly third partner. The hotel she runs like a "whole little country"⁴⁹, with whites-only male guests and black servants. She is not completely

⁴⁵ As described in Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull* (Op cit.) p 22. "Nadine Gordimer once asked a black writer: 'Why do you always picture a white woman lounging next to a swimming pool? We are not all like that!' He replied: 'Because we perceive you like that!' Gordimer admits that she has to take cognisance of that truth."

⁴⁶ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 493.

⁴⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 480.

⁴⁸ While dancing around a swimming pool in a red bikini.

⁴⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 580.

unaware of the power of Africa or the weight of her own guilt but attempts to lock these out.

From the very first moment we set foot in the Congo, I could see we were not in charge....The way I see Africa, you don't have to like it but you sure have to admit it's out there. You have your way of thinking and it has its, and never the train shall meet![sic.] You just don't let it influence your mind. If there's ugly things going on out there, well, you put a stout lock on the door and check it twice before you go to sleep. You focus on getting your own little place set up perfect, as I have done, and you'll see. Other people's worries do not necessarily have to drag you down.⁵⁰

Rachel fulfils the role defined by Memmi as "the colonizer who accepts", in an exemplary fashion. She "stresses the difficulties of (her) life abroad" and, "on the other hand (she) admits (her) guilt by proclaiming the riches of living abroad; and after all why not?" The truth is that "deep within herself, the colonist pleads guilty."⁵¹ Rachel opts to accept the conditions of colonial life and her role as coloniser but her defensive stance betrays the fact that she does not believe in her own innocence.

Her reflections on what happened to her youngest sister and her own part in the events that destroyed her family, provide a glimpse of another facet of Rachel's guilt. What lies on the other side of the locked doors of Rachel's fortress is fear and shame.

I ask myself, did I have anything to do with it? The answer is no. I'd made my mind up all along just to rise above it all. Keep my hair presentable and pretend I was elsewhere. Heck, wasn't I the one hollering night and day that we were in danger? It's true that when it happened I was the oldest one there, and I'm sure some people would say I should have been in charge. There was just a minute there where maybe I could have grabbed her, but it happened so fast....So I refuse to feel the slightest responsibility. I really do....Better to keep this place filled up with businessmen and keep the liquor flowing, is what I always say. Honestly, there is no sense in spending too much time alone in the dark.⁵²

⁵⁰ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 585.

⁵¹ Memmi, Albert. *Op cit.* p 123.

⁵² Kingsolver, Barbara. *Op cit.*, p 527.

Rachel is as aware of the disturbing, judging “eyes in the trees”, of the “creepy little things...that peep down at (her) with their beady little eyes till (she’s) just about to lose (her) mind”, as her mother is. Her solution is to fill her life with men she feels she can control and to lock out the “darkness”. Rachel is Kingsolver’s sketch of a (white) woman who deals with guilt and the stain of whiteness in Africa by practising the denial implicit in *apartheid*’s racism.

Leah

Whilst Rachel creates an insular, locked world in which guilt is suppressed and barricaded out, Leah decides instead to embrace Africa, to attempt to step outside or beyond her white skin. She becomes Memmi’s “colonizer who refuses” and who remains to “fight and change” the conditions of colonial dominance.⁵³ Further than that, she decides to “adopt the colonized people and be adopted by them”⁵⁴. Her feelings of guilt are translated into a genuine devotion to her Congolese husband and a political passion for what she believes is just and right for the Congolese people. According to Rachel, Leah’s way of dealing with the death of Ruth May (which was, in some way, perhaps “more” her fault, in that she had provoked Kuvudundu to rage by her active *female* participation in the mass hunt organised by the village), is to “pay for it by becoming the Bride of Africa”.⁵⁵ Although this assessment carries a great deal of spite and a paltry understanding of Leah’s decision, it also carries a grain of truth. Leah’s attraction to Anatole Ngemba is partially gratitude for the lack of blame in his attitude to her and her white skin. After leaving Kilanga, Leah is forced to rest in Bulungu, deep in the throes of a prolonged, malaria-induced fever. During this time, Anatole follows them from Kilanga, finds her, her mother and sisters, and helps to nurse her back to health.

For my whole sixteen years I’ve rarely thought I was worth much more than a distracted grumble from God. But now in my shelter of all things impossible, I drift in a warm bath of forgiveness, and it seems impossible to resist. I have no energy for improving myself. If Anatole can wrap all my rattlebone sins in a blanket and call me goodness itself, why then I’ll just believe him.⁵⁶

⁵³ Memmi, Albert. Op cit., p 85.

⁵⁴ Memmi, Albert. Ibid., p 88.

⁵⁵ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 526.

⁵⁶ Kingsolver, Barbara. Ibid., p 449.

Of the four girls it is Leah who had most avidly sought her father's approval and had felt the sting of his condemnation most acutely. She had desperately attempted to prove herself worthy in terms of his faith and had known little affirmation. As her awareness of her father's inadequacies in the Congo grew, she had begun to break away from his rule but had also become more acutely aware of the mistakes being made by white people in Africa. Thus, the "forgiveness" and appreciation she experiences with Anatole is the redemption she so desperately seeks.

What else but this fever could commute my father's ghost crying, 'Jezebel!' into a curl of blue smoke drifting out through a small, bright hole in the thatch? Anatole banished the honey-coloured ache of malaria and guilt from my blood.⁵⁷

Having found this "requited love", Leah decides to stay in the Congo, with Anatole. By this means, she both assuages guilt and opens new possibilities for prolonged guilt and shame.

For all I may be forsaking, he's giving up a good deal more: the possibility of having more wives than one, for instance. And that's only the beginning. Even now, I think Anatole's friends doubt his sanity. My whiteness could bar him outright from many possibilities, maybe even survival, in the Congo.⁵⁸

This *is* only the beginning. As political changes and intrigues sweep through the Congo, Leah finds herself more of a burden than she may at first have imagined. As a "foreigner in the eye of a storm" she could bring down the wrath of Mobutu's army on the village which was hosting her. Moving to Stanleyville, she quickly realised that she was even more of a liability there than in Balungu. "People were outraged by the sight of a white skin, for reasons (she) had the sense to understand. They had lost their hero to a bargain between the foreigners and Mobutu."⁵⁹ Thereafter, moved to a convent for safety, Leah rails against her skin and "her people", declaring her desire to fight with the Simbas, a militant nationalist group.

'...But it is not your place to fight with the Simbas, even if you were a man. You're white...'

In the privacy of my little room I've damned many men to hell, President Eisenhower, King Leopold, and my own father included. I

⁵⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 453.

⁵⁸ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 455.

⁵⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 473.

damn them for throwing me into a war in which white skin comes down on the wrong side, pure and simple.⁶⁰

Later, in Kinshasa, after a time spent in America, studying, Anatole is arrested and imprisoned. Leah once again ponders the shame of her whiteness. In America, Leah had been “homesick” for Africa and had felt that her husband and children were treated as “primitives, or freaks”. Back in Zaire, however, she has to adjust to a new city, without Anatole.

I never bothered to notice before how thoroughly I've relied on Anatole to justify and absolve me here. For so many years now, I've had the luxury of nearly forgetting I was white in a land of brown and black....Cloaked in my *pagne* and Anatole, I seemed to belong. Now, husbandless in this new neighbourhood, my skin glows like a bare bulb.⁶¹

The conditions of Leah's redemption and absolution lie firmly in the companionship and acceptance of her husband. Left to cope for a while without him, she is unable to fight or ignore her guilt and shame.

I rock back and forth on my chair like a baby, craving so many impossible things: justice, forgiveness, redemption. I crave to stop bearing all the wounds of this place on my own, narrow body. But I also want to be a person who stays, who goes on feeling anguish where anguish is due. I want to belong somewhere, damn it. To scrub the hundred years' war off this white skin till there's nothing left and I can walk out among my neighbours wearing raw sinew and bone, like they do.

Most of all, my white skin craves to be touched and held by the one man on earth I know has forgiven me for it.⁶²

Leah feels her skin to be marked, not to be simply blank or clear. On her “narrow”, white body, are the marks and wounds of people betrayed and exploited: she bears the guilt and shame of whiteness in Africa, as stains that cannot be washed away. Yet, at the same time, she wishes to remain in Africa. Leah has effectively chosen to carry the burden of whiteness in Zaire and to suffer the consequences of her status as Memmi's “refusing colonizer”; in return for which she accepts - and “craves”- the forgiveness offered by her black husband. It is in the context of this successful yet

⁶⁰ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 477.

⁶¹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 535.

⁶² Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 538.

undeniably costly relationship that the “contradictions” and guilt inherent in her whiteness may be borne.

In the concluding sections of the text, Leah’s dream remains, “to leave (her) house one day unmarked by whiteness and walk on a compassionate earth with Ruth May beside (her), bearing no grudge.” She says she lives her life as “un-missionary” in Africa, praying, “*Forgive me, Africa, according to the multitudes of thy mercies.*” Her hope is that despite the “sins of (her) fathers”, Africa will move on to peaceful independence. Although her skin may never be free of its whiteness, only darkened by working under the sun, her children, who are the “colours of silt, loam, dust and clay” provide her with the understanding that eventually, “time erases whiteness altogether.”⁶³ Leah’s final assessment suggests that actions, words, even suffering with her husband in their struggles for freedom in Zaire, do not erase the guilty inscriptions of her white skin. Her children will not be white “colonisers”, but she will have to resign herself to a “position of ambiguity”⁶⁴.

Adah

But we’ve all ended up giving up body and soul to Africa, one way or another. Even Adah, who’s becoming an expert on tropical epidemiology and strange new viruses. Each of us got our heart buried in six feet of African dirt; we are all co-conspirators here.⁶⁵

Adah is the watcher, the assessor. She was born with an apparent disability, which caused her to grow up dragging her right side and, seemingly, with a speech handicap. Though sidelined by these assumed birth defects, Adah’s position enables her to observe with shrewd intelligence the actions and reactions of those around her. She comments most closely on the short-sighted, unyielding doctrines of her father, referring to him, ironically, as “Our Father”- a reference to his demands to be obeyed rather than for benevolence. She seems to sense, most acutely of the narrators in the first part of the novel, the disaster that looms as a result of the insistent, harsh application of her father’s understanding of the Gospel. Although she does not make friends with the villagers in the way that Ruth May and Leah do, she keenly observes

⁶³ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 595.

⁶⁴ Memmi, Albert. *Op cit.*, p 111.

⁶⁵ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Op cit.*, p 537.

and grasps many of the nuances of language as well as cultural intricacies that the other girls miss. For this reason, she is most keenly aware of the blundering ignorance that accompanies her family's efforts in Kilanga. Nonetheless, she, too, is complicit, in that she sees what is happening and is present when Ruth May dies: she is "co-conspirator", as Leah points out.

It is Adah who later comes to an understanding of what motivated and drove her father, when she comes across his military discharge papers.

The conditions of his discharge were technically honorable, but unofficially they were: Cowardice, Guilt and Disgrace. The Reverend the sole survivor in a company of dead men who have marched along beside him all his life since then.

She understands that he could not permit himself to flee the jungle for a second time. His guilt and shame compel him to submit himself and his family to conditions which are hostile in every way to their white skins. In his blind attempts to please a merciless God, he subjects his wife and daughters to a sharing of the punishment he has meted out to himself.

Fate sentenced Our Father to pay for those lives with the remainder of his, and he has spent it posturing desperately beneath the eyes of a God who will not forgive a debt. This God worries me. Lately He has been looking in on me. My sleep is visited by Ruth May and the many other children who are buried near her...Why not Adah? I can think of no answer that exonerates me.⁶⁶

Nathan Price's sin is thus in some sense also inscribed upon the bodies and souls of his wife and daughters. Adah is no exception. Her status as observer does not exonerate her and she feels herself as somehow unworthy of her apparent escape. Ruth May has paid the price demanded of their family, and other children died during their stay in Kilanga. Why, Adah asks, was she spared? Indeed, in the light of her silent "complicity" with her father's mission, she asks,

How many of his sins belong to me? How much of his punishment?⁶⁷

Adah has grown up accustomed to the performance of inscriptions of shame on her imperfect body. An awareness of the meanings ascribed by (white) America to physical deviations from the "norm", sharpens her anti-colonial vision.

⁶⁶ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 468.

⁶⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 557.

Don't we have a cheerful, simple morality here in Western Civilisation: expect perfection, and revile the missed mark. Adah the Poor Thing, hemipleigious egregious besiege us. Recently it has been decided, grudgingly, that dark skin or lameness may not be entirely one's fault, but one still ought to show the good manners to act ashamed.⁶⁸

Whilst she is able to critique a "Western" world view, however, she does not exclude herself from the blame she attaches to the West. She is all too aware of the damage done in the name of "Civilisation" and so refuses dominance, even in relation to her study of tropical diseases: "Believing in all things equally. Believing fundamentally in the right of a plant or virus to rule the earth."⁶⁹ Whereas Leah becomes an "un-missionary", living in Africa; Adah becomes, in a sense, the ultimate "un-colonist", refusing to claim territory or rule the earth even at microscopic levels, in an American laboratory. Identifying with guilty Western society, she asserts,

I know what we have done, and what we deserve.⁷⁰

The Eyes in the Trees: Ruth May

I broke my arm because I was spying and Mama told me not to. This time I got sick because Baby Jesus can see ever what I do and I wasn't good. I tore up some of Adah's pictures and I lied to Mama five times and I tried to see Nelson naked. And I hit Leah on the leg with a stick and saw Mr Axelroot's diamonds. That is a lot of bad things. If I die I will disappear and I know where I'll come back. I'll be right up there in the tree, same color, same everything. I will look down on you. But you won't see me.⁷¹

As a small child, the youngest of the Price girls, Ruth May initially provides an "innocent's" perspective on the Price's move to Kilanga. She demonstrates a transparent, uncluttered understanding of the tenets of Nathan's faith and the basis for his mission. The people of Africa are, she says, the "Tribes of Ham", with Ham being the "worst one of Noah's three boys". Ruth May has been well versed in her own state of sinfulness and therefore, despite being taught that black people are an entirely separate, essentially sinful "tribe", she identifies with them: "Ham was the youngest

⁶⁸ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 559.

⁶⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 600.

⁷⁰ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 601.

⁷¹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 308.

one, like me, and he was bad. Sometimes I am bad too.”⁷² She translates her experiences of life in the village according to the dictates of the adults, unable to judge them, accepting their rules and commands as “Gospel”. In this sense she accepts Axelroot’s pronouncement that her parents will be punished with death if she tells anyone that she saw diamonds in his aeroplane. She naïvely claims culpability for a great deal of the misfortune that falls upon the family. Marked by her obvious innocence in the text, she is an apt sacrifice in terms of Biblical punishment and absolution, a “lamb to the slaughter”.⁷³

After her death, Ruth May appears in the text as marker for the other narrators’ guilt. The “eyes in the trees” are hers, watching their actions, assessing their sins and failures. The text achieves this thematically by means of a narrative moment in which Ruth May is told by a village boy, Nelson, to protect her spirit by fleeing to a designated safe place at the moment of death. Ruth May tells the reader (or her family, through the text) that she plans to escape and “come back” as a creature which hides, camouflaged in the trees. From the point of her death (fittingly, by a green mamba, which characteristically lies, camouflaged, in the trees) until the last chapter of the novel, these “eyes” are perceived as accusatory by the other narrators. They form indicators for moments of remorse, dejection and despair. Each woman attempts to tell a story which deals with her feelings of guilt and shame. Each is left with a burden of irredeemable self-accusation.

The “last word”, however, is left to “the eyes in the trees”. After providing a textual focus point for the narrators’ guilt, the voice that was Ruth May now proclaims,

I am *muntu* Africa, *muntu* one child and a million all lost on the same day. I am your bad child now gone good, for when children die they were only good.⁷⁴

It is not so much that Ruth May is, in any essential or spiritual sense, “good” or “redeemed” in her death, but rather that she has become “good” or “perfect” in the minds of her mother and sisters. She has become the unblemished “lamb that was

⁷² Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 23.

⁷³ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 307. A phrase used by Nathan to describe the circumcision of Congolese girls. Orleanna tells him be concerned about his own girls first.

⁷⁴ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 607.

slain”, for the sins of her sisters, her mother and her “fathers”. In this way she has become a sign which signifies their feelings of lack and failure but that does not offer forgiveness or release from guilt. Within this perception, the figure of Ruth May, and her death, does not offer the text a gesture of redemption. Rather, the voice “in the trees” declares that redemptive potential lies not in remembrance of her death, as price paid, but in a comprehension of personal subjective forgiveness.

Mother, you can still hold on but forgive, forgive and give for long as long as we both shall live I forgive you, Mother.... The teeth at your bones are your own, the hunger is yours, forgiveness is yours.⁷⁵

Kingsolver’s text suggests that the apportioning of blame and retribution - for death, for colonial abuse - is unavoidable, inevitable but ultimately lacking in redemptive power. In terms of Nathan Price’s gospel of shame and perpetual payment for sin, guilt with its accompanying burden of punishment or reparation - and, crucially, no forgiveness - is indeed *bangala*: poisonwood.⁷⁶ The redemptive possibility lies in the individual’s acceptance of all of life/death, of *untu*, “all that is here”. In the same way that Ruth May becomes, in the text, one with Africa - she “is” the snake which claimed her life - so “all that is” may be seen to be transformable. By living, in a particular place, at a particular time, “everyone is complicit”. Even the innocent Ruth May, “touched history”⁷⁷, but within an economy of blamelessness, life is infinitely changeable and in this sense, redeemable.

The sins of the fathers belong to you and to the forest and even to the ones in the iron bracelets⁷⁸, and here where you stand, remembering their songs.⁷⁹

For Orleanna and her daughters, release from their guilt and shame will lie in their ability to forgive Nathan Price, forgive themselves and to “move on”: to change.

⁷⁵ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 614.

⁷⁶ A tree which causes extreme discomfort to humans when touched. The leaves and branches cause the skin to develop a severe rash and inflammation. Fumes from burning poisonwood can be lethal. Nathan Price, in an attempt to declare “Jesus is precious”, mispronounces *bangala*, proclaiming instead, “Jesus is Poisonwood”. For Nathan Price, his family and the villagers of Kilanga, this misunderstanding holds dark prophetic value.

⁷⁷ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 608.

⁷⁸ An allusion to slavery and transportation of Africans to the Americas. “Their music has made a remarkable, circular trip.... This ruin must be called by another name. What would have been is this instead. Change.” Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 610.

⁷⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 614.

Think of the vine that curls from the small, square plot that was once my heart. That is the only marker that you need. Move on. Walk forward into the light.⁸⁰

As in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, there is little sense of resolution in Kingsolver's text. What the novel suggests at its conclusion is, rather, that change may be costly - it may demand blood - but it is ultimately unavoidable. Colonial power struggles have taken place, the lives of many are affected and reparation for colonial crimes will inevitably be demanded. In Kingsolver's novel, however, there is an impulse towards regenerative hope that Coetzee's narrative marginalises. Whereas Lurie prepares himself to abandon all that is meaningful, all that may offer comfort, and will accept that he may live and die, "like a dog"⁸¹, Kingsolver's women are offered a sense of future. Leah, in particular, suggests that time will erase "whiteness" itself and that her children offer positive witness to that end. Lurie's daughter will also bear a child of "mixed race", but this child, in Coetzee's text, is the result of a violent act of hatred. Lucy will accept her misbegotten child, will attempt to be "a good mother"⁸² but Coetzee's protagonist, Lurie, bleakly contemplates the means by which one "leaks out of existence"⁸³. It may be that the narrative stance taken by each writer: Coetzee telling his tale through the perspective of Lurie, a (white), male academic⁸⁴; Kingsolver relating her story via the voices of a family of women, is of greater significance than is contained within the bounds of the novels. It may be that the authorial voice betrays a deeper seated, gender-inflected approach to postcolonial change - and guilt. Does this woman writer, with women at the centre of her narrative focus, move closer to a perception of flux, change - even racial mixing, or "chaos"- with greater acceptance of the heterogeneous than either Coetzee, or his protagonist, is able to? Does she, as (white) woman, more easily comprehend the inscriptions of shame? Or are both novelists suggesting that women are ontologically more able to forgive, to bear the burdens and consequences of guilt and "move on"?⁸⁵ Either way,

⁸⁰ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Ibid.*, p 614.

⁸¹ Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. Op cit., p 205.

⁸² Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 216.

⁸³ Coetzee, J.M. *Ibid.*, p 219.

⁸⁴ Unlike, for example, *Age of Iron*, with its (white) female protagonist - who also, like Lucy, wrestles with the conditions for remaining in South Africa. Coetzee, J.M. *Age of Iron*. Secker and Warburg: London, 1990.

⁸⁵ Orleanna states that the inability to change or move on will destroy men like her husband. "But his kind will always lose in the end. I know this, and now I know why. Whether its wife or nation they

what may be asserted is that both Disgrace and The Poisonwood Bible note the marking of (white) women's bodies within an economy of guilt and retribution. Inscribed by power, branded to create a memory, the (white) women in these novels, as in Lessing's The Grass is Singing, bear the cost of (white) colonialism's history of abuse.

occupy, their mistake is the same: they stand still and their stake moves underneath them. Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p 436.

Chapter 4

Postcolonial Premonitions: Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing

The “woman” in “white woman” acts one way... and the “white” another.¹

The thought of Dick's exasperation, and his warning that he could stand no more changes of servants, a challenge which she had not the vitality to face, caused her to hold herself like a taut-drawn thread, stretched between two immovable weights: that was how she felt, as if she were poised, a battleground for two contending forces. Yet what the forces were, and how she contained them, she could not have said.²

Mary's story is that of a woman who finds herself torn apart by “forces” beyond her control. What are these “forces” and how do they exercise their dominance over her? To what extent is Mary, her (white) body, ultimately a notepad for prophetic, postcolonial inscription? Mary Ann Singleton, in a book about Lessing's writing published in 1977, plays down the postcolonial discourse in The Grass is Singing, maintaining that race issues are only secondary, perhaps incidental, to the “real” issues of the novel. These issues, she states, are psychological explorations. The novel is really about Mary's repressed sexuality and Moses, the black servant who murders Mary, “represents Mary's repressed sexuality, a neurosis originating in her childhood.”³ Whilst I would by no means wish to offer a contradictory, single “real meaning” of Lessing's text, I would like to suggest, as an alternative reading, that the colonial and anti- or post-colonial discourses embedded in the text cannot be so easily dismissed or disregarded. I shall argue that it is the co-ordinates “white”: “woman”, their point of crossing on the graph of Mary's self, that destroy her and mark her as unavoidably “guilty”. In Singleton's reading, Mary's murder is a weakness in the plot, a failure of the text to fulfil its potential. In mine it is the central event, the pivotal narrative moment that betrays Mary's role *both* as victim of patriarchy as well as colonial scapegoat: the price paid.

¹ Driver, Dorothy. “Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise.” Op cit., p 14.

² Lessing, Doris. The Grass is Singing. Op cit., p 148.

³ Singleton, Mary Ann. The City and the Veld: The Fiction of Doris Lessing. Associated University Presses: London, 1977. p 81.

Before beginning an assessment of Lessing's text, however, it is necessary to address what may seem to be a misnomer, a flawed use of terminology, in that chronologically speaking there is no sense in which this novel could be "post-colonial". Published for the first time in 1950, in London, the text could in no way refer to a successful political shift from a colonial to a post-colonial state in Southern Africa. What the novel does do, however, is to strike a discursive note which is out of tune with colonial discourse. Lessing's narrative is undeniably critical of the colonial status quo expressed in Southern Africa. Michael Marais identifies this sense of "post-colonial"⁴, in the following way:

The concept proves most useful...when it locates a specifically *anti- or post-colonial discursive purchase in culture*, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others...⁵ (my emphasis)

Ato Quayson also argues for a non-chronological appreciation of the term "postcolonial".

...it is necessary to disentangle the term 'postcolonial' from its implicit dimension of chronological supersession, that aspect of its prefix which suggests that the colonial stage has been surpassed and left behind. It is important to highlight instead a notion of the term as a process of coming into being and of struggle *against* colonialism and its after-effects. In this respect the prefix would be fused with the sense invoked by 'anti'.⁶

Thus, in the sense that The Grass is Singing takes up an anti-colonial, critical stance, as well as in the sense that it incorporates a view which is analytically (deadly) accurate - prophetic - in its implications for colonial rule; I would argue that the novel traces discursive strands which mark it as "postcolonial".

These strands knit with those that clothe Lessing's troubled central character in guilt and abjection. As (white) *woman* Mary is marked with what Kristeva terms the

⁴ Ato Quayson comments on the spelling of "post-colonial" as opposed to "postcolonial" in the following way: "I prefer the unhyphenated version, mainly to distinguish it from its more chronologically inflected progenitor and also to indicate a tendency, marked mainly in conference papers and book titles, that seems to be gaining dominance in the field. Quayson, Ato. Postcolonialism. Theory, Practice or Process? Polity Press: Cambridge, 2000. p 1.

⁵ Marais, Michael. "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-Colonial Metafiction", in Huggan, G and Watson, S (ed.). Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee. MacMillan Press Ltd: London, 1996. p 66.

⁶ Quayson, Ato. Op cit., p 9.

“demoniacal potential of the feminine”⁷ as well as the indelible ciphers of white culpability. The inscriptions of “womanness” as well as those of “whiteness” inscribe Mary into the guilty discourse that finds its voice in Lessing’s novel. For this reason I shall draw on both psychoanalytical (Kristevan) as well as postcolonial theories to map the lines of Mary’s destruction.

“Woman-ness”

...the threat remained: the dark continent would take on its own force if it remained unchecked, which is to say, uncharted and unadministered by English Phallic Law. So too would the newly emerging woman...take on her own direction into the excess of a “dark” nature if she were to become un-domestic, un-married, unfeminized.⁸

South Africa is a wonderful place: for the unmarried white woman. But she was not playing her part, for she did not get married.⁹

The path which led to Mary’s murder was, in a sense, paved in her childhood. After intimately observing her mother’s unhappy and frustrating marriage, being drawn into a kind of complicity in it (“She made a confidante of Mary early.”¹⁰); Mary unconsciously chooses singleness as a more attractive option. By doing so well into her thirties however, she is seen to be evading the accepted norm for women. The rule of society that Rich has termed, “compulsory heterosexuality”¹¹ cannot, ultimately, be ignored.

But all women become conscious, sooner or later, of that impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married, and Mary, who was not at all susceptible to atmosphere, or the things people imply, was brought face to face with it suddenly, and most unpleasantly.¹²

The overheard conversation, which impels Mary into marriage, refers to her apparent deficiency, her inability to relate “normally” - that is, beyond non-sexual friendships - with men. The assertion that she is “not like that”(not sexually aware) haunts Mary over the following years, well into her sexually cold marriage to Dick. A first,

⁷ Kristeva, Julia. Op cit., p 65.

⁸ Driver, Dorothy. Op cit., p 17.

⁹ Lessing, Doris. Op cit., p 38.

¹⁰ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 33.

¹¹ Rich, Adrienne. Op cit.

¹² Lessing, Doris. Op cit., p 40.

disastrous attempt at a proposal from an older man, from which Mary recoils violently, is met with unsympathetic derision from her friends. She is seen to have failed and “they didn’t forgive her; they laughed and felt that in some way it served her right.”¹³ Thus Mary’s difference, her naïve resistance to marriage is not tolerated - or forgiven - and she stumbles into her relationship with Dick in a blind, crisis of identity. It is the disjunction between knowledge of the self (or lack thereof) and social definition of sanctioned identity for women that throws Mary “off balance”¹⁴ and into the life on the farm that destroys her.

Initially, however, Mary makes every attempt to meet the requirements demanded of her in her newly married state. Despite an overwhelming sense that she has been cursed by her (hated) father, “possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead,” she submits to Dick’s guilty marital demands and finds them to be “not so bad”.¹⁵ She is “naturally” able to withdraw from intimacy with Dick, whilst going through the motions of married life. Her frigidity disappoints Dick but he turns his disappointment into self-blame: he feels that he had no right to bring a woman to his farm, as he is acutely aware of his lack of material things. “ And if Dick felt as if he had been denied, rebuffed, made to feel brutal and foolish, then his sense of guilt told him it was no more than he deserved.”¹⁶ Thus Mary’s sexual coldness becomes a source of power over her husband and she is able to assume an illusion of emotional control.

Her first weeks on the farm are spent almost obsessively making the house “pretty”. As Jacqueline Bardolph points out, the couple comes from the town (Dick’s family were not farmers) and are in the same position as “newly-arrived colonials”¹⁷: they are poor and have few belongings. Mary sets about attempting to improve the appearance of their flimsy house, to make it inexpensively accommodating, thereby initially living

¹³ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 43.

¹⁴ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 44.

¹⁵ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 55.

¹⁶ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 55.

¹⁷ Bardolph, Jacqueline. “Woman and the World of Things: A Reading of *The Grass is Singing*” in *Doris Lessing. Southern African Literature Series* ed. Eve Bertelsen. McGraw-Hill Book Company: Johannesburg, 1985. p 121.

up to the myth that white women “made the dark continent liveable”.¹⁸ The concept of women’s ability to provide refinement, of the imperative for them to take a humanising or civilising role, is an idea that Dorothy Driver identifies as foundational.

In the South African colonial situation, where the Law of the Father has taken hold with particular force and the ideals of masculinity and femininity have been particularly sharply polarized, the humanising function of women has had a vigorous life in the world of ideas.¹⁹

Mary seems to take on these feminine “virtues” as if assuming a new identity. She spends each day earnestly employing herself in her assumed tasks, looking for Dick’s approval at the end of it. She is the epitome of “womanly industry”²⁰, seemingly driven by a desire to turn the rough, primitive and functional bachelor house into an orderly, attractive home. Dick is impressed. “For his pride and affectionate gratitude for what she was doing (he would never have believed that his forlorn house could look like this) overshadowed his patient disappointment.”²¹ What Mary lacked sexually, where she failed “as a woman” in the bedroom, she initially compensated for in her housekeeping. It is as if by creating order in the house, Mary is establishing boundaries²² between “civilised” and “uncivilised”; by means of her cleaning and scrubbing, she is attempting to effect a sanctification, or separation, from the defilement and apparent disorder of the surrounding farmland and its (black) workers.

After her first flurry of activity, however, Mary is brought face-to-face with the issue that becomes central to her destruction. She is not obliged to do the “real” housework of cooking and cleaning, with which, in another society, she would have filled her time, as there is a “houseboy” who performs these tasks. This fact, and the knowledge of his constant presence during the day, is both difficult and repellent to her.

She had never come into contact with natives before, as an employer on her own account. Her mother’s servants she had been forbidden to talk to; in the club she had been kind to the waiters; but the ‘native problem’ meant for her other women’s complaints about their servants at tea parties. She was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South

¹⁸ Driver, Dorothy. *Op cit.*, p 9.

¹⁹ Driver, Dorothy. *Ibid.*, p 9.

²⁰ I use the terms, “womanly industry” ironically, as an allusion to sexist social expectations and demands.

²¹ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 62.

²² Mary Douglas’ term. She, and Kristeva, refer to society’s - and the individual’s - need to establish a “boundary” between “ourselves” and the threat of that which is perceived as defiled, or “mixed”-chaotic. Douglas, Mary. *Op cit.*; Kristeva, Julia. *Op cit.*

Africa is brought up to be. In her childhood she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive, lowered, but matter-of-fact voice she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her.²³

Her upbringing has thus taught her nothing about relating to “natives”, other than fear. Her sense of repulsion for sexual contact with men is intensified and realised in her apprehension of this black male presence in her house. For this reason she is ill equipped to manage the servants that attend her and fails in what is a central role for white women in Africa: to “mediate between the races”.²⁴ Between Samson (the “houseboy”) and Dick there is “a perfect understanding”, but Mary is unable to reconcile her fears and grasp the “unwritten rules” that exist between master and servants.²⁵ As a result, and to Dick’s extreme annoyance, she loses a number of “good boys”, who will not work for her. “A cook never lasted longer than a month, and all the time there were scenes and storms of temper.”²⁶

Mary’s obsessive hatred of intimacy, the feeling that she will not and cannot endure “being imposed on” is displayed in a number of narrative moments involving her servants. On one particular occasion she commands “the boy” to scrub the old zinc bath. After hours of his patient, hard scrubbing she is still not satisfied that it is clean. Her anger and repulsion, the sense of abjection she feels for the bodies of others, is directed at the bath, which over a number of years had acquired a “patina of grease and dirt”. In her desperate desire to keep what is “loathsome”²⁷ separate from herself, she forces the servant - who is also a focus for her fearful abjection - to continue cleaning.²⁸ In this way, Mary’s compulsive cleanliness betrays a deeper disability: she is unable to fulfil relational roles outlined in patriarchal society, in which her worth “as a person” is gauged “by her success in establishing interpersonal relationships”²⁹. Her keen sense of defilement, the overwhelming yet unspoken acknowledgement of her inadequacy, drives Mary to repel others as a symptom of her shame. She fails in

²³ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 59.

²⁴ Driver, Dorothy. *Op cit.*, p12.

²⁵ Lessing, Doris. *Op cit.*, p 65.

²⁶ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 82.

²⁷ Kristeva, Julia. *Op cit.*, p 2. Please see pages 5 to 8 of this document.

²⁸ Lessing, Doris. *Op cit.*, pp 71-73. Jacqueline Bardolph comments on this event as well, linking it to Mary’s suppressed guilt. *Op cit.*, p 123.

²⁹ Ferguson and Crowley. *Op cit.*, p 39.

terms of her relationships with her husband, her neighbours and, most acutely, with the “others” of colonial Africa, the black workers on their farm.

Whiteness

Moses is the last in a long line of Mary’s servants. In frustration and desperation - he is unable to find a “houseboy” who will work for Mary and her own housekeeping has disintegrated badly by this time - Dick brings up one of the farm labourers to be trained to work in the house. When Mary objects to Moses’ employment, Dick explodes.

He said again, after a silence, his voice ugly with hostility: ‘I can’t stand any more changing of servants. I’ve had enough. I’m warning you , Mary.’....

‘Mary,’ he said, like a superior to a subordinate, ‘did you hear what I said?’³⁰

Mary is compelled, by Dick’s exertion of authority, to accept Moses in her house. This highlights a meeting of dynamically conflicting power structures. Jean Pickering comments on this in the following way:

In white settler society men outrank women even more than they do at “Home” in middle-class England. Charlie Slatter can make a joke of this situation: “Niggers...keep their own women in the right place.” This “natural” relationship of dominant man and submissive woman becomes problematic in this society only when the man is black and the woman white...³¹

Dorothy Driver illuminates the further complexity of the colonial value systems, by pointing out that “the symbolic signifying system, in its dichotomising of culture/nature, masculine/feminine, white/black, reason/sentiment, and so on, places (white) women and black people within the same categories.”³² Mary’s hysterical encounters with her servants are frustrated attempts to exert power, to maintain the social values she at least partly understands. Her deep desire to keep a distance from others, her almost overwhelming sense of abjection which rises when she is forced into intimacy, is pressed to unbearable limits when this webbing of relational strands is imposed on her. Moses’ arrival at the house brings her to crisis point.

³⁰ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 147.

³¹ Pickering, Jean. Understanding Doris Lessing. University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 1990. p 19.

³² Driver, Dorothy. *Op cit.*, p 13.

Mary's earlier, first encounter with Moses was when Dick had fallen ill and she was forced to confront the labour force on the farm. She had had to "crush down violent repugnance to the idea of facing the farm natives herself"³³ and take up authority on Dick's behalf. Mary becomes overwhelmed with a sense of revulsion at the sight of semi-naked black bodies: "slack black breasts", men's "haunches" and children's "pot-bellie(s)" and the text marks her response as one of abjection by the images which cluster around her impressions of the compound:

...big amber coloured pumpkins scattered among the leaves. Some of them were beginning to rot, subsiding into a sour, festering ooze of pinky stuff, covered with flies. Flies were everywhere. They hummed around Mary's head in a cloud as she walked, and they clustered round the eyes of the dozen small black children...³⁴

Steeling herself and armed with the *sjambok*, which had been hanging, almost as an ornament, in the house, she forces a number of workers onto the fields. She then finds herself "exhilarated by the unfamiliar responsibility, the sensation of pitting her will against the farm".³⁵ She is able to control her sense of hatred and revulsion once the men are perceived as a "gang of natives": a useful, machine-like group which may be bent to her will. Their bodies, the reminders that they are human, continue to repel her. She hated their "half-naked, thick-muscled black bodies....and more than anything, with a violent physical repulsion, the heavy smell that came from them, a hot, sour animal smell."³⁶ In this context, her encounter with Moses is shocking, a revelation that shakes her with fear and desire.

It is a moment of defiance at her inhumane control of the work force, her insistence that they work without an adequate break, that sparks the confrontation between Mary and Moses. Incensed by his use of his "own dialect", followed by English (the use of which she regards as "cheeky")³⁷, she is rendered speechless with anger.

And she saw in his eyes that sullen resentment, and - what put the finishing touch to it - amused contempt.³⁸

³³ Lessing, Doris. Op cit., p 108.

³⁴ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 110.

³⁵ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 111.

³⁶ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 115.

³⁷ Like Coetzee and Kingsolver, Lessing refers powerfully to the point of conflict and disjunction marked by language, in colonial discourse.

³⁸ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 119.

In what is an involuntary movement, born of her rage and hatred, she brings the *sjambok* down across his face, in a “vicious swinging blow”. She watches as “a drop of bright blood...splash(es) to his chest” and she takes in the fact that he is “magnificently built, with nothing on but an old sack tied round his waist”.³⁹ The scene is fraught both with latent sexuality and racial conflict: these discourses intersect powerfully at this point in the narrative and the blood-stained *sjambok* condenses them into a single image.⁴⁰ Mary’s rage turns to fear “at her own action, and because of the look... in his eyes.”⁴¹ She has been provoked, by communication in “her” language, into direct, intimate confrontation with a black person - with a black man. It is significant (Lessing’s text spells this out) that she has no fear of prosecution for assault. Her white skin protects her from that.

She had behind her the police, the courts, the jails; he, nothing but patience.⁴²

However, in that moment of extreme intimacy, Mary is shocked into an acknowledgement of her most abject fear, that about which her mother had warned her. It is, of course, a nameless, unspoken fear/fascination, embodied at this moment in the blood-marked black man. The text does not attempt to suggest much about Moses’ thoughts but hints at future retribution: he has no recourse to justice but he does have “patience”. At this point in the narrative, Mary appears to hold power. Later, this moment of violent intimacy will cause her to relinquish this illusion entirely.

She began on the usual routine of instruction, as cold-voiced and methodical as always, but with a difference. She was unable to treat this boy as she had treated all the others, for always, at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit him and thought he would attack her.... But she was not quite as indifferent as she had been.⁴³

Mary’s moment of terrified intimacy with this “boy” has, without any sign from him, changed the nature of her relationship with her servant. She is unable to keep the

³⁹ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 119.

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Bardolph points out that the *sjambok* is a “commonplace symbol of colonial domination and sexual perversion and bondage”. Bardolph, Jacqueline. *Op cit.*, p 123.

⁴¹ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 120.

⁴² Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 120.

⁴³ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 142.

distance necessary to her own sense of “balance” and despite an assumed air of neutrality, is increasingly disturbed by his presence in the house. She is “fascinated” by his “broad-built body”, watching intently as he works, his muscles bulging inside the servants’ uniform.⁴⁴ The white shorts and shirts seem incapable of containing or constraining his body. It is at his wash time, one morning, when she unwittingly intrudes upon his privacy, that a second moment of heated intimacy is provoked. Once again, it is because Moses insists (this time wordlessly) that she acknowledge his humanity, that the confrontation is brought about. She is “arrested” by the sight of “the white lather...startlingly white against the black skin”: her fascination is gripped by this display of contrast, of difference, on his skin. When he waits for her to go, she is furious.

A white person may look at a native, who is no better than a dog. Therefore she was annoyed when he stopped and stood upright, waiting for her to go, his body expressing resentment of her presence there....She felt the same impulse that had once made her bring the lash across his face.⁴⁵

Once again the scene is fraught with sexual as well as racial intensity. This time she is forced to retreat, into the house, and is goaded by anger, hysterical with a “violent nervous reaction”.

What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being, (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of *guilt*, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip.⁴⁶ (my emphasis)

Mary is marked with (white) guilt as surely as she marked the “native” with her earlier violent lashing: she has betrayed herself with the same stroke. As a result, she loses her “balance” and feels she has “no control over her actions”.⁴⁷

She finds his presence in her house intolerable, a constant insufferable pressure, and is unable to explain her fears to Dick. The “knowledge of that man alone in the house with her lay like a weight at the back of her mind” and although Moses seems

⁴⁴ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 142.

⁴⁵ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 143.

⁴⁶ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 144.

⁴⁷ Lessing, Doris. Ibid., p 145.

indifferent and calm, Dick senses the tension and begins to complain of her “bad management” of the servant.⁴⁸ Mary is torn between two forces, believing herself to be a “battleground”, as indeed she is. Having recognised Moses’ humanity, albeit in phrases of violence and guilt, she finds herself caught between two loyalties. As Memmi writes of the coloniser,

With all (her) power (she) must disown the colonized while their existence is indispensable to (her) own.... Having become aware of the unjust relationship which ties (her) to the colonized, (she) must continually attempt to absolve (her)self.⁴⁹

It is impossible for her to please two “masters” and despite Moses’ apparent subservience, it is clear that he has a power over Mary composed of her guilt and fascination: a fascination which is sexual as well as that of the “other”. Jean Pickering points out that the Rhodesian law which made it an offence for a white woman and a black man to have sexual intercourse (but not a white man and a black woman), “recognises that the relationship between white woman and black man is a point of tension, a weakness in colonial culture; and because black men rather than black women take jobs as domestic servants, the weak spot in the social system lies within the white man’s home”.⁵⁰ The “weakness in colonial culture” is brought about by the complex power structures of patriarchal, colonial society. Mary’s crisis is unquestionably emblematic of this “point of tension” and she is brought to breaking point when Moses announces his resignation. Thinking of Dick’s anger, she is unable to face this blow and to her shame is reduced to tears, “in front of the native”.⁵¹ She begs him not to leave and the power shift is illuminated in her “renewed fear” as she sees “an indulgence for her weakness in his eyes”.

‘Drink,’ he said simply, as if he were speaking to one of his own women; and she drank.⁵²

From this point in the narrative, Mary becomes increasingly unbalanced and disturbed. Moses asserts his power by simply expressing human concern for her, gently but firmly insisting on the existence of their “personal relation”⁵³, speaking in English

⁴⁸ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 148.

⁴⁹ Memmi, Albert. *The Coloniser and the Colonised*. Op cit., p 120.

⁵⁰ Pickering, Jean. Op cit., p 120.

⁵¹ Lessing, Doris. Op cit., p 151.

⁵² Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 151.

⁵³ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 153.

rather than “kitchen kaffir” as a sign of his right to equal communicative opportunities. Mary is at once horrified and obsessed, “out of her depth”. She experiences “a terrible dark fear”⁵⁴ at his touch, when he gently guides her to her room to rest, after her tearful breakdown. Her sense of abjection is clearly marked in the text: she feels as if she is in a “nightmare...powerless against horror”, she is filled with “nausea” and moans out loud, “as if she had been touched by excrement”.⁵⁵ In addition, she is acutely, neurotically aware of the shift of emotional and moral control that has taken place. She feels “helplessly in his power” and linked with her unease is an irresistible “dark attraction”.⁵⁶ Ultimately, she becomes “possessed” by an overwhelming fearful awareness of Moses’ presence, so that Dick becomes “more and more unreal”⁵⁷ and she becomes convinced that her conflict, her ultimate, inexorable yielding to the black man’s dominance is all that matters.

And in the attitude of Moses, in the way he moved or spoke, with that easy, confident, bullying insolence, she could see he was waiting too. They were like two antagonists, silently sparring. Only he was powerful and sure of himself, and she was undermined with fear, by her terrible dream-filled nights, her obsession.⁵⁸

Even Dick’s decision to leave the farm for a while makes no impression on Mary’s conviction that something awful is going to happen to her. There is a brief moment of confused respite for Mary, when the newly arrived English farm assistant observes Moses dressing her and attempts to step in and protect her from herself and from Moses.

‘Go away,’ she said suddenly, over his shoulder at the native. Tony realised that she was trying to assert herself: she was using his presence there as a shield in a fight to get back command she had lost.⁵⁹

This moment passes quickly, however, and Mary dissolves into fear at the thought of the consequences of her words. At the moment of her death she feels guilt: for betraying the black man, “at the bidding of the Englishman”.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 152.

⁵⁵ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 152.

⁵⁶ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 154.

⁵⁷ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 167.

⁵⁸ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 167.

⁵⁹ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 188.

⁶⁰ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 204.

Guilty

Mary marks herself as guilty. Her feelings of abjection are moments of repulsion from deep within the self. Kristeva describes this sense of abjection as in some way thrusting aside what the self must jettison or exclude in order to “live”: “these body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands”.⁶¹ Her fear of her father, her revulsion for her own sexuality and, most crucially, her repulsion for the bodies of others, particularly black people (her extreme “Others”) are fetishised responses to Mary’s own sense of defilement. Thus, at a deeply subjective level, Mary is prepared to experience and accept guilt, even at the fearfully awaited moment of death.

The evil is there, but of what it consists I do not know.... She groaned because of the strain, lifted in perpetual judgement on herself, who was at the same time the judged, knowing only that she was suffering torment beyond description...had she not lived with it for many years? Long before she had come to the farm! ...Against what had she sinned?⁶²

This subjective, “human” acknowledgement of guilt is not Mary’s only burden, however. The text inscribes, on Mary’s form, the guilt of her failure in white Southern African society. By allowing Moses to gain power, and by allowing him the intimacy she denies other white people, she has broken the “first law of white South Africa” and allowed the “nigger to see he is as good as” any white person.⁶³ The fact that Charlie Slatter knows this about Mary, causes him to inscribe the blame for all that has happened on her (murdered) body.

He turned and went into the bedroom. Mary Turner was a stiff shape under a soiled white sheet. At one end of the sheet protruded a mass of pale strawish hair, and at the other a crinkled yellow foot. Now a curious thing happened. The hate and contempt that one would have expected to show on his face when he looked at the murderer, twisted his features now, as he stared at Mary.⁶⁴

Both Slatter and the white policeman called to the scene of the crime are appalled at the sight of the body, displaying a “profound instinctive horror and fear”⁶⁵ of a kind that Tony Marston has not been long enough in the country to understand. He is taken

⁶¹ Kristeva, Julia. *Op cit.*, p 3.

⁶² Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 195.

⁶³ Lessing, Doris. *Op cit.*, p 178.

⁶⁴ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 17.

⁶⁵ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 20.

aback at their “bitter, contemptuous anger” and indirectly questions their response, wishing to talk about the motives for Mary’s murder. They, however, are part of a community that knows the unspoken codes of white behaviour and by no means wish to expose the background possibilities of this case.

‘When you have been in the country long enough, you will understand that we don’t like niggers murdering white women.’⁶⁶

That Mary’s death is in some sense a crime of passion: passion across the colour bar, is a strict taboo. Marston’s attempt to explain the details of the case, to provoke Slatter and the policeman into discussing her circumstances, is met with a stony refusal. As the text explains,

...it was ‘white civilisation’ fighting to defend itself...‘white civilisation’ which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures...⁶⁷

Mary’s hysterical intimacy with Moses is a failure. She has betrayed her “own kind” and is guilty of threatening “white civilisation’s” identity and security.

The ultimate inscription of blame that Mary is submitted to is that written most clearly on her body by Moses himself. Intriguingly, Mary anticipates her own destruction, knowing that that night, their last on the farm, will bring her death. She leaves her bed to meet what she sees as her judgement, “propelled by fear, but also by knowledge”⁶⁸.

And, at the sight of him, her emotions unexpectedly shifted, to create in her an extraordinary feeling of guilt; but towards him, to whom she had been disloyal, and at the bidding of the Englishman.⁶⁹

Mary’s “crime” is disclosed in terms of her emotions. Moses’ thoughts and feelings are not revealed in the text. What is related is simply his deed: the writing on her body of the penalty to be exacted. He has spent the day preparing a steel blade for the execution of her sentence and carries it out with quiet, decisive purpose. Bartolph comments on the rape-like nature of the murder⁷⁰: the penetration of the blade, the

⁶⁶ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 22.

⁶⁷ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 26.

⁶⁸ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 203.

⁶⁹ Lessing, Doris. *Ibid.*, p 204.

⁷⁰ Bartolph, Jacqueline. *Op cit.*, p 125.

stifling of her cries and the forcing of his body on hers. However, what is also apparent is the deliberate, passion-free manner of Moses' actions. The murder is more an act of necessity than a hate-filled moment of illicit rage and abuse. In contrast to the hysterical lashing with which Mary had spilt his blood, Moses observes the dripping of her blood from the piece of metal he had sharpened earlier, with detachment. After he has rinsed the blade in the rain, he is undecided in his purpose, but declines to take revenge on the sleeping Marston. He has achieved his primary task and Mary has paid the requisite price. For this act of justice, Moses does not hide the part he has played and he later calmly offers himself to the police.

It would be too simplistic a reading of Lessing's novel to suggest either that it is all about the "race problem" (that Mary represents all (white) colonists in Africa and that her death is an unambiguous warning of what is to come); or that the novel is only about "gender issues". As Pickering points out,

...it seems clear that neither the problem of race nor that of gender can be subordinated to the other: Lessing has not made Mary a woman in order to suggest that, in Moses's dominating her he represents the superior masculinity of the blacks....Nor has she made Moses a man in order to suggest that the novel's main focus is female oppression.⁷¹

What I would argue, however, and what I believe Pickering misses in her reading of the novel, is the means by which the "problems of race" and "gender" intersect in the novel, in such a way as to expose the discourses of dominance and guilt within colonial society. The message inscribed on Mary's (white, woman's) body may be read in a variety of ways, with a number of inflections, but it may also most certainly be apprehended as a text of blame and hint, prophetically, of post-colonial retribution.

After her death, the long-awaited rains begin to fall: Moses washes her blood from his weapon in the cool, heavy drops. The text marks the redemptive gesture performed through the (white) woman's death, in terms of the life-giving, natural rejuvenation released on the land. Moses, his name resonant with Biblically messianic significance, will not "see the promised land" and will most certainly not be spared by colonial justice. Nonetheless, his action permits a textual suggestion that restitution will ultimately take place. What is significant, in terms of my reading, is that this moment

⁷¹ Pickering, Jean. *Op cit.*, p 23.

is released in response to an inscription in blood on the body of a (white) woman. Her body is held to account, made to pay. For what must not be forgotten, a corporeal note has been made. In addition, to quote Nietzsche, Moses' action permits, "...a literal compensation for an injury...a recompense in the form of a kind of *pleasure*, the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely on one who is powerless...the enjoyment of violation," and what is more, "...in punishing the debtor, the creditor participates in a *right of the masters*".⁷²

⁷² Nietzsche, Friedrich. Op cit., p 65.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

[Foucault's] work has not left a space for the inclusion of women's accounts and representations of the various histories of their bodies that could be written. That does not mean that the metaphor of social inscription of corporeal surfaces must be abandoned by feminists but that these metaphors must be refigured, their history in and complicity with the patriarchal effacement of women made clear, if there is to remain something of insight or strategic value in these texts.¹

What I have attempted to do in this dissertation is to accept Grosz's implicit challenge: to re-consider Foucault's "metaphor" of inscription and to "refigure" the means by which it may be rendered coherent in an epistemology of women's corporeality. By no means do I wish to suggest that the single inscription that I have begun to trace, that of (white) women's guilt in postcolonial literature, is the full text: an entire, completed, stable discourse. Rather, I wish to gesture towards a phrase, a single theme in a vast narrative, which is constantly changing and yet is persistently retold in the ciphering of women's bodies. My readings of Coetzee's Disgrace, Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible and Lessing's The Grass is Singing represent an interrogation of the discourses of power, defilement and guilt as they cross and conflict on the bodies of (white) women in Africa - as reflected in these novels. I have suggested that the conjunctions of the corporeal markers "white" and "woman" provoke readings which render women's bodies undeniably and irrefutably etched with multiple configurations of guilt.

An inherent postcoloniality in the considered novels has been assumed, in that each of the writers assumes a narrative position in some way critical of (or anti-) colonialism and has demonstrated a textual acknowledgement of colonial unsustainability. Within this textual context, I have investigated the role that (white) women play in the post-colonial restitution demanded from (white) colonial society. In his portrait of the "colonizer who refuses", Memmi saw the coloniser's "wife" (only men are represented as significant agents in Memmi's colonial critique) as a mere distraction, an opponent who will complicate and frustrate his anti-colonial purpose.

¹ Grosz, Elizabeth. Op cit., p 158.

...even his wife will join in and cry – a woman is less concerned about humanity in an abstract sense, the colonized mean nothing to her and she only feels at home among the Europeans.²

What is of interest is that, contra Memmi, the (white) women represented in the fiction of all three writers take complex, crucial positions in the anti- or postcolonial impulses within the texts. It would seem that the inscriptions of guilt on bodies already noted as “woman” and “white”, mark these bodies as fit for effective, reparational punishment. To quote Grosz, “memory, social history and cultural cohesion are branded onto the flesh”³ in the exacting of social compensation. In each of the three novels, the (white) women are aware of their shame and comprehend their complicity in the discourses of colonial power. The consequent etching of their skin, the mnemonics of blame and the exacting of retributive payment, is in some measure an expected or accepted gesture. In Disgrace Lucy accepts that her rapists have “marked” her, that they will “come back” and insists that this knowledge is not a reason to leave the land. To the contrary, she suggests that her subjection, as (white) woman, is the “price one has to pay for staying on”.⁴ Leah, too, in The Poisonwood Bible, accepts her guilt and shame as a condition of being white and a woman, in Africa. Ruth May’s death is mourned and her mother and sisters live their lives within its shadow, but they do not attempt to cast blame on the people of the village. They carry the burden of culpability themselves. Orleana declares that Ruth May was in some sense part of the necessary cost of democracy (and the transition to a post-colonial state) in the Congo when she says, “On that awful day in January 1961, Lumumba paid with a life and so did I”.⁵ In Lessing’s Rhodesian account, the neurotic Mary in The Grass is Singing is strangely prepared for her death. She expects Moses, her executioner, and predicts the place of her murder. Seconds before his blade strikes, she experiences guilt and wishes to appeal, to gain absolution, but it is too late. She knows, however, that it is through her death that the land itself will be relieved: “‘It will rain,’ she said to herself, ‘after I am dead.’”⁶

² Memmi, Albert. Op cit., p 88.

³ Grosz, Elizabeth. Op cit., p 133.

⁴ Coetzee, J.M. Op cit., p 158.

⁵ Kingsolver, Barbara. Op cit., p368.

⁶ Lessing, Doris. Op cit., p 202.

The redemptive gestures made in The Grass is Singing and The Poisonwood Bible relate directly to investments of punishment in systems of (female) body writing. In both these novels the death of the (white) woman/girl appears to bring long awaited, life-giving rain: a promise of hope for the African landscape and the colonised peoples. In Coetzee's text Lucy's inscription by rape does not offer redemption, only payment of debt and the promise of (white) subjugation. Disgrace does not attempt to resolve postcolonial power struggles: Lucy is simply a cipher in the "scheme" by which reparation will be exacted and "transformation" achieved. The frail sign of hope in Coetzee's narrative is, as in Leah's story (The Poisonwood Bible), invested in the product of Lucy's body: her child. "'Perhaps it will be different once the child' - he made the faintest of gestures toward his daughter, toward her body - is born. It will be, after all, a child of this earth. They will not be able to deny that.'" ⁷ Lucy herself, however, will remain at best written into the "system" as receptacle for a new generation. This generation's mixed race will bear testimony to the undoing of the (white) "settlers" and their policies of *apartheid*. This is ultimately Lucy's "niche". ⁸

Perhaps it is precisely (white) women's potential as mothers: their paradoxical identity as "radical evil" ⁹, as well as their availability to be producers of a post-colonial generation, that renders them open to inscriptions of "that which must not be forgotten". ¹⁰ Following on from this, perhaps it may be suggested that the marked (white) woman's body forms a sign in the texts: a sign that is recorded in order to "establish a boundary" ¹¹. This is no longer the fetishised boundary of *apartheid*, but, as Homi Bhabha writes, a "bridge, where 'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world - the unhomeliness - that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" ¹². In other words, (white) women's bodies, formerly sanctified for the purpose of white procreation, mark the site at which white, colonial hegemony may be un-settled, un-homed - positioned as they are on the ambivalent, contingent boundary between private and public spheres. As much as these (white, female) bodies are fit

⁷ Coetzee, J.M. Op cit., p 216.

⁸ Coetzee, J.M. Op cit., p 98. "There must be some niche in the system for women..."

⁹ Kristeva, Julia. Op cit., p 67. Please see also pages 5 and 6 of this document.

¹⁰ Grosz, Elizabeth. Op cit., p 132.

¹¹ Bhabha, Homi. Op cit., p 9.

¹² Bhabha, Homi. Op cit., p 9.

for inscriptions of guilt, they are also fit to mark, sacrificially, the boundary lines of a “new” era, as well as the cessation of the “old”, colonial power markers. If this is so, the consideration of inscription of guilt on (white) women’s bodies within postcolonial African fiction, gestures towards a disjunction, a violent unsettling of rigid, binary colonial identities and opens the potential for “performance of identity as iteration”¹³.

I concur with Grosz, that “the kind of texts produced depends not only on the message to be inscribed, not only on the inscriptive tools...used but also on the quality and distinctiveness” of the surface written upon.¹⁴ I have not assumed that (white) women’s bodies represent a blank, texture-free page, but rather insist that an investigation of (white) female inscribed embodiment must take into account the specificities of the bodies written upon (including the specificities of space and time), the particular means by which they are inscribed or etched, as well as the resultant text. This dissertation is, I suggest, merely a beginning, a single line of a far more extensive narrative which may produce both an understanding of gender-based inscriptions of blame, as well as the potential for transformation of the discourses which consistently write (white) women into a powerless position of guilt and shame. As the (white) writer Antjie Krog states in her harrowing account of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work:

The goal is not to avoid pain or reality, but to deal with the never-ending quest of self-definition and negotiation required to transform differences into assets.¹⁵

¹³ Bhabha, Homi. *Ibid.*, p 9.

¹⁴ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Op cit.*, p 191.

¹⁵ Krog, Antjie. *Op cit.*, p 449.

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