

**RECONSTITUTING THE SELF AND THE BURDEN OF BELONGING IN THE
NATIVE COMMISSIONER (2006) BY SHAUN JOHNSON**

BY

KNOWLEDGE NYONI

SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF

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AT

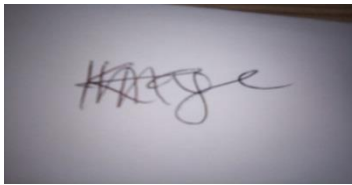
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Declaration

I, KNOWLEDGE NYONI, declare that RECONSTITUTING THE SELF AND THE BURDEN OF BELONGING IN *THE NATIVE COMMISSIONER* (2006) BY SHAUN JOHNSON is my work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A photograph of a handwritten signature in black ink on a white surface. The signature appears to be 'KNYONI' written in a cursive, stylized font.

SIGNATURE

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31 August 2017

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Abstract

Post-apartheid writing has been characterized by an ardent search for a voice that truly depicts the painful apartheid past. The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) promoted a confessional mode of writing as a means to obtaining healing, hence reconstitution. Such a paradigm shift in writing necessitated imagined characters to re-invent and re-align themselves with the new post-apartheid dispensation if they were to remain relevant to South African readership. Reinvention of characters is made possible through several means and various organs of reconstitution such as history, narration, possession of one's landscape and a disavowal of belonging as depicted in *The Native Commissioner*.

This study seeks to examine the process of self-constitution undergone by the co-protagonist and surrogate narrator, Sam Jameson, following his failure to function as an individual and father in post-apartheid South Africa. To this end, a close reading of the novel is done, to better understand the context of Sam's trauma. The study traces the *self-reconstitutive* process of Sam from the moment he decides to re-visit his father's past, to the moment when he finds release from the trauma. I argue that an investigation of his father's life, as well as his, ultimately gives him agency over his own. Sam's identity shifts from his childhood past, in which apartheid exerts primary influence, to that of an adult who lives in the post-apartheid moment, having come to terms with his past. Telling his story, to him becomes an act of re-creation and self-invention and the means by which he formulates his own identity. At the end of the story, it is a totally liberated individual that the reader witnesses.

Key Terms: autobiography, apartheid, biography, cityscape, confession, ecocriticism, environment, landscape, identity, mindscape, self-reconstitution, Shaun Johnson, *The Native Commissioner*

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Knowledge

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CHAPTER ONE

REINVENTING THE SELF THROUGH RE-INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY.

“Only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior.” Chinua Achebe

1.1 Introduction

The publication of *The Native Commissioner* in 2006 by Shaun Johnson was met with intense excitement in the publishing and literary fraternity. The media hype following its nomination and subsequent winning of the award of “best book in Africa” ahead of that by renowned writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his satirical novel, *A Wizard of the Crow*, is testimony to this.

In my view, there are several reasons why the novel had such a strong impact amongst its readership. Foremost was its timely publication two years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had concluded its sessions in South Africa. Secondly, the novel itself and its subject, namely, a white man of British origin narrating the story of his complicity or lack of it in the grand apartheid project, was an persuasive choice for readers and critics. Couched in passive and muted language, the novel sounds part confession and part apology. As such, it provided a case of one more confession in the spirit of truth and reconciliation. This interpretation is buttressed by a comment from *The Sunday Independent* praising the novel as “...a personal truth commission.”¹

What makes the novel stand out in my view is its treatment of the past. Johnson demonstrates in the novel that if an individual is to live a meaningful life, as in the case of Sam, the co-protagonist of the story and son of the narrator, he must unravel what happens in the past and find closure. Only then can he move on with his life. He thus has to reconstruct the broken shards that are the memories of his father’s life, thereby reconstituting his own incomplete life.

¹ This is part of the praise for the novel found inside the Penguin Edition.

This study seeks to critically examine the role of the past (history) and personal testimony in the formation of an individual's character as portrayed in *The Native Commissioner* by Shaun Johnson. To do so, I offer a close reading of the novel, examining issues and concerns it raises as well as its style of writing. Close reading entails an analysis of the novel in terms of thematic concerns, plot, as well as the characterisation of the novel. I argue that the main protagonist, Sam, arrives at a realisation of himself, that is his identity as an individual, by revisiting his past. This past, which is characterised by absence through death by suicide of his father, helps Sam reconstitute himself forty years after the tragedy. As Sam tells the story of his father, he ultimately narrates his own life. This eventually fills him with the knowledge of who he is and his role in society.

Identity itself, as the novel demonstrates, is not a clear and simplistic phenomenon of merely knowing one's name, race and origin. It is a complex, knotty and often painful process that entails introspection, an examination of the other as well as an understanding of the space one occupies, amongst other factors. The study seeks to prove that an understanding of the landscape for example, and how the writer cleverly weaves it into the social and psychological milieu of home and country, helps Sam to be reconstituted in the end. I also critically examine the role of history and personal testimony in the formation of the individual by investigating the way the past has been used in *The Native Commissioner* (2006) by Johnson. My intention is to demonstrate that understanding the past is not only a liberating experience, but a recuperative one as well. Through reflecting on these revealing historical experiences, a person may well develop a closer understanding of himself or herself as the reader sees Sam doing towards the end of the novel.

Closely linked to identity, the concept of reconstitution, simply defined, refers to the process of finding oneself. It is how an individual comes to a self realisation in the novel. By this I refer to a self awareness that makes an individual appreciate his or her intrinsic value to himself/herself as well as to society and those around. For example, at the start of the novel, Sam, the co-protagonist of the story, is clearly in some state of unease and psychological stress arising from a fractured childhood. He is continually haunted by traumatic memories of his father's violent death through suicide. This incident haunts him to the point of failure to function as a parent and

member of society. To cleanse himself of this trauma, Sam has to visit the scene of this violence which is in his past, in order to better understand what happened. Thus, the process of reconstitution occurs to Sam some forty years after the death of his father.

History, as the story demonstrates, becomes an organ of the reconstitutive process² in an individual's life. Through history, individuals confront their painful past in order to better deal with the present and the future. The past is therefore a critical point of reference in an individual's life.

In his polemical essay "The Past Never Stays Behind: Biographical Narrative and African Colonial History," Brizuela-Garcia argues that in recent years, writers and historians of Africa:

have tried to redefine periodization in African history to highlight the complex set of relationships, conflicts and continuities that characterized social change in the nineteenth century. Particularly important ... has been the questioning of dichotomies between the colonized and the colonizer, as well as the chronological discontinuities between the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial (2007: 63).

Brizuela-Garcia raises a very pertinent point above, that in order to understand history, an attempt to periodise it (especially in the context of colonialism) is necessary so as to appreciate the various relationships effecting change at a particular historical moment. This also draws attention to the notion that for post-colonial Africa, its history will always be understood as constituting the complex relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

I hope to demonstrate in this study that history played a crucial role in shaping the character of Sam in *The Native Commissioner*. Similarly, Silas in Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2007) is strangely caught in some malaise that has to do with the apartheid past and like Sam he has to revisit the scene of his trauma, therefore properly reconstituting himself as well.

² Johnson clearly demonstrates that there are various organs of reconstitution in the novel such as history, self narration and visual possession of the picturesque landscape amongst others. Thus by a close analysis of the above-mentioned, I argue that the process of reconstitution occurs in Sam after telling the story of his father.

This dissertation also seeks to point out that *The Native Commissioner* is a novel that shows a meeting point between the self and history, basing its arguments upon the works of Elisabeth Wesseling (1991) and Frank Kermode (1990).

I also examine the complex relationship between an individual and his nation, and the notion that the two often coincide in blurred trajectories. By this I mean that it is sometimes unclear in a casual reading of the book whether what is reconstituted in the story is the co-narrator Sam, his country, or both. I argue that the mere act of narrating his life confers upon Sam his identity as a South African as well as a father who has duties and responsibilities. And that by telling his story and that of his father, Sam confronts his anonymity, his lack of identity and selfhood. Thus to be reconstituted is to know one's identity and one's history through engaging in, as mentioned, one's "own personal truth commission."

1.2 The Novel

The Native Commissioner is the story of Commissioner George Jameson, originally from Babanango, who is employed by the Department of Native Affairs as a junior clerk, eventually rising through the ranks to become Native Commissioner. However, the rise to power of the Nationalist Party and the promulgation into law of apartheid marks the start of George's disaffection and discontentment with his job. He begins to see the injustice faced by the natives daily and as he himself becomes powerless and indecisive in his disavowal, he develops a certain uneasiness which borders on trepidation. His sense of right and his guilt increases when he realises the magnitude of the grand apartheid plan. Belatedly, George attempts to leave but his age and his profile do not favour private employment.

Eventually, George snaps mentally and his guilt manifests itself in psychological distress which drives him to the brink of madness. So one day, left alone at his Witbank home, he takes pen and paper and attempts to console himself. Finally, he writes, "It's all wrong, all of it" (pg. 240). The statement is a horrendous self-indictment and unable to face this any more, he commits suicide by shooting himself. The suicide is tacitly left unspoken about in the family (no doubt as a way of dealing with the trauma) and for Sam, who is the youngest, this withdrawal leaves an

unexplained void in his life. Forty years later, Sam revisits the scene of his father's death in order to repair his fractured life.

The story line is simple enough but the plot itself is complex and does not follow a linear progression. The novel is written using the flashback technique and veers from early South African settler history to the apartheid moment and at times to the post apartheid present in Sam's time. Told from Sam's point of view, the novel is actually a "novel of letters" in that much of the material in the novel comes from the letters his father wrote in his official capacity as Native Commissioner as well as father of his family.

The plot unravels the maze that is George's life, implying that the process of reconstitution is itself not simple. In my view, the context in which the story is written, such as the early settler history, the Xhosa wars, the South African wars, the Union of South Africa and the rise of apartheid, all contribute to the reconstitution of the story and ultimately the life of Sam. The more Sam understands his father's life, the more he understands the history of South Africa and ultimately his own life. In the end the story becomes a puzzle that finally makes sense at the end with Sam's feeling of euphoria when he realises the kind of man his father was.

1.2.1 Why *The Native Commissioner*?

I have already pointed out the importance of *The Native Commissioner* as a work of literature. The novel acts as a watershed between white writing before and after apartheid. It interestingly describes the state of the postcolony and the "state" of the white liberal in South Africa after apartheid. It offers the evaluative rhetoric of the white liberal whose writing has been noticeably resistant to apartheid as portrayed by Alan Paton, Rian Malan amongst others. Most importantly, it also examines the function of confession and truth telling as a means of gaining healing and closure from trauma.

The voice of the protagonist, George, who tells his story through his son Sam, is a voice that has long been suppressed in the apartheid grand narrative. The novel offers a quest for relevance in an imagined post-apartheid society, considering that the authorizing discourses have undergone change. Here I am reminded of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's oft quoted rhetorical gauntlet thrown down to western academia when she asked the famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?"³ The answer to this question is provisionally a yes. The subaltern can speak but only if he or she has been granted charge of the grand narrative or if those in charge of the grand narratives themselves have been silenced.

In a way, to exaggerate a little, George, the protagonist of the novel assumes the status of a subaltern. Thus, his story cannot be told in the dominant apartheid era, because he represents a challenge, a critique and opposition to those in power. His narrative is therefore deferred, to be told when those with authorising power have been replaced.

The Native Commissioner becomes a subaltern voice, a confession by George of his failure to voice his disapproval of apartheid. But it goes beyond that. It questions the role of confession in conferring identity in the aftermath of the TRC. In other words, it asks the following questions: Does confessing complicity or failure thereof help one to find closure and thereby perhaps one's identity? Does confronting the past and weak moral choices reconstitute an individual? Does it expunge the guilt, even if the said guilt has been passed off to an offspring? I argue that a close reading of the novel will provide answers to these questions and some others. As Chidora says, "The future is generated according to our understanding of the past" (2013: 13).

³ By "subaltern" Spivak meant the oppressed subject. See Spivak (1985) as cited in Gandhi L. (1998: x). George Jameson in *The Native Commissioner* may not fit the definition in the strict sense of the word considering that he was a white subject who was considered privileged. The term refers to the natives in the colonised territories who were oppressed and deprived of a voice in the colonial dispensation. George becomes a subaltern in the simple sense of the word, of someone oppressed by the system. He does have a voice however, although he fails to speak out.

Since its publication in 2006, *The Native Commissioner* has been strongly linked with history because of its strong preoccupation with the past. Many of the endorsements for the novel, in the blurbs, made direct reference to the historical circumstances of South Africa such as the apartheid policy and its effects on the whole nation. Most of these remarks thus indicated that a closer reading and understanding of the book would aid the process of healing and reconciliation then taking place in South Africa.⁴ Typical examples of such endorsements are those by Njabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Jakes Gerwel. These eminent scholars were keen to heap praise on the book, thus pre-empting and promoting its reception and understanding. Jakes Gerwel says of the book: “A brilliantly constructed novel, beautifully written; a searing tale in which the private and the political seamlessly meet ...”⁵

Ndebele adds, “... A novel of reconciliation through personal testimony.”⁶ However, it is Coetzee who most boldly endorses the novel when he states:

In the rural areas of the old South Africa, the law of the land was administered not just by soulless white bureaucrats but also by men like George Jameson ... sympathetic to African aspirations ... The story of Native Commissioner Jameson ... is a welcome step towards the **reconstitution** of the South African past in all its moral and political complexity. [Emphasis mine].

The question of reconstitution becomes a very relevant theme in the novel as it eventually contributes towards the development of Sam as an imagined character, and at the same time underscoring the importance of the past as a means towards individual and national reconstruction. The novel hence provides us as readers with a microcosm of South Africa during the apartheid era. It depicts the life of a white South African family and how Sam, faced with a moral dilemma of choosing between apartheid and liberalism, suffers the consequences. Therefore our understanding of the latter period will enhance our understanding of the novel and the primary issues that were at play at the time.

⁴ However, lofty notions of healing and national reconciliation are not a one day wonder. I argue that even today more than ten years after the end of the TRC and publication of *The Native Commissioner*, South Africa is still a nation in the process of healing and reconciliation.

⁵ Quoted from the praises of critical readers of the novel; *The Native Commissioner* (2006), Penguin Edition.

⁶ Ibid; See praises of the novel from critics on the front page of the Penguin Edition.

1.2.2. Theoretical Approaches

Chidora (2013) argues that a work of literature cannot be studied in isolation from a theoretical framework which informs its society. There has to be an ideology that informs it. He declares:

As long as there is life, there is an ideology that emanates from life or informs it. We are the objects of ideologies that fight for our lives. There are ideologies that are locked in battle for human lives... (Chidora, 2013: 36).

A theoretical approach greatly influences the way the novel is understood. It informs the way the writer has employed the various stylistic devices and thematic concerns raised in the novel and how these issues are perceived. Theory provides critics with an analytical model that helps in offering an in-depth analysis of the novel.

In my view, the most relevant approach to the novel is the post-colonial theory as advanced by Marxism. This approach is practical because the novel, being an African publication (much of Africa having been formerly colonised by European powers), explores the challenges brought by colonialism to an imagined post apartheid nation. Raymond Williams (1977) in Louise Yelin (n.d) argues that Marxism sees social consciousness as a dialogic outcome of history and society. In other words, Marxism argues that the human being as a social being is a product of society and the struggles he/she encounters on a daily basis. Marxism insists that the “self can be understood only in relation to society, or as it is, situated in society: that is that a developed consciousness cannot be other than consciousness of social being” (Yelin nd: 18). This form of Marxist humanism becomes the basis upon which this study will be situated. The ‘social being’ becomes the individual who is therefore understood within the context of his or her very society he/she lives in.

Contact between Marxism and post-colonialism has been inevitably necessitated by the two theories’ preoccupation with the ongoing capital accumulation and disparities, largely a result of colonialism. Subir Sinha asserts that Marxism and post-colonialism “claim to be sensitive to ongoing politics and seek justification in providing critiques of dominant ideology and the

current conjuncture...[and] the tracing of compatibilities and contradictions” (2015: 2). The term “post-colonialism” refers to a state of affairs in which a country formerly under the political control of another finds itself independent. Childs and Williams (1997) define post-colonialism as, “the period after colonialism.” This definition is similar to that of Ashcroft et al. (1989: 2) who define post-colonialism as a theory that seeks to study, “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day.” What can be gathered from these definitions of the term is that post-colonialism examines the process subsequent to colonialism. Thus as a theory, it examines the dichotomy between the colonial process and its aftermath. It further looks at the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in the aftermath of the said, imperial process. *The Native Commissioner* fits perfectly well within this context considering its setting, which is South Africa in the apartheid as well as the post apartheid moment.

Other theories may arise in an attempt to critically examine African literature, but for me, the post-colonial approach in all its complexity satisfactorily accounts for the many developments, good and bad, since the onset of the imperial process that gave birth to colonialism in South Africa through the establishment of the Dutch East India Company. The introduction of colonialism has brought with it a myriad of problems, complications and challenges. Everything that comes out of the colonial mill such as the commodification of land, labour, illegal housing and a host of many other such ills which are a direct result of western civilisation—can only be understood in the context of post-colonialism which examines the aftermath of the imperial process as well as the dichotomy between the colonised and the coloniser. Both cannot escape it. The coloniser and the colonised are both victims of the colonial project and both find themselves entrapped in its tentacles in the aftermath of the process.

It may be argued by some, that post-colonialism will not provide the answers I need from a reading of the novel under study and is therefore not perfect or ideal. However, no theory ever is. Such critics may bring up arguments by Anne McClintock who in her polemic essay “Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’” argues that post-colonialism is a troublesome approach which creates problems relating to its application. She contends:

The term...signals a reluctance to surrender the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular

and ahistorical abstraction. Rifling through the recent flurry of articles and books on “post-colonialism,” I am struck by how seldom the term is used to denote **multiplicity**. The following proliferate: “the post colonial condition,” “the post colonial scene,” the post colonial intellectual...” (McClintock, 1992: 86). [Emphasis in the original].

McClintock challenges post-colonialism on the grounds that it has a tendency to treat the post colonial condition as if it is dealing with a single subject, when in reality it could be dealing with multiple subjects from Africa and other post colonies such as India or the Americas. In this argument, McClintock argues, correctly, in my view, that the post-colonial condition is not universal to all the post colonies. She points out that the post colony could be one of many other nations in this state but at different stages of post coloniality. Thus, the state of the post colony in Zimbabwe cannot be the same as the state of say Australia or New Zealand, for example.

One other major criticism that McClintock raises of post-colonialism is its failure to periodise the state of the post colony. In other words, she argues that post-colonialism does not demarcate its relevancy in terms of the period under colonialism considering that the colonial project dates back as far back as the 16th century. Aijaz Ahmad in Childs and Williams (1997) says:

... I have seen articles in a great many places, in the special issue of *Social Text* on post coloniality, which push the term ‘colonialism’ to as far back to such configurations as the Incas, the Ottomans and the Chinese well before the European colonial empires began; and then bring the term **forward** to cover all kinds of national oppressions...(Ahmad, 1997: 9). [Emphasis in the original].

Another criticism McClintock raises of post-colonialism as a theory is that it sounds “prematurely celebratory” (McClintock, 2009: 92). She argues that the prefix ‘post’ implies that colonialism is gone and that the colony can now enjoy self rule notwithstanding the poverty, the misrule, the economic dependence on the former colonisers and a host of many other social and economic ills which are directly a result of colonialism.

For purposes of this study, I find the definition of post-colonialism by Ashcroft et al. appropriate. They define it thus:

We use the term 'post-colonialism', however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression (Ashcroft et al., 1989: 2).

This 'continuity of preoccupations' denotes the continual and residual effects of the colonial project which overlap into the post-colonial. In regard to the above, I argue that this continual imperial process is exactly what *The Native Commissioner* is about, as it addresses issues I would consider post-colonial such as identity, belonging, trauma and re-memory.

In spite of the above contentions about post colonialism, arguments for its use in the study of *The Native Commissioner* are quite compelling. To counter these arguments which are mostly valid, I intend to employ that brand of post-colonialism propounded by Marxists with a strong touch of Afrocentrism. The Marxist/ Afrocentric⁷ post-colonial approach is ideal for this study in that it encourages a dialectical approach to the post-colonial dilemma. By this I mean that it advocates for Africans to take charge of their history and engage in dialogue with their past so as to forge new paths to nationhood. Mariangela Palladino (2008) provides the crux of the argument when she states:

... post colonialism grants a significant role to fiction and its narrative weight and it re-formulates the old grand narratives that have othered the non European world: offering a literature that often navigates the past, it amends past histories that had been silenced or manipulated. Post colonial literature often opens a permanent dialogue with the past: the writing back into history becomes its institutionalised feature (Palladino, 2008: 54).

⁷ See Chidora T (2014 :3) *The Zimbabwean House of Hunger* pg 3 ibid.

Palladino could not have expressed it any better. The strength of post-colonialism as a model lies in its ability and its desire to interrogate the past, the grand narratives of the time, and formulate new paths, new narratives and new understanding. It appeals to the uchronic and reflexive impulses of history, which I will explain below, and studies it from an altogether new standpoint. For example, it will challenge the dominant narratives of the past and give voices to those that have been muted and suppressed.

As illustrated in *The Native Commissioner*, post-colonial criticism will assist me to give voice to the narrative of George as reconstructed by his son. Through post-colonialism, I am compelled to re-examine the role of native commissioners in apartheid South Africa and revise commonly held assumptions about them. For instance, in struggle discourse⁸, native commissioners are often presented in a bad light, often as heartless and unfeeling⁹ people, when in fact they were just employees merely discharging their mandate.

Most importantly, through post-colonialism, the post-colonial subject is able to come up with grand narratives of his or her life, thus granting himself or herself a voice.

Leela Gandhi (1998) argues that despite the ‘controversy’ surrounding the theory, critics need to evaluate it in terms of its ability to offer a clear understanding of the, “aftermath of colonial occupation” (Gandhi, 1998: 2). She further argues that there is often an impulse from the new post colonial state to forget the past, to erase it so as to start from a clean slate. She argues:

Principally, post colonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination (Gandhi, 1998: 3).

⁸ By “struggle discourse” I refer mainly to literature that was published during South Africa’s struggle against apartheid. This literature is sometimes referred to as “protest literature”. There are many works of literature: novels, songs and poems that form part of struggle discourse, for example, novels like *Tenderness of Blood* by Mandla Langa, Mphahlele’s writings and many others. Songs include “Safa Saphela isizwe Esimnyama”, Asimbonanga uMandela and numerous others.

⁹ See Sol Plaatje (1916) *Native Life in South Africa*.

By promising to engage with the past and to forge new histories,¹⁰ acceptable to the post-colonial nation, post-colonialism can be viewed as “theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the cultural aftermath.” (ibid., 1998). In the final analysis, it becomes clear that visiting the scene of the colonial encounter offers limitless possibilities to the post-colonial scholar, perhaps the most primary of which is that incomplete narratives might be made whole.

To conclude the argument on post-colonialism as a theory relevant to this dissertation, I refer to Gandhi who aptly summarises her perception of it as follows:

It (post colonialism) is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and crucially interrogating the colonial past (Gandhi, 1998: 4).

She goes on to say:

The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between coloniser and colonised. And it is in the unfolding of the troubled and troubling relationship that we might start to discern the ambivalent prehistory of the past colonial condition (ibid., pg. 4).

By “reciprocal antagonism and desire,” Gandhi certainly meant the contrasting and often conflicting feelings that colonialism evoked from both the coloniser and colonised. There is the impulse to re-live the colonial experience as an instrument of power on the part of the coloniser, hence desire, while on the other hand it is evidence of subjugation and humiliation on the part of the colonised, hence the antagonism. Post-colonialism provides a means through which readers may interrogate *The Native Commissioner* in the light of colonialism’s influence. This is particularly useful mainly because the subject, George Jameson, is himself a direct product of colonialism, having been born to Milton Jameson, a cattle farmer and himself the son of Lucas Jameson, the first of the family to settle there.

¹⁰ I am mindful of the fact that the term may create some confusion. By “acceptable history” I mean the kind of history that is representative of the dominant voices of the people without necessarily marginalising the minorities and the disadvantaged. Acceptable histories represent the people. By people, I refer to everyone in a single country. Acceptable history is not biased against the weak and the marginalised. It is history whose sole authorising voice is owned by the people.

As he recounts this story, he inevitably narrates his and that of the country they both love so much. By telling it, Sam gives his father voice to tell of his frustration, his guilt as well as his failure to speak out injustice. At the end of the story, Sam feels at peace that this story has been told and eventually laid to rest and his own life has been reconstituted.

As one reads the novel, one is gripped with a sense of the majestic, of grandeur, especially in the descriptions of the landscape. Throughout the early pages of the novel, Johnson gives the reader glimpses of South Africa as a land that is beautiful and royal. Zululand is described by Milton as a place “that got into the blood and the brain and wouldn’t get out again.” (Johnson, 2006: 58) This sentence demonstrates clearly how the landscape completely overwhelmed the Jamesons. Milton’s reference to blood evokes strong feelings of bonding between him and the land. Just as blood is the source of life, Milton’s relationship with it is akin to a covenant between him and the land he loves so much.

In this study, unless otherwise stated, I use the terms apartheid and colonialism interchangeably. Being a product of colonialism, in my opinion, does not make apartheid any worse or any better than colonialism. Like colonialism, apartheid sought to impose its authority over the weak and the defenceless. Like colonialism, it sought to brutalise and subjugate the weak through violence. Above all, both sought to perpetuate a system in which one race imposed its superiority over another. So in my discussion, reference to apartheid is merely reference to a form of colonialism. It is this apartheid colonial enterprise that causes individuals like Sam to be misfits in the post colonial epoch. For someone of forty, Sam’s attempt to confront his past is testimony to the fact that he has been indeed trying without any measure of success to live his life.

1.2.3 The Ecocritical Approach

Complementing the post colonial approach to this study is the theory of ecocriticism (an offshoot of postcolonialism) which, according to Morton (2007: 2), “explores elements of ecology such as animals, plants or the weather”. I deliberately employ this theory because I believe it will inform my analysis of the novel in terms of the topographia, chorographia and dendrographia—in other

words, in terms of the landscape (Morton 2007: 33). As we are surrounded by nature, it makes sense that we also examine the imagined landscapes of our literature. The theory of ecocriticism fits perfectly well with the post-colonial approach in that it gives critics an opportunity to carry out an environmental audit now that the colonial project has ended. Writers need to be seen to be creating characters who, like George Jameson, feel an obligation to not only admire the environment, but to offer care. The choking physical atmosphere of Witbank which is a direct result of pollution from mining activities, is an indictment and a challenge for humans to adopt a more sensitive approach to the environment. Characters need to claim agency over their environment as evidence of ownership thereby formulating permanent and less fluid identities. These issues are thus best examined in the post-colonial domain in an effort to forge new identities which are truly post-colonial.

A study of Johnson's treatment of the landscape shows that this environment confers upon his characters a sense of identity and belonging. I argue that the descriptions of the landscape in the novel are couched in a language that creates a bond between the beholder and the landscape. George imposes historical imperatives on different scenes of the landscape that he sees. Cosgrove in Hooper (2005) says of this phenomenon:

The argument here is that the landscape...has its own history but a history that can be understood only as part of a wider history of economy and society (Cosgrove, 2005: 3).

Cosgrove expresses the view above that every landscape has a story to tell, just like the various places stated in the novel such as Ultimatum Tree, Coward's Bush and Fort Mistake, to mention only a few of them in the novel. Cosgrove argues that, "historically and theoretically it is unsatisfactory to treat the landscape...in a vacuum, outside the context of a real historical world" (ibid pg 3). In reality, human beings and their environment have always been inseparable. As they pass over the different landscapes, they visually possess the said landscapes and ascribe names and different identities over them. The act of naming a place, in these cases, inscribes upon it social relevance and the history of a given community.

In my opinion, what makes ecocriticism ideal for this study is the way it fits so perfectly well within the post-colonial epoch. Although ecocriticism can be said to have its roots in the study of American nature writing of the British romantics (Rudd, 2007), it complements the theory of post-colonialism in so many ways. Foremost, it will suit my purpose of examining post-colonial South Africa by analysing the historical state of the environment in the pre-colonial as well as the post-colonial moment. It is a well known fact that the grand colonial project was simply a ruse, a deliberate undertaking by the the colonial powers to siphon away the natural resources of the vanquished colonies¹¹. Such resources involved minerals in their various levels of industrial and commercial importance for the hungry European markets. The extraction of these resources was not without a toll on the landscape. Makeshift shelters, roads and railway lines were hastily built. Large tracts of land were cleared, in the process affecting natural ecosystems and the natural habitats of flora and fauna. Now, through ecocriticism, readers can make an environmental audit of the way our natural landscapes were affected by colonialism. It becomes a ready made tool for post-colonial scholars, as it examines the nature of the environment in the context of colonialism and its aftermath. Ecocriticism is bound to look at the encounter between the environment and colonialism as well as its side effects. For example, at the moment of initial encounter between Zululand and South Africa in general, the landscape is described in virginal terms. It is described as rich, lush and evidently unsullied by colonial civilisation. But later, at the height of colonialism, Witbank, a settler mining town is described in corrupt, defiled terms with pollution and civil unrest, seen as a direct consequence of the colonial dispensation.

1.2.4 Through The Lens of History: From Apartheid to The Post-colony. (A Historical Approach)

The making of South African post-apartheid literature cannot be completely achieved or understood without a thorough grasp and an examination of the past. Indeed, and rightly so, much writing since 1994 has dwelt in one way or another with the implications of the past on the current social, political and economic dispensation. The literary tradition of the post-apartheid moment is perhaps best described in Lewis (2003: 7) who observes a “shift in South Africa from a spectacular literature of resistance to ... literature of re-memory,” referring to literature that uses history as a focal point of its creativity. By “re-memory” the writer refers to the act of

¹¹ See Rodney W (1972). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Pgs 3-19.

visiting the past as a reconstitutive process. The past, as I shall demonstrate, is an important repository of memory which from time to time must be visited so as to properly forge paths to the future.

At its very beginning, when Sam decides to visit the cellar where the box containing his father's papers is housed, the reader is gripped with a sense of history¹² and awe. One cannot help feeling that the situation is fraught with mystery and trepidation. The narrator recounts:

The cellar door opened easily. When my eyes had adjusted, I saw that there, in the far corner in the dank half-light amongst gently rusting garden implements and the crowding flotsam of too many homes in too many places, sat the box. It was propped up against a sodden wall on ill-fashioned ...trestles from another **time and purpose** (Johnson, 2006: 2). [Emphasis mine]

The above citation is replete with historical imagery evoked by rusting garden tools and so on. The cellar itself suggests a disused place containing pieces of junk and discarded implements of a bygone era.

It is further suggestive of something thrown away, probably an unpleasant memory¹³. This is further enhanced by the respect and awe with which Sam approaches the box. The box's hold over him is total. In its proximity, he is reduced to a nervous school boy, although he hints in an earlier paragraph that he is grown up and approaching "balding head" (ibid pg 2.) status. The act of opening the box is itself a delicate process as he successfully manoeuvres it onto a trolley without spillage. This alone demonstrates the act of "re-memory," alluded to by the rescue of the box from the cellar which is suggestive of a movement from darkness and oblivion into light. This act implies the fact that the story is itself an untold story that has been salvaged from oblivion to visibility; hence an act of remembering is perpetuated. The moment he opens the box,

¹² By this, I refer to the strange sense of the past coming to life at Sam's contact with his father's papers.

¹³ The suicide of Sam's father is an event unspoken of in the family. It seems that for some reason, the family feels that the less they talk about it, the less the unpleasant memory will linger in their minds. Unfortunately, this has the opposite effect on Sam who wants to understand what really happens in the incident. This lack of closure on his part is largely responsible for his failure to function effectively as a young man and later as a father.

Sam is assailed by a memory of all the places where the box has been to, from Babanango to Witbank. Such is the potent capacity for history and information that Sam compares it to Tsomsoub, the great volcanic pipe that was “so virile with mineral wealth that it thrusts itself through the crust of Africa’s earth demanding to be mined” (ibid pg. 4). This image is consistent with Johnson’s treatment of history throughout the novel, which is that of a rich and fertile source of information. His treatment is reverent, acutely conscious of the fact that like Sam’s box, in history lie all our ills as well as the source of our social redemption. This approach mirrors Fanon’s work quoted in Susan Gallagher’s essay, when he states: “a national culture cannot be purely recuperative or static; it will dwell on the past, look forward to the future and participate in the present...” (Gallagher, 1997: 4).

Fanon is advocating here for what he terms a “national literary culture”(ibid. pg 4). which will develop because it will be drawing sustenance from the past and the present in order to anticipate and prepare for the future. This implies that for him, meaningful writing is that which draws from past experiences. Indeed, a large number of writers especially from Africa have been, and are tapping deeply into the historical well, thus placing their experiences within a historical framework. Writers who come to mind are Ngugi wa Thiong’o from Kenya, Ayi Kwei Armah from Ghana, Shimmer Chinodya from Zimbabwe and Njabulo Ndebele from South Africa.

Kermode (1990: 49) declares:

It seems more and more people are turning away from the idea that literary works should be treated as autonomous and without significant relation to the world in which they are produced and read.

Kermode notes that in order for a work of fiction to be understood meaningfully, it must not be separated from the very context it seeks to portray. Put differently, writers should not de-contextualise their works from the people and society they write about. Shaun Johnson wisely chooses this approach. He blends history and fiction to create credible experiences for his characters and readership as well.

Johnson’s use of the historical mode, which is justified by the use of historical places and real names of people who once existed in space and time, qualifies the novel as historical fiction. As

one reads the novel, one has the distinct impression that the writer builds his story painstakingly around the events of a particular historical moment by making adaptations of circumstances around the story. Such adaptations as Wesseling (1991: 01) puts it are “conventionally regarded as the province of the historical novel”.

Wesseling goes on to argue that the manner in which the story begins is a signal that puts it in a particular period, and thus emphasises its historical nature. She adds: “the opening sentences of historical novels often indicate quite emphatically that the action which is to be described takes place in a time and place other than that of the writer and his or her reading public (ibid pg 20).” She terms such features of the historical novel “generic signals” (ibid pg 20) since they help us as readers identify the genre. This fits clearly with the way *The Native Commissioner* begins, “...On the morning it all started,...” (Johnson, 2006: 1). This causes the story to sound like a tale or fable. Such a statement is not only possibly a reference to historic events but a momentous prelude to some major catastrophe or event that will surely follow.

The other “generic” signal that Wesseling mentions as a common feature of a historical novel is the use of “names of historical figures and events which invite us to read the text in question in the light of our historical knowledge and our knowledge of strategies for incorporating historical materials into fictional narratives” (Wesseling, 1991: 21). For example, in *The Native Commissioner*, Johnson uses several historical figures such as Chief Poto Matanzima, RRR Dhlomo and many others.

I contend that an appreciation of historical terms such as “natives,”¹⁴ “commissioner¹⁵” and “apartheid¹⁶,” to mention only a few, will greatly enhance a reader’s understanding of this historical moment. *The Native Commissioner* is replete with places familiar in history such as Babanango, Umbumbulu, Nkandla, Witbank and many others. There are also names of people

¹⁴ A “native”, in the context of this novel, is a black South African born in South Africa during the apartheid era. See Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa* (1916).

¹⁵ A white person during the apartheid era, who was put in charge of native affairs in an area. See *The Native Commissioner* pg 173 ibid.

¹⁶ *The MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Students (International Students Edition)* defines apartheid as “the political system that existed in the past in South Africa, in which only white people had political rights and power.”

who existed in real life such as renowned Zulu writer RRR Dhlomo,¹⁷ Chief V. Poto, Chief K.D Matanzima; and the reader is informed that the main character George, knew these eminent persons personally. He or she is left with a thin line to draw between fiction and history in the novel.

It is important to note that the use of these historical elements in *The Native Commissioner* by Johnson clearly positions the novel as a historical one. These historical references help to accord authenticity to the whole story by tacitly making it factual with reference to relatable events. Secondly, it acts as a reminder of the historical past and the struggles that have characterised the South African people and Africans as a whole. One is reminded of Ngugi who sees no distinction between African people and their struggle¹⁸. Lastly, it helps us examine and understand the peculiar circumstances shaping the lives of characters in that particular historical moment (Lukacs, 1962).

Therefore the historical novel becomes not only a story but a purveyor of information that is historical, factual and spatial. Renowned novelist and critic Andre Brink, quoted in Van der Vlies (2010: 584), supports the notion that imaginative works of fiction have a role to play as they have the advantage of creating a plethora of historical experiences and blending them with fiction. He contends that writers of fiction were “perhaps uniquely positioned to reach beyond facts in engaging with the past,” and that “historical memory and language interact so precisely as to be almost indistinguishable.” Brink uses an interesting term, “archive,” to refer to history. This term is suggestive of something stored for retrieval to be used in the future should the need arise. This is clearly consistent with Sam’s box at the start of the novel which is the moment the story unfolds.

¹⁷ RRR Dhlomo is a renowned Zulu writer and critic, popular for his novel *Izwi neSithunzi* (1977).

¹⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, respected writer and novelist, argues that African people will always be associated with an ongoing struggle for emancipation. First, it was against the yoke of colonialism, now it is against neo colonialism and what he terms the new bourgeoisie, the new political masters of politically independent but still economically enslaved Africa. Consequently, it is in struggle that an African people is defined. He says, “struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are, in whatever we do...” See *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986: 88). To Ngugi, that George is engaged in a struggle against apartheid would only be symptomatic of the dichotomy between colonisation and the colonised. This struggle to find a voice against colonialism is what defines an African.

In order for the historical novel not to be accused of frivolity and misrepresentation of information, the question of its authenticity has to be considered. Jerome de Groot (2010: 7) states that from the very beginning, that is, since its inception, the historical novel has always been “keen to emphasize its authority”(ibid. pg 7) as a serious and credible genre. This pre-occupation with authenticity is what makes the said type of novel stand out from other forms of fiction. The historical novel sets out to convince the reader that the set of events and circumstances described in the story are indeed a true reflection and should therefore be taken as credible accounts.

There is undeniably some anxiety stemming from certain critics of the historical novel that the general modern readership may be misled. The “spirit of a period may not be reclaimed”(ibid. 5); therefore writers of such novels must always be mindful of this fact so that a novel might be as close as possible to the reality of the historical moment.

On the contrary, some early writers like Sir Walter Scott¹⁹ however contend that minor corruptions of history do not tamper with the genre; if anything, they make it more appealing to the reader²⁰ (Groot, 2010: 5). For example, the character in a story might be historical but the words he or she utters might not. This would not affect the spirit of the novel and its thematic concerns. Certainly, we may know, for instance, that a character like RRR Dhlomo, mentioned in *The Native Commissioner* existed in the story, but we may not have a recording of all the words he uttered; thus a writer intent on recreating the existence of this character may take the liberty of

¹⁹ Sir Walter Scott is considered by many critics (such as James Macpherson, Jane Austen and later, Marilyn Butler) as the father of the modern historical novel as we know it today. This may be debatable. But it is indeed true that he popularised the genre at the turn of the 19th century with the publication of his Waverley novels and thus gave the genre some form of currency to the modern readership. One may not discuss the historical novel without mentioning him.

²⁰ Scott’s argument implies therefore that it is not significant whether Johnson is accurate, regarding historical facts, in the novel or not, since the thematic concerns remain unaffected. I disagree with this view, firstly because such a novel would be difficult to classify and also because it would be almost impossible for readers to take such a work of fiction seriously as a historical novel since it would be misleading. An example of this would be to portray characters living in the 19th century driving SUVs and using cell phones; unless the novel is understood as a fable or science fiction, thus putting it in context for the reader to take seriously.

giving him a voice and crediting some statements to him and this would not affect the story, unless the words he utters are so out of character as to make the whole story unauthentic.

Sarah Waters does not seem to agree with this perception by Sir Walter Scott wholly, but nevertheless gives it her tacit approval when she states:

I don't think novels should misrepresent history unless it is for some obvious serious or playful purpose. I think we have a duty to take history seriously, not simply to use it as a backdrop or for the purposes of nostalgia. (Waters, 2010: 10)

It is apparent from the above quotation that history nevertheless has to be treated correctly and should some alteration of historical information be necessary, it should be minor, clear and necessary to the plot. Historiography thus can reflect authentic facts and events from the perceived point of view of the narrator. Thus the *res gestae*²¹, the actual deeds committed by actual historical persons, are sacrificed and put aside in favour of *historia rerum gestarum*, the historical narrative about those events. This becomes important as it serves a more informative purpose in clarifying historical events. Besides, it has the advantage of giving us the socio-politico historic moment of the *res gestae*.

The Native Commissioner offers quite an interesting study of historicity. Johnson indeed does not tell us how certain historical events happened in the story. For example, we are not privy to the circumstances behind the rise to power of the Nationalist Party. What he is interested in is the *rerum gestarum*, the narratives triggered by it. The repercussions behind the advent to power of the Nationalist Party are felt not only in South Africa but also throughout the world. Thus the novel becomes an apparently realistic rendition of life in apartheid South Africa through the eyes of a white person.

²¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1955: 45) says: "In our language [German] the term History unites the objective with the subjective side, and denotes quite as much the *historia rerum gestarum*, as the *res gestae* themselves; on the other hand, it comprehends not less what has happened than the narration of what has happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events. (My interpolation.) Hegel G.W.F. (1955) *The Philosophy of History*.

I have already mentioned that the historical novel is relevant today because it acts as a reminder of events that happened in the past. That the novel is a work of fiction and may contain historical imperfection is immaterial. What matters is that it depicts certain events as they are perceived by the narrator, to have happened at that particular historical moment. By so doing, the novel “mediates between the past and the contemporary reading public” (Wesseling, 1991: 43).

Wesseling goes on to point out that:

By claiming to make a vital contribution to the propagation of historical knowledge, the author of historical fiction somehow had to answer for the fact that such novels not only conveyed authenticated facts Thus the historical novel offer[s] itself as a more effective means of disseminating historical knowledge than official historiography (Wesseling, 1991: 45).

I am reminded of the historical circumstances behind the naming of Duiwelskloof in *The Native Commissioner*. The writer gives us an interesting piece as background to the provenance of the name to the effect that it was known by many names to the locals, such as Ngoako Ramalepe, but to the English it was known as the Devil’s Ravine (pg. 125) and adds the reasons why it was given the name.

Alessandro Manzoni in Jerome de Groot (2010: 3) praises the historical novel as not just giving “the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete”. He comments:

The figures we meet in historical fiction are identifiable to us on the one hand due to the conceit of the novel form, in that they speak language, and their concerns are often similar to ours, but their situations and surroundings are immensely different. The historical novelist concentrates on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived to a variety of purposes.

We read George’s story with a historical mindset which informs us that he lives a life full of guilt and torment because, coming from a liberal family, he was not going to stay untouched by the rigours of apartheid, the system that he worked for. The readers may sympathise with him and

understand his failure to come to terms with the situation facing him; in any case they would note that George's malaise is not of his own making. The omniscient narrator states:

He forced himself to focus on their (his family's) doings and thought processes, even if they were mundane compared to his own meanderings of the mind. But he understood that this time was a hiatus: however much he tried to hide away, matters of his work would place the family in shadow again (Johnson, 2006: 148).

George's futile efforts not to let the traumatic situation at work interfere with his sanity by deliberately focusing on his family fail as usual. His mind refuses to reject the reality he faces, resulting in his experiencing the usual stress that has characterised his work.

Our reading of the novel becomes, as a result, an active interactive process between the subject and the work of fiction concerned. According to Waters in Groot (2010: 4), the novel therefore reminds readers of their particularity and simultaneity:

It follows then, that the historical novel as a form is something which demands an unusual response from its audience: an active response, at the least and a sense of otherness and difference when reading. The historical novel, then is similar to other forms of novel writing in that it shares a concern with realism and development of character authenticity (de Groot, 2010: 4).

Another crucial function of historical fiction that I have mentioned earlier is that it helps us to appreciate the historical circumstances surrounding the events in the story. This aids the reader to understand a plethora of factors shaping the lives of characters thereby enabling us to relate to the reasons as to why they behaved in the manner they did in the novel. Different characters respond differently to events and situations in the past. The social milieu plays an influential role in shaping the lives and influencing their behaviour patterns. For example, George is plagued by guilt and suffers from anxiety attacks because for him, at that historical period, it was not possible *not* to feel that way; the daily contact he experienced with natives allowed him to

witness the injustice of apartheid and its repressive laws first hand. Hall (in Gagiano, 2006: 98) says this of history:

... both in daily life and inquiry, a web of narration connects story tellers and audiences, giving substance to social meaning and historical experience as a constitutive practice of life itself. The constitutive nature of the novel in a way becomes an “articulation of nationhood via the past ...”.

The argument above implies that the actual construction of a historical novel, from its research stage to its reception by the public, is itself a reconstitutive process. Visiting a scene of history inevitably grants voice to the past and suggests that by mere narration, identities are shaped. These sets of identities in turn result in shared experiences requisite in nationhood.

1.3. Some Criticism of Historicity

The use of history in works of fiction has not always been accepted with open arms by some critics. Coetzee, in Gallagher (1997: 376) referred to the use of history in works of fiction as a “colonization” of the novel by history. He argues against a:

powerful tendency to subsume the novel under history, to read novels as ...imaginative investigation investigations? of real historical forces and real historical circumstances, and conversely to treat the novels that do not perform this investigation of real historical forces and circumstances as **lacking in seriousness**. [Emphasis mine]

Coetzee expresses a fear, albeit a needless one (in my opinion), in which he explains that the overuse of history in works of fiction reaches a point where fictional works that do not follow the tradition of historicity may be considered irrelevant and literary works of inferior quality. He contends that in such a situation only two alternatives will emerge: “supplementary and rivalry” (ibid: 376). By the notion supplementary, Coetzee implies that the use of historicism will eventually relegate the novel to being a supplementary guide to history rather than an imaginative work of fiction. The other, more negative result is that other works of fiction may develop a rivalry with historical fiction. It is not apparent that his prediction has yet come to pass. What is however evident is that the historical novel continues to flourish as more and more writers, particularly South African ones have given the genre a new lease of life. Works that come immediately to mind are *The Native Commissioner* (2006), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2004) by Zakes Mda, *Amazulu* (2007) by Walton Golightly, *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013) by Zakes Mda and *Trek* (2013) by Winnie Rust.

Throughout the post-apartheid years, it has become apparent that it is not possible to write a work of fiction that may aid reconciliation and promote nation building, without dealing with the past in some way. The past is a point of recovery of the “memory necessary for the formation of a truly post-colonial society, the rivaling of historical discourse without reverting to a native romanticism” (Gallagher, 1997: 385).

In an interview with Sharon Meyering²² on 16 May 2006, Johnson was asked if it was possible for him to write a novel “free from political and historical influence”. He answered that for him, it was not possible to do so. The past is therefore a point of reference for Johnson. It offers a starting point, a repository as well as a means of transmission of historical fact into the future.

²² Before embarking on his journey as a writer of fiction, Mr. Johnson worked as a journalist, successfully rising to become Editor of *The Saturday Star*. He has to his credit a travel guide on South Africa entitled *Strange Days Indeed*, a book that deals with the historical facts of South Africa’s transformation from a country engaged in violence, civil unrest and a liberation war to the time it becomes a democracy.

Susan Gallagher sums up the argument aptly when she declares:

stories about the past enable us to create and share a common future. In the post-colonial moment, as a new nation struggles to define itself the unfinished business of our collective history needs to be addressed (Gallagher, 1997:386).

The Native Commissioner ends with a feeling of release, euphoria and hilarity for Sam. For him, all the mystery that was his life has been revealed to him. For the first time he understands himself and the role the past has played in his life. He states:

When I finished, I laughed. I felt a dizzying lightness of heart. I took the new sheets of paper on which I had written in my hand. I stood and walked out over the wide veranda and down the steps, across the lawn to the garden gate that looks like it opens the very ocean itself ... I placed the sheets inside another box, in which there was a mound of carefully ordered paper and memory trinkets...(Johnson, 2006: 283).

The act of walking away from the box (ibid 283) that follows the putting away of his father's papers, is a symbolic act of redemption and recuperation. Once Sam has read what is in the box he feels free of all that has been weighing him down. This backward glance helps him be reconstituted, thereby enabling him move on with his life. Again, one cannot help noting that by safely storing the papers he himself has written, Sam is unconsciously also caching a historical memory that one day would help his own children understand themselves better, thereby perpetuating a continuous cycle of history. The following section focuses on the possible historical approaches to the novel.

1.4 Historical approaches to *The Native Commissioner*

1.4.1 The self-reflexive approach

As a genre, the historical novel reconstructs a story around historical events. Because it is a merging of two different forms of writing, namely: fiction and history, it thus becomes a hybrid work of fiction (Wesseling, 1991: 1). Being a book of this type, *The Native Commissioner* uses two main approaches to bring to the fore historical issues addressed.

Wesseling identifies two forms of historical fictions, namely self-reflexive and uchronian fiction. She defines the former as a “conflation” of historiography and the detective genre. Such historical fiction not only looks at the past as a source of material, but also actively searches the past, interrogates it and comes up with acceptable histories. Self-reflexive historicity is a post-modernist approach meant to look at alternate forms of history, rather than focusing on the official mainstream history. In reflexive historical fiction, the writer examines the past and selects from it those versions of the past which have not been told, or rather have been suppressed by official historiography. Wesseling (1991: 01) contends that “...in this way, unrealized possibilities that lie dormant in certain historical situations are brought to our attention”. Applied within the ambit of dialectical Marxism, the reflexive approach will therefore encourage scholars of history to engage in dialogue with the past in a reflexive manner with the ultimate aim of getting a clearer understanding of where we are coming from as a collective and as individuals while at the same time showing where we are going, thereby becoming reconstituted.

The self-reflexive approach to history therefore reflects upon history and the past in order to tell untold stories. This is the approach that Johnson employs in *The Native Commissioner*. He uses the past to bring to memory the unknown history of Sam’s father and the plight of men like him, caught between the apartheid system and their consciences. The novel hence offers therapeutic possibilities to Sam. The reader is taken on a tour of discovery and reflection on George’s character, who is shown as a proud man, willing to be given a chance to work with his hands and do as much good as he possibly can before going into retirement to lecture in either Zulu or Xhosa. Johnson dexterously provides a close up of George as a public figure as well as a family man. While he is a patient in a psychiatric unit, he demonstrates a concern for his family which shows him as a passionate man who cares for his relatives. The reader may come to understand him and possibly respect him also as a principled character. His heartfelt wish is to be good and to dispense goodness to others. The value of the reflexive mode is that it tells us a different story of George other than the public one. The reader is privy to his anxieties and shame about apartheid, an image certainly not consistent with a white man in apartheid South Africa. He even worries about the state of his family’s financial position. George is thus presented in very humane forms to the reader who may forgive him for his failure to make the best out of a bad

situation. By searching his past, readers are told for example, that George, being largely self-taught, teaches himself Zulu and Xhosa. To realise this dream, he even starts a correspondence with Mr. RRR Dhlomo. This shows him as an anthropologist but above all, it depicts a man who is eager to blend with and belong to the people he serves and lives with as well.

The self-reflexive approach used in the novel is indeed an important device as it also helps to clear historical misconceptions, promoting a better understanding of certain groups of people whose side of history has not been made available in the public domain. Such an approach helps the readership to confront the past and accept it without bitterness. Here, I refer to the reality that Native Commissioners were some of the least liked whites considering their perceived historical role of being the very foot soldiers of apartheid. Understanding that some of these commissioners were also subject to a system that they did not like would indeed promote healing and reconciliation. Zakes Mda also encourages this approach of examining (by reflecting on) the past and teaching generations to know where they come from rather than getting lost in “blissful amnesia” (Mda, 2002).

Reflecting on the past, we are reminded of Nonqawuse,²³ the Xhosa prophetess and the Xhosa cattle killing of 1850, a story retold in brief by Johnson in *The Native Commissioner* (pg. 88). Why would a disastrous story, a symbol of a people’s humiliation and a point of subjugation for them, be included in a story supposedly meant to promote healing? Thankfully, through the reflexive approach we understand the story in a different light. The Xhosa cattle killing is extremely relevant to the story in the reflexive domain. It is not just some foolish story about a Xhosa maid, who probably was no prophet at all. Surely, the significance was not in the seemingly foolhardy gesture of killing and destruction. Why would a proud people, a nation of warriors in every sense, listen to an insignificant maiden who asked them to destroy their only source of wealth? We are not told of Nonqawuse’s previous exploits as a prophetess, so we assume she had none to boast about. The answer lies in reflecting upon this story. Nonqawuse’s

²³ In 1850, a Xhosa maiden told her nation that she had received a prophecy which said that if her people burnt their crops and destroyed their livestock, the ancestors would grant them victory against the British. She supposedly received her visions and messages along the Gxarha River. None of the prophecies came true and by the winter of 1851, the whole Xhosa nation lay dying of hunger and cold, thereby granting total victory to the British (Offenburger 2007: 21). Brief as it is, the Nonqawuse legend serves to validate the inscribed history of the place which gives George both a sense of identity and pride about the area.

prophecy opened people's thinking to astounding possibilities, that if they were to come to fruition, the Xhosa nation would be free forever, with no more white people to fight or contend with. Such is the audacity of hope. To the Xhosa, no sacrifice was too great if they could rid themselves of this evil. Thus, in the reflexive domain they are seen as martyrs ready to do anything to rid themselves of colonists.

Historian Offenburger (2007: 21) points out this about Nonqawuse's prophecy:

Consider the national significance of this time, the British are expanding eastward bit by bit, river by river,...[and] vastly different modes of thinking and religions, beliefs.....along the frontier zones with...missionaries and land loss amongst the AmaXhosa intensifies, materially and spiritually ...
(My interpolation).

The grim picture that Offenburger paints shows a Xhosa nation in the grip of great hysteria, desperation and the terror of being overrun by the British abounding. In light of this, the reader will not be surprised at how the Xhosa nation played right into Nonqawuse's opportunism and carried out some of the most desperate acts of self-destruction ever committed by a nation towards itself.

Nonqawuse's prophecy demonstrates what people are capable of if they are in crisis and are of one mind. Johnson's mention, albeit briefly, of this legend indicates that it was to some degree a prelude to and perhaps a premonition of the events prior to 1994 when the people of South Africa would join hands against a common enemy and triumph over the mighty apartheid machinery. The story is therefore a typology of the war against apartheid that Nonqawuse's grandchildren would unite against, this time as a whole nation. It also reinforces the sense of identity stemming from the warrior image that he paints about Xhosa people, that, naïve though they may have been, they had a proud history of resistance and sacrifice. Now to relegate Nonqawuse's story as unpersuasive in the reconstitution process is to delete George's possession of the socio-scape²⁴ that makes him feel that he is truly one with the land. These are the issues

²⁴ I would define the word as a panorama of the social environment of a given area.

that make George truly South African and they in turn are imparted to Sam who in the end receives the blueprint of George's humanism, contributing greatly to his reconstitution.

The historical mode of fiction creates possibilities out of seemingly meaningless events of the past. Out of these countless possibilities we are able to recreate and reconstitute selfhood. Thus this mode enables mediation between the past and the present reading public.

1.4.2 The Uchronian mode

The other historical mode that Wesseling argues is characteristic of historical fiction and that I consider also applicable to *The Native Commissioner* is what she terms the uchronian historical fiction. She defines such fiction as "counter factual parodies" written from the perspective of the previously disadvantaged and those "excluded" in the making of history (Wesseling, 1991: 162). The ideological premise underlying this type of historical fiction is that it is concerned with the sympathetic portrayal and identification of those who have suffered in history.

One can very well argue that the portrayal of George is uchronian in nature. George becomes a societal representation of a group of liberals and those who were critical of apartheid as a way of life. This group assumes the status of subalterns in a government that is run by members of their own race. The novel evokes our sympathy and begs our understanding and empathy for the type of crisis they were facing.

The opportunity we are being offered here is a closer, more intimate understanding of their story. Perhaps the poem by chief Mxolo Qoboyana (pg. 151) best sums up our understanding of George:

Who is the honest man?
He that doth still and strongly good pursue
To God, his neighbour and himself most true
Whom neither force nor favouring can
Unpin or wrench from giving all their due.

The poem of gratitude from a minor Xhosa chief, for some unmentioned favour by George, demonstrates the measure of respect with which black people viewed him, although it also

illustrates the paternalism of the system in dispensing favours to natives as if they were children. Through the application of the uchronian model of historical fiction, George's life is not only clarified but validated as well. Wesseling (1991: 162) adds that:

Uchronian fiction differs from self-reflexive fiction in that ... (they) [it] move[s] beyond the project of striving after a valid interpretation of the past. They do not turn to the past in a quest for authentic historical knowledge, but in pursuit of **dormant possibilities** that may figure a new beginning of History [emphasis mine].

One may ask about these dormant possibilities that Wesseling describes which may arise out of our uchronian reading of historical fiction. In fact, there are several. One of these is an enhanced understanding of the problems besieging the family and the nation (racial disharmony is one such problem raised in the novel). Therefore, enabling readers to relate to the story and the historical circumstances of the time also enables them to relate to the protagonist's situation thereby evoking sympathy, acceptance or rejection.

A closer analysis of *The Native Commissioner* will demonstrate that as a historical novel, it is both self-reflexive as well as uchronian in its historicity. The novel is self-reflexive in so much as it interrogates the past and searches it for historical relevance. The past therefore becomes a starting point in the process of self-reflection as the writer starts from a noteworthy historical moment and lets the story unfold. At the same time, the novel is uchronian because it is told from the perspective of a white, colonial administrator, whose story is being heard for the first time, thereby representing a minority and formerly unheard voice.

The uchronian nature of history is particularly concerned with the minority²⁵, the downtrodden and the voiceless. This of course creates new possibilities in the engagement with the past. Official historiography is put in abeyance for a moment as the reader acquaints himself or herself

²⁵ I argue that George Jameson represented a minority group, the liberals who advocated for moderation and liberalism towards black communities. To deny that this group was in the minority and that they suffered for their socio-political stance in the hands of the Nationalist government would be both unfair to their own suffering and the role they played in the apartheid era. It would also be akin to deleting them out of a history they are a part of. I dwell more on this in Chapter 4.

with the unknown and the unofficial. Greater understanding is achieved and the reader comes out of a reading experience more informed of the past.

1.5 What History? *The Native Commissioner* in a Historical Moment

The historical nature of the novel is significantly loaded as the writer not only builds the story against the backdrop of some historical events that happened in South Africa but also around certain global and national historical events such as the First World War, the rise to power of the Nationalist Party, the apartheid policy and the Bantu labour control boards, from Proclamation number 866. These are some of the events that George shapes his life around and they in turn, shape his story.

Arthur Danto in Wesseling (1991: 128) points out that:

To ask for the significance of an event in the historical sense of the term, is to ask a question which can be answered only in the context of a story. Th[at] identical event will have a different significance in accordance with the story in which it is located or in other words, in accordance with what different sets of later events it may be connected with. [parenthesis mine].

Kermode (in Wesseling, 1991: 148) describes the historical novel as that which transforms the *chronos* into *kairos*. In other words, the novel modifies the mere events that happen in a story, the *chronos*, to a “point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end, which is the *kairos*”. I am reminded of two novels: *The Madonna of Excelsior* by Zakes Mda (2002) and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The Wizard of the Crow* (2006). The latter starts with a significant event, the speculative talk circulating in the city about the sudden illness of the leader. The story unfolds from this speculation into a full-fledged novel, with people giving different interpretations explaining the strange sickness. Mda begins his story with a historical event of 1971 in which nineteen whites and blacks who had contravened the sexual immorality act of 1950 were arraigned before the local magistrate in Excelsior.

The terms “*chronos*” and “*kairos*” imply that the form of the novel is not accidentally formulated but a result of a deliberate and careful design. Historiography has very often been misrepresented as mere *chronos*, the presentation of events, one after the other in a story. Yet writers of historical fiction have the responsibility of making their stories not only credible but interesting as well. Therefore, scholastic interest builds up the literariness of a text, resulting in a deep interaction between the reader and a work of fiction. The historical novel hence creates “authentic characters with a factual-led framework and writes stories about them which will communicate as much as is necessary of the past” (Groot 2009: 4) to create the required context for the story. George Lukacs argues:

What matters therefore, in the historical novel, is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. And it is a law of literary portrayal which first appears paradoxical, but then quite obvious, that in order to bring out these social and human motives of behaviour, the outwardly insignificant events, the smaller (from without) relationships are better suited than the great monumental dramas of world (Lukacs, 1962: 44).(Parenthesis in the original).

Lukacs summarises the reasons for the existence of the historical novel as the need to re-live past experiences, discover why our great heroes of the past behaved in the way they did and felt as they did. Such an engagement with the past brings to life a kaleidoscope of historical experiences. These significant moments allow for a blending between fact and fiction, thereby transforming the *chronos* of history into *kairos*.

In conclusion, one may therefore state that history plays an important part in the novel as it enables characters to revisit past experiences of their lives or of family members in order to recall incidents, both pleasant and unpleasant, in a reconstitutive process. The act of recalling and remembering becomes a process of ordering historical circumstance into a meaningful teleology. In the novel it is both reconstitutive and reconstructive, enabling Sam to rearrange his

life into meaningful parts. As Sam demonstrates, history simply stored away, cached and unused is useless. It has to be retrieved, studied and made relevant to those in need of it.

This study consists of five chapters. The first serves as an introduction to the whole dissertation by looking at how Shaun Johnson uses history to make the protagonist of the novel, Sam, to re-discover himself as a liberated individual. Chapter two examines how the writer uses the landscape to make his characters bond with the land the way George does in the novel. The picture on the front cover of the Penguin edition of the novel shows a person (most probably Sam), dressed in a long overcoat standing on the windward side of a mountain, gazing over an expansive landscape with snow white mountains in the distance. The front cover of the novel preempts the notion that descriptions of the landscape will feature inside. Chapter three deals with the concept of self-making and self-accounting via the use of the biographic mode as well as the use of first person and the omniscient voice, which are narrative techniques used in the novel. I suggest that these narrative techniques serve as a confession and thus help a person come to terms with his or her past²⁶. Chapter four examines what I refer to as the “burden” of some ordinary white South Africans, like George Jameson who were not supportive of the apartheid grand plan yet found themselves within a system that was running their lives. In my opinion, the ability to rise against the norm, to challenge the prevailing order of things and forge one’s own path, no matter how arduous it is, is in fact a reconstitutive opportunity. This chapter investigates how the problem of belonging to the white supremacist and elitist group is a burden. It examines their fears and concerns and how, through these fears, they lived a precarious existence, distrusted by their fellow whites and hated by the black people they were willing to serve. It also examines briefly the origins of apartheid and its disastrous impact on both the whites who are beneficiaries of the system and blacks. Consequently, a study of the novel in terms of racialisation is carried out. All these issues are examined in the context of George’s liberalism. This approach makes it possible to analyse in the critical domain, the nature of George’s guilt and trauma. This will substantiate the argument that the reconstitutive process was not as simple since it involved a critical denial of the self in favour of one’s ideals. Consequently, this one act of self denial by George helps in the personal reconstitution of Sam as he realises the value of his

²⁶ See Gallagher S (1997) *The Confessional Mode of Writing*.

father's sacrifice. Chapter five provides a conclusion and summary of all the issues raised in the preceding four chapters.

The next chapter looks at the issue of the landscape as playing a critical role in identity formation as well as in creating belonging. I argue that one's affinity with space enables one to understand himself or herself in terms of whose space it is and what space really is.

CHAPTER TWO

Transposition and Transmission of the Landscape onto the Protagonist and Reader's Psyches

"And this life, exempt from public haunt, Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything." William Shakespeare.

"If this is your land, where are your stories?" Chamberlain

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines Johnson's treatment of the landscape as a place of consolation, of identity, memory and belonging, thus aiding one in the process of individual reconstitution. In Chapter 1 I explained how the front cover of the Penguin edition of the novel shows a person standing over a wide expanse of the countryside gazing into the distance surrounded by a picturesque landscape. The picture serves a critical and subliminal as well as ironic role in demonstrating South Africa as an expansive land full of beauty, poise and meaning. As one looks at the cover picture he/she is caught with the expectation that description of the landscape will feature in the novel.

Johnson's approach to the landscape is rather muted and subdued²⁷ in comparison with, say, that of Alan Paton in his *Cry the Beloved Country*,²⁸ but nonetheless, in the few instances that Johnson refers to the landscape, there is a powerful subliminal longing by the writer to possess the landscape and become part of its history, thus making it his own.

²⁷ For example: the writer describes Tsumeb rather passively without use of dramatic language saying, "The Tsumeb of his days was in the throes of becoming a boom town in a hurry. Astonishing mineral deposits, famed from prehistoric times, were now considered to be commercially exploitable." (pg. 76) See also description of Ngoako Ramalepe on page 125 and Witbank on page 172.

²⁸ I give an example of an excerpt from Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the pages that follow.

Although I intend to dwell on the landscape as a place of memory in the novel, I also propose to look at other forms of “scapes,”²⁹ such as the cityscape and the mindscape³⁰. Much of the plot in *The Native Commissioner* deals with the mindscape and how George as a character deals with the moral crisis bedeviling him and the land.

The approach to this chapter will be underpinned by the Gaia³¹ principle. This principle advocates the view that the earth be seen as a living cell. This means that the earth responds to the way individuals care or abuse it. It is a view that advocates for an ecocritical audit of the way humans, hence characters in a work of literature, respond to their environment. Through the theory of eco-criticism, in general, I intend to examine the impact of the landscape in shaping the identity and character of George, depending on how he interacts with and responds to his surroundings. I argue that a closer analysis of the environment is critical to our understanding³² of the issues raised in the novel. Such issues include but are not limited to guilt, identity, belonging and the violence of apartheid. An examination of the environment brings George to life as an authentic³³ character shaped by his environment. Ultimately, there forms an indelible bond between George and his environment and this bond in turn impinges strongly on Sam’s reconstitution process.

²⁹ Robert Muponde writes about the other “scapes” as being equally powerful and influential in determining our current understanding of the protagonist in a story. He considers the cityscape; the landscape of the city, as well as the mindscape, that of the mind. See *Zimbabwean Literature (Poetry)* (2000). See also Wagner E. (2009: 572).

³⁰ As just noted, Muponde (2000) defines a “cityscape” as the landscape of the city. As an extension to this idea of scapes I see a mindscape as an expression or a view of what happens in the mind. In other words, one’s perceptions and thoughts.

³¹ See Brown D. (2006: 106)

³² I am aware that some critics are of the view that it is unimportant to understand any work of literature as it does not offer any knowledge that may change society for the better. Such critics argue that art must be seen for what it is; art. I consider this view foolish to say the least. Africa is too busy carrying out an audit of its sociopolitical landscape to afford this luxury. I choose to take Achebe’s view that, “art for art’s sake is simply deodorised dog shit.” See Achebe, C (1975) *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Our society is in a state of flux, and largely trying to come to terms with hundreds of years of slavery, legalised chicanery and economic rape. Literature in this regard must prick our consciences, formulate new paths of self assessment and progress.

³³ By authentic I refer to a character who reacts to the different situations in the novel as if he/she were an actual/real person outside a work of fiction.

Glotfelty (1996: xix) defines ecocriticism³⁴ as: “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” Douglas (2007: 4) provides a similar definition as well when he adds, “ecocriticism is reading with attention to treatment of nature, land and place, informed by a desire to understand past and present connection between literature and human attitudes regarding the earth.” Labuscagne (2008: 434) comments that even the “landscape falls within the ambit of ecocriticism.” Therefore, all three definitions agree on a spatial analysis of the world in order to achieve greater understanding of a text. Thus, the physical and the socio-political environment influence a writer as regards the world surrounding him or her. Without a clear understanding of the way the environment has been treated, we may not achieve an intimate grasp of a work of art. Moore (2008: 5) argues for a “sympathetic recognition” of the environment as an equal entity in a work of literature, rather than the background to a story. Ecocriticism encourages care, respect and responsibility for our environment and suggests an “egalitarian approach” to it (ibid pg. 5). I find this theory relevant to *The Native Commissioner* because of the way Johnson creates an affinity between the environment and the two protagonists, namely: George and his son Sam. Most importantly, it largely falls within the postcolonial reflexive approach in that it carries a cross-analysis of the aftermath of the colonial encounter. Throughout the novel, George is presented as some kind of crusader and caretaker of his environment. He even painstakingly starts a garden by himself which he tended lovingly at his leisure until the flowers bloomed. The image of George acting as some sort of caretaker and restorer of the damaged land prevails throughout the novel.

The issue of landscape and its treatment by Johnson falls under the ambit of the theory of ecocriticism. For purposes of this discussion I will refer to the landscape theory as being essentially the same theory as ecocriticism. Beningfield (2006: 3) defines the term landscape as consisting of a “physical place and representational forms in which social, cultural and political meanings are embedded and through which these meanings are communicated.” The landscape

³⁴ The provenance of the term “ecocriticism” is rather uncertain but it seems to have found currency around 1949 after the publication of Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand Almanac* in 1949. The advent of ecocritical thinking may have been a response to the environmental damage caused by the Second World War particularly the one caused by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1944. From the late forties onwards, the eco-critical movement gathered strength and gained much support and sympathy. By the turn of the new millennium, ecocriticism had more or less become a way of life for most people who seem to advocate for a more responsible treatment of the environment (Moore, 2008: 5).

is therefore not merely a physical place as perceived by the viewer or reader but a social, cultural and political system of signifiers. This view endorses what Lofline (1998: 3) asserts, that the landscape of literature is not merely the geographical setting of the story but a socio-cultural and political portrayal of the story. Lofline refers to the social milieu as being a critical part of any story. Cosgrove (2005: 3) sums up the debate as follows:

in the landscape we are dealing with an ideologically charged and very complex cultural product and moreover, it is in the origins of the landscape as a way of seeing the world that we discover its links to broader historical structures and processes.

The above argument is also supported by Harrington and Tallmadge (2000: 9) who point out that our terrain of consciousness is largely influenced by the environment we live in. Thus, writers often find themselves subconsciously describing the environment and the spaces they live in. Landscape is presented as home, a familiar place or concept which “puts land at a distance in order to look upon it, **represent it and claim it**” (Beningfield, 2006: 3). [Emphasis mine]. Therefore talking about the landscape makes one not just a passive participant, but an active one who not only admires it but consummates its beauty and claims it as his or hers.

In a similar fashion, Satterlee (2006: 81) contends that “the landscape functions within those moments of remembering as a link between identity and memory, thus acting as both the place of trauma and the location of recovery.” Satterlee adds that, “an intimate relationship between human and non-human is a necessary process of identity formation ... (and) direct contact with the land aids the protagonist’s process of **remembering and recovery** due to the cultural histories that are embedded in the land...” (ibid. 86). [Emphasis mine]. Miyasaki shares the same sentiments as Satterlee when she asserts that “nature and landscape are not merely décor. Rather, they are an essential means to self-discovery and formulation of a person’s identity.” The landscape is thus a very important part of a writer’s world because, through relating to it, a character may find solace and acceptance or alienation and denial. It becomes a place of cultural memory and an individual’s space for social redemption and solace. Lofline (1998: 3) observes that the “description of the landscape provides the geographic, cultural and social boundaries of the text, the spaces within which the text will signify”. According to Buell, (1996: 69) there is now a second wave of criticism which “revises the traditional commitment to the nature

protection ethic...to accomplish the claims of environmental justice or (more broadly) the environmentalism of the poor.” Buell’s (in Fromm, 1996: 69) comments also emphasise the perception of the environment as a highly contested space through which collective ownership can be realised. Individuals must therefore be seen to be playing an active role in caring and protecting our environment.

Jameson’s initial portrayal of the landscape is that of a person who has accepted it, claimed it and made it his home. For example, George shows delight in his work in the Transkei by associating it with the beauty of his garden and home: “The property was surrounded by established trees, dominated by an ancient yellowwood which offset the garden planted and tended by him; him with his uncomplicated love of gardens if nothing else” (Johnson, 2006: 99). This demonstrates the perception George has of his environment as picturesque; his tender care is to a large extent the way he views the role of the European in Africa; that of a caretaker instead of a colonial master. George perceives himself as performing a pragmatic role in Africa rather than as coloniser and an accomplice of the colonial dispensation. As he muses on the circumstances involving Ntabaka and his co-accused (ibid pg. 91), he considers that the whole business about the assault was rather a “gory” incident which had upset the whole village. He thinks, “that is why the state had to step in, in his view; that was what made the role of the European in Africa both valid and useful” (ibid. pg. 91). This paternalism is typical of colonialism which sees every native as a timid child who needs guidance, reproaches as well as occasional punishment.

The one significant image used in the novel is that of the garden. One cannot help but note an analogy with the Garden of Eden which was supposedly put under humanity’s charge immediately after creation, before the fall from grace.³⁵ This view is consistent with ecocriticist thinking which sees humans playing a responsible and caring role for their environment. I am reminded of a poem by Ina Rousseau (1926-2005) entitled “*The Abandoned Garden*”.³⁶ Rousseau writes:

³⁵ The story is found in the Holy Bible in the book of Genesis Chapter 1.

³⁶ The poem was originally published in Afrikaans. It was translated into English by a person or persons unknown. Its date of publication is also unknown. Perhaps the poem appeals to picturesque imaginations of writers like H. Rider Haggard who imagined Africa as the lost Eden. Perhaps Africa is the lost Eden which has been rediscovered through colonial conquest? See Beningfield (2006: 82).

Stands there still an Eden?

/Somewhere / neglected like a city in ruins,

/doomed to gradual decay

Johnson likewise presents George as a character who is moved to adulation and admiration for his garden and the landscape in general. Zululand, Duiwelskloof, Umgazana River and many other places are all described in awe stricken tones full of admiration. To him, it is no wonder where the elusive Garden of Eden is. For example, the wild coast near the banks of Umgazana River is called by George, the “most beautiful place in Africa ... an evocation of paradise”. The place is described in idyllic terms as a:

... combination of green hills, majestic shadow-casting rocks, pure beaches, thick mangroves and mysterious islands in the lagoon. [George] said he would live there forever if he could, cut off from humanity’s doings and as close to pure Africa as it was possible to be” (pg. 147).

For George, the landscape becomes a place one can call home as it gives him a sense of belonging. He is not led to visual possession of the wild coast described above only. Even Zululand is referred to as his “beloved Zululand”. The landscape he sees becomes for him a *terra-nullius* – belonging to no one and there for the taking – and this bolsters for him his sense of belonging. It (the landscape) is something tangible for George; he can visually possess and claim it as his own. This thinking is alluded to by Una Chaudhuri (2002: 21) who describes the landscape as “a commodity” that can be possessed at will. She adds that the landscape is charged with what she terms “spatial legibility” (2002: 4), a term she uses to associate the landscape as “symbolically significant” with historical, spatial socio-economic and cultural meanings (ibid. pg. 4). The pastoral, according to Huggan (2010: 20) is about:

legitimation of the highly codified relations between socially differentiated people. [It is] a contested space where spatial fantasies and histories are accumulated and the land is revealed both as speaking subject and disputed object of discursive management and material control.

Here I draw an analogy with music. I am reminded of the late Zimbabwean musician Simon Chimbetu on his album ‘Reward Ten Million Pounds’ on the song, ‘*Kumba*’ meaning ‘Home,’ where he sings about home. In this track, a nostalgic son who misses home evokes the imagination to lament:

*Ndokumbira kuenda, ndokumbira kuenda kwedu kuAfrica
Gomo reMakwiro ratsamira mwoyo randiita
ndifunge kumba kwedu. Kushaikwa kwezuya
rekwazvo kwazvo kwandiita ndifunge kumba kwedu.
Kana masvika mhoresa vose mhoresa vose*

Translated:

May I please go home to Africa. The Makwiro mountain has touched my heart and made me miss home. The absence of true sunshine here has made me miss home. When you get there please greet everyone

The lyrics above coalesce into reminiscence about a home by a diasporic voice. But in order for this nostalgia to evoke the image of home and belonging that the persona so desperately wants to show, he gives names to the features he remembers most: Africa and the Makwiro Mountain. Chimbetu rejects the diasporic landscape which he sees as uncomfortable and alien as shown by the absence of sunlight. Instead, he yearns for the comfort of home personified by the mountain. Interestingly, he does not just refer to it in general terms but specifically names it. Name placing is a critical feature of landscape scholarship. It is a form of possession and identity mediation. Landscape rejection and or acceptance, as we see in Chimbetu above, is similar to George Jameson’s rejection of the Witbank landscape while accepting that of Zululand and Libode. Perhaps of significance here is the fact that acceptance or denial of a landscape set up is an emotive decision based on the set of identity or identities being mediated. For example, George’s disaffection with the apartheid administration makes him reject what he perceives as an injustice on the land when he sees the scarred landscape of Witbank town. This means that in so doing, he unconsciously identifies with anything that is opposed to apartheid. Another noteworthy observation as well is that identity formulation is not spontaneous nor momentary and instantaneous; rather, it is a process that takes place as a learnt set of behaviours that culminates in an individual getting to be what he/she is. This is specifically the reason why it takes Sam,

George's son, some forty years to finally know himself. Sam has to sift through layers of rubble, sometimes visualising the socio-political landscape through the eyes of his father before he successfully becomes reconstituted.

The love that George feels for his land (South Africa) is to him a self-cleansing catharsis that enables him to function in the apartheid government for such a long period. Each moment, during which George is assailed by the sadness of the injustice around him and the violence inherent in the policies of apartheid, he consoles himself that as long as he *loves* the land and mitigates all this with his own good, then he can somehow minimise the damage being done to it and its people. His attempts at avoiding being presumptive, for example, in the case involving Ntabaka and his use of Xhosa in making his notes show George as a person who has already mapped the trajectory of his identity by choosing to be liberal and sympathetic to the oppressed in his society. Even when he hears the Zulu language being spoken, it assumes a "real" status to him and is like music to his ears.

2.2 The Picturesque Landscape in *The Native Commissioner*

One of the most distinct images Johnson creates about South Africa is its pastoral image of beauty and grandness. He, for example, describes Zululand as a "carpet of hills and plateaus which rolled out from the foothills of the great chain of the Drakensberg to the Indian Ocean. It was subtropical and green, and wooded, a country of powerful rivers, wild game and thorn bush" (pg. 58). This rather attractive description of Zululand evokes strong emotions of belonging through visual possession of a landscape.

Beningfield (2006: 1) alludes to this beauty of the landscape:

I have no hesitation in saying that each (one of us) is ultimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the Jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the Mimosa trees of the bush veld. Each time one of us touches the soil of this land, we feel a sense of **personal renewal**....We are moved by a sense of joy and exhilaration when the grass turns green and the

flowers bloom [Parenthesis in the original]
[Emphasis mine].

Beningfield's implicit comparison of Jacaranda trees, which are exotic to Africa, with the love she has for South Africa is powerful. Just as Jacaranda trees have thrived in South Africa and made it their home, she ironically implies that the settler has also found a niche and has grown attached to the land, the way we see George Jameson doing. It is important to note that both Johnson and Beningfield allude to the greenness attached to lush vegetation, thus bringing out emotions of freshness, vitality and exploration. I am reminded of Alan Paton in his *Cry, The Beloved Country* who writes:

There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it....The grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. It holds the rain and the mist and they seep into the ground, feeding the streams in every kloof (Paton, 1991: 01).

The similarity between the two texts is evident as both writers attempt to demonstrate the richness associated with the landscape of South Africa. For Johnson and Paton it appears the description of the lush vegetation is a digression from or a deliberate contradiction to the social injustices perpetrated by the apartheid government. Describing the landscape thus becomes an act of solace, an escape from the glaring world of the present to a more properly constituted natural world for Johnson, while for Paton it serves to create a stark contrast with the kind of luxury and comfort in which whites lived.

Human (2010: 49) argues that the:

picturesque mode facilitates an aesthetic appreciation of natural environments by focusing attention on the picture-like properties of sensuous surface and formal composition. Central to this approach is the concept of disinterestedness. The basic idea of disinterestedness is that aesthetic appreciation requires appreciators to distance themselves from the objects of their appreciation as well as their own interests, such as the personal, the possessive and the economic.

This approach is used to considerable effect by Paton in *Cry the Beloved Country*, and later by Shaun Johnson in *The Native Commissioner*. Johnson's style of writing is aloof and muted, marked by the use of unobtrusive irony and understatement. The importance of the implicit narrative method is that it does not dwell on the obvious, thus becoming in itself, a form of protest, leaving the reader to make summations and arrive at conclusions by him or herself.

Ryan Trimm in Labuschagne (2008: 186) points out that pastoral imagery leads to identity formation of both an individual and a national nature. He observes that national qualities are embodied in the landscape itself as it is prepared for visual consumption. "Gazing at a landscape, the viewer is led along a chain of identification, visual possession of the countryside allowing one to identify with those who literally possess it..." (ibid., 91). Thus, appreciation of the beauty of a landscape becomes by itself a revealing experience. It allows the individual to participate in the landscape itself, enabling him or her to identify with it, as well as claim it as his own, the way George does in the novel.

2.3 The Landscape as Memory

Beningfield (2006: xi) views the landscape as an "experienced world which is drenched with meaning through inhabitation, conflict and violence." The landscape therefore becomes a purveyor, a carrier of historical memory. She proceeds to argue that we use the term landscape to "identify physical places and representational forms in which social, cultural and political meanings are embedded and through which these meanings are communicated." A particular locality in the novel is not just some space which is ordinary and insignificant but a historical purveyor on its own. Therefore, sites like uMgungundlovu, Isandhlwana, Dingaan's Kraal, Mtubatuba, Ultimatum Tree, Coward's Bush, Fort Mistake³⁷ and many others are loaded with memories of what happened there.

³⁷ Fort Mistake was originally known as Fort One Tree. No one knows why the name was later changed to Fort Mistake although stories abound on why it earned the name. Fort Mistake is historically significant as the last place where the last battle of The Transvaal War of Independence was fought. See www.encounter.co.za/fort-mistake.html accessed 16/062015 10:42am

It might be argued therefore that, the whole terrain of South Africa is one huge historical text, some pages tragic and some heroic. For example, to George the river Gxara is a place of historical memory. It evokes memories of the tragic prophecy by Nonqawuse³⁸ which eventually led to the subjugation of the mighty Xhosa Nation.

The landscape of Gxara becomes a locality associated with a desperate but tragic attempt by blacks to rid themselves of oppression. In fact, the landscape of Africa is replete with incidents of such desperation. I am reminded here of the Maji Maji³⁹ rebellion of 1905 in Tanzania where ancestral spirits through their mediums asked for (blind) loyalty from their subjects, whom they assured that all colonists' bullets would turn to water. Similarly, the 1896-7⁴⁰ Chimurenga rebellion in the then Rhodesia colony was instigated upon a promise that the people would be invincible should they rise against their colonial masters. However, in both these instances the people were entirely defeated.

George's understanding of the tragic historical events of Gxara and Isandhlwana, where the British finally defeated the mighty Zulu impis and began inroads into the interior, redeems him and makes him a full participant in re-memorising the landscape rather than as a distant and uninterested observer. This is because memory implies experience and experience denotes participation (Stephenson, 2010). By being part of the events unfolding in the story, he inscribes them onto the landscape. Satterlee (2006: 81) asserts that the "landscape functions within these moments of remembering as a link between identity and memory, thus acting as both the place of trauma and the location of recovery". Each moment that George sees a certain part of the land, his vast memory bank and the knowledge of the history of his land makes him relive it all. By so doing, George becomes not a passive but an active observer of and participant in the story. As a result, his story cannot be separated from that of the land; both are intricately intertwined. In fact, his birth almost coincides with the emergence of the young South African republic.

³⁸ I have dwelt in some detail on this and its tragic consequences in Chapter 1.

³⁹ See Tindall P.E (1968: 165 *ibid*) *History of Central, Tropical and Southern Africa*. Also, Boahen A. et al (1981: 308 *ibid*) *The Growth of African Civilisation, The Revolutionary Years*.

⁴⁰ See Bhebhe et al (1984: 122 *ibid*) *From Iron Age To Independence*.

Wagner (2009: 572) asserts that, “seeing and evaluating landscapes is thus effectively a **participation** in the everyday discourses...” [Emphasis mine]. Such discourses may entail a quest for identity, national and individual, re-memorising one’s space and thus aiding in the process of self-reconstitution.

The landscape, with its geographical connotations, has powerful implications as a vehicle of cultural memory. Throughout the novel, George indicates that for him, South Africa is not just an occupied space in the colonial project, but a place on which the culture of a nation is inscribed. His life story and the trauma that he experiences becomes a narrative that sets out in detail the emergence of the apartheid republic, the advent to power of the Nationalist Party and the introduction of the Group Areas Act. The trauma George suffers is a mirror to what the land suffers as well, a concept suggested by Satterlee (2006: 74) who asserts that “individual trauma is rooted within a cultural context and tied to specific landscape” and adds that individual trauma often symbolically mirrors cultural trauma.

Horvitz (2000: 11) defines cultural trauma as “an officially sanctioned, sadomachistic system of oppression in which a targeted group, perceived by the dominant culture as an obstacle to the goals of the existing hegemony, are tortured, imprisoned or killed”. The trauma that George suffers is directly a result of the Nationalist government coming to power. George realises that he has to get out of the system before he ultimately becomes corrupted by its policies. His attempts to leave fail and he somehow tacitly attempts to create a balance between what he can do and what the apartheid government is doing. His feelings of entrapment, despair and disillusionment eventually give way to mental distress resulting in his suicide. Chief among the causes of this trauma are the feelings of failure against forces more powerful than himself. The promulgation of draconian pieces of legislation such as The Natives Land Act and many others only serves to entrench his despair more deeply.

The trauma for George becomes more poignant in that it stops him from functioning well as he is constantly faced with moral dilemmas at his workstation. As the Nationalist Party becomes more and more daring, he finds himself being tied more and more tightly to an impotent role from which he cannot effectively function. The narrator, Sam, mature for his age, also notices the trauma that his father goes through, “The work rears up in front of my father like a swaying snake. His eyes seem to be receding in their sockets, and he never sings his Xhosa songs” (pg. 178).

2.4 City ‘Scapes’

The inhuman treatment that George witnesses as being meted out on the black population becomes the final straw that snaps his sanity. The culture of violence against the black people is not meant only to subdue them but to annihilate them. What he witnesses in Witbank convinces George that there is a concerted effort by the apartheid regime to destroy the black population. His misgivings about what happens there translate themselves onto the landscape. The description of the town image evokes a sinister environment which “lurks” behind shields of black coal dumps “malevolently observing” the arrival of Sam’s family. The black smoke suggests the turmoil and destruction emanating from the unrest due to the violence of apartheid as well as implying erasure and total annihilation. Thus, the sheer natural beauty of the land has been deleted, pillaged and eradicated. The image of Witbank as a destroyed and subverted landscape demonstrates the violence of colonialism and apartheid perpetrated on the landscape and its inhabitants. The perpetual smoke associated with it denotes a place on fire, implying extreme violence. This connotes unease, discomfort and unrest. Contrary to the solace, comfort and acceptance George derives from the country and rural landscape, the urban landscape is unnatural, scarred and hostile.

Muponde (2000) concurs. In terms of the urban landscape (which, as mentioned, he refers to as the cityscape), Muponde explains that the cityscape is an antithesis of the rural landscape. Everything about the city is broken, ravaged and corrupt. He writes: “The city is much more anarchic. The rule of moral law is indefinitely suspended. The conscience of the man in the city is numb and insensitive...” (Muponde, 2000: 21). Such is the image Johnson evokes in referring

to Witbank. He directly contrasts it with the countryside by explicitly mentioning that the vegetation and the fields of the Witbank area are “as brown as the Transkei’s are green” (pg. 172). The brown fields suggest an absence of life, growth and prosperity and may as well hint at human misery and bleak living conditions. The narrator (Sam) even compares the hotel they temporarily move into with their previous residence in Libode. He describes the hotel as shabby and cramped but their previous residence in Libode was “elongated spaciousness” and adds, “It is all my mother can do not to cry...” (pg. 172).

The cityscape is further portrayed as rotten and devoid of any love or warmth and as being meant to make the whites richer at the expense of suffering natives and migrant labourers. Johnson writes:

With the bilious belching smokestacks, thrusting mine dumps like the work of mutant moles, dirty blackened sky, incessant noise of construction, and great tides of new arrivals like advancing divisions in wartime, my father says the scene makes him think of Dante’s bleakest passages or a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare, **transposed onto an African** plain. It is his most pessimistic vision come to pass ;...(Johnson 2006: 174) [Emphasis mine].

The horrific image George evokes of Witbank is pessimistic to say the least. The dark smoke that comes out of the coal chimneys denotes an atmosphere that is choking and oppressive while the blackened sky implies an ominous and frightening occurrence which is imminent. His frustration and cynicism is further heightened by what he perceives to be the lack of decisiveness by his English compatriots, at the same time benefitting the most from the status quo.

The unease George feels about the cityscape of Witbank prompts him to escape somewhat from all the injustice he sees by throwing all his energy into his work. Sam says of him:

When the shock of the enormity of his situation has passed, my father has dismissed as too humiliating his first impulse to resign within days of our arrival in Witbank He will do the work he has to do as humanely as possible, and help as many as possible (pg. 174).

Whatever consolation George tries to derive from his work in Witbank is apparently ineffectual. He even buys a house on mortgage yet the admission from everyone is that it is, “ugly, cramped and soulless, but we do not say so” (ibid pg. 176). This apparent unhappiness with Witbank, felt by George’s family, is in reality a mirror of what he himself is feeling although he tries very hard not to show it. His failure to translate his pain into words is eventually the very factor that makes him fail to find a way to deal with the situation in Witbank. I argue that George’s suicide stems largely from his failure to find some equilibrium in the land he has come to love so much. This understanding drives him to despair and eventual suicide.

The history, the socio-cultural trauma that George experiences and witnesses is permanently transcribed onto the landscape and can be well summed up in Milton Jameson’s words:

... the history of Zululand was both tragic and romantic, that the human drama of the surrounding lands **attached itself to all** who lived on them, stayed even if they left [My emphasis]. There were bleached human bones still to be found on the battle fields at the base of the Ghost Mountains nearby, no one would go near a mountain that was said to emit its own light at night, and make its own sounds (ibid pg. 58).

2.5 The Journey Motif – The Landscape Narrated and Reimagined (A mindscape).

Some of the most vivid depictions of the landscape are indicated through the journey motif.⁴¹ Throughout the novel, the Jameson family is presented as being in a state of motion from the time George is employed in the department to the time he dies in 1967.

⁴¹ Here I refer to the idea of George and his family being constantly on the move from one place to another as a motif used in the novel.

George’s birth coincides with the war that is raging in Europe and is thus seen as a “talisman of hope” (pg. 59) which signalled that the “Jamesons were staying, planting bulbs that would flower and trees that would provide shade only in future seasons.” Johnson’s utilisation of trees and flowers as symbolising permanence and beauty demonstrates the value of the landscape as a means of asserting one’s authority and possession of space.

George’s first appointment by the Department is as a clerk. His subsequent promotion to Native Commissioner at Ndwendwe is full of hope and enthusiasm, evoking none of the doubts that later characterise him. Much of the enthusiasm displayed stems from the fact that as a youth he deludes himself that he is part owner of the Zulu landscape with the Zulu people and would from time to time “visit his beloved Zululand” (ibid pg. 65).

However, this feeling is immediately replaced by doubts as soon as the Nationalist Party assumes office. These are expressed by the omniscient narrator:

The uncertainty and shaky self-esteem that had been in his very tissue from childhood began to press. He had no idea of what else he might do with his life: he had sought security, found it in some form, and all his actions had been predicated on the keeping of it (ibid pg. 71).

For some reason the Department seemed to have conspired to keep George on the move from place to place, most probably because he is English. The following table illustrates George’s movements from the time he assumes office in the Department of Native Affairs to the time he dies.

Year	Place	Duration
1934	Ingwavuma (Zululand)	4 years
1938	Umbumbulu (Zululand)	4 years
1939	Ndwendwe (Zululand)	1 year
1944	Nkandla (Zululand)	5 years
1948	Tsumeb (South West Africa)	4 years
1952	Zoekmekaar (Northern Transvaal)	4 years

1953	Johannesburg (Transvaal)	1 year
1955	Kentani (Zululand)	2 years
1959	Duiwelskloof (Transvaal)	4 years
1961	Libode (Transkei)	2 years
1965	Witbank (Transvaal)	4 years
1966	Tour of Europe	

George’s travels offer a panoramic view of the state of the nation. His movements are somewhat involuntary, as if some strong, unseen force is determined to let him see the state of life in South Africa. This tour of South Africa (and later of Europe, although the former is not of his own volition), offers an overview of the social, physical and political landscape. This translates itself into an impulse to reclaim the immediacy of the landscape through narrative testimony. This has the advantage that it provides a depiction of the landscape from both a visual witness as well as a narrative perspective. May (2003: 66) argues that “verbal and visual representations of landscape have always gone hand in hand, both of them expressing prevailing ideologies about humans’ relationship to nature.”

The anonymous landscape is visualised and given some form of immediacy that is filled with narrative. George refers to Tsumeb, the area he is sent to, as a “desert” and even Jean thinks of it as an “ominous” place where they took weeks to reach even an oasis of water. The title of the chapter is thus suggestive of difficult times ahead since a desert is a dry area that is characterised by debilitating temperature extremes. George’s posting there is actually his first outside of home. The first four postings to Ingwavuma, Umbumbulu, Ndwendwe and Nkandla were actually domestic postings closer to his home. His eyes are thereby opened to his fears and doubts about his role as Native Commissioner:

He grew restless and incrementally uncertain as to whether all this was leading somewhere in some linear and logical way; this was in sharp contrast to his Zululand years ... The word *failure* [italicised in the original] whispered itself loudly in his ear for the first time though he clung to the countervailing notions of security and some stature at least. (ibid. pg. 82).

Johnson is suggesting here that the socio-political landscape played a role in shaping the character of George as a considerate man who is certainly not meant for public office in apartheid South Africa. It is at Tsumeb that he makes a tentative attempt to extricate himself from his role as Native Commissioner but is instead let down by his indecisiveness.

From Tsumeb, George and his family move to Zoekmekeer where he has a brief stay before he is transferred to Zululand in Kentani. By now the landscape has already become a place of discomfort and desolation, foreshadowing the gloom of Witbank. He no longer finds solace in the beauty and the picturesque landscape. It is as if the desert had quenched all his love for the pastoral since he has become more politically aware.

At Kentani George's love for the land is somehow rekindled by the cultural-scape of the land. His visit to Gxara would rekindle the legend of Nonqawuse and his knowledge of Zulu could be put to some practical use. At Kentani George experiences a life changing event while presiding over a case of grave assault between two groups of young men. During the court case, one of the accused asks him why he is meddling in matters that should not concern him. This question stuns him and puts his role in perspective; for the first time he feels total alienation and what it means to be an outsider. The narrator writes:

Since 1948, he agreed with himself, he had worried primarily that his own advancement was being seriously curtailed by the political change in the country. But now he could not avoid questioning the career itself, he questioned the meaning and validity and morality of everything he was standing for, everything about himself. He felt come over him, not dilettantishly now, a sense of hopelessness and purposelessness that weighed a ton, and he said out loud in his good English accent: It is all wrong. It was a physical feeling in his chest He found, to his surprise and annoyance that he was weeping ... Where is the country boy from Babanango now, the one teachers said would go far? This was how far he had come, and gone; presuming to judge Tanase Ntabaka and having him futilely whipped. What right had he to judge anything at all about these people... (ibid pg. 105).

The critical question that George asks himself soon after the Ntabaka court case helps demonstrate how far and deep his disillusionment went. It is ironic that George finds himself questioning his role in native affairs in the very place where he had enthusiastically begun his career and in Zululand which he had called his home. He suddenly speaks in his “good English accent” (see above) thus possibly remembering that he is after all British and not Xhosa or Zulu (the languages he is equally proficient in). His unconscious reclamation of his identity as a British person is the ultimate act of denial. His home, Kentani, had failed him, and thus cannot offer him solace or redemption, so that he reverts to his long discarded British ancestry. This sense of disruption and rejection by the landscape is described by Loflin who comments that an individual character may find that from within himself/herself he or she has now been alienated from the landscape and consequently fails to derive an identity, comfort or belonging from it (Loflin, 1998: 6).

From this moment, George’s interaction with natives and subsequently his environment is that of a distant traveller who has been, to use Homi Bhabha’s (1998: 133) term, “unhomed”. Bhabha defines being unhomed as that moment when one finds himself or herself without a home, not in the strict sense of the word but in a psychological and emotional one. Bhabha comments, “To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomely be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow” (ibid. pg 133). This is the position George finds himself in. The crisis he experiences eventually culminates in a medical condition that results in his depression which has been triggered by guilt. One evening, during a rare family gathering, George reminisces about all the places he has been to with his family. “Those are the places that will be on your passports one day and you must remember that while there are many who boast about coming from big places, eventually you will know the value of the fact that there are not many with those names that you will have on your passports”(pg. 107). Of note is that George refers to a passport as a means of identification while it is actually a travel document. Reference to the passport may parallel George’s impending tour of Europe later on in the novel but might symbolise a shift of identity, a role switch by him as a South African that I have alluded to earlier on. His peculiar lack of ethnic solace eventually makes him inhabit a homeless space as something of “a non-entity” (Wagner, 2009: 582).

Yet to George and his family, the posting to Duiwelskloof affords him an opportunity to renew himself and find his space again, “enchanted with the place and allowing themselves small dreams of new possibilities...” (Johnson 2006: 118). However, it is at Duiwelskloof that he has his first breakdown. He woke up one morning and found that “a shadow [like Witbank] had crept across his face and stayed there” (pg. 135) [My parenthesis]. Eventually, his anxieties had caught up with him. These fears had finally manifested themselves, leading to his sickness. This “shadow” becomes a symbol of the malaise that had come to characterise the land. In other words, apartheid is viewed as a disease that has corrupted the land and consequently is incapable of providing solace to those who seek it.

When in July 1966 George and his wife finally realise that their overseas savings account is full and commence their tour of Europe, he creates an interesting world scape⁴². He offers a running commentary on everything they see and experience from the moment they leave to the moment they come back. The tour itself is significant in that it portrays George as a person willing to learn more of the world he is living in. Wagner (2009: 572) contends that, “journeys from one’s homeland were meant to aid the formation of a stable subject—a person leaves the influences of family and friends to find out who he really is in an extended character endeavour detached from familial and landed roots ...”

If the above argument is to be adopted, then the journey George undertakes is meant to develop him further by opening his eyes to the European landscape. Johnson undoubtedly juxtaposes these two separate worlds, apartheid South Africa and a free and liberated Europe, to indicate how far behind South Africa was from the rest of the world in terms of its social development. For example, George witnesses abject poverty in Portugal during his tour of Europe, yet there is some form of dignity to the suffering of Portuguese people. George comments, “There is primitiveness here in Portugal, but I would call it honest. You can get very sophisticated people who are dishonest, don’t I know!” (Johnson, 2006: 202) The sophisticated people George is talking about are most definitely his own countrymen, white South Africans who were the engineers of the apartheid machinery. There is therefore a kind of simplicity and honesty from

⁴² I have merely extended Muponde’s idea of “scapes” from cityscapes which are landscapes of the city to worldscapes: landscapes of the world.

amongst the Portuguese poor that somehow appeals to him, bringing to fruition the adage that it is better to be poor and free than to be rich and in chains.

The journey to the United Kingdom affords George an opportunity to trace the origins of his family as well as visit his old aunt, Ethelworth. The family history makes him realise that even though the Jameson family was a humble one, there had been some relatively eminent names of character and influence on the family tree. The local church in Itchenor had these names inscribed on them, particularly that of Stanforth Jameson. The discovery accords some dignity and credibility to George as a steady character boasting some past family status.

Throughout the journey, George makes a number of comparisons between Africa and Europe. Lisbon is compared to Tongaat; Newcastle is compared to its namesake in Natal. Kendal in the Lake District is compared to Underberg. This is most significant in that George is trying to find some comfort and consolation by building some familiarity and confidence from within the physical environment yet studiously ignoring the socio-political landscape of his home. The overseas landscape becomes his only form of comfort in his much tormented soul. A sense of historical permanence and contentment pervades his soul and he thinks, “My God, I feel happy!” (ibid pg. 208) and later comments that, “Jean afterwards said that she had not seen me so relaxed and happy in ages and I think she is right” (ibid. pg. 211).

Exposure to the socio-historical landscape of Ireland also exposes George to the parallels between South Africa, Rhodesia and Ireland. He learns that the systematic exploitation and deprivation of the natives in these three countries is similar to what the English have done to Ireland, bringing to the fore notions of suffering and struggle.

At the end of the European tour, George returns home far more informed and knowledgeable about his world than when he set out. He is acutely more aware of the problems at home and more accepting of his role as a global citizen. He says:

When one thinks of the trouble that has been happening on the continent and it looks so peaceful from here.[From space] If there was a door here, I feel I could easily just open it and walk out...It makes you consider that everything, everybody, is in relation to you. It makes you feel at once great, humble, and most of all, responsible (pg. 217). [Parenthesis mine]

The European tour seems to have renewed George's zeal for life and Sam, who sees them disembark from the plane, seems to think that they look younger. The jovial mood they are in lasts for days. The overseas landscape becomes a place for recuperation, giving George a sense of peace and comfort which his home cannot.

Johnson uses the picturesque tradition of Alan Paton in portraying the land as unsullied by European colonisation in the early stages of the novel when he discusses the home landscape. This purity that he derives from the landscape is therefore responsible for his sense of peace, of comfort, of belonging and attachment to the land. However, this picture is transformed later when the National Party comes into power and that sense of beauty is consequently eroded. Witbank is narrated in soiled language and a sense of alienation manifests itself in him. He later terms it a horror image. As has already been discussed in this chapter, the landscape as space carries with it ascribed memories which help the protagonist bond with it or find alienation in it. At the start of the novel, the caretaker image plays itself within George's mind and he deludes himself that what he is doing on the land is useful and beneficial to its people, but at the end of the novel, a sense of failure pervades him as he finally acknowledges the harm that colonisation and apartheid have done.

These memories of the landscape eventually become transposed to Sam who is after all the narrator of the story. His unique role as a surrogate narrator for his father ultimately implies that he is strategically situated as a co-benefactor of the landscape. He positions himself to formulate an identity that will enable him to function even after the story of his father has been completed. The landscape therefore aids his reconstitution in the end. One cannot help note the sense of freedom and release that permeates Sam at the end of the novel after he has retold his father's life story.

In the next chapter, I examine how narration as a form of life writing and life narration enables Sam to become reconstituted. I argue that narrating his life and that of his father enables Sam to face the trauma in his life as well as overcome it. I further contend that self-narration is a form of healing through confession and therefore an organ of reconstitution.

CHAPTER THREE

Constructions and Interrogations of Identity Through Self-Narration (Narrative Identity in the Novel)

“We are never really the cause of our life, but we can have the illusion of becoming its author by writing it, providing that we forget that we are no more the cause of the writing of our life.”
Philippe Lejeune.

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the landscape as a place of memory and identity creation. I have argued that landscape, be it rural or urban, impinges strongly on a character’s sense of belonging and identity depending on how he or she bonds with it. Thus a character gains possession or rejection depending on the set of identities he intends to form from his or her landscape.

This chapter, like the previous ones, seeks to reinforce arguments I have put forward in this study, that identity formation or self-reconstitution is not an arbitrary process; rather, it is a painstaking, complex one which may take a life time to achieve as seen in the case of Sam Jameson in *The Native Commissioner*.

In this chapter, I discuss the theory of narrative identity and how it helps provide a semantic framework to the process of reconstitution. I argue that narration confers identity on an individual and enacts a movement from anonymity to recognition just as Sam experiences in the novel. Johnson employs a number of stylistic devices in the telling of Sam and his father’s story all reinforcing the idea of reconstruction and reconstitution. He uses the omniscient narrator, the first person narrator, the interior monologue as well as the epistolary genre. All these voices merge into Sam’s in the narration. The novel comes across in part as fictional biography and autobiography. The style of life writing employed in the novel effectively creates a duality in the voice of Sam in that in some instances he speaks with his father’s voice and in others with his own, thereby claiming possession of the narrative. This problematises the idea of reconstitution

as it becomes unclear as to who becomes reconstituted in the story. Ultimately, it has to be Sam because he is the final beneficiary of the narration. He benefits because telling the story becomes his means towards gaining closure to his tragic childhood. Narration becomes a form of re-creation of his self: On this, Kerby (1999: 133) says:

... the narrated past best generates our sense of personal identity. [...] Narration...gives both a structure ... [and] a degree of understanding to the ongoing content of our lives The story not only connects events together but also configures these events in relation to the plot. [Ellipsis mine]

By translating these lived experiences of his father's life as well as his own, Sam not only gives voice to their life narrative but recreates it into lives by connecting the missing links coherently and as a result creating his own unique identity in the end.

The context of the novel influences its style. For example, the work is what would be called a novel of 'letters' in that the whole story of Sam and his father's life is constructed from the jumble of letters that were put in a "box" and left there for ages.

The story of George itself is written achronologically, beginning from Sam's perspective in post-apartheid South Africa. It is therefore told in retrospect by Sam who puts together the pieces of the maze that comprise his father's life. In doing so, he ultimately finds meaning in the events leading to his father's death. This kind of sense-making and life narration proves once more that reconstitution is not a simplistic phenomenon but one that is characterised by complexity and trauma as well.

Of critical note is the way the novel deals with the idea of self-making and self-conception through the confessional mode of writing. While I intend to address the effect of this mode on the novel in some detail later in the chapter, it is interesting to note that this style of writing raises some interesting questions. It questions self-narrativity as a means of gaining agency over one's life. For example: Who is Sam that he decides to write his story? What is so noteworthy about his story that he decides to write it and make it public? What does he hope to gain by telling this story? Lastly, what sort of individual is he who pauses long enough to examine of all

things... the past? The questions above need to be examined in the context of Sam's trauma which to him becomes a focal point for his unravelling mid-life crisis. Sam hopes that by confessing this long kept "family secret" he would come to a better understanding of himself, thereby reconstituting his own fractured life, and in part his family, community and nation at large.

As has been mentioned elsewhere in this study, *The Native Commissioner* is a story within a story. It is the story of Sam told within the story of his father George. Sam's voice is superimposed on that of his father; therefore if he ever has to make sense of his self, he has to make sense of his father as well. In this regard, he becomes a "self-defining" subject who voluntarily subjects himself to scrutiny and self-creation through narration.

The concept of "self" is defined by the American Psychological Association (2006: 312) as an individual's "nature, special qualities or one's own personality". The self is therefore that unique characteristic that separates one individual from another.

I argue that there are several "selves" that we find in Sam Jameson. On the one hand there is the narrative self who morphs into the confessional mode as he narrates his father's guilt. The narrative self also assumes the biographic and autobiographic mode in the narration of both Sam's and his father's lives.

On the other hand, the confessional self assumes a voice in that Sam attempts to understand his life mirrored in his father's dark history of guilt and torment. To do so he engages in an active interrogation of his father's life and subsequent confession. It is critical to note that as Sam confesses the complicity of his father, he ultimately achieves dual absolution. He absolves his father from guilt and frees himself as well. The feeling of relief that he feels in the end is the reconstitution he has been looking for which testifies to the cathartic effect of the confessional imperative.

It took years for Sam to eventually realise that the problem, as manifested in the sleepless nights, the nightmares, the fear and many other ills that have been tormenting him, can only be laid to rest by a thorough subjectivisation of himself. This actually becomes the first step towards correcting past imbalances and imperfections in order to bring some equilibrium to his life. In other words, the answer to his fractured existence lies in a person none other than himself. Mbembe (2003a: 4) states:

The self that views itself has a sharp awareness of the fact that what it sees beyond the material screen is indeed itself or, in any case, a reflection of itself.

This becomes the great distinctive feature that differentiates Sam from his father. The moment Sam realises that he has to engage in the process of self-reconstitution, he immediately acts on it. Mbembe also asserts that a sense of power permeates the self that is able to reflect on itself in order to establish a sense of identity. He calls this the “power of reflection” (ibid., pg. 4).

Sam’s power lies not in the final identity he achieves at the end of the reflexive process but in the ability to engage in the reflexive process itself. He realises that his own life is at a dead end (and runs the risk of panning out exactly like his father’s), and as such, he must formulate a new avenue of existence underpinned by the way he must look at himself and everything around him. He therefore must re-create his own life and historicise it to accord himself the power to analyse it. Johnson draws on some of the several advantages of this mode of storytelling as evinced by Eagle and Bowman (2010: 29) who state that self-narration seeks to “manage the manner in which [writers] present themselves and significant others... and simultaneously to manage self-esteem and the manner in which they are likely to become objects of scrutiny by others.”

The above assertion implies that Sam’s narration, or self-confession as it were, may well be a conscious attempt to “manage” his and his father’s story and portray him as a victim of the apartheid system. This becomes true considering the painstaking effort he puts into chronicling the traumatic indecisiveness of his father, yet wisely refraining from blaming him. He also refrains from commenting on why his father chooses to make a tacit disavowal of the apartheid genocide. In a way, in the eyes of Sam, George becomes the man on the fence; one who is on neither side of the system, choosing to play a tender balancing act and ensuring that he neither

offends the system nor sears his conscience too much. Unfortunately, this becomes his great undoing, perhaps even his Achilles' heel. Society tolerates indecisiveness as much as it does radicalism and social injustice. In this case, he chooses to soothe his conscience by massaging it, and it actually festers into a sore that drives him to mental breakdown and eventual suicide. Understanding this empowers Sam with the knowledge that one must be decisive in life and stand for what one believes in.

The conclusion of the foregoing discussion is therefore that self-presentation is both conscious and unconscious as witnessed in the character of Sam. He tries to provide a narrative that aligns everything to his perceived understanding of the re-created circumstances surrounding his past through self- narration.

Sithole (2014) asserts that self-subjection and self-narration are forms of identity creation. This implies that an individual who is willing to narrate his own story is one who gets properly reconstituted. The self is therefore constructed reality (Anderson, 1997) that one arrives at through every day discourses. Our identities as individuals are continually being constructed and re-constructed through our daily interactions. Meaning and identity are thus in a state of flux as they are also infinitely being interpreted and reinterpreted to fit our present understanding of reality and enable us to reach what Aristotle calls a state of "Eudaimonic"⁴³ well-being (Bauer et al. 2008: 81). It is this state of well-being that Sam as an individual seeks to achieve in order to be fully functional as a human being.

Ironically, it is the self, the individual in question, who must realise, as Sam does, his/her state of disequilibrium which prompts him/her to seek other avenues of self-understanding. It is Sam alone who realises after some forty years that his life is at a point of dysfunction and therefore voluntarily seeks recourse by going to his past to interrogate it and find means to achieve individual reconstitution. It is only after this process has been done that other self-processes can begin.

⁴³ Bauer et al. (2008: 81) describe the concept of Eudaimonic well-being or happiness as defined by Aristotle as that state of sublime contentment which individuals achieve when they realize a life of "purpose, identity and meaning". I argue that Sam's failure to function effectively stems largely from his failure to achieve this state of tranquillity in his life, hence the need to search the past for answers.

Bamberg (2010: 9) asserts that:

Acts of thematizing and displacing the self as a character in past time and space become the basis for other self-related actions—self-disclosure, self-reflection and self-understanding (and even) self-deception. [Parenthesis in the original]

Bamberg's pronouncement vindicates Sam's quest for a truly personal search that would place him in the post-apartheid moment. His need to find closure actually implies that he has to make himself the subject of the investigation. His sense of self emanates from the constructions of identity that he derives from the search. Thus, centralising himself in the research becomes the very initial step towards reconstitution. Only then can he proceed to the other processes such as narration, reflection and closure.

3.2 Narrative Identity in The Native Commissioner

As has been previously mentioned, Sam's attempt to narrate his life and that of his father becomes itself a process of identity mediation and construction. The very act of narration accords him the opportunity to create his own identity. The self and identity become products of an "internal make-up" (Bamberg 2010: 9).

The term narrative identity refers to that very identity obtaining from a narrative act. Bauer et al. (2008: 81) define it as the "internal, dynamic life story that an individual constructs to make sense of his or life". This concept tallies closely with the Berkeleyian perception of oneself which is *Esse est percipi meaning*: To be is to be perceived (ibid. pg. 81). I argue therefore, that before Sam embarks on his life story journey, he is a nobody, a nonentity whose perception of himself is totally at variance with those who know him. Narrating his life becomes the means to expose himself and the truths concerning his past. According to (Lieblich, 2006: 4), "Our narrative identity" therefore comprises "the stories we live by" in our everyday discourses. It goes without saying that identity formation is a never ending process of constantly viewing oneself, re-defining oneself and re-aligning oneself with whatever prevailing ideologies there are. These reconstitutive processes therefore imply that the narrative self is a reflexive self. As

Anderson (1997: 220) so aptly puts it, “the self is a dialogical—narrative self and identity is a dialogical narrative identity”. Anderson goes on to argue that individuals often always perceive themselves as many potential selves that are embedded in many of our daily interactions. This ironically applies to Sam who becomes an extension of his father. His sense of Eudaimonic wellbeing is achieved by his newly perceived understanding of himself. Because he now understands the provenance of his emotional amnesia and can codify it, he becomes redeemed and can now function fully and normally as a human being.

McAdams et al. (2008) classify self-narratives into two kinds of “emotional sequences” namely, redemption and contamination patterns. On the one hand, contamination patterns are those narratives that move from an emotionally negative or bad episode to a negative outcome, as seen in Sam’s father George Jameson. His unpleasant encounter with the apartheid administration and his subsequent failure to find peace from it eventually leads him to commit suicide. On the other hand, a redemption sequence enacts a move from a negative encounter to a positive outcome. This fits perfectly well with what Sam does in the novel. His traumatic witness of his father’s violent suicide is an extremely bad experience which scars him for much of his childhood and adult life. His desire to confront this traumatic moment albeit at a very late stage of his life accords him the ability to salvage this encounter into a positive one. The move therefore affords him an opportunity for intrinsic growth. The end of Sam’s narrative is testimony to this move. Therefore, in telling the story he exorcises the demons that have been tormenting him for much of his life.

3.3 *The Native Commissioner: A Fictional Auto/biography?*

As I have mentioned in the previous discussion, Johnson employs the style of self-narration in the story to better posit Sam as a character who has become aware of the need to subjectivise himself as a way of gaining agency over his life. Again, as has been pointed out before, Sam cannot tell his own story without telling that of his father. As a result there are two life constructs at play in *The Native Commissioner*. There is his father’s as well as his own. Although Sam finds the need to re-construct his story, he realises the need early in the story that the single episodic trauma of his father’s suicide is not the beginning. Although he has to start somewhere, the best

point becomes the early history of the Jameson family. It is from these beginnings that Sam obtains an indication of the sense of pride and identity embedded in the family which becomes his father's hallmark.

The need to tell his story and that of his father, to which I would refer, using Gillian Eagle's (2010) term, as the "confessional imperative" creates an urgency for him to confess and tell it, thereby narrating his father's biography and his autobiography in the fictional sense. It is clearly interesting that Sam's story assumes auto/biographic connotations through the various measures he takes in the writing of it. As an ontological narrative,⁴⁴ Sam uses his story and that of his father to define himself and forge some sense of social relevance to his own fractured life. To do so, he must own the narrative, make it truly his own and where it locates his father, use that sense of location to eke from it his own identity. Thus, the auto/biographic impulse takes over the narration of the story, making it a form of life writing in the fictional dimension.

Given the above explanation, I argue that *The Native Commissioner* subscribes to the conventions of a genre that I will term auto/biographical fiction as advanced by Hamilton (2000) and Houston (2012). Houston suggests that autobiographical writing actually has two other relatively new genres emanating from it, namely, fictionalised autobiography and autobiographic fiction. The two are almost identical with slight variations. For instance, in fictionalised autobiography, the "author includes titbits about his or her life," on the one hand, as observed in *The Native Commissioner* where there are certain parallels between the writer's life and his fictionalised alter ego Sam Jameson (Houston 2012: 1). On the other hand, autobiographic fiction is "primarily comprised of made up events and characters...The protagonist might be modelled after the author and do at least some of the things ...the author has done in life" (ibid. pg 1) but that is where the similarity may end.

Thus, in the final analysis, it becomes very apparent that there exists a thin line between real autobiography and fictional/autobiographic fiction. Any narration that attempts therefore to focus

⁴⁴ Somers (1994: 618) defines ontological narratives as one of the dimensions of narrative writing. She sees them as stories that "social actors use to make sense ..." of their lives. These narratives define who we are, which she sees as a precondition of knowing what to do and to have some sense of social being.

on a substantial amount of an individual's history may actually suffer the risk of being classified as auto/biographic work. Previous works of literature which are in fact works of fiction may actually be termed fictional auto/biographs. Examples are Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849), *Oliver Twist* (1867) and *Great Expectations* (1861) as well as Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and many others. Closer to home, the late Zimbabwean writer, Solomon Mutsaers, was renowned for writing autobiographic fiction. His publications, titled after the names of his protagonists, are *Feso* (1957), *Murambiwa Goredema* (1959) and *Hamandishe* (1991). All the novels I have mentioned above are interestingly given the names of protagonists as their titles although there are many others which do not have the titles of characters but still fit the criteria.

As a conclusion, Houston sums up the discussion effectively:

It can easily be argued that all fiction is autobiographical in some way because it (inevitably) undoubtedly contains elements of the author's actual experience (Houston 2012: 1). [Parenthesis mine]

The final question must be: Can readers classify *The Native Commissioner* as autobiographic? I would totally agree to the classification, whether as auto/biographic fiction or as fictionalised autobiography. The title of the novel in the Victorian tradition could easily have been *Sam Jameson* or better still *Mr George Jameson*. Another critical question which I believe has already been addressed in the foregoing discussion is: why does Shaun Johnson choose to employ this mode of self-narration in his story? I believe in short, that he employs this mode so that he makes the story of Sam to be a truly personal history that will prove to be totally self-defining through redemptive personal testimony.

Smith and Watson (2001: 1) point out that the term autobiography is derived from the Greek words "autos" which denotes "self", "bios" which means "life" and "graphe" referring to writing. Put together, the three morphemes mean "self-life writing". This is in agreement with *Webster's New World Dictionary* definition of the word which defines it as "the story of one's life written or dictated by oneself".

French writer and theorist Philippe Lejeune⁴⁵ expanded the definition of autobiography when he described it as the “retrospective” narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence. Gunew (2005) defines autobiography as an “experience” of a life lived and narrated in words. It is thus not just a “simply straightforward account about oneself, but a symptomatic narcissism - to grope for a self-regard that does not yet exist” (Chow, 2002: 142). Autobiography is thus not the mere telling of one’s life but a loaded experience meant for one to find himself or herself and the self-regard that Chow talks about.

In an autobiography, life is “expanded to include how one has become who he or she is at a given moment in an ongoing process of reflection (Smith & Watson, 2001: 1). The writing of an autobiography is a reflective, self-introspective process that is ongoing and helps lay bare the writer’s life. Smith and Watson define autobiography as a form of “self-writing” and “life writing” (ibid. pg. 2).

Smith and Watson further point out that it was not until the twentieth century that the word autobiography gained currency. Until then, a self-life written book was called a memoir. Historically, a memoir was understood as “memoire” (les memoires), recollections by the publicly prominent who chronicled their social accomplishments. These recollections often bracketed one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life span and offered reflections on its significance for the writer’s previous status or self-understanding (Smith & Watson, 2002: 3).

⁴⁵ I am aware that some critics will be quick to argue that the novel is not an autobiography or biographic work because Shaun Johnson does not consider it so. Granted, *The Native Commissioner* may still be passed off as a work of fiction despite the many glaring resemblances of the story itself with the life and story of Mr Johnson himself. (There are some critics who however consider the novel an autobiography. See: Wamuwi Mbaos’s MA Dissertation: Imagined Pasts, Suspended Presents: South Africa in The Contemporary Moment, 2010.) For example, his father was a Native Commissioner himself, of British ancestry, who also happened to commit suicide at the time when Mr Johnson was also very young. I do not wish to contest this issue. It may well be seen in whatever light different critics choose to see it. I wish to look at the auto/biographic elements in the novel on the basis of Hamilton’s (2000) perception of there being a thin line between any auto/biography and any work of fiction. For example, the fact that Sam narrates his own life, and that of his father obviously elevates the novel to what Hamilton terms “fictional biography” (Hamilton 2007: 2), a view with which I am entirely in agreement. It is on the basis of this view that I seek to address this narrative mode in the novel. Besides, I am more interested in the concept of self-making, self-subjectivisation emanating from the auto/biographic mode.

This definition of an autobiography as a memoir had obviously its own shortcomings, primary of which was that it dwelt on a particular period of an individual's life, ideally his/her term of office or public life. It therefore excluded his most private thoughts or his private life. Consequently, the individual succumbed to the temptation that many publicly prominent people do when faced with memoir writing which is to paint their lives in glorious colours, exaggerating their triumphs and understating their failures. A second shortcoming of labelling an autobiography a memoir is that because it dwelt only with a specific period, it therefore did not give room for a continuous self-reflexive process of the writer which in all essence is a life time journey.

What is critical to note is that in the contemporary moment, the use of the term memoir signals autobiographical overtones. Therefore a memoir may be found in an autobiographic work with both being categorised as life writing.

Life writing is defined as, "writing that takes a life, one's own or another's as its subject" (Smith & Watson, 2001: 4). In this regard, *The Native Commissioner* is a life narrative in that it narrates the lives of both Sam and his father George. Life writing can be biographic as in the case of George's life being narrated by Sam or it can be self-referential (autobiographic) as in the case of Sam narrating his life story.

Hamilton (2007: 2) argues for the broadening of the definition of the term biography. She argues that auto/biographic writing encompasses many different ways in which "real-life" depiction is practised. Thus, any novel is essentially biographic in that it depicts the lives of different people (characters). Perhaps novels might even be classified as fictional biographies.

In *The Native Commissioner*, this classification might even be taken a step further and one might classify it as a fictionalised auto/biography. Classifying autobiographical works as can be seen from the above can be thus problematic. However, in narrowing down this broad genre, I would like to take Lejeune's (2010: 13) definition of autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life in

particular on the development of his personality.”⁴⁶ Lejeune’s sentiments are echoed by Menand (2007: 66) who asserts that “all biographies are retrospective in the same sense (that) though they read chronologically forward, they are composed essentially backward” (Parenthesis mine).

What can be deduced from the two definitions of autobiography is that this genre is written in retrospect from the present moment of the writer going backwards into the past. It is thus a form of retrieval of one’s past or, to use Wamuwi Mbaos term, an act of re-memory.⁴⁷ The writer of autobiography thus retrieves from his/her memory, experiences for the reader’s consumption. This is how *The Native Commissioner* begins when Sam wakes up in the morning determined to unravel the myth of his life by going back into his past. Sam uses the powerful phrase “I remember ...” (pg. 1) to signify that what he writes about is something that has been etched in his mind; hence it cannot be forgotten easily. He writes:

Inside (the box) was a rotting, fused mound of carefully ordered paper, memory trinkets kept closed for an adult life, her magpie’s work, capable of calling back the unknown dead. Powerful smells of age, confinement, solitude, inattention. Resentful colours had run into one another, inks no longer manufactured, dyes not fastened. Some of what was inside was lost to decay, but most had survived ... Somewhere inside all of this: the family secret, not spoken of for nearly four decades. I had an overpowering sense of something having been rescued arbitrarily, at the very instant before its predestined oblivion (Johnson, 2006: 4).

Sam’s thoughts at the start of his life’s story summarise for the reader the purpose of his self-referential writing. For Sam, his writing symbolises a retrieval of memory “trinkets” long confined in the doldrums of history. The family secrets he alludes to which have been spoken about in whispers for nearly forty years must be rescued and confessed in order for him to be free thereby reconstituting himself. Here the use of the word ‘secret’ denotes shame, embarrassment and

⁴⁶ The translation of the passage was undertaken by Folkenflik R. from Lejeune’s *L’Autobiographie en France* pgs 13-14. See Folkenflik R. ed “Introduction: The Institution of Autobiography in The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation pgs 1-20. Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 1993

⁴⁷ See Mamuwi Mbaos MA Dissertation: *Imagined Pasts, Suspended Presents*; South African Literature in the Contemporary Moment, Rhodes University: 2009.

something that would rather not be spoken about. Yet Sam feels that confronting this shame will create closure for him and self-reconstitution. He would be able to look at himself and understand where he came from and where he is going as an individual. Thus he rightfully feels having rescued something at the very instant before it has been lost (pg. 4).

The act of telling his story helps him confront his demons and exorcise himself of their terrible fear. Therefore the autobiographic mode becomes a cure, a panacea for his tormented soul which can only be healed by confession.

Studies have been carried out extensively on the importance of writing as a confession in order to induce healing. Studies in this area were popularised by Ira Progoff⁴⁸ funded by The American Psychological Association. Progoff argued that “journalising” as a method of “psyche healing” helped individuals to obtain healing and subsequently recovery from trauma. (Progoff, 1977: 19) These studies were later augmented by Lepore and Smythe (2002: 6) who supported Progoff’s studies on self-referential writing, contending that documents such as letters and autobiographies can aid the process of healing. Lepore and Smythe observe that:

Writing overcomes many ... barriers by providing a method for expressing related thoughts and feelings ... In addition to drawing on *traumatic experiences* as sources of inspiration, poets and novelists have viewed writing as a way of transforming and healing themselves and others [Italics mine] (Lepore & Smythe, 2002: 6).

The argument above substantiates the opinion that Sam and subsequently Shaun Johnson’s autobiographic inference is a way of confronting the secret of his family, which is the source of his trauma, and confessing it to free himself of its debilitating presence. In this regard, Lepore and Smythe make reference to their research findings which indicate that while expressive writing might be helpful in reducing perceived threats and feelings of helplessness, people who are not expressive about their experiences are less likely to recover from trauma. They argue:

⁴⁸ Ira Progoff was a psychologist and a member of the American Psychological Association. He studied the various methods of life writing as expression and therapy of trauma. See Ira Progoff (1977) ‘A Journal Workshop: The Basic Guide for using The Intensive Journal Process’. New York: Dialogue H.

Repressive persons tend to be less emotionally expressive and engage in fewer self-disclosure behaviours that are likely to be concerned about social approval, thus delaying and reducing the chance of successful support recruitment (Lepore and Smyth, 2002: 25).

One may thus argue that one reason for Johnson's use of the autobiographic mode may have been to heal himself by coming to terms with his past. The autobiographic mode that is used in the novel becomes the means by which the protagonist looks at himself in order to confess and confront his fears and trauma.

Smith and Watson (2001: 28) add:

Narrators suffering from traumatic or obsessional memory may see the act of telling as therapeutic in resolving troubled memories, acknowledging how the process of writing has changed the narrator and the life-story itself. Suzette Henke⁴⁹ calls such responses to trauma 'scriptotherapy' to signify the process of speaking or writing about trauma in order to find words to give voice to previously repressed memories.

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that there are obvious advantages of the use of the autobiographic mode by the writer, primarily being that it aids the process of self-reconstitution. The writer of the story secures a cure for his trauma by re-living his experiences as well as writing about them. Such a process results in the release of negative emotions; all the anger we see bottled up in Sam is let out at the end of the story. He is made to understand his father, even admire him as well as forgive him for the suicide. In an interview with Roos Moosa⁵⁰, Johnson concedes that, "writing this book (*The Native Commissioner*) about a similar set of events was cathartic," meaning that it helped him find closure to his troubled childhood.

⁴⁹ See Henke Suzette. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1998

⁵⁰ See Interview with Shaun Johnson on the Johnson website www.shaujohnson.co.za.

Another advantage derived from the use of the autobiographic mode is that it helps to reshape experience by translating emotions into verbal form. This telling process becomes an outlet for “cognitive restructuring and emotional expression” (Lepore & Smythe, 2002: 25).

Stephen (2010: 58) explains the cognitive restructuring as follows:

... without the ability to organise experience through narration arguably one cannot have a coherent self ... Self cannot be separated from narrative ... Narrative arises out of experiences as we tell the stories of our lives, but conversely the storehouses of experiences- the self is not only shaped by, but actually created out of narrative...

In the above quotation, Stephen contends that the autobiographical impulse to tell one’s story is itself an organisational process, hence one is able to organise life experiences through narration. Narration becomes a process designed not only to tell one’s story but also to create a timeline that coherently portrays all experience into a meaningful teleology. The retrieval of previously archived experiences and their subsequent decoding for public consumption is testimony to the authority and credibility that autobiographic writing evokes. Hence Sam gives us a privileged record of his family life. The use of recovery imagery at the start of the novel suggests that what Sam is doing is to restore and embark on a salvage operation of his and family life’s story.

The telling of the story then becomes a coming out of the closet (though not in the contemporary conventional sense) of Sam and his family. It is critical to be always mindful of the fact that Sam’s reconstruction of his life and that of his family is to him a reconstitutive process. Sam believes that re-telling his family experiences would enable him to find release and closure. He writes:

I thought then that I knew at least one thing about what might be inside, though I had never read so much as a word of the contents of the box. Inside was the presence of absence which had shadowed my life. I thought I must surely be ready now, with more than half my days certainly done, to confront what had happened in a small suburban house on a summer’s morning in Witbank, South Africa, in 1968; something that changed everything in an instant and forever. I wanted to release a story from a sealed box I had dragged around for decades, and which had in

turn dragged me like a sinker. I wanted to hear the voices of my father and mother ... (Johnson: 2009: 5).

The story and the life become intertwined and one cannot separate the two. Therefore to speak of Sam's life or his father is to tell a life reconstituted at the end and testified before the reader. Bocse (2008: 92) calls for the need to confess as a driving impulse that takes control of the subject in such a way that he cannot control it. He says, "the need to testify becomes gradually a need to confess and recompose himself out of the shards of a mutilated, traumatised and traumatizing ... biography ..."

Sam's story testifies to the noble character of his father and how he tried to play a balancing act by tacitly remaining neutral in the unfolding events of his country. It also testifies to the ordinary nature of his family and how it tried to make the best out of a bad situation. As a confession, the story narrates the indecisive nature of his father George which eventually paves way for a debilitating guilt and ultimately suicide. The shame that stems from the suicide becomes a source of trauma for Sam. It is this shame that Sam has to confront and confess. .

I am reminded here of the Catholic auricular⁵¹ confession which teaches Catholics to confess wrong doing before a priest so as to rid themselves of guilt, anxiety and shame. Gallagher (2002: 17) argues that the Christian practice of confession has evolved into the confessional mode of writing that has become so trendy. She defines the confessional mode in the following manner:

⁵¹ One of the Catholic Church's most important rites, the auricular confession, has been met with widespread criticism as being dehumanising and a violation of the sancticity of human privacy. The church has defended the confession as a critical process into a person's wellbeing and the erosion of guilt. See Father Chinique (1911) *Forty Years in the Church of Rome*; pg 1-20. Also Father Hardon www.therealpresence.org/archives/sin/sin_001.htm

The confessional mode is a narrative first person account by either a fictional or a historical speaker who expresses the need to testify [...] and admit guilt about certain events in the speaker's life story in order to construct or reconstruct a self within a particular community. Confessional writing can take many generic forms, including ... autobiography. (Gallagher 2002: 17)

Gallagher argues that the use of the confessional mode denotes silence. Thus the confession mode enacts a move from “silence to speech even as the silence of the confession is broken by the announcement, *forgive me father, I have sinned.*” (Ibid.pg 17) [Italics mine]. The silence being broken is the sin that has been keeping the subject in bondage since it had been imposed on the subject by some force or power that is “countermanded by confessional articulation” (pg. 17) Thus, confession becomes in itself a cure and a process of reconstitution designed to lead the individual into paths to healing since it is performed voluntarily by the subject who has decided that to keep quiet and not confess is destructive to the self. Doddy (1980: 185) comments that, “confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to identity [sic] himself, to explain his nature to the audience...” So confessions are narratives we create ourselves ... reworking the past in public (Peters, 1998). This is exactly the self-making imperative that readers see manifesting in Sam in his effort to re-create and re-model his life so that it is aligned to the future which demands a more self-aware individual.

3.3.1 Autobiographical Memory and *The Native Commissioner*

As has probably been observed from the foregoing discussion, memory plays a critical role in the writing of autobiography, hence Sam's reference to “memory trinkets” (Johnson, 2006: 4) when he refers to the box and its contents. In fact, without the use of memory, it is impossible to narrate the self largely because, as Menand (2007: 66) puts it, all [self] writing is essentially “retrospective.” Thus memory cannot be separated from autobiographic writing as it is through memory that an individual is able to recall and record events gone by.

On the one hand Berntsen and Rubin (2012: 333) define autobiographic memory as the “ability to consciously remember personal events”. Fivush (2012: 226) on the other hand defines it as “the construction of a coherent [self] woven from the fleeting memories of our past experiences.” (My interpolation). Both definitions reveal in common that autobiographic memory entails lived experiences and that in order for it to be seen as such, it has to be remembered consciously and arranged into a logical and coherent experience. This makes perfect sense when we see Sam reconstructing his life’s story by deliberately retracing his childhood memories through tracking his family’s movements from Babanango to Witbank until a coherent picture emerges.

Fivush explains the notion of autobiographic memory further:

Through telling and sharing our stories with ourselves and others, we reconstruct and reinterpret what happened in ways that provide an evolving sense of meaning and narrative identity: who we are over time. More provocatively, although autobiographic memory is defined as memory of one’s own experiences, individual life narratives incorporate and integrate cultural interpretative frameworks (Fivush; 2012: 226).

A true autobiography in the sense of the word must be able to tell the story of the self in a spatial sense, which is in relation to his or her space, events around as well as the people involved. These spatial circumstances must be seen to be playing an active incremental role towards the development of the subject. Thus, through retrospective analysis, the writer must be able to explain each event in his or her life as well as its significance in shaping his or her character as well as experiences.

Therefore we are able to appreciate the lightning bolt that strikes Sam’s family in Witbank as a portent, an omen of the suicide his father will commit. It signals the impending trauma that will be experienced by Sam and his family. Just like the bolt which strikes only his family house in the whole of Witbank, the suicide of Sam’s father becomes an ominous parallel of all this.

Baddeley (2012: 73) talks about “flashbulb memory” which is a phenomenon which involves a single vivid memory of an event with many explanations. Such a memory may be global, national, local or individually. Flashbulb memory may be compared to episodic memory, which is a memory of a specific episode occurring at a specific time (Fivush, 2012: 227). It is apparent that George’s suicide becomes the single most powerful and influential episode in Sam’s life. All his uncertainties stem from this trauma. Although he tries to emulate his siblings’ example of ignoring the event, it nevertheless continues to haunt him. Thus, when he decides to face it, he consequently faces his fears and nightmares. For his courage he emerges triumphantly a liberated individual who is ready to move on with his life. Thus, Sam successfully dispels all his fears by facing them head on rather than running away.

3.3.2 Functions of Autobiographic Memory in *The Native Commissioner*

Pillemer and Kuwabara (2012) point out the practical applications that are played by autobiographic memory. They identify three general categories of these said functions, namely, social functions, self- functions and directive functions (Pillemer & Kuwabara, 2012: 184).

Social functions are those that promote interpersonal interaction through memory sharing. A typical example in *The Native Commissioner* is shown by Sam who, after confronting the story of his life and his father’s suicide, feels a sense of release and peace. His memory has thus helped him come to terms with his ghosts, ultimately becoming a better, and more loving character who will relate and socialise better than before. Johnson writes, “I felt a dizzying lightness of heart” (pg. 283). This demonstrates Sam’s readiness to become a social individual who will ultimately become better than he was.

Self-making functions promote personal identity and help the individual to find coherence, continuity and personal development through the use of memory. Memory function plays a critical role in Sam’s development as a character. Throughout the course of the reconstruction of his life and that of his family, he demonstrates a tenacity and resilience of character which refines him in the end, to emerge a resolute free and liberated individual. His autobiographic memory serves him

well and helps him overcome the psychological challenges that emanate from his father's death. Inadvertently, the Sam who emerges at the end of the story is infinitely more liberated **and decided** on what he wants from life. On the acronym of his name on the letter M in Sam he writes: "Make your home a place of safety, love, honour, happiness." On the letter J for Jameson he writes: "Give thanks you lived to see justice in your country." (Johnson, 2009: 285) Thus, through his memory, Sam is successfully reconstituted as an individual ready to play a part in his country and family's development.

The last function of autobiographic memory in the functional domain as propounded by Pillemer and Kuwabara (2012) is the directive function which involves using memories to make decisions in the present moment and to guide future behaviours and decisions. Although this function seems to be the least realised in the novel, it nevertheless is demonstrated at the end of the novel when Sam makes critical decisions. He makes crucial decisions such as making sure that his home was to be a place of safety (pg. 282) and ensuring that his skills as an individual should be put to better use by being utilised to benefit others.

3.3.3 Some Criticism Of Autobiographic Memory

Some arguments have been put forward against autobiographic memory, the primary one being that it relies solely on one single act, remembering. So many factors are at play in making remembering and retrieval of memory successful. Smith and Watson (2001: 30) assert that:

... we listen for and attend to the role of remembering –and conscious forgetting –in the act of making meaning out of the past and the present or particular moods and voices identified with certain memories ...

The act of remembering is not merely a passive retrieval of events gone by, but an active re-experiencing process dependent upon the right stimuli such as mood and the identification of certain "voices identified with certain memories" (Smith & Watson: 2001: 30).

Autobiographic memory entails reporting experience as lived by the subject. While it may seem that the experience represented in an autobiographic narrative is personal, it in fact is not. Smith and Watson add:

Experience then is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities constituted through material, cultural, economic and psychic relationships (Smith & Watson, 2001: 31).

A clear analysis of the above discussion will reveal that autobiographical experience is not a sacred process immune to corruption, but a subjective multifaceted phenomenon. Thus it cannot be granted total legitimacy and authority as the memory itself may be faulty, corrupt or incomplete. This means that autobiographies do not make indisputable authorities. Du Bois reflects on this as he attempts to tell the story of his life “frank and fair”. He says:

Memory fails especially in small details, so that it becomes finally but a theory of my life, with much forgotten and misconceived, with valuable testimony but often less than absolutely true, despite my intention...This book then is the Soliloquy of an old man on what he dreams his life has been as he sees it slowly drifting away; and what he would like others to believe (Du Bois, 1968:12).

Memory thus can never be perfect. Neither is its retrieval as Du Bois points out above. There can never be what one can term a perfect autobiography. Besides, its re-experientive nature is merely a rendition of the events which happened in the past, not the actual events themselves. This calls to question the issue of autobiographical accuracy and authenticity.

Smith and Watson (2001:37) argue that:

Charges of autobiographical bad faith or hoaxing reveal how complex questions of **authenticity of experience** and the integrity of identity can become, how critical they are to the central notion of the relationship between life writer and reader. Through

the text the life narrator **claims** that the memories and experiences are those of the author named on the cover. Readers ascribe these memories to a flesh and blood person and assume that publication acts as an ethical guarantee (Emphasis mine).

Therefore it seems that the publication of an autobiography and the public's good faith and unquestioning grace are the only endorsements that can be accorded autobiographic writing as being authentic. With particular reference to *The Native Commissioner* the use of the autobiographic mode poses serious questions of authenticity of experience. The complication is actually twofold. Critics, on the one hand, are faced with the dilemma as to whether memory is relevant to autobiographic writing. For example, we are forced to look at the value of memory in *The Native Commissioner* if we as readers are to take the view that the novel is in fact a real autobiography, and that Sam is actually an extension of Mr Shaun Johnson. On the other hand, if we simply label it a mere 'auto/biographic' fiction, we are simply left with a good story that has used memory as an element of narrative. Either way, one cannot discard memory as irrelevant in self-narration as it is the single most important factor that enables one to remember his/her past. Most critical to note is that it is through memory that Sam derives the imperative to tell his story.

Sam does not only content himself with reconstructing his life's story but uses the omniscient narrator to also narrate the story of his father, mother and siblings. While the omniscient narrator has some obvious advantages as a narrative technique, it however creates subjectivity when it comes to the presentation of accurate autobiographic memory as much of the rendition of George's life is based purely on Sam's judgement and analysis of documentary evidence. Thus, we do not have accurate experiences in terms of the mood and spatial circumstances such as historical and socio-political events. The little we have presented in the novel about George, Mother or any of his siblings for that matter is based on letters between George and his wife and what he recorded in his diaries.

Smith and Watson (2001: 15) present an interesting argument on what they term autobiographic truth. They say:

In trying to differentiate autobiographical narrative from biography, the novel and history writing, we encounter a fundamental question: What is the truth status of autobiographical disclosure? How do we know whether and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying? And what difference would that make? Life narrators may present inconsistent or shifting views on themselves. They may even perpetrate acts of deliberate deceit to test the reader or to hint at paradoxical truth of experience itself. (Thus) are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to lived experience, to self-understanding, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself? (Parenthesis mine)

As shown in the above argument, autobiographical writing may present for us all sorts of problems about truth. In the end, the shifting functions of autobiographical writing become the things that matter as readers are left with no choice but to accept whatever the writer feeds them. The question “what is truth?” becomes inconsequential. Fish argues in the same vein that “autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not” (Fish, 1999: 52). Thus any utterance in autobiographical text according to Fish is a characterisation of the writer; subjective, probably inaccurate but nevertheless an autobiography. Thus an autobiography, with all its imperfections, plays a critical role in realising the subject as a human being with dreams and aspirations of a different era

3.3.4 Autobiography and Identity in *The Native Commissioner*

Autobiographical writings inadvertently involve identity mediation and creation. Writers make themselves known to their readers and also make it known that what happens in the story whether by implication or otherwise is a set of actions attributable to the writer in the story. Finnegan (1997: 69) asserts that:

... the idea of self as story both overlaps and contrasts with other models of identity. It also

extends the idea of culture and media beyond the organisational structures of say the culture industries, into the everyday modes in which we **express and construct our lives** into personal terms... (Emphasis mine)

What Finnegan is expressing here is the idea that by virtue of writing a self-story, we embark on a process of constructing our identities, be they cultural or otherwise. The question of identity is very critical to autobiographical writing. As Finnegan points out, identity overlaps into many other structures such as culture. Russian theorist Bakhtin talks about the “dialogic function” of autobiography. Autobiographic writers come into consciousness of who they are and what identities they might adopt through what Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia” which is the multiplicity of meanings that “mutually supplement one another and interrelated dialogically”. The subject realises himself or herself through multiple identities. Identity formation is therefore a continuous process that is formed through evocation of memory.

Eakin (1999: 198) argues that autobiographical writing is a form of self-invention that constitutes the self and the self is the origin of “the reflexive center of human subjectivity”. Thus, according to Eakin, self-creation and invention re-enacts and extends earlier phases of the entry into identity through language (Ibid. pg 226). In a way, self-referential writing is a kind of awareness or consciousness which manifests itself in identity formation, expressly demonstrated through the use of the “I”. McAdams (2003: 189) argues that the self may be “viewed as both the subjective sense of “I” and the objective sense of “me”. He goes on to argue that the act of narrating the self is in itself a defining moment in terms of identity. This means that by giving a life narrative, the writer identifies himself/herself in terms of who he/ she is, the space he/ she occupies, the actions he or she does in the life narrative and the picture that emerges at the end of the process. Self-narration is therefore a self-defining process that helps the individual to reconstitute him or herself. Consequently for Sam, the act of telling his story helps him to realise himself as a father, a white man, a South African and the many other forms of identity or roles he creates for himself in the story.

In *The Native Commissioner*, identity thus takes an intersectional dimension. For example, George is presented as a white male of British descent. His identity intersects into a multi-dimensional one

and “challenges generally preconceived notions on identity” (Smith & Watson 2001: 41). For example, to say George is white is not to say that he is a racist and to say he was a Native Commissioner is not to say he was an oppressor and an inhuman apartheid official. The question of identity is an extremely fluid one, hence its multiple “intersections” (ibid., 41).

Identities shift in the novel in line with the role of the subject and the way he perceives himself at every particular moment. When the story commences at the start of the novel, Sam’s identity is rather obscure and not well defined. It appears he is confused, hesitant and unsure of himself. He commences the story as a person who goes to his far and obscure past to find who he is. At the end, we see a very confident, assertive Sam who is proud of his race and his collective identity as a South African in the new democratic dispensation.

3.3.5 Autobiographical Space

One of the major features of autobiographical writing is its use of space and how it facilitates mediation of identity and an individual’s reconstitution.

Emplacement is the point from which self-articulation foregrounds notions of location of the subject as space emerges. Space can be national ethnic, racial, gendered and social background in which the narrator is embedded by virtue of his or her history and from which he/she speaks.

Space evokes, to use Bhaktin’s term, a “heteroglossic” ideology adopted by the autobiographic narrator towards himself or herself and others. Buell (1995: 53) argues that space is always a social product. It is where one is conscious of the belonging to a particular locale. Knowledge of the self therefore articulates notions of identity and belonging. Boardman and Gioia (2004: 03) assert that:

... one marker of autobiography produced in and about North American west is a preoccupation with place: rootedness, anxiety, nostalgia and restlessness.

The two further observe that interrogating identity occurs at three kinds of location/ space, namely, physical, rhetorical and political and that for most critics, autobiography becomes a claim to authenticity and recognition (ibid., 19).

Space can be seen in terms of fixed geographical terms when “subjects are located in complex spaces of citizenship or multiculturally, across nations in complex spaces of citizenship” (Smith & Watson, 200: 45)

In *The Native Commissioner*, space plays a critical role in mediating the identity of George as a South African first and a man of British origin later. George’s heteroglossic space is both geopolitical and physical. Originally, George questions his identity as a South African considering his geopolitical origins characterised by a colonial type of migration. This dual identity ambiguates his identity as he questions his role first as a British in a colonised territory and ultimately as a South African in the victimisation of his fellow countrymen.

Similarly Sam’s space is less complex and questions of identity are for him less fluid. For him space is a place of memory and nostalgia. Each locale brings its own brand of memories, some to be yearned for in nostalgic reminiscence and others to be revisited in order to eke from it whatever experience/ memory avails itself.

For Sam, memory and space complicate the self so that the one cannot be seen without the other. Thus, development of autobiographic memory depends in no small measure on space, be it social or otherwise. The act of re-memory that occurs in the novel therefore suggests a reconstitution of the self from a previously disenfranchised individual.

3.4 Biographical Elements in *The Native Commissioner*

I have indicated at the beginning of this chapter that *The Native Commissioner* employs both the autobiographic mode as well as the biographic one. The autobiographic tells the self-written story of Sam in which he subjectivises himself and the biographical impulse focuses on the story of

George. In a way, George's story itself may be seen as an autobiography in that George narrates his own story through his letters, testimonials and diaries that he keeps throughout his life time.

Biographic writing has been one of the most widely practised modes of life-writing since the publication of the Epic of Gilgamesh between 2750 and 2500 BC. The most common but one of the oldest forms of biography is the New Testament which narrates the life-story of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Even some books of the Old Testament dating to some 1000 years BC such as the book of Jeremiah⁵² and many others are believed to be biographical in nature.

Studying the origins and historical phases through which biography has passed may not be within the scope of this study but it is critical to understand why the use of the biographic technique helps Sam find closure to his life-long trauma. The biographic mode helps the reader gain privileged information about the subject. Hamilton (2007: 10) argues that "biography is important for its insight into human character, experience of life and human emotion as guides to our own complex self- understanding." As can be observed, biography, like autobiography, involves experience. It is a form of life writing which depicts an individual's experience from a certain point of life to another. Usually it is a *Bildungsroman*,⁵³ a story that gives an insight into how an individual gains deep understanding of his or her environment.

Hamilton argues that like autobiography, biographical writing is a story that enacts events already gone by. It is thus important for its crucial contribution to our "knowledge, understanding and construction of (the) past" (ibid., 10). However, biography has less subjectivity than autobiography because it is not self-referential and is written by another who, in all probability, will present a life-story with less bias than if it had been written by the self.

Banner (2009) likens biography with history. He argues that firstly, like history, it is based on archival research. Secondly, it raises complex issues of truth and proof (Banner, 2009: 581). If we

⁵² See D. H Mayes in *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (2006) pg. 1

⁵³ See Smith and Watson pg. 119 to 120. They define the *Bildungsroman* as a novel that narrates the formation of a young life as gendered, classed and raced within a social network larger than the family or the religious community.

are to follow the argument we may conclude that biography may well be seen as an inferior type of history. Thus, studying the life story of an individual might be seen as:

akin to studying the history of a city, region, or state as a way of understanding broad social and cultural phenomena. A life deeply lived, like any complex historical narratives moves across space, time and areas of human involvement both capriciously and predictably validating certain accepted historical constructions while challenging others (Banner, 2009: 582).

Most critics in the contemporary present such as Edwards (2010) have suggested that it may be preferable not to strive to define the genre of biography but to see it as a trait present in a variety of texts.

Whatever notions the various critics may advance, it is noteworthy that re-telling the lives of others is certainly a privileged activity exclusive to the writer who appears to be “eavesdropping”⁵⁴ on the lives of his subjects and other people in order to report it to the public.

As a biography, *The Native Commissioner* fits perfectly well within the genre. Johnson gives a reconstruction of George’s life through a variety of stylistic devices inscribed on the biographic mode. Seen through the eyes of Sam, he manages to gather the pieces of a puzzle that is his father’s life until a clear picture of the man emerges.

One of the devices Johnson uses for Sam’s reconstruction of his father’s life is the letter. Sam manages to re-build his father’s life-story by going through his father’s letters, written by George to his wife and vice-versa.⁵⁵ These letters play a critical role in revealing the character of George and his family. For example, the worry and tenderness he shows to his wife after he gets committed to hospital presents him as a deeply caring man, with strong moral commitments and

⁵⁴ See Michael Trapp (2006) “Biography in Letters, Biography and Letters” McGing B. and J. Mossman (eds) (2006) *The Limits of Ancient Biography* pgs. 335-350.

⁵⁵ Epistolary biography involves the use of letters to tell a story as shown between George and his wife in the novel. See McGing and Mossman pg. 335.

values towards family life. Sam thus sees his father the way he should be seen by his son, a responsible man, gentle, loving and fair towards others.

Like autobiography, biography is also a purveyor of identity, individual and collective. Tracing the family tree pointing to the origins of a particular family branch helps the reader and writer to confirm their relationship with the subject. Banner concedes this point saying, “biography raises issues of ancestry, kinship and friendship” (Banner, 2009: 582). In the end, writing a biography about an individual invariably ends up as writing a “collective” (ibid., pg. 582) life-story, one involving the lives of several other people linked to the main subject; hence Banner’s assertion that studying the life of an individual is similar to studying a collective history of a people or a city.

As mentioned, Sam is able to trace his family ancestry from Babanango in South Africa back to Aunt Ethelworth of Itchenor and Stanforth Jameson, both in the United Kingdom (Johnson, 2009: 205). Here the family is seen as having some noble blood after all, thereby instilling a sense of pride in Sam.

Still dwelling on the question of identity, sociologists have developed a framework through which to view the various selves that an individual can present. This framework, known as the “identity theory”, focuses on the categorisation of the different identities people display in life (Jacobe, 2009: 35). These identities are of three types: role, social and third person identity. Burke and Stets (2009: 112) define role identity as a “set of expectation tied to a social position that guides people’s behaviour.” Social identity is based on a person’s identification with a social group, while third person identities are defined as the uniqueness of an individual that does not conform to either role or social identity (Burke & Stets, 2009: 112).

A closer look at *The Native Commissioner* will reveal that the biographical representation of George’s life actually fits all the three categories of identity. First, George is seen and identified by the role that he plays in the novel both as Native Commissioner and a government official. Secondly, his social identity is evident in that he is presented as a white man, thus a member of the privileged enclave of a race that rules the country. So for him to fit within the social parameters of his white counterparts, he is forced to create a façade, a semblance of a man who is at peace with

the socio-political situation in the country. This social identity is George's greatest undoing. He is forced to thus toe the line for the sake of appearance and social acceptance. In doing so he ignores the voice of his conscience for the better part of his life. To his credit, his conscience refuses to be silenced and eventually manifests itself in a guilt that ultimately results in his death. However, it is his third person identity that superimposes itself over the other two forms of identity. George shows himself to be a unique individual who refuses to be conformed to other people of similar stature and class. He is fluent in three indigenous languages, Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho, and is genuinely interested in the welfare of the people he serves, their practices and culture so as to understand them better. So just because he is a white man does not make him a racist and an oppressor. His humanity makes him unique as an individual who appreciates the value of justice and equal treatment for all the people of South Africa. It is this identity that ironically leads to his death at the end of the novel. George's sense of wrong and justice is so acute that for him, death is the honourable option. His death is akin to that of the Japanese warriors who were encouraged to commit "seppuku"⁵⁶, meaning honourable suicide, rather than face the disgrace of living. It is critical to note that for George, suicide is for him much of a noble choice than a desperate one.

The critical question regarding the function of the biographic mode is: Does retracing and reconstructing his father's life and his various roles in the novel make Sam understand himself better? I certainly believe so. I believe that by understanding his father more fully, Sam reconstitutes his identity as a father himself, a white man and lastly as an individual. Further, his understanding of his father's life assuages his conscience and instils a sense of liberation on him, shaping his character and fully giving credence to Banner's assertion that "culture not nature is the primary force moulding individual personality and identity" (Banner, 2009: 579).

⁵⁶ A Japanese form of ceremonial suicide practised by the Japanese warriors of ancient times who believed that death was the noble choice, rather than face disgrace. This custom was later practised in the Second World War by Japanese kamikaze pilots who drove their planes straight at enemy planes regardless of their safety. Such pilots earned glory for their act of bravery even though they lost their lives in the process. The comparison of George's suicide is not an apt one. It simply parallels George's death as having been preferable to the guilt and the disgrace he felt would haunt him should he choose to live.

CHAPTER FOUR

To swim against powerful tides. Reconstituting the self and the burden of belonging

“When we examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with, the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species...”

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the issue of identity and how an individual can realise his or her identity through self-articulation which is a process of telling and examining one’s story. I have argued that the auto/biographic mode as a narrative device can help in the construction of identity through the act of remembering and narration. As an individual tells the story of his life or the life of another, experiences are thus articulated and shaped into logical events and organized meaningfully, thereby reconstituting existence.

This chapter seeks to examine the grand policy of apartheid and its origins, its apparent benefits to the white race and how forsaking it meant a rejection of a life of ease and comfort. The chapter will briefly examine race issues by referring to some theories of race scholarship. This is done in order to properly understand the nature of George’s sickness which I contend, can be diagnosed through his reaction to the political dilemma he finds himself which in itself is underpinned by race matters, hence the term racialization, which will feature frequently in this section. In this chapter, I suggest that for George to rebel against the status quo and choose death over comfort and prosperity, reflects a resumption of the reconstitutive process for him as an individual which later manifests itself later in the formation of Sam’s identity.

I maintain that in order for a person to be properly reconstituted, a process of denial has to be experienced. This entails swimming against powerful tides and forsaking the perceived comfort and luxuries which a certain life may provide, the way the reader sees George doing in the novel. He rejects the comfort that comes with the privilege of his class and race thereby setting a value system which is aligned towards the African concept of Ubuntu (holistic humanism) as opposed to capitalistic materialism.

4.2 A study of the novel in terms of racialization: A theoretical approach

It is not easy to understand George as a character. He remains quite an enigma. Much of the challenge lies in the fact that very few statements in the novel are directly attributable to him. What happens, his conversations, perceptions and his experiences are reported back to the reader via the omniscient narrator's voice. Thus, a closer examination of him is warranted. To undertake this analysis, I have decided to examine how he handles the issue of race which is central to the novel. I refer to some scholars of race such as Banton (1977) and (1988); Steyn (2001) and Tochluk (2010). These writers have carried out comprehensive research in race matters and have dwelt extensively on cause and effect regarding race issues, hence the term racialisation.

As Murji and Solomos (2005: 1) point out, the term racialisation may have been coined by Fanon (1967) who used it as a relational term, but it was Banton (1977: 18) who put it in sociological perspective:

There was a process which can be called racialisation whereby a mode of categorization was developed, applied tentatively in European historical writing and then more confidently to the population of the world.

According to Banton, any work, be it fiction or other forms of writing that use race discourse in any way, is assumed to have done racialisation. Simply put, racialisation is a process where race is the subject.

Because of *The Native Commissioner's* focus on Native Affairs and the apartheid government and its policies on the basis of race, it can be argued that the novel grapples with racialisation. The underlying concept of race, according to Banton (1988: 26), is that "some races were supposed to be permanently superior in their ability to generate civilization". He adds that in the late 1960s in the United States, the term "race" was given "the extended meaning as designating the use of racial beliefs and attitudes to subordinate and control a category of people defined in racial terms" (ibid. 26).

As Hewit (2005: 70) points out, "issues of race and ethnicity have been amongst the most narrativised topics in urban settlements and community relations. Indeed, narrative and race have maintained an almost inseparable closeness..."

As I have already pointed out earlier, *The Native Commissioner* qualifies being termed a novel about race in so far as it deals with relations between black and white people. The sense of shame felt by George in his day to day interactions with natives arises because his conscience challenges the morality of the policy of segregation.

Vice (2010: 332) maintains that shame and guilt are infinitely more satisfying than a state of satisfaction with the state of things, and have a redemptive quality in them. She notes:

It is unlikely that a white South African will be in a situation in which shame is not called for ... [since] one is feeling as one ought to. Living as a self, one is ashamed of or regrets is morally more decent than living with a self one is more comfortable with ...

Vice makes the claim that for white South Africans:

Reducing one's presence through silence and humility seems right; recognizing their damaging presence, whites should try to make themselves invisible and unheard (Ibid.pg 333).

This idea of therapeutic shame and guilt, as Vice puts it, sounds controversial, but I concur with her that feelings of shame and guilt similar to those that trouble George may play a part in shaping a person to make him better. This concept is also supported by Hook (2011) who suggests that “moral progress, is not attained by the need to avoid bad feelings, certainly not by a hasty turn to the work of self-redemption.”

However, it is Tochluk (2010) who gives the most satisfactory assessment of George’s condition. She contends that “white people in general are ill at ease over issues of race and we are not very skilled at naming the nature of the problem” (Tochluk, 2010: 3).

Tochluk calls this general state of anxiety and unease on the issue of race a *dis-ease* (pg. 37) [Italics in the original]. The dis-ease manifests itself largely through an avoidant approach. The concerned individual will at all costs avoid confronting problems of race partly because he or she does not know how to deal with the problem and partly because it exposes him or her to his own prejudices, which in fact he or she has not yet had the courage to deal with. These are probably the reasons why George seems so uncomfortable and ill at ease with the Nationalist government.

Tochluk identifies no less than five models of whiteness; George fits one of them perfectly. For purposes of this discussion, I will discuss only three of these models because I find them relevant to the study of *The Native Commissioner*. The remaining two do not have relevance to the novel and therefore fall out of the scope of the dissertation. These are: the white racist, the unconscious white and the guilty white.

The white racist model needs no definition. Whites who fall in this category are obviously racist. Another person is measured by the colour of his or her skin. This model perpetuates a “system that offers advantages based on race” (Tochluk, 2010: 8).

Whites who fall in the racist model read too much into the symbolism of colour. Whiteness is described in lofty terms such as being infused with light. It is associated with intelligence, purity, closeness to creation and nobility, while blackness is associated with evil, sin, evolution, dullness and other such ideas (Tochluk, 2010: 136).

The second model of whiteness that Tochluk discusses is the unconscious white. This model refers to that group of white people who are “oblivious to the effects of race and see being white as not meaning anything” (Tochluk, 2010: 36). She further remarks:

In our efforts to escape our discomfort we often do in fact remain rather unconscious and ignorant about what it means to be white. We might see social inequity and strive to work in the world in response but we do so without allowing that our racial identity should hold meaning (ibid., 37).

Whites who fit this model of whiteness make efforts in their various capacities and situations to demonstrate that race for them, is not an issue.

The last model of whiteness to be discussed here is the guilty white model. This model describes the majority of those whites who feel a sense of obligation for every wrong or injustice that has been suffered by blacks or other races, on account of their colour, from slavery to colonialism.

Tochluk explains that this model:

Describes some of us who recognize both our connection to the shameful aspects of United States history and how that history shapes current structures, and we feel badly about association with it. For those of us who see the effects of the past injustices at work in the twenty first century, we might want to be part of correcting the situation. Keeping an eye on our disastrous history understandably inspires guilt and shame in many of us (Tochluk, 2010: 37).

Tochluk argues that it is the guilt-ridden whites who mostly suffer from perceived racial injustices done to others. This is often a result of incomplete recovery worsened by a lack of resolution which eventually leads to a situation of complete dis-ease, a state of discomfort and unease about the status quo.

Taking a critical look at all the three models of whiteness, one can see a gradual shifting by George from one model to the other. At the start of the book, George's character fits perfectly into that of the unconscious white. He carries out his duties as native commissioner and endeavours to learn vernacular languages without any racial consideration. To him, learning IsiZulu, or Xhosa or Sepedi is only natural since it "comes with the territory (ibid. pg 37)" - implying that staying in an area where a different language is spoken may result in one learning that language too.

Gradually, George shifts from the unconscious white model and finally drifts into the guilty white model. It is apparent that his guilt started manifesting itself after the advent to power of the Nationalist Party when he had been in the employ of the department for some time. His shame stems partly from his inability to do anything as well as from the fact that his race is the one responsible for the exploitation of the black community. His tacit removal from the daily happenings around becomes in itself an indictment of his morality, actually demanding that he takes a stand against the status quo.

Tochluk contends that although the three models are by no means conclusive, they enable us to understand whites in the context of their interaction with people of colour.

Whites who could be classified in terms of the guilty model need strong intervention strategies for them to be eventually cured of their guilt. Although writers like Vice (2010) advocate for this model, arguing that it is better to feel shame and guilt, I reiterate that one must not dwell too much on such negative emotions as they might eventually harm the perpetrator. Clearly, in the novel, guilt and shame did not do any good to George who ended up committing suicide.

George's embarrassment stems from his refusal of apartheid as a policy that can promote peaceful co-existence. His disgust with apartheid is more of a moral reaction and he feels somehow that nothing good can come out of this policy. Blair (2014: 493) refers to George Jameson as a liberal who is unhappy with the wait and see approach of liberal politics. Yet it is this liberal tradition that shapes George's political sensitivity. His moral sense of justice is in

direct contrast to apartheid policies. Blair quotes the definition of liberalism propounded by Alan Paton:

In 1973, Paton offered a well-known seven-fold definition that was however transhistorical: By “liberalism” I don’t mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high of the worth and dignity of man, repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom (Blair, 2014: 475).

Paton’s definition of liberalism is an embodiment of George’s life. He attempts to live by all these principles, but apartheid is like a dark cloud hovering over his life, threatening to devour his life, his family and his sanity in a vortex of guilt and shame. The contradiction that is apartheid complicates George’s life to the point that he assumes responsibility for every little injustice meted out on the native.

The policy of apartheid is a narrative of the Afrikaner and his struggle against English exploitation and expansion into the interior of South Africa. It could be described as a love story between a group of people and a place they call their own. Rian Malan (1990) traces the origins of apartheid to a group of Afrikaners who called themselves Doppers because “they were deliberately and consciously extinguishing Enlightenment⁵⁷. Malan states:

It seems to me looking back on history, that all of South Africa’s agony is rooted in Dawid Malan’s ancient act of self-binding. The Dopper spirit survived the centuries and finally blossomed in apartheid and we are eating poisonous fruit to this day. The Dopper spirit manifests itself in everything my tribe has done to dark skinned people in repression and censorship, pass laws and job reservations (Malan, 1990: 29).

This desperate and rather misguided form of nationalism was to linger and later ignite the flames of Afrikaner Nationalism. The rise of apartheid was thus regarded as a necessary means for the

⁵⁷ The term ‘Enlightenment’ refers to the spread of the ideas of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity which were spreading across Europe from the French Revolution of 1789. The French Revolution is regarded by many as the first to have ignited a fire about the nature of human beings’ liberty and fraternity. From this revolution these ideas spread across to America where a revolution was already brewing. The three notions are enshrined in the preamble to the American Constitution beginning with the famous words, “We the people, hold these truths to be self-evident...” A dopper is a metal cap used to snuff out candle light: a common household device in the early days of the Cape Colony. See Malan (1990).

preservation of Afrikaner interests. The Dopper spirit survived the harsh years of British imperialism and persecution in the interior and later culminated in 1918 in the formation of the Afrikaner Broederbond: a secret organization founded “for fostering unity and a national consciousness among Afrikaners and promoting all the interests of the Afrikaner nation” (Welsh, 2009: 13). Membership of the brotherhood was strictly by invitation after a rigorous screening and exhaustive character evaluation. This enabled the organization to approach men of powerful intellect to champion the cause of Afrikaner nationalism.

Consequently, the rise to power of the Nationalist Party was the culmination of years and years of careful planning, festering anger and a misguided sense of nationalism. An eminent Afrikaner historian states that Apartheid did not come from thin air; it was:

Grafted onto ideas that were already there, produced by 300 years of turbulent history... Apartheid [was] an ideology of protest grafted and received ideas ... (De Villiers, 1987: 310). (My interpolation)

This concept is supported by Steyn (2001) who considers that given the volatile history of Afrikaners, their persistent state of conflict with the British on the one hand and their uneasy relationship with the blacks on the other hand, the rise of apartheid “was a logical, if extreme, interpretation of the trope of modern Western whiteness” (Steyn, 2001: xxxi).

A sense of empathy, perhaps even tolerance, may have been expected by many at the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the advent to power of the Nationalist Party. But the obvious intolerance exhibited to the black community immediately removed all forms of sympathy. This belligerent attitude is displayed in the official guide book:

It is nonsense to suppose that the interior of Southern Africa belonged to the Bantu and that the white man took it away from him. The Bantu penetrated from the north almost at the same time as the white man entered from the South. They had equal title to the country .The Voortrekkers wished to partition the country and live in peace because they had already experienced enough trouble in the Cape. But the Bantu were not amenable to reason. He respected one thing and that was force (Harrison, 1987:15).

Given the socio-political and economic background of the country and the history of Afrikaner nationalism, it is thus a curious fact to see George Jameson, an obvious beneficiary of the policy of apartheid, rebelling and challenging the status quo.

Granted, the history of the black person in chains was certainly not a new phenomenon in his time, given the fact that Africa was still smarting from the slave trade and was now suffering under the yoke of colonialism and apartheid. As Martin Luther King Junior rightly points out, “There has never been a solid unified and determined thrust to make justice for [Africans]⁵⁸” (King, 1967: 68). This therefore gives the proponents of apartheid the audacity to proceed with their grand plan of apartheid.

The answer to George’s rebellion against the system therefore lies in himself and the way he is forced to look at himself in the circumstances. What makes George Jameson’s case unique is that for him, this rebellion becomes something personal. George’s traumatic contact with apartheid proves only one thing to him: that one cannot dispense apartheid justice and apartheid policies and hope to remain untouched and unscathed. Apartheid brutalizes both the victim and the benefactor. It is therefore described at the start of the novel in the imagery of disease, discomfort and anonymity:

The walls are painted the colour of **nicotine** like all government institutions in this country ... In the building itself there is not much room to move about. One must either be in the sleeping area or the lounge. And when in the lounge area on most **uncomfortable** chairs with only eighteen for thirty people not including the visitors (Johnson, 2006: 12) [Emphasis mine].

The reference to nicotine, a powerful and addictive drug, may imply the obsession with power demonstrated by the Nationalist government. Yet the atmosphere of depraved indifference and discomfort that prevails in the hospital (a place of hope and healing) merely accentuates the suffering that is already in the whole country as a result of apartheid.

⁵⁸ The original statement reads “Afro-Americans”. But I contend that what King says of the black Americans is true of black Africans as well. [Parenthesis mine]

To my way of thinking, the rebellion of George against the system of apartheid is itself a reconstitutive process. Despite the fragile mind that emerges in the end, ultimately George is infinitely more reconstituted than when he starts employment with the Department of Native Affairs.

The first step George assumes in the process of finding himself is when he accepts that despite the colour difference that exists between him and the blacks, they are all equal. The acceptance of so simple a fact becomes the basis from which he treats other human beings. As a native commissioner appointed to deal with native affairs, he strives to understand the cultural standpoint of his subjects despite the insignificance of each of their actions. He comments:

It's said of farmers like my family, he told the boys, that all they do is eat, and watch cattle - that is all they do. And it is true. Thank God, we find we are just like the Xhosa! He talked of the dignity and wisdom of Africa that, **he was beginning** to understand, should not be judged according to smug assumptions of superiority; how you should not even deal with a man unless you **genuinely respected him**; about the wicked sin it was to call a black person a kaffir (pg. 108) [Emphasis mine].

This line of thinking reinforces George's transformation towards reconstitution. His ability to see things beyond the immediately obvious enables him to sense and feel the effects of the 1948 advent to power of the Nationalist Party, hence his early but doomed attempt to leave. The election rhetoric, compounded by the stormy relations between the British and the Afrikaners, warns George that the Nationalist Party will make the situation worse should they come to power. His fears come true when the party comes to power and immediately effect into law the policy of apartheid.

George exhibits that rare quality of being able to see a fault in his personal judgments and admit to others that he has been wrong. When he talks to his children he reasons:

Who says one human being can go through his life without making mistakes, even moral ones? I have found that sometimes when you are absolutely certain you are right, you are very possibly wrong- and you should try not to be afraid of being wrong. Now that I am older I think one should expect in this life to make mistakes – and

then the question becomes whether it was an honest mistake, and whether you have the courage to stop repeating (ibid. pg. 108).

The sensitive yet prudent decision George takes to blend with the culture-scape in which he lives out of genuine love and interest in local anthropology, sharpens his insight into the injustices suffered by the natives. His fluency in the vernacular languages enables him to listen to their cases without the aid of an interpreter. This unusual ability creates confidence amongst the blacks he works with, thus earning their respect.

Yet despite his character, George woke up one morning to find that he was momentarily paralyzed. "I think I have had a bang in my head" (pg. 136). This was a final symptom of the clinical depression he has been fending off, blamed entirely on the nature of his work with the department of Native Affairs.

A thorough examination of George will reveal that he created some semblance of a man at peace with himself and the status quo, but that underneath he was tormented by the anonymous system he worked for. Its constant technique of keeping him always on the move denied him an opportunity to establish permanence and make a lasting impression in the areas he worked. This made him feel cheap like some tool used and discarded without further concern.

In this situation, George becomes, to use Bethlehem's (2006: 2) words, a writer as "victim ... and witness [and] simultaneously a political delegate bound to the articulation of an alternative politics on behalf of precisely those South Africans whom apartheid bars from access to democratic representation." His experiences become the point, the yardstick from which we measure and assess other whites in similar situations, mainly because his experience as Native Commissioner gave him direct contact with natives. His voice thus becomes a voice for all people like him who are caught or entrapped in a situation they could neither control nor escape from.

George therefore gives the reader an insider's view of the sick world of apartheid, which he clearly disowns for a more egalitarian society. His actions loudly proclaim one thing: *I am not a product of white privilege. And I am not defined by it!*

His feelings of entrapment and anxiety are weighed down by his sense of right:

When he looked at his country's future he saw only an angry blurred ball of confusion where once there was such optimistic clarity in his mind. He brooded on this in the home (pg. 144).

George feels a sense of shame at his fawning behaviour following the visit by the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development. The narrator comments on this incident:

He carried with him from that day a fleeting, shaming image: his face reflected momentarily in a mirror in the house, smiling ingratiatingly close to, obsequiously at, the powerful politician [The Minister]. That night he rose from their bed, took the mirror to the woodshed in the back garden, and shattered it with an axe (pg. 149) [My parenthesis].

The Minister's visit is a culmination of all his fears and feelings of entrapment embodied into a person. Yet his failure to confront the Minister, complicated by his rather insincere efforts to please the dignitary, creates a huge contradiction with ingratiating behaviour. No wonder he is disgusted at himself when he looks at the mirror. Therefore, he takes it out to the garden to shatter it, in an effort to expiate the guilt. His sense of shame and disgust at himself for his failure to challenge the Minister to a discussion on the moral standpoint of his government leaves him feeling sickened with himself.

Having examined the nature of George's guilt and what it meant to be white to both the reader and George himself, I contend that George's understanding of his whiteness, his ability to reject comfort for truth, becomes a point of his strength rather than weakness. These are the salient features of the strength of his character which become the points of reconstitution for Sam at the end of the novel. Clearly, Sam sees the dangers of entanglement that come with not being decisive and emerges resolutely from the story of his father.

One might argue that the tragic end of George does not matter. What matters is the process, the transformation, the making of the man. Whether the process breaks him or not is of no consequence; rather, the point that in the end he is a mature and transformed individual is what is

important. He denounces apartheid and its colonial structures as well as its inhuman face in the strongest possible terms. The story becomes a point of reference for Sam, to ultimately use it to build his identity and reconstitution.

When at last the picture emerges clearly for George's youngest son, now a middle aged man, he can say his own reconstitution has taken place. He looks at the picture of his father and says "*Nyabonana*"-- we see each other, a Zulu greeting between two adults who respect each other.

As has already been discussed in this chapter, the guilt and shame George feels at being a white person makes him assume responsibility for the malaise that is apartheid. This becomes his salvation as well as his demise. It saves him from assuming the character of the white racist and pushes him into rejecting the cozy comfort of apartheid. At the same time, it becomes his undoing because it is the one driving force that makes him commit suicide. Suicide therefore becomes a statement, a rejection of the status quo, as well as his loud voice condemning the apartheid system as unjust. This is what his son realises forty years later and is able to look back at his father's memory with a sense of pride.

The next and last chapter of this study provides the conclusion. It offers a summary of what has been discussed in the previous four chapters and demonstrates how this all aids the process of reconstitution.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Conclusion

This chapter provides a synopsis of the discussions in the various preceding chapters. It summarises the salient features that have been raised in this study about *The Native Commissioner* as a novel and offers possible areas of further research in post-apartheid literature.

This dissertation has established that the process of self-reconstitution is a multifaceted one that occurs in several planes and through different routes. The successful reconstitution of the narrator, Sam is established through a reflection of history as a starting point for self-definition. Viewing life as history involves going back to the past through a process of self-introspection and retrieval of the past. As has already been pointed out, archival research entails actively investigating one's past the way Sam does, and in the process reconstituting his life.

The Native Commissioner starts at the very moment when Sam's life, is at a crossroads. The trauma that has characterised him throughout his life has to be faced and dealt with and closure found. For Sam, the latter can be achieved by facing the very trauma that has haunted him for almost all his life. He decides to look back at his father's death and try to recreate meaning out of the event.

In a way, Sam's journey into his past, where he retraces and recreates his father's life, becomes to him an exorcism of the anger and the unease he had always felt about his past. So, for Sam the protagonist, the moment of confronting his past is a beginning as well as an end. It is the beginning of a reconstituted existence and the end of an uncertain and traumatic history.

This odyssey enables Sam to engage with his past on both the reflexive as well as the uchronian planes of the given historical circumstances.

As has already been observed in the study, the reflexive approach to the past enables Sam to carry out introspection of his life as well as seek clarity on some of the past events. Amongst these are the nature of his father's illness and the treatment methods then used to deal with it. When Sam reflects on this, a different picture of the man who was his father emerges. Instead of a dark and frightening picture of a man senselessly within the grip of the apartheid euphoria, Sam sees George for what he is — a compassionate liberal with a profound sense of justice, a man certainly before his time.

Sam not only reflects on his father's life but also re-examines the latter's past in order to revisit the rest of his family so as to properly reconstruct his own (Sam's) past. Throughout this process, another picture emerges —that of his mother as a woman of strength. She is the one who holds the family together after George's death. This feminist note⁵⁹ struck by Johnson is a powerful insight into the role of women in the apartheid past. They appear seemingly docile and subservient but this picture is quite misleading. George's wife is shown to be made of steel inside. She is strong, resilient and determined. She even has the presence of mind to sell the house to settle the family mortgage. The implication is that while men went to play apartheid and war games and got killed, it was the women who were left to hold the fabric of the family together. Therefore, the process of reconstitution in the novel can never be complete without the aid of the strong women and the many anonymous ones, found in the novel like Rina, Jean's neighbour.

They typify the struggle, the pain, the loss and the brutality which the apartheid moment exacted from all the women of South Africa. Seen in the reflexive domain, the women, both black and white, thus become the real champions of the apartheid struggle. Through the eyes of history, Sam looks at his mother whose injunctive "those are your father's papers" serves as a warning and a reminder that an archived memory was implanted there and when the time was right would need to be salvaged.

⁵⁹ I introduce this to show how complete Sam's reconstitution is. He achieves this by revisiting his father's life and also his mother's as well. The chapter entitled Kitchen "1967" (ibid pg. 29) shows a heartbroken woman, but also one who has taken charge of her life and that of her family. Obviously Sam derives much of the reconstitution from her as much as from his father.

The uchronian reading of history also enables Sam to look at his father through a sympathetic lens. Through this mode of history, Sam is made to understand several facts that have to do with his past. He not only appreciates the role his family plays, especially his mother, in keeping the family intact, but also his father's role in instilling virtues of fairness, justice and respect for fellow human beings in his children. Consequently, Sam respects the native blacks and shies away from calling them kaffirs. This is the main reason why Sam feels thankful at the end of the novel that he lived to see justice for all South Africans.

Both the uchronian and reflexive readings of history are quite applicable to the novel under study and ultimately help in the reconstitutive process undergone by Sam and also his father. At last, the former is aware of his past and most importantly, the practical life lessons he learnt from his father which he would, in turn, impart to his children.

The study has also established that as portrayed in the novel, the landscape can be seen as a place of memory and subsequently a place of reconstruction and reconstitution. As pointed out in the study, Johnson's treatment of the landscape is fairly distinctive. The rural landscape is depicted in picturesque terms, as unsullied by colonisation and apartheid, and is perceived as a space for nostalgia and re-memory. For George, it is a place of idyllic beauty and conquest. Individual identity is inscribed on the landscape and places of historical significance carry with them an identity of their own. Those places such as Umbumbulu, Ulundi and Babanango have a unique history behind them. For George, the landscape carries with it memories of his childhood, belonging and identity. The rich valleys and the lush vegetation give him a sense of who he is. This also helps to instill a sense of identity in Sam later in the novel.

The unsullied rural landscape impinges strongly upon the formation of George's identity as a South African, first, and a British person second. George's view of the national landscape from Kentani south of the country to Duiwelskloof north of the country leads him along a path of beauty, poise and meaning, which makes him feel that he is co-owner with whoever appreciates and accepts its beauty and wishes to visually possess it also.

As the preceding arguments have shown, the landscape helps to mediate George's identity as a South African and a father. This is the identity that he imparts to his children, particularly the sensitive Sam. The landscape can therefore be regarded as aiding the process of reconstitution. Being fully reconstituted, George passes this on to his surrogate narrator son, who now symbolises the future, the next generation's preparedness to face the challenges of tomorrow.

However, the landscape as shown in the novel is not just a place of solace, comfort and nostalgia. Contrary to the rural landscape which offers a sense of peace and home, the urban landscape of Witbank is shown as ominous, dark, threatening and evil. The smoking chimneys are suggestive of something negative which is about to happen. This landscape is like this because it has now been pillaged and spoilt by the pervasive influence of colonialism and the apartheid policy. It stinks of the corruption and decay characteristic of the apartheid era.

George's family rejects this urban landscape. Their failure to bond with the Witbank cityscape is symbolic of their rejection, as a family, of the apartheid policy. This is transmitted to George, who feels the shock of what his subconscious has rejected for so long. His suicide is thus a culmination (brought about by this cityscape) of events, frustrations and emotions that have built up for a long period. The Witbank landscape becomes the catalyst that triggers and perpetuates suicidal thoughts in him. His death becomes a successful completion of the reconstitution process whose fruits are later enjoyed by Sam and his siblings.

Colonialism and apartheid are perceived as exerting a form of violence on the landscape. This violence in turn impinges upon the protagonist's failure to achieve equilibrium, hence his suicide. The violence of this act parallels that imposed upon the landscape and consequently, the people dwelling on it.

The other process through which reconstitution may be attained, as discussed in this dissertation, is through a process of self-articulation and self-narration as well as through life-writing. Self-articulation is a way of finding a voice as well as meaning. George uses letters, memoirs as well as recordings of his perception and thoughts. As he does this, he unconsciously arranges his life

into a meaningful experience. This takes place because self-narration entails reorganisation and reshaping of experience into a logical occurrence. As one does this, he or she reconstitutes his own existence as both George and his progeny do.

Self-narration is thus a form of mediating meaning out of an individual's life. This form of sense-making and truth-making through narrating one's life is what gives Sam clarity about his father's own life. As Sam follows his father's footsteps, he gains insight into his father's life, the challenges that dogged his life as well as the passions and triumphs that drove him.

Raditlhalo (2003: 7) summarises this perspective aptly:

Thus to study the autobiographical texts of a society in which the very being of people, the self, was subjected to a conscious effort of 'thingification' is to study the tenacious spirit of a coherent (at any rate, a near coherent) self-making meaning of a debilitating environment.

In other words, Raditlhalo attests to the sense-making and reorganisation potential of life narrated into a meaningful existence. Similarly, the narration of an individual's life by another follows the same codification process of sense-making, hence reconstitution is successfully carried out.

Lastly, rebelling against an established status quo is ultimately a form of reconstitution. As the previous arguments in the dissertation have shown, it is not easy to take on a system as powerful as the state machinery. This is even worse when the common people have been so brainwashed by the system that they do not see the evil around them. To study *The Native Commissioner* is therefore to investigate the story of one man's experiences in apartheid South Africa, his community and his very existence. This is what makes George a unique character.

There are at least two interpretative possibilities that may stem from the reading of *The Native Commissioner*. Readers may choose to take the obvious, official route, of seeing the novel as confessing to the duplicity of Commissioner Jameson, in that he voluntarily chose to work for the system. In this sense, the confession becomes a motivation to all those who worked for the system but were afraid to make a clean breast about it. Such a confession, obviously, would aid

reconciliation. This may have been the author's intention: to add one more confession to the truth and reconciliation process then in force at the time of publication, thus earning white South Africans a credible role in the post-apartheid era.

Alternatively the novel could be seen to be closing the great divide between South African white writing and South African national writing⁶⁰. Put differently, I perceive *The Native Commissioner* as a novel (like *Cry, the Beloved Country*) which depicts and grapples with national problems of identity, apartheid, belonging and peaceful co-existence between people of various races and classes.

It is also noteworthy that the novel provides life lessons that teach about reconstitution. As is shown in the novel, successful reconstitution occurs if we as individuals are able to confront our past, painful or otherwise. This past provides the lessons and the foundation upon which the individual can formulate an identity for both himself/ herself and for that of the nation by clearly understanding how he or she came to be.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that *The Native Commissioner* raises a pertinent issue on the role of women during the apartheid era. Possibly, a study needs to be undertaken to examine the role of both black and white women during the apartheid era. Such a study would assist in shaping and defining the role of women in a post Mandela society. Their roles may need to be investigated in their shifting capacity as mothers, workers, bread winners as well as heads of families in line with the manner in which Jean acts in the novel.

It would be most useful to consider to what extent the protagonist in other recent works of South African literature undergoes any process of reconstitution, similar to that explored by Johnson

⁶⁰ In his paper on 'Postmodernism and Black Writing' in South Africa Lewis Nkosi identifies this divide. He states: "My purpose is to insist that in South Africa, there exists an unhealed—I will not say incurable—split between black and white writing between on the one side, an urgent need to document and to bear witness and on the other, the capacity to...loiter and experiment. This difference between black and white writing can also be seen as a sign of social disparity..." See Tejumola and Quayson (eds.) (2009: 665)

through his main characters. If they do, how and why does the process unfold, and what light does this shed on trends in such literature?

Finally, a character such as George, may be seen as a hero, at least in the general sense of the word, if not in line with the Greek definition where a hero is regarded as a protagonist with a fatal flaw. I would like to point out that it would be beneficial to readers as well as scholars to establish what really makes a hero. Such a study would probably have to answer the following questions: Who are the heroes of South Africa in the post Mandela moment? Are heroes still relevant (after apartheid) in this global village? And lastly, is there a shifting image of heroes in terms of space and time today or has our perception of heroes (as readers) shifted over time?

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