

Humiliated Consciousness in Ronnie Govender's *The Lahnee's Pleasure* and Ben Okri's *In Arcadia*

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Abstract

Ronnie Govender entitled both his major play (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977) and his later novel (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2008) *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, articulating that life was, and still is, a pleasure ground for a privileged minority in South Africa. Over a period of three decades, spanning both the periods before and after apartheid, his assessment of political conditions in the country of his birth remains as valid. Lao, in Ben Okri's *In Arcadia*, reveals how much of life in Europe today remains a "fairground for the favoured" (London: Head of Zeus, 2014, 108) and how little pampered and privileged people such as Jim, the director of the film project in this novel, see or comprehend of what is so often a secret ordeal for a person of colour. Okri writes of conditions and perceptions in contemporary Britain, while Govender writes of South Africa up to the present time; yet despite the many differences in their social contexts, their delineation of conditions that surround a person of colour living in British or South African society shows that interracial equality and brotherhood are still distant ideals in both countries. Both writers, however, do hold out a measured degree of hope in their depiction of Wordsworthian figures of humble labour: Mothie in Govender's novel and the train driver in Okri's.

Keywords: Ronnie Govender; Ben Okri; humiliated consciousness; *The Lahnee's Pleasure*; *In Arcadia*; race

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Lao felt himself ... materialising from that realm of normal humanity into a state that Camus called “humiliated consciousness”: the consciousness of being automatically suspect, automatically distrusted, automatically de-humanised, less than humanised, demonised, because of colour differences ... (Okri 2014, 106)

There is a signal congruity between Ronnie Govender’s and Ben Okri’s observations of how the private consciousness is humiliated by prejudices, suspicions, and ignorance, all of which are still deeply entrenched. Govender and Okri keenly observe the neo-colonial landscape which they inhabit; for them, South Africa and Britain respectively remain, in many cases, a pleasure ground or funfair for the visible few, and a hell for marginalised, unseen labouring masses, those who are still what Frantz Fanon (1968) labels “the wretched of the earth”. The minority live, while the majority merely exist. Govender and Okri describe the pain of being viewed as a person of colour first, and as a person second. Both writers testify to the agony of being assessed and classified as inferior because of a darker skin. Comparing how similarly these two writers, from such different backgrounds and contexts, portray the personal torment of being observed as “other” provides a useful index of existential angst today and an insight into the perceptions of those who believe they are “seeing” the other, when in fact they are looking at no more than a reflection of their own purblind vision. The style of writing used by each writer varies in significant ways, just as their unique adaptation of the form of the novel does. Identifying and comparing these distinctions comprises the main purpose of this essay; such variances and characteristic modes of expression reveal each writer’s “take” on the predicament of racial prejudice, which remains a universal social issue two centuries after the legislated abolition of slavery in Britain, a century after the end of indentured labour, and more than two decades after the end of apartheid.

We live in an only nominally free world, one in which other forms of slavery and indentured labour have emerged and in which racial segregation flourishes in new ways. Societies still suffer to this day the consequences of these injustices and systems of exploitation. Through their writing, however, thinkers such as Okri and Govender raise the hope of enlightening those many biased and narrow-minded individuals who resemble the “heaven-borns” of the Raj: characters such as Mr So-So in *The Lahnee’s Pleasure* (Govender 1977; Govender 2008) and Jim in *In Arcadia* (Okri 2014). Such insensible beneficiaries of social privilege assume the world belongs to them and them only and that it is solely there for their pleasure: they do not “see” those like Lao in *In Arcadia* and Mothie in *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, who have been pushed into the shadows around them; they neither feel their pain nor do they even know that they exist or that they might wish to live fully.

In his novel *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, Govender sedulously eschews the term “white”. In a witty yet determined manner, he turns the hegemonic pyramid of whiteness upside down: he insists that whites are deficient, not superior, as they lack colour or melanin, being “melanin-challenged” (Govender 2008, 2). Govender claims his right to be the observer of whites, and not the other way around: he “sees” whites as lacking in colour,

in blood, and in warmth. Metaphorically, this lack of feeling is often equated in Govender's writing with a lack of compassion, sensitivity, and humanity. By writing and observing in English, the language of the erstwhile rulers, Govender situates himself as scribe and as viewer. *He* is now the cameraman: *he* de-scribes on paper and in-scribes upon the collective consciousness the motives, inadequacies, and deficiencies of whites, who once examined and observed his people in India with anthropological detachment, enthusiasm, and curiosity, classifying and gazing at their peculiar "tribal" differences and languages in conquered India and Africa. As scribe and viewer, Govender appropriates subjectivity, agency, and visibility within his own domain; he inscribes his own perception of a world gone wrong—of so many postcolonial societies, such as South Africa, scarred and wounded by the impositions of racial classification, the rule of "white" law and the exploitation legalised under it.

Many "white" observers or writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries imprinted pejorative notions of colour upon a privileged, educated readership, initiating prejudices by associating skin pigmentation with wildness and disorder. Writers as celebrated as Charlotte Brontë characterise or effectively brand persons of colour, for example when Brontë portrays a character such as Bertha as the mad woman in *Jane Eyre* ([1847] 1960). Brontë's portrayal may be evidence of a subconscious repugnance for miscegenation despite the fact that, ironically, the so-called mad woman of colour brought the Rochester family the money they needed to maintain a lifestyle of baronial grandeur. Jean Rhys's (1966) re-writing of *Jane Eyre* allows Antoinette Cosway, Bertha in Brontë's version, to speak for women, the enslaved, and the oppressed. Rhys, like Govender and Okri, exposes the indifference of the Rochesters (or *lahnees*) of the world, whose prime instinct is mercenary. Such rewriting of colonial texts and white history is a primary focus of the work of Okri and Govender; both nudge aside the patriarchal hegemonic observer, writer, or photographer.

Govender regards the colonial and apartheid governments in South Africa as inherently lethal: a half-life of psychotic control, precise fascist laws, and exact obedience. At the start of his novel, Govender sets out the polarities of British "law and order" versus the free flow of human feelings—what Govender designates the current of the "Age of Aquarius". The Lawrentian opposition that he quickly establishes between spiritual/emotional death under oppressive dictate, and the liberal life of free expression and interracial tolerance, is sustained potently in Govender's collection of short stories *At The Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996) and both versions of *The Lahnee's Pleasure*. Mothie, in both the dramatic and prose versions of *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, shares the shadowy aspect of marginalised existence with Lao in Okri's *In Arcadia*. Mothie and Lao are not seen as human beings by the seeing minority; they are viewed as no more than functionaries within the system that sustains the minority. Okri sustains a motif of filming or seeing life as the precinct of occidental professionals—those few granted the right to point the camera and choose the still. By this technique of novelistic metaphor, Okri both critiques elite white agency and indicts notions of an egalitarian Western society. Lao is filmed, seen, watched. Mothie, in Govender's texts, is seen and

relied upon as a labourer but unrecognised as an individual called Mothie. The company servant who has laboured tirelessly for the firm of sugar planters for thirty uninterrupted years remains unknown.

In a moment of extreme anxiety, when it seems his daughter is shamed, Mothie approaches his own assertion of self and subjectivity, a moment of seeing and being seen for himself. For a while he questions the *lahnee*'s power and almost becomes his own "man", his own person. In both the 1977 play and the post-apartheid prose text, however, Govender significantly consigns Mothie back to serfdom, together with those millions of marginalised Mothies whom he represents both before and after apartheid. Mothie's will to live, rather than to exist, fails him and he returns to being a "good little black boy" (Govender 1977, 141), subservient to the *lahnee* and in awe of his power. The Stranger (Govender) in the play, who goads Mothie to claim subjectivity and visibility, watches with bitter disappointment as Mothie resigns himself and sinks into invisibility as nothing more than a grateful labourer. The fact that Govender repeats this loss of self in the post-apartheid prose text signifies what Govender regards as the failure of liberation in profound ways: its inability to grant dignity and autonomy to citizens. Similarly, Lao's invisibility denies the much-vaunted multiculturalism of liberal, modern Britain. Lao has to explain or prove his existence, make himself visible, to the white director of the film.

Although the tenor of the two authors' arguments shows considerable agreement, Govender's style differs markedly from that of Okri. Govender is iconoclastic, outrageous even in his humour; he is determined to speak of those things which are forbidden. Govender exposes any attempt to establish an elite group of privileged governors, whether British from 1901 to 1947, Afrikaner from 1948 to 1994, or post-1994 black elite. Okri, by contrast, is lyrical to the point of appearing ephemeral in his style. His prose is known for a limpid beauty and fullness of phrasing. Okri sets up the reader, but in a different way. His poetic prose is so alluring and seductive that the reader is quickly lost in dense, beautiful writing that rolls across the wordscape. Characteristic of Okri's high prose is the language of his *Intuition in the Garden (2)* (2014, 42):

Rivers ran and danced in space, and ribboned the earth, silvery and changeable, unique in space, harbouring its own cities and indolent fishes, deep and darkly joyful in its own mystery too. And the wind blew from the first breath, and cleansed the world roundabout, and chased the waters on, and ruffled playfully the hair of trees and bushes, and sped the gentle seeds of lazy flowers over the great distances between being born and being real; and the wind cavorted and played, danced and twisted, as it felt, in its own immortal mystery.

The soporific beauty of this purple passage lulls the reader into a pastoral world of the past, the Arcadia of Theocritus, Virgil, and Wordsworth, a tradition beloved of the English poets. In a remarkably short space, Okri has captured the essence of prelapsarian nature at play, free and untrammelled. The biblical (King James version) quality of phrasing is apparent in the line introduced by the conjunctive and cumulative "And the

wind blew”. This plenitude, Okri suggests, is our true home and right condition—being at one with our bucolic origins. In the heart of each member of his pilgrim film crew there lies hidden a primordial recognition of this true state of being. By suggesting this common condition, Okri can claim a monogenist truth: that all human beings, irrespective of pigmentation, are of one family. In Okri’s novel, each member of the film crew discovers an Arcadia within; each finds a degree of inner peace, common humanity, and inner tranquillity. The Edenic echoes of this passage recall the world as it once was. For Okri, this playful freedom of a perfect world alludes to many parts of verdant and unspoilt paradisaal Africa before the white mist of colonialism choked its being, as described in Okri’s *Starbook* (2008), before the scramble for Africa and the wholesale appropriation of a continent under various European rulers.

The pilgrimage of a group of complaining, dissatisfied Britons to a discovery of Arcadian inner truth is made even more complex and richer than the ancient pastoral tradition which Okri invokes. The favoured whites in *In Arcadia*, blind to their privilege and too loud in their cries for entitlement, entirely fail to recognise their good fortune or how much of their wealth is earned on the back of slavery, colonialism, and unequal global trade. But they are educated by Okri. As poetic *vates*, or shaman-figure, Okri, through Lao, teaches Jim the film director to see feelingly—to consider the plight of those around him, of those whose lot may be far more terrible than his own. Okri enlightens each member of the crew by showing them the Africanised Arcadia which they need to see. Okri grafts the pastoral tradition to his own pre-colonial African Eden. He attaches issues of primordial Arcadian happiness to Africa before colonial rule and the iniquity of worlds apart, of “developed” and “developing” nations—the euphemisms for global exploitation of vulnerable economies.

Okri’s chief concern is for social harmony and equality, but he hides his moral purpose and ethical/ethnic intensity behind a richly flamboyant lyricism, which allows him to appear to be wandering off at random moments into prose soliloquy of reflection or enthusiasm. Both Okri and Govender frequently employ their styles to mask the real target of their socio-political critique. Govender’s rambunctious burlesque style offsets his grave political and humanistic purpose: to construct egalitarian community life and create responsible citizens in a free society. Typical of Govender’s prose smoke-screen is the following passage (2008, 2):

In this neck of the woods [Natal], nostalgia for Empire lingered on in the minds and hearts of its melanin-challenged denizens who had wanted God to Save the Queen’s dominion even after the Boers had changed the Union of South Africa into a Republic. Their forebears had long ago sailed from the overcrowded tenements of a plague-ridden little island, celebrated in literature, not without a touch of romance, as the Sceptred Isle.

Govender’s irreverence and dislike of power is as obvious as his sharp wit. His play on the United Kingdom’s national anthem is underscored by the use of the word “denizens” and his acerbic insistence that Britons did not sail from Britain imbued with any philanthropic or religious zeal to share their concern for humanity or the words of

Jesus's Gospel, but to escape disease and overcrowding and to search for an easy life. The three C's of Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce were used to justify countless land grabs in Africa (Pakenham 1991) and elsewhere, yet the only true concern was predatory, as ruthless and mercenary as the Spanish occupation of South America. Govender's harshness, however, is muted and effectively disguised by the humorous tone of his writing, which maintains a light quality. The socio-economic gravity of his concern is easily mistaken for levity.

Govender inverts the accepted propaganda of the global British conqueror in exactly the same way that E. D. Morel turns about the terms of white pillaging. Morel changes the imperial slogan of "the white man's burden", taken from Rudyard Kipling's poem, to title his account of the British empire's rapacity in Africa, *The Black Man's Burden* (1920). Both Okri and Govender use the same technique of rewriting the language of imperialist propaganda and its socio-economic consequences a century later. Morel's thinking, that black men bear the weight of white men on their shoulders, is correct: black slaves cleared forest land and bushland across the globe to allow slave-owners to become rich planters. Yet the force of white "spin" is so great and well-funded that history has not yet embraced Morel's truths and admitted that slave owners were and are still, in some respects, borne economically on the shoulders of blacks, or so-called developing economies. Today, the trade advantages of "developed" countries, mainly American and European, sustain the global suppression of so-called "developing" countries, what were once termed "Third World" countries. Blacks are still burdened by colonial exploitation on a larger scale.

Okri and Govender infer such unjust socio-economic gaps while they deal overtly with the intimate psychological and social effects of the chasm between the standards of living in "First" and "Third World" lands. Govender's satiric narrative structure allows him to scatter covert references to socio-political injustices between the amusing or diverting episodes of his general novelistic or dramatic form. Okri, on the other hand, submerges all obvious political concerns beneath a tide of lyrically intense prose or poetry, a strategy which has benefits similar to those of Govender's irreverent *satura* or *melange* of elements. Okri's lyricism allows him to cloak an equally intense political purpose and an urgent social conscience; his habit of lulling the reader allows him to ambush his reading "prey". Okri's fine writing can easily be mistaken for whimsical, self-indulgent description that meanders away from its plot. But these long sections of seemingly unrelated lyric self-indulgence render the sections of abrupt and disarming truth-telling far more potent. Govender's particular type of satire and Okri's lyric indirection are deployed by these master-writers as a means of (i) disarming readers who have never thought about how lucky they are and/or (ii) arming those unlucky readers who, like Mothie and Lao, have lost their will to resist capitalist hegemony and claim their right to life.

Because Govender is first a playwright, his prose bears many of the marks of a playscript: his prose is often drama-prose. So he describes the son of Mr Cato, a mayor

of Durban, as: “Richard So-So was an Englishman, born and brainwashed” (2008, 15). This quick and witty turn of phrase is obviously born of the theatre, made to have the audience rolling in the aisles. Similarly, Govender’s grasp of slang is derived from the theatre (15):

Inevitably, the Pekkies Ous, as the African menials were called, were placed towards the end of the roll call of the Blithering Idiots. And the Bruin Ous, who were the Coloureds, you may ask. Na, the Bruin Ous didn’t do this kind of graf [work]—they were mechanics, welders and bricklayers—the Wit Ous made sure that their generally unplanned-for Offspring were placed just above the other darkies through another of their smart-arse edicts, the Job Reservation Act. ... No expense was spared in the course of effecting such imaginative and meticulous social engineering.

Govender’s exact replication of slang creates a liveliness and humour that allows the audience/readership momentarily to inhabit, in their imagination, the community which he describes. The use of “Na” and “Ous” copies the patterns of street speech so exactly that Govender fabricates in words the scene before us. Then, just as suddenly as his word-props are up, he turns to the phraseology of overt social critique to reveal his intention and political concern: to expose the iniquity of Nazi-style “meticulous social engineering” under apartheid. Govender’s ability to move so rapidly between realistic and credible description to sharply analytical prose allows him to set up the reader, luring the reader into the beguiling world of his make-believe and then, just as suddenly, ambushing the unsuspecting reader.

The farce of imperialism is exposed by Govender primarily in his mockery of Mr So-So, who assumes all the airs of a born lord but has none of the graces. Govender uses this caricature of the pomposity of one representative of the British lower class lording it out in the colonies to caricature a nation of Mr So-So’s who lived so long on ill-gotten gains that they came to believe their own propaganda of racial superiority. Mr So-So is the son of Mr Cato, once no more than a Covent Garden barrow boy in London, but raised to mayoral grandeur in colonial Natal.

In his adaptation of the 1977 play to the 2008 novel, Govender alters the substance of events mainly by his addition of a new first section, which tells of Mr So-So’s wife conducting a liaison with one of the black servants at the hostelry which she inherited and which Mr So-So runs. The addition of this section is significant politically, because Govender registers that, at root, racial conditions have not changed that much over thirty-two years. Had Govender been convinced that a post-Mandela Arcadia had been inaugurated and that the rainbow nation had actually emerged like a radiant butterfly from the grim chrysalis of the past, he would have written a completely new tale. Instead, his only major change is to elaborate on the hypocrisy, folly, and deceit of British greed. Like Okri, Govender can see that the soulless society of Europe, a continent which once boasted of Christian faith and sent missionaries to the four corners of the world, now devotes itself to socialism and materialist atheism. They expose those “explorers” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who pretended to be

humanitarians first of all, civilised to a pre-eminent degree and full of Christian compassion and altruism. This is not a case of the empire writing back; it is a scorching reproach to those who paraded themselves as superior in every way, for so long that they came, and have come, to believe their own propaganda. The individual European has not changed in their basic nature: their cunning is relentless in pursuit of an ever higher standard of living for a small island of privileged inhabitants. By exposing the emptiness of Mrs So-So's life, her husband is revealed as a perfect figure of ignorance and arrogance. Govender portrays the same hollowness of being, the lack of any ethical purpose for living, as a national British disease. The consumerist foundations and habits of wanting more for less are by now so deeply part of the spoilt little nation's culture that citizens cannot easily make their way back to a life of meaning, humility, and sincerity.

Okri, like Govender, holds the torch of humanity to light the way. In *In Arcadia* he deliberately places the train driver as a figure of usefulness and humility, much like Wordsworth's "leech gatherer" in the poem "Resolution and Independence". The train driver works his garden and creates happiness in a modest yet real way, which associates him directly with the Mothies of the world. The train driver is set in the novel to point to the pretensions and false artistic endeavours of Jim's crew, who lack the humanity and humility required to make the sort of masterpiece to which Jim so urgently aspires.

In *The Lahnee's Pleasure* Mr So-So's wife was far better bred than he was: she was Bronwyn Mary-Anne Braithwaite before she married the son of the Durban mayor/ex-Cockney barrow boy. Not that Govender has any quarrel with Cockneys as such; what he does object to are low-class Britons acting as if they were superior simply because they were white living among people of colour, whom they regarded as colonial serfs. Bronwyn's parents opposed the marriage because they could see through the pretence, and pretentiousness, of Cato's son. As they predicted, the son's raw edges, crudity, and materialism soon showed through and Bronwyn was left weltering in a loveless marriage. In one of his most incisive metaphors, Govender compares her half-life with that of Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, who was allowed to live only as long as she saw things reflected in a mirror instead of in reality. But Bronwyn's desire for the reality of passion proved as indomitable as that of Tennyson's heroine. Govender is satirising the emotional aridity of the British people, so many of whom prefer to live a half-life, seeing passion (and reality) in a mirror only. Mrs So-So is liberated, however, by real passion in the arms of her lover and emotional redeemer, Fanyana Ncobo (Govender 2008, 30–31):

All of eighteen, Fanyana Ngcobo, one day to become field colonel of the ANC's underground military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation. Right now, though, Fanyana's glorious spear sashayed ever so visibly beneath his white denim uniform, the standard wear of the menials, as he strode into the ken of our sighing Lady of Shalott ... and as Fanyana plunged in his spear she cried out as she hit the high note of human existence. Verily the Big bang couldn't have spewed into the Milky Way such a galaxy of stars as she experienced in that explosion of ultimate passion. That glorious

first night, as she felt the weight of unfulfilment lift from her slender shoulders, the Lady of Shalott uttered triumphantly into the bracing summer night:
The curse of the Covent Garden barrow boy is no more upon me!

To Govender, sexual desire crosses all barriers of race, creed, or sexual orientation; it is the ultimate proof of monogenism.¹ To pretend that one race is inherently superior is an outrage to Govender. The “curse of the barrow boy” is the false life, the untruthfulness of the Cato regime, apartheid, colonialism, fascism, and all creeds that oblige members to live at odds with nature and natural impulses. Govender invokes the spirit of Aquarius at the start of his novel and sustains it deftly throughout to portray the polarities of natural, ethical, and truthful life versus artificial, unethical, and fallacious existence. Govender keeps his 2008 narrative pitted against white supremacy well after liberation under Mandela in 1994, because he perceives that the curse of the barrow boy has not disappeared or been broken. The old game of maintaining the status quo, business as usual, is still being played and for this reason Govender not only retains the narrative structure of his playscript of 1977 but elaborates upon it in the tale of love between Bronwyn and Fanyana.²

Okri, speaking for the few, exposes the blindness, indifference, and ignorance of racial inequality through Lao’s sudden and determined revelation of the pain of being unseen, uncared for, and ignored. Lao’s communication of such agony is sparked by the border crossing from England into France. Usually, Lao is resigned to a shadow-land existence, very like that portrayed by Govender as the existence of Bronwyn under the Cato curse: “True, he had learned to live as a hermit, a recluse, and had as little contact as possible with the ugly things that induced suicide upon his soul. He had found this truce effective, this de-materialisation useful, this exile within England practical ... He, Lao, dwelled thus, in a splendid unreality that made reality malleable” (Okri 2014, 105). But now Lao faces the prospect of passport control—of being assessed and questioned as a person of colour. As such he is treated and regarded differently from privileged whites, who are part of the hegemony and allowed free range, as if the world was their playground. His anxiety is too great not to be expressed openly (106):

But now, with entry into Paris before him, facing the army of immigration control as he had done before in his life, sometimes with disastrous results, Lao felt himself ... materialising from that realm of normal humanity into a state that Camus called “humiliated consciousness”: the consciousness of being automatically suspect, automatically distrusted, automatically de-humanised, less than humanised, demonised,

1 For polygenists such as Edward Long (1774) and his white supremacist followers today, miscegenation is a capital crime since, to them, the white race is a separate species and cannot be mixed with “other” races. Govender, however, believes in monogenism and takes as fundamental the notion that all human beings share a common humanity.

2 Govender knows that laws may have changed and that the proscriptions of white rule may have been erased on paper, but the mind-set of the haves has not altered significantly. Beneath the veneer of liberation rhetoric, capitalist prerogatives have simply recruited a new elite, a new members’ list.

because of colour differences, because of varieties in nature's canvas, because of history, the eyes, what people read into the skin, illusions.

Okri, we suspect, is speaking through Lao of his own agony. Lao (Okri) tries three times to alert Jim, the white film director, to the existential torment that a black man suffers in a predominantly white land. Even after an explicit second attempt at explaining his predicament, and that of millions like him, Jim is "puzzled". Lao tries to explain to him (107):

There are many invisible lines in the world. You cross the line without noticing it. You are unaffected by it. For you there is no line, no chemical reaction, no danger of being humiliated, insulted, bundled up and thrown out, shouted at, animalised, locked up in a back room with a gag that eventually chokes and kills. You wander through it all so unknowing. But if I go past the line a chain reaction is set off. The line is meant to weed out people like me, different people. The line trips me up. I get detained. I get questioned. It is a question of pigment. It makes pigs of people. My innocence is my crime. I am condemned at birth, because of a different sun.

Only on his third attempt does Lao succeed in getting through to Jim. Lao compares his situation with that of Jewish people during the Holocaust (108):

Not so long ago being of a different blood, and belonging to the main trunk whence sprang the dreams of Jesus Christ, set off fatal chain reaction at those invisible lines. And the lines determined those who could live normally, as though life were a fairground for the favoured, and those who were bundled off to death camps, to be tortured, gassed, exterminated, made into soap, for the cleansing of society. I am one of those now who get in the way of such homogenising.

At this point, after three attempts to enable Jim to see feelingly into the condition of those around him, Jim suddenly realises what Lao is conveying to him: "Jim looked at Lao intensely, as if seeing him with new eyes" (109). Jim is, finally, intellectually enlightened and emotionally awakened. Jim had sight before but now, through Lao's dogged and patient hints, suggestions, and blunt explication, he gains insight. Lao ends his education of Jim with a final admonition: "Don't sleep through life thinking that all is well under the sun and within society. If you see them dragging me away don't look away. If I cry out listen" (111). Okri speaks for the millions who have to bear the black man's burden every day—who have to carry a humiliated consciousness, existing but not living, grateful to be in the shadows, hoping to be left alone.

The same contestation of power, and the difficulty of negotiating a way between a visible life for the few and subservient invisibility for the many, is encapsulated in Govender's 2008 novel. *The Stranger* (Govender), who is an activist and a socialist, attempts to educate and conscientise Sunny, a cowed servant of white hegemony (Govender 2008, 141):

As he also left, Sunny looked smugly at the Stranger. “You see, if you’re nice to a white man, you see how they’ll help you out?”

The Stranger had difficulty keeping down the bile. “Yes, I suppose that’s true if you’re a good little black boy and say ‘Yes, sir, no sir’ all the damned time.”

Mothie, in many ways the central figure of both the play and the novel, vacillates between Sunny’s mode of passive opportunism and the stranger’s activism. At first he favours the old adherence to servility (152):

By now the lahnee had come into the bar, hearing Mothie’s tantrums. He was annoyed, which was nothing unusual ... “Oh no, not you again.”

All Mothie could see was his benefactor. “Oh hello, boss, thank you, boss. The police was nice to me. Thank you, boss!”

This display of servility found its mark. So-So preened himself and grabbed the opportunity to play the expected role of the lahnee to the hilt.

Mothie had nothing but admiration for his considerate lahnee. “Lekkerlahnee, see how he likes me!”

Mothie’s greatest difficulty in life arises when the flashy Johnnie seduces his daughter and the liaison is reported to Mothie by his youngest son. Two sides vie for the honour of assisting Mothie: the old politics of the *lahnee* (capitalism) versus the new politics of the Stranger (socialism). Mothie vacillates between the two sides as he tries to decide which is the better bet. Govender’s text exposes such a feckless survivalist strategy as the direct consequence of decades of humiliated consciousness: the complicated trap of slavery/indenture/racist oppression. The Mothies of Govender’s world have been so stripped of humanity and hope that they have become the willing, obsequious pawns of empire, grateful to be alive and allowed to serve the *sahib/baas*. Despite the great efforts of the Stranger, the champion of independence and personal autonomy, it is the *lahnee* who triumphs and solves Mothie’s difficulty. This power enables Mr So-So to display the largesse of the white race. In general he is able to patronise Mothie. He makes Mothie’s problem seem small and insignificant. Metonymically, Govender speaks, through the characters in his play and novel, of the general political situation of South Africa today. Mothie’s humiliation and return to the terms of social stratification are symptomatic of the suspicion with which Govender views the utopian vision of a rainbow nation.

The Stranger, like Govender, refuses to play along with the game of capitalist largesse: he refuses to “join the club”, to drink with the patronising So-So. The Stranger utters a final warning about the ethics of “business as usual”, the pleasure ground of the few: “Shocked into silence, the lahnee could only stand and stare. The Stranger made for the door, kicked over a chair on the way, stopped and whirled on the lahnee. His tone was not measured any more, it was unrestrained, all malevolence and foreboding, ‘One day, white man! One day!’ And he disappeared into the darkness” (166). This image of irreconcilable adversaries and a day of reckoning is drawn exactly unchanged from the 1977 play script. The fact that Govender has retained this key passage marks his

pessimism about the country's future as long as the white capitalist "pigmentocracy", as Govender calls it in his prologue, maintains its system of control and the return to "business as usual".

Govender is unforgiving of the So-So world of pragmatism: in the epilogue to the novel he consigns Mr So-So to a room in a Salvation Army hostel, where he lives out the last days of his imperial bombast in bursts of the British national anthem. By contrast, Mothie enjoys a retirement in his successful son's home, as a just reward for his life of humble labour. The humiliation meted out to Mothie is reversed and heaped on the head of the lazy, incompetent loafer Mr So-So. The Stranger and Govender reassert their socialist values.

Okri/Lao and Govender/Mothie, an African in London and an Indian in Africa, inhabit different worlds, yet both suffer and register the effects of humiliated consciousness in the art of their writing. By different means, both succeed to some extent, through their art, to shake off the bonds of servility and emerge to live, not merely exist. Despite his largely dystopian forecast for South Africa, Govender, in his epilogue, imposes some prospect of justice: a slender hope of defeating the capitalist sleaze of So-So and his world of mercantilist compromise, bargaining, and horse-trading. Although Okri holds out little hope of any sudden social metamorphosis for Britain, his enlightenment of Jim suggests a qualified optimism remarkably similar to that offered by Govender. Neither Govender nor Okri are duped by idle dreams of a bucolic homeland of sweetness and light. Both thinkers root their hopes of a just green space for all in the common recognition of a mutually dependent and respectful humanity, gained through labour and honesty.

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