



Narrating the past: Reflections on recent Black Afrikaans writing

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Abstract

A return to the past has been a dominant feature of recent Afrikaans writing. This is evident in the many novels re-visiting the Anglo-Boer War or recounting incidents from the apartheid past. The approaches include the debunking of myths and a nostalgic longing for the good old days. Whether this is true of the small body of Black Afrikaans writing, given its ambivalent relationship to the canon, needs to be investigated. A number of texts that was published recently either had a clear autobiographical background or emanated from the desire and imperative “to tell our own stories from our communities”. A feature of the texts is also the way it engages with the past and makes use of diverse narrative strategies to recount circumstances and experiences and portray an image of how characters lived through the historical events during the apartheid years. The paper draws on David Scott’s distinction between romance and tragedy as two distinct narrative forms in which the past can be represented and narrated. Scott’s typology is applied to a critically reading of selected texts by inter alia Fatima Osman, Simon Bruinders, Ronelda Kamfer and Valda Jansen. In the case of the texts by the first mentioned authors the narrative is about survival, determination and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of a dehumanising system like apartheid. In the latter texts one finds elements of dystopia and disillusionment with the past as an ydill. It also gives an unsentimental view of the state of mind and events playing out in communities in the present. The texts furthermore grapples with textual strategies to represent history and the inability at times to comprehend the past.

1

Studies on the South African literary landscape after the transition to democracy in 1994 emphasised the turn to history as a dominant feature. André P. Brink for instance finds in his contribution titled “Interrogating silence: new possibilities faced by South African literature” that “History provides one of the most fertile silences to be revisited by South African writers; not because no voices have traversed it before [...] but because the dominant discourse of white historiography [...] has inevitably silenced [...] so many other possibilities” (Brink “Silence” 22). (See also the contributions to the *Litnet* online seminar “Poolshoogte” in 2015, and in particular Burger, Viljoen and Willemsse (“Oor sosiale betrokkenheid”) for other views on recent developments in Afrikaans literature).

As a writer who in novels such as *An Instant in the Wind*, *A Chain of Voices* and his last one *Philida* undertook a critical revisit of the past, it is no surprise that Brink would find history to be fertile ground to turn the myths of apartheid and its false histories on its head.

Little more than a decade later Brink concludes in his lecture “Ground Zero: The South African literary landscape after Apartheid” that “one finds traces of the past in the midst of the new South African literature in the continued re-visits to the

landscapes of apartheid” (Brink, “Ground Zero” 2). He expands by saying that the literature is “a re-appreciation, even re-discovery of the past through memory as a key to identity” (Brink, “Ground Zero” 3).

Although David Medalie is critical of Brink’s hyperbole, utopian tendencies and suggests that it is rather the dystopian nature of recent South African literature that is more characteristic, he also finds that the literature “is rather inclined to a pre-occupation with the past than an embrace of the future” (36). He ascribes it to the uncertainties of the transition period and observes: “in historical periods which feel strongly their own transitional status [...] there is an inclination to look at the present with dismay, the future with trepidation and the past with nostalgia” (Medalie 36). He continues by saying that “the recurring, even obsessive preoccupation with the past in a great deal of the fiction and even non-fiction of this period may be understood as a form of nostalgia, and that it may even be pertinent to characterize it as a literature of nostalgia” (Medalie 36). The element of nostalgia is indicated as a common characteristic in a number of studies on recent South African literature (Robbe 2015; Worby and Ally 2013). These studies are generally critical of nostalgia as a longing for a past of white privilege. This sentiment is expressed by Fanie Naudé in a recent Memorial Lecture: “Rural or retrospective bonhomie, even the perpetuation of 19th century bucolic fantasies [...] a few false notes of nostalgia, often focusing on a white childhood under apartheid, regularly with a child protagonist displaying an instinct for injustice lacking in the adults” (Naudé 12).

Critics are aware that the way nostalgia is handled is very complex and that there are nuances in the approaches. Robbe (325) distinguishes between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia and Medalie (40) discerns a “critical and evolved nostalgia as against an unreflecting one”. In both cases it is about a nostalgia that sanitises the past of its atrocities and transgressions and creates an idyll as against the conviction that recreating the past can be a tool for critical reflection on the present. An important question posed by Naudé is how black writers engage with nostalgia and referring to Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* he finds that the responses are ranging in nature.

A dominant theme in Black Afrikaans writing since 1994 was the return to the past, to forgotten histories as an answer and response to the collective quest to “tell our own stories”. This theme was introduced by A. H. M. Scholtz’s highly acclaimed *Vatmaar* and E. K. M. Dido’s *’n Stringetjie blou krale* (A string of blue beads). This tendency is continued in the recent publications of a number of writers which is the subject of this article. In my opinion the key issues for these writers are:

- How do I write about a past from which I was excluded in the official historiography,
- How do I write myself into that history in the language from which I was excluded?

In reviewing the South African political setup at the end of 2015 Achille Mbembe makes an interesting remark about the current state of mind, that coincides with these issues that I have identified:

Tropes of pain and suffering had come to saturate current narratives of selfhood and identity [...] These tropes had become the register through which many now represent themselves to themselves and to the world. To give account of whom they are, or to explain themselves and their behaviour to others, they increasingly tend to frame their life stories in terms of how much they have been injured by the forces of racism, bigotry and patriarchy.

2

Fatima Osman's autobiographical narrative *Ek's g'n Slams* (I'm no Slams, 2013) is the account of someone who has struggled her whole life against racism, bigotry, male chauvinism and patriarchy and whose psyche was scared by it. It is a *Bildungsroman* in which the main character, a girl of Indian descent growing up in a traditional Muslim family, rebels against the orthodox family setup in which the young woman has no say in her life and often finds herself at odds with tradition and eventually lands up in an arranged and unhappy marriage. Fatima is a strong and wilful woman and after a life in which she was the victim of her husband's reckless business transactions and always having to bounce back from it, she takes control of their lives as the primary provider in their household.

The first part of the narrative contains stories about the traditions and customs of immigrant Muslim families from India. It gives rare insights into a part of the Cape community never before told in Afrikaans. An important element is the dialogue in the Cape vernacular Kaaps of District Six. The narrator says the following about how the cleric—*galifa*—taught them about the Koran and *kop-les* (I am responsible for all translations):

Met groot trots het ons galifa ons geleer [...] Altyd met sy vinger in die lug sou hy in sy Distrik Ses-Afrikaans begin [...] “Wiet djulle, as djulle ‘n roos pluk sonner toesteming in iemand se tyn, da’ gat Allah djulle straf! Djulle gat jahannam toe! As die malaaikats (engele) na julle kabr (graf) toe ko’ en djulle kennie djulle Kalima Shahada’ nie, da’ gat djulle behoo’lik innie jahannam brant! (14).

Our cleric taught us with great pride [...] Always with his finger in the air he would begin in his District Six Afrikaans “Do you know that if you pick a rose in somebody's garden without the consent, then Allah will punish you! You will go to hell! When the angels come to your grave and you do not know your lessons, then you will burn in hell.

The construction of identity is foremost in the opening pages and the references to group identity are all important: “Die mense daar buite is Kaapse Maleiers en Kleurlinge en wit mense [...] Ons meng nie. Ons is Indiërs. Ons is ‘n rein nasie (11). Ons bly

rein.” (“The people out there are Cape Malay and Coloureds and white people [...] We do not mix. We are a pure nation. We stay pure.”) It is ironically that this emphasis on group identity drives Fatima to assert herself as individual in her own right. Against the traditional customs she chooses her own husband, she starts to wear tight jeans, cuts her hair in a short style and starts to befriend the charismatic, evangelist women in her neighbourhood. She fights the preconceived ideas of men and the fact that everywhere she goes she has to defend herself. The title of the novel gets particular resonance when she defends herself against the gangsters on the street corner: “Ek’s g’n slams nie ... Ek issie! Ek issie! ... ‘n slams is ‘n stukkende gebou! Ek’s ‘n Moslem. Ek’s ‘n mens! O’s is ammal mens!” (45). (I am no slams ... I’m not! I’m not ... a slams is a derelict building! I’m a Muslim. I’m a person! We’re all people!)

As a way of defining her own life and taking charge of her future she starts to experiment with diets and becomes the victim of its secondary effects. She suffers from depression and lands in an asylum. After different forms of therapy which inter alia included sketching, she finally finds respite. In a vision that she experiences during a visit to the dentist she comes to the conclusion:

My lewe lank loop ek sonder ‘n identiteit rond en ek kon dit nie verwerk nie. Die skets het iets in my wakker gemaak. Ek weet wie ek is! Daar het ‘n gestalte in die lig gestaan en hy het my naam geroep. [...] Dis Allah sub-ga-nallah se gestalte wat ek langs myne gesien het en wat my laat besef ek moet net op Hom vertrou en alles val in plek [...] Dis die groot deurbraak waarop ek al so lank wag [...] Dit is ‘n wonderwerk van Bo, van Allah sub-ga-nallah self wat tot my redding gekom het [...] Ek het my lewe terug omdat ek oorgegee het aan Allah sub-ga-nallah. My naam is Fatima en ek het innerlike vrede [...] Dit is opwindend en verfrissend om te weet ek het my identiteit gevind [...] Ek is vry van alles. Vry. (266–9)

My whole life I wandered without an identity and I could not handle it. The painting awakened something in me. I know who I am! There was something in the light and He called my name [...] It is Allah sub-ga-nallah’s image that I saw next to me and made me aware that I should rely on Him and everything will fall into place [...] This is the big breakthrough that I have been waiting for so long [...] This is a miracle from above, from Allah sub-ga-nallah who came to my rescue himself [...] My life is returned to me because I submitted to Allah sub-ga-nallah. My name is Fatima and I have inner peace [...] This is exciting and refreshing to know I have found my identity [...] I am free from everything. Free.

It is a story of individual triumph over adversity that plays off against the backdrop of the apartheid histories in District Six and other rural, black communities in the Southern Cape. In *Conscripts of Modernity* David Scott (8) makes the following statement:

Anticolonial stories about past, present, and future have typically been emplotted in a distinctive narrative form, one with a distinctive story-potential: that of *Romance*. They have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication; they have tended to enact a distinctive rhythm and pacing, a distinctive direction, and to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have largely depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving.

I will return to Scott's alternative for the way in which the anticolonial past and postcolonial future should be construed. His previous statement is relevant to Osman's *Ek's g'n Slams* as well as the debut novel of Simon Bruinders.

3

Die sideboard (2014), translated as *A Handful of Land* (2017) is the story of Abraham de Bruin who battles his whole life against the unjust apartheid system that robs him in a devious and heartless manner of his dream to have his own little piece of land where he and his family could build their own future. As a smart, hardworking young man who firmly believes in Biblical and traditional values and after being devastated by the senseless expropriation of his land by the authorities, he often rises to start anew in the conviction that God will provide them with a sensible outcome.

Abraham joins the Cape Corps, the separate army unit for Cape Coloured troops, after he was promised ten hectares of land in addition to his military pay. They fight on the side of the Allied Forces in the Second World War in Abyssinia but after the war they feel duped because after demobilization they receive only a bicycle and a coat and not the promised piece of land. The physical and emotional scars threaten to overwhelm him and he concludes:

Hy het as 'n gewonde mens teruggekom. Maar 'n dankbare mens. En tog het hy sy beloofde land nooit gesien nie. Vir baie jare het hy verneuk gevoel. Hy het geglo die grondbelofte was van God. Dit was helaas die belofte van mense. 'n Windeier. (226)

He returned as a wounded person. But a thankful person. Although he never saw the promised land. For many years he felt conned. He believed that the promise of land was from God. Alas, it was the promises of people. A farce.

The sideboard of the title gets symbolic meaning and provides closure. Abraham saw the piece of furniture the first time in Abyssinia where he was so overawed by its beauty and workmanship that he decided to make a replica for his wife Stella on his return. It occupies a special place in their home and becomes the altar on which their family Bible rests. It also symbolises their hardship when it is nearly destroyed in a fire and Abraham could save it with superhuman strength. Thereafter it is sold for a trifle when they are forced to relocate from an area with ample land, called the Island to a smaller house in Rosemoor, one of the Coloured townships, created by the post-1948 apartheid administration. The circle is closed on a happier note when their

former conscientious white neighbour buys the sideboard at an auction and returns it to them on their wedding anniversary as a symbol of atonement. Closure is brought to Abraham's travails and suffering, and in gratitude he proffers a jubilation: "Dankie, dankie, dankie, Here, U is groot en genadig" (262) (Thank you, thank you, thank you God, You are great and merciful).

Against the background of the tradition of the plaasroman/farm novel in the Afrikaans literature and the central role that land and identity plays in this genre *The sideboard* gives an important perspective from the bottom up, from communities dispossessed from their land (see Willemse, "Sideboard" 252). Despite the happy and fortuitous end to the narrative the overwhelming feeling is of deceit and injustice and it fits squarely within the postcolonial theme of place and displacement.

In the words of Scott it is a story of survival and determination and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of a dehumanising system that endeavours to bring him down. But as Scott indicates the romance presents itself as an answer to questions about the past and the present and faced with the unsatisfactory nature of those answers one needs to pose a different set of questions to get another perspective on this problematic. In Scott's view the narrative mode of tragedy could provide an answer:

We live in tragic times. Not meaningless times, not merely dark or catastrophic times but times that in fundamental ways are distressingly off kilter in the specific sense that the critical languages in which we wagered our moral vision and our political hope (including, importantly, the languages of black emancipation and postcolonial critique) are no longer commensurate with the world they were meant to understand, engage, and overcome. (Scott 210)

4

With this in mind I want to reflect on Ronelda Kamfer's latest poetry anthology *Hammie* (2016). These poems have a tragic and elegiac tone. The "Hammie" of the title, which is a term of endearment for the loved and deceased mother, is eulogised in a number of poems that serves as a way to come to terms with death and bereavement.

A wish but futile hope for consolation is found in the poem "Seymour":

die oggend toe ek die ICU instap het ek
gehuil
op my knieë geval en gehuil
ek het vir myself gesê
soos mens mos sê as iemand doodgaan
sy is na 'n beter plek en ek het dit geglo
totdat die suster my kom troos het en vir my fluister

jou mammie is op 'n beter plek toe sê ek nee suster

my ma is op die worst possible plek waar 'n mens kan wees (40)

The morning when I stepped into the ICU I cried and I fell to my knees, and I cried and I told myself as one always says when someone dies: she is in a better place, and I believed it, until the sister came to console me, and whispered to me, your mommy is in a better place, then I said no, my ma is in the worst possible place where one can be.

And in “Nathan” (21) the irreversible nature of the news is underscored in the way it breaks into the ordinary chain of events of a day that was supposed to be ordinary:

vandag was veronderstel om 'n boring dag te wees ek en my ma was van plan om my babaklere uit

die lay-bye te gaan haal

Today was supposed to be a boring day, my mother and I planned to fetch my baby's clothes from the lay-bye.

There are epic poems addressed to working class women who make sacrifices for their families, as in “antie Gerty, suster Kamfer, antie Trui” (74). It sketches an image of women who in the face of poverty fights to keep a sense of normality but are disarmed by situations in which they do not know how to express emotion—“Torrying” (49) (“Nuisance”)—who are forced by circumstances into a business-like and unsentimental handling of death and bereavement, for instance in the poem “Troupanne” (33) (“Wedding bands”) where the narrator is forced to pawn the wedding bands of her deceased mother so that she can buy food and medicine for her own child. A number of poems express an ambivalent and complex relationship with faith, religion, God and the Bible.

But it is not only a lament; the imperfections of the mother and her generation are mercilessly exposed. In the poems “Humble brag” (93) and “Wees lief vir mekaar, kyk agter haar, Neldie, sy is jou suster...” (94) (Love each other, look after her Neldie, she is your sister...) the neglect of parental duties is disclosed. As such the anthology avoids the romanticising of working class women who in their nurturing and supportive role heroically withstand the onslaught of society.

Relevant here, are Scott's remarks about tragedy as the form in which the anti-colonial past can be represented. Dalleo's paraphrasing of Scott is apt:

In contrast to the assured optimism of romance, the tragic vision wonders if we are ever fully masters of our fate and if the past can ever be entirely left behind [...] tragedy emphasizes contingency and conflicting, often irreconcilable demands: for these reasons, it is especially well suited to ambiguous moments of historical crisis and transformation, when old certainties are coming apart. (Dalleo 134)

The anthology takes a hard look at the travesties in communities: family violence, sexual assault, gangsterism. The view of the apartheid past and the postcolonial, postapartheid present in the townships and fruit farms of the Western Cape is one of disillusionment and unhomeliness. Dystopian elements abound, the past is not the idyll to which can be returned with longing and the present is not the fulfilment of heroic and utopian desires.

5

Of the aforementioned texts Valda Jansen's debut novel *Hy kom met die skoenlappers* (He comes with the butterflies, 2016) shows mellowness and comes across as the most considered approach towards the past and history. The novel is presented as an elegy on lost love, cast in a hybrid form of memoir, diary and epistolary novel in which the narrator goes in search of the happy times and lost chances of a romance in her days as a young German language teacher on a yearlong exchange in the former East Germany. The pasts of herself and her lover Anders are revealed in the process. They are wounded not only by personal and family tragedy but also as a consequence of the histories of apartheid South Africa and Germany during the Nazi and DDR regimes. Anders puts it this way: "Ons probeer nog om vandag te verstaan. Daarom moet ons soms weer stil word en terugdink, onthou hoe dit was. As ons dit nie doen nie, sal ons lewe vandag geen betekenis hê nie" (73). (We are still trying to understand today. That is why we sometimes need to be still and think back, remember how it was. If we don't do it, our life will not have meaning).

The narrator expresses a similar honest and bold acceptance of the past. She says for instance: "Wit Suid-Afrikaners kan nie die wandade van apartheid ontduik nie." (155) (White South Africans cannot escape the travesties of apartheid), and on p. 75: "Ons moet almal nog leer om met ons verlede saam te leef, om vrede te maak met wie ons was" (We must all learn to live with the past, to make peace with who we were).

The inability to fully comprehend the past is here shown at a textual level. The deficiency of language to represent the past is signified in the failure of punctuation and capital letters, elliptical sentences and stuttering utterances e.g. p. 158:

ek vertel my storie jy leen my jou oor my storie is my voete wat om 'n vuur dans ek dans die taal van dooie woorde

I tell my story you lend me your ear my story is my feet that dances around a fire I dance the language of dead words

It shows the working of amnesia and the repression of hurtful memories from the past, the quest to fill in pieces of memory and the emotional pain lying underneath the words. A similar point is made by Robbe (329) when she refers to the Antjie Krog's textual strategies to reconstruct the past.

Jansen's formal experiments illustrate how difficult it is to write about apartheid and create a meaningful account of the past. In this regard the narrator remarks: "In my weergawe van my geskiedenis is ek in die middel van die storie saam met my ouers en my familie wat ek van foto's af ken. In vele ander se idee van die geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika is ek uitgesluit [...] die ou geskiedenisvertellers lieg die waarheid en die nuwe heersers is nie veel beter nie" (129). (In my version of my history I am in the centre of the story with my parents and my family who I know from photo's. In many others' idea of history in South Africa I am excluded. The old historians lied the truth and the new rulers are not much better).

Some of the moving scenes in the book are the times when the narrator recounts her experiences as a young child with the apartheid laws. It is told in an understated manner but in such a way that the hurt and humiliation are unmistakable. For example when she tells about the times that they have to go around the back of the hotel to get a meal of left-overs (118). The emphasis that falls on the local in this small town installment of apartheid accentuates the working of apartheid machinery. The narrator describes her experiences with the Group Areas Act in her hometown the Strand with its long white beaches in this way:

Ek en my broers stap dorp toe [...] Ons loop op die sypaadjie tussen die witmense se huise [...] Ons mag nie daar woon nie, ons mag net inkopies doen en dan die dorp verlaat, ons mag nie in restaurante eet nie, veral nie in die Wimpy nie. (99–100)

My brothers and I walk to town [...] We walk on the pavement between the houses of white people [...] We are not allowed to stay there, we can only do shopping en then we must leave the town, we may not eat in the restaurants, especially not in the Wimpy.

The emphasis on white here and in other passages should be noted. It is as if the narrator uses it as a curse and turns it on itself. The narrator's ambivalent relationship with the Afrikaans language is another aspect that is explored in the book. Despite the fact that she was raised in an Afrikaans home with her father scolding them in his perfect Eastern Cape idiom and pure Afrikaans (63) her Afrikaans is perceived as strange when she and her child speak it on the school grounds. Here she plays in on the notion that Afrikaans is the white man's language. She alludes to the fact that her humanity was stifled in Afrikaans and that it was through German that she found her way back to the language (170).

An important intertext are the passages in German that are sometimes translated and sometimes not. She finds solace in German and in the multiple references to Bertolt Brecht. It becomes a meta-textual reflection on writing in times of crisis. She remembers the words of her German lecturer during the struggle years of the eighties: "Bertolt Brecht kon net sowel met ons gepraat het, vandag, hier in hierdie land."

(94) (Bertolt Brecht could just as well have spoken to us, today, in this country").

In the same vein these words can be relevant in the present in which the narrator is intensely aware of the socio-political role of the writer and the need to write about societal issues: “Watter soort tyd is dit waarin ons leef dat ‘n gesprek oor bome eintlik ‘n misdaad is omdat dit beteken dat ons oor soveel ander dinge swyg.” (94) (In which times do we live that a conversation about trees is really a crime because we remain silent about so many other things).

This makes the novel not just another love story or elegy about lost love, but a reflection on the role of literature in times of crisis and the impossibility to escape the past even though you wear the scars of that past.

6

Narrating the past from an insider’s view will for some time be a preoccupation in writing emanating from particular communities. For Black Afrikaans writing this is clear from the number of work that is self published or produced by little known publishers (see the debut anthologies of Paulse and Rhode). Against the backdrop of a society in which dystopia plays out on a national level this writing brims with a pride in local communities and its histories, customs and language and is produced with a distinct utopian desire to restore the humanity of its subjects after apartheid. The poet, play wright and academic Adam Small evinced this sentiment in the first column of the series “Counterpoint” which he wrote for the *Cape Times* newspaper after his return to public life and resuming his role as public intellectual and writer after more than a decade of silence: “One’s writing is probably better for not being a tepid post-script to people’s being, but designed to bring tribute to their humanity.” (Small 2015)

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