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Haunting the Present: The Presence of History in Post-Apartheid Literature

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*To my scouts,
for I owe this to them*

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INTRODUCTION

History and Narration

When I was in primary school, I remember my teacher explaining how the subject of history distinguishes between primary and secondary sources, supplying respectively a direct and indirect testimony of a given event or situation. I can also remember the puzzlement as I discovered that a simple object, a piece of stone or a bone were held on a higher rank than an accurate written account dealing with the same event. I could not understand why archaeologists could not be content with a detailed report about a battle or the construction of a temple, and had still to break their backs digging up some evidence.

I asked for clarification, and I was answered that yes, written evidence can be very useful, but you can never trust it without cross-checking it with what you actually found on the field. The person who wrote that could lie, be inattentive, or just omit something because they thought it irrelevant or assumed that everybody already knew that. I accepted the explanation, even if I could not figure out why anybody would write something that is not true. Of course, I was to discover that the issue is not so straightforward.

If we think about ancient history, there are a number of examples of archaeologists gone mad trying to discover whether certain events narrated by some of the most ancient texts actually took place. The siege of Troy narrated in the Iliad or the ark that according to the Bible saved Noah from the great deluge are just examples of how written sources can mislead the quest for a historical truth if the great variability concerning the act of writing is not taken into account. Moreover, the examples chosen are both from ancient books that cannot be referred to one identifiable author: the book of Genesis in the Bible is a collection of different sources that accounts for the myth of origins in the Jewish religion, and Homer is widely considered to be a figure representing a whole tradition of Greek storytellers, to which a final editor gave a unitary shape.

Representation, Culture and Discourse

First of all we have to consider that writing always has a purpose. Be it for the need of communication, remembering, issuing documents, filling in archives or just putting down one's thoughts in order to consider them more clearly, every function of writing has its own rules and is characterized by a form that is chosen to fulfill that purpose. Failing to recognize the form of a text – let's call it genre – will result in failing to get out of it all the information it can give. Returning to the former example, Noah's great flood is an episode written within the genre of wisdom literature, and seeing it as a historical account of something that really happened in the past is in the first place an error of interpretation.

When we talk about history, the narrative aspect must always be taken into

account. As any other form of representation, historical writing cannot be assumed as history as such: we need to consider the influence of the authorial subject on it, which unfailingly – though maybe unconsciously – applies their ideological lenses and schemes of representation. Stuart Hall says that

Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.¹

Representation is then the way meaning is given to the things we represent, and this system of production of sense around things, which we could call “discourse” using Michel Foucault’s category, necessarily involves a process of selection. As the topic I am now considering is the representation of history and its perception, it is quite simple to imagine how such a subject of representation must present a series of problems, since history covers almost all and everything. History is such a massive source of stories that one is compelled to choose, in order to summarize, if they want to create an account that can be communicated, and it is just the modality of such choices that which outlines the perspective of the historian.

As I said before, the ideological lenses that lead to the choice of the modes of historical representation can sometimes be unconscious, and it is culture which supplies the subject with the categories to interpret reality. It is the field of cultural studies (to which the aforementioned Stuart Hall belongs) that investigate upon the influence that a certain social and cultural situation has on the production of art, goods and meanings. The elements to be taken into account are many: ideology, social class, nationality, ethnicity, gender and sexuality for example. The mixing of all these factors makes it necessary to consider the surrounding context in order to interpret the meaning of a

¹ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (SAGE Publications Limited, 1997), p. 15

cultural product. Cultural studies are therefore based on relativistic theories, and have become a model of interpretation along with constructivism from the 1960s on. The philosophical basis of this theories is that the only reality that we can get to know is that represented by human thought. Reality is still considered to be independent from human thought, but meaning and knowledge are always human constructions.

In this perspective, culture is the invisible goggles that we wear while understanding the world, but it can nonetheless become the object of the contruction of meaning. The schemes and ideologies which usually operate without the awareness of the subject can be intentionally used to build, or to strengthen, a certain view of the world, since a particular interpretation of the past often serves an ideological purpose in the present (see for example the negationist theories about the Holocaust in countries like Iran). This is usually something carried out by the ruling class through its institutions, which combine to bring about the construction of a “discourse”, i.e., in a Foucaultian sense, a closed set of structured knowledge that represents a vision of the world – or of a specific field of knowledge – supported by the ruling class. According to postcolonial theories, this strong construction of knowledge is the instrument of administration of the hegemonic power that the ruling classes impose upon the subaltern classes, which find themselves to represent their world only through the ideological tools of the accepted discourse, being prevented from the construction of a counter-discourse, a different way of seeing reality.

The challenge to the hegemonic system of representation was the first obstacle that colonized people found in their way to self-consciousness, in order to get rid of the orientalist look that made them feel different and always wanting in a cultural development that they were prevented from achieving. That was also the aim of writers at the dawn of postcolonial literatures, who had to face the difficulty of breaching the

thick walls of colonial discourse to find a way into the official literature and culture that denied them public recognition. More than other groups, women suffered from an imposed silence, being often the weakest and less considered part of society, and it is because of this situation that the role of women in the novels I here analyse is even more telling.

It was the growth of different voices challenging colonial discourse that undermined not just that ideology in itself, but the very possibility of an all-embracing ideology. It is the case of the postmodern theories, that basically disrupted the idea of a univocal vision of the world: ideologies, the great systems of thought, are no longer able to fulfill the need for meaning in a world that is changing faster and faster, with so many variables to be considered and a continuing hybridization and contamination between cultures. If on the one hand this process of discourse-weakening may show a negative connotation, on the other hand it gives room for an opening towards other ways of thinking, intercultural dialogue, and leads to a lack of presumption about truth. And it is here that postmodernism meets the postcolonial, since the former colonies have been an extraordinary field where lots of intercultural situations can be found and struggle to make their voices heard.

The Postmodern Perception of History

The interesting aspect about postmodernism is that in the formulation of its theories it always considers the individual's reception of the subject at issue. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard explains how postmodernism is an age characterized by a mistrust of the grand narratives, the comprehensive explanations that could account

for a justification of the human condition and society. The ideas of progress and of scientific knowability of the world that the Enlightenment put as the basis of the modern age, or the Hegelian-Marxist vision of history as a chain of dialogic consequences leading towards perfection, are no longer believed to be able to represent reality. To shake off the desire of a narration that could unify and make a whole of a multifaceted world can yet be useful to allow us to recognise its nuances: every single micronarrative has a truth of its own, which can contrast with others, forming a set of extremely particularised truths that are not unified in a higher philosophical synthesis.

This scepticism toward metanarratives is – in a poststructuralist perspective – a positive thing, for it acknowledges the natural condition of chaos and disorder of reality and focuses attention on the importance of the individual event. As a consequence, it tends to dismantle all those power structures based upon such metanarrative discourses, which ignore the heterogeneity of the human experience, so that their ideological use of knowledge is made evident. A localized narrative is therefore a preferable standpoint to the untrustworthy metanarrative: it brings into focus the singular event, accounting for the multiplicity of reality without any claim of universality.

Lyotard considers that a suitable category to understand the postmodern stance before reality is the concept of the sublime, as formulated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*: the feeling of aesthetic anxiety that we experience when confronting wide and wild sights like craggy mountains or a stormy sea, that is to say whenever we are faced with objects that are so huge and boundless that our mind is unable to take them in as a whole, so that we experience a clash between our reason (which knows that all objects are finite) and our perception and imagination (which sees that object as incalculably large). Lyotard interestingly underlines how even one of the philosophical fathers of the Enlightenment admitted that the human mind cannot always organise the

world rationally, being incapable of bringing everything neatly under concepts. Similarly, the world ruled by the late capitalism has come to consist in an endless flow of information, which tends to saturate and overwhelm the ability of the subject to understand and cope with all these stimuli. The observers are so fully wrapped by this alienating net that they cannot take a look at it from a distance so as to get an idea of the underlying structure, and are therefore bound to deal with scattered pieces of reality without a unifying meaning.

Jean Baudrillard developed these ideas with particular reference to the postmodern perception of history. He argued that after the end of the Cold War, and even more so with the development of globalization, the idea of historical progress collapsed, and not because the ends of history had been fulfilled, rather they simply vanished, being the utopian visions of the world no longer fit to interpret it. Baudrillard thought that the idea of an end of history itself was just an illusion, and pointed out how it was yet utilised in world politics as an excuse for unjustifiable actions and choices, even though its validity was increasingly declining. In his opinion, in the postmodern era history is too strong a referent: it presents unclear and critical areas, requires to be deeply analysed, and for this it becomes a useless and obsolete object, left aside preferring to deal with an eternal present which is seen as untied from the chain of event that caused it. History, with its complexity, could unveil the artificiality of the present, but as the last grand teleological myth, the absolute and all-comprehensive narration, it is deposed.

Recalling the idea of the sublime, history is too vast to be grasped and reduced to coherent concepts, so it is impossible for us to completely understand the multiple nature of human life. When people are led to see the world as a coherent system, what they really see is a simulated version of reality, a “hyperreality” which is yet devoid of meaning, without depth. Reality does not become unreal, but its truth dies out as it is

represented. History appears to the postmodern standpoint as a warehouse full of juxtaposed images and icons, which can be fetched and activated even out of their context. The past is not recovered to give an explanation of the present, but becomes instead the object of an aesthetic taste that, lacking interest in the deeper meaning of historical events, is content with a soulless surface representation.

This presumed superficiality of the postmodern is criticized by the American Marxist philosopher Frederic Jameson, who sees postmodern thought as the cultural outcome of late capitalism. Jameson analysed postmodernism following Marxist literary criticism, together with notions from structuralism and culture studies, taking as main principle the need to always historicize: more than the literary text itself, the important thing to study is the interpretative framework within which it is created. He argued that the postmodern scepticism towards metanarratives originated from the labour conditions imposed on the intellectual by the late capitalist mode of production. The sectorialization of knowledge into over-specified and apparently self-contained fields led to questioning over the existence of some fundamental principles or beliefs that would be the basic ground of all inquiry, and consequently to a relativization of truth-claims.

In Jameson's opinion, two main features of postmodernism are the lack of depth and the crisis of historicity. Postmodern aesthetic representation does not require an interpretative participation from the viewer, and indeed it prevents this like a pair of sunglasses. It presents objects in a way that make them appear shallow and inaccessible, almost lifeless, deprived of their natural context and therefore unable to tell us anything, becoming just iconic fetishes (like the ironic example of t-shirts with the portrait of Che Guevara on them). On the other hand, the multiplication of the sources of information caused a weakening of the authority of memory, resulting in the perception of a present

that has no organic relationship with its past. History becomes then a sort of museum of juxtaposed images that can be plundered without regard for their meaning, creating an anachronistic pastiche.

Unlike Jameson, Linda Hutcheon is not so critical towards postmodernism. In her opinion there is a high level of historical awareness and sophistication in the postmodern use of the past. Instead of seeing it as an uncritical approach, she argues that the sometimes naive treatment of this subject reaches the field of irony, resulting in self-aware and self-undermining discourses that stir suspicion towards their own intentions and strip bare the structures of meaning. History can then be thought in a different way, being aware of the fictional elements that every kind of narration involves. The purpose of the postmodern approach is to denature what we are used to receiving as a matter of fact, to reveal the fabrication behind every act of communication, to reshape any claim of truth. What is represented is not so much reality as its representation; metatextuality becomes a main feature, that highlights the inner workings of sense-construction. There is a strong consciousness that the only reality we are able to reach is just a form of text, so that history is no longer perceived as some sort of truth but is instead put on the same plane as fiction, and by this nature it can be seen under different perspectives and is never set once for all. Postmodern historical fiction can indeed formulate new testimonies of past events, shifting the standpoint to some subaltern protagonist and giving new meaning to the established historical canon. Linda Hutcheon coins the phrase “historiographic metafiction” to indicate those literary texts that give an interpretation of the past but at the same time recognise it as partial and incomplete. All is text, all is artefact; historiography as source of truth is regarded as fiction, and viceversa fiction becomes a source of historical truth. It is in this demystification of every constructed truth that the political stance of

postmodernism lies.

The assumption that “there is nothing outside the text” is the axial statement of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive criticism, meaning that the context is the only framework able to convey meaning, without a reference needed to some originating external reality, be it some metaphysical truth or just the author’s will or intention. In this way, objectivity and the search for an external and fixed truth become just illusions, and human knowledge is then seen as founded on a series of binary metaphysical oppositions (signifier/signified, soul/body, ideal/real) that Derrida considers to be socially-constructed violent hierarchies. His deconstructive approach aims at revealing the artificiality of these oppositions, and proposes that the starting point of all investigation should be seeing this relationship as non-pertinent. This argument saw its origin in the research about language and linguistics, but deconstructionist ideas found a proper field of application in epistemology, stirring up a debate about the role and the ruling power of language in the creation and the transmission of knowledge.

As far as historical research is concerned, deconstructionism set a new way of looking at the historical text. Deconstructive readings of history could not but affect historiography as a discipline, undermining all claims of objective and unbiased representation of past events. In his *Deconstructing History*, the British historian Alun Munslow summarizes the main features of this approach to historical practice, and asks himself what the significance of narrative is in generating historical knowledge:

I will argue that the genuine nature of history can be understood only when it is viewed not solely and simply as an objectivised empiricist enterprise, but as the creation and eventual imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past: a process that directly affects the whole project, not merely the writing up stage. This understanding, for convenience, I shall call the deconstructive consciousness.²

2 Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

In his opinion, “a historical narrative is a discourse that places disparate events in an understandable order”,³ but the links of causality between them are not objective, being supplied by the assumptions made by the historian.

The very act of organising historical data into a narrative not only constitutes an illusion of ‘truthful’ reality, but in lending a spurious tidiness to the past can ultimately serve as a mechanism for the exercise of power in contemporary society.⁴

It is quite easy to imagine how such a statement would sound in a colonial context, where the colonizer’s efforts are all directed, in Frantz Fanon’s words,

to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives’ heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality.⁵

The definition of history as a socially constituted narrative representation that we found as one of the features of postmodernism finds in Hayden White a historian who fosters the application of this schemes of interpretation also in historiography. His point is to make clear that history as a discipline creates at the same time his object of study and the principles that will be used to analyse and explain it; like a novelist that writes a novel starting from the final scene. The element of invention is central also for Eric Hobsbawm, who claims that rather than describing and evaluating past events, historians actually *invent* the past. For him, the past is often invented or imagined rather than found, and applies this concept to analyse nationalism: nations are usually perceived as something that has always been there, rooted in the remotest antiquity, while they are actually a comparatively recent historical phenomenon. It is the narrative

3 Alun Munslow, p. 12.

4 Alun Munslow, p. 15

5 Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture”, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 1967) p. 169.

element that builds a nation, an “imagined community” that is felt real even if its members never get to know each other. Benedict Anderson sees in the early print-capitalism one of the key elements that made possible the creation of today’s national communities by means of the localizing power of the vernacular. The link between history, nation and literature is a very solid one.

Postcolonial Deconstruction

Written during the Algerian struggle for independence, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* gives an explanation of how native colonized peoples start being interested in their past. The affirmation of the existence of a national culture which is independent from the colonizer’s influence and pre-existing it is of great importance for the liberation movement that acts in the present carrying out struggles for liberation. The recovery of a national culture is first necessary to the colonized’s mind to perceive colonization as just a period within the wider horizon of their national history, so that they can at least imagine an end of it.

The claim to a national culture does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a better future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native.⁶

Of course what we call “nation” is a cultural construction, so it is from the cultural field that the construction of a new national future must start. This is necessary – at a psychological level – for the native’s self-representation; but the cultural nation-building process cannot consist just in the recovery of pre-colonial history or of a general and

6 Frantz Fanon, p. 169.

undifferentiated continental culture, which would end in fruitless “comparisons between coins and sarcophagi”,⁷ as Fanon has it, that is to say that mere archaeological evidence of great past civilizations cannot be enough to generate a sense of national participation and unity. National culture is not folklore; the fight is not for dead cultures, but for the present and future:

A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in under-developed countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on.⁸

In Fanon’s opinion, what is important is the participation in and the support to the liberation struggle, as well as its celebration, because it is in the struggle and through the struggle that the new national culture takes its shape. Explicitly,

[w]e believe that the conscious and organized undertaking by a colonized people to re-establish the sovereignty of that nation constitutes the most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists.⁹

All that considered, we need not to forget what we said before, that culture is a social construction and that history can be manipulated in order to suit any political and cultural purpose. Ironically enough, the very concept of nation is itself a category of European political philosophy that has its own history and has been exported along with colonization. It is likely, though, that in Fanon’s eyes the only way to get rid of the colonizers was to oppose to the colonialist national culture a native culture that could stir the passions and the pride of the colonized people (nationalisms are actually a strong driving force), so as to obtain that kind of political energy that could be directed to the purposes of the liberation struggle.

7 Frantz Fanon, p. 188.

8 Frantz Fanon, p. 188.

9 Frantz Fanon, p. 197.

The fact that the historical truth sponsored by the imperial power was no longer regarded as monolithic gave way to a rebellion against colonial discourse and its tales made of racism, bad social darwinism and the white man's burden. A strong anti-colonial identity arose from separation and contrast to colonial domination, but the new voices could not aspire to reach the level of supremacy that characterized the imperial powers: it was no longer the 19th century, when it was accepted that a single vision of the world could explain and rule every situation; moreover, the European nations, even with the loss of their empires, were still militarily and economically the most powerful, so that the high rank of the culture that they embodied was not to be contested. In such a situation, the European vision of the world could not be erased and substituted with another one. The cultural dialectic was not going to be linear any more; juxtaposition was the new way of arranging ideas.

It is a sort of weak identity that which results from this process of postcolonial identification. Not to be intended as "feeble", but as aware of not being able to stand on its own, to find within itself its own reason of existence. It is a peripheral identity that does not aim at substituting its cultural predecessor, but rather at coexisting and merging with it. In a situation like this, binary logics such as black/white or self/other – through which identities of difference are often constructed – result fruitless to reach an understanding; focusing on the points of contact, on the contrary, reveals to be more interesting than reasoning by oppositions.

Cultural identities can no longer pretend to be pure, and hybridity becomes the fundamental feature of postcolonial societies and cultures. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha affirms the unlikelihood of any pretence of cultural pureness:

The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities – *as the*

grounds of cultural comparativism – are in a profound process of redefinition. The hideous extremity of Serbian nationalism proves that the very idea of a pure, ‘ethnically cleansed’ national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood.¹⁰

The “interstitial space”¹¹ is for Bhabha the best place where we can discover new identities. It is the place of hybridity, where strong identities are shed to embrace contamination; where “the essential question of the representation of the nation as a temporal process”¹² can be opposed together with the traditional historicism that stands behind it. It is on liminal situations that the “holism of culture and community”¹³ can be contested, because it is in these locations that identities are more likely to be displayed and performed. Bhabha considers hybridity a positive value: a creative condition that prevents from fixing into rigid stances and that lets us go beyond the traditional narratives of identity – like epic – that are then replaced by marginal narratives accounting for the lesser and unnoticed protagonists of history.

A New Past for a New South Africa?

Theories of representation, cultural studies, post-structuralism, postmodern philosophy, deconstructionist historiography, postcolonial theory: these are the cultural tools that I consider important to undertake a critical analysis of a literary work dealing with historical matters and written in a former colony at the end of the 20th century. Considering the relativistic background of all these interpretative approaches, I feel the need to declare that I am a white, middle-class Italian man in his late twenties, and that I

10 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), p. 5.

11 Homi K. Bhabha, p. 3.

12 Homi K. Bhabha, p. 142.

13 Homi K. Bhabha, p. 142.

am aware that this is inevitably, one way or another, going to influence my perception of the historical situation that South Africa went through during the 1990s, as well as my own analysis of the literary works that were published at the end of that decade.

This work initially supplies a background for my analysis by means of an outline of the themes and features of the South African historical novel, in order to present what kind of cultural and national myths that literary tradition created. This survey will serve to highlight the continuities between the canon and the more recent novels, as well as to recognise, by difference, new features or point of divergence from past models. Then I analyze how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission represented a strong instrument for the nation-building project of the democratic South African state, and how it officially opened a window on the dark side of the past “white” South Africa, enacting a collective performance showing important social, political, and even narrative aspects.

As my object is to analyze how South African history and nation are represented in historical fiction after the end of the apartheid regime, I have chosen three novels that were published after the TRC hearings ended. This decision was due to the fact that the TRC hearings were a historical event that officialized the existence of a different history along with the one maintained by white colonial discourse. Choosing three novels all published in 2000, I assumed that at that time the TRC issue was experienced and considered by the authors. The fact that they were published in the same year may be a coincidence, but on the other hand it helps us in the work of comparing them, as in a period dense with political and social events changes in perspective can be quick, and the temptation of political commitment for an artist is frequent.

The focus of my analysis is on the way the past is accounted for in South African fiction, what kind of relationship it has with the present and the future within the novels, and whether they offer a vision for the new nation. In a period of transition, it is

important to see whether the past is forgotten or remembered, or even reinvented, and to what period in the past the novels make reference to: Elleke Boehmer's *Bloodlines* deals with the years of the Anglo-Boer War; Mandla Langa's *The Memory of Stones* sees how the recent past of the MK guerrilla affects the period of reconstruction after the first democratic elections; finally, Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* has its past reference in the mid 19th century during the Xhosa cattle killing.

CHAPTER 1

Representing the South African Nation

The historical event may be the same, but what is being celebrated on the two sides of the divided community are two different signifi-cations. The starting point are the different experiences of black and white South Africans, experiences which cannot but inform the materiality of their writing.

LEWIS NKOSI

Is not the academic who differentiates a Black South African body of literature from works by White South Africans simply superimposing the apartheid template over what is really a single, national literature?

BRIAN WORSFOLD

We, the people of South Africa, recognise the injustices of our past; honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land; respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION

Making a nation is often more difficult than making a country. It is a fact that, with the necessary military or diplomatic effort, a piece of land can be declared an independent country. It is not so easy when it comes to build a nation for that country, that is to say that the people living in that country feel an emotional attachment to the land they inhabit, and feel they belong to a community embracing all their fellow people, because they are connected by a common language, a common religion or set of values, a common past, and are bound to a common future.

It is therefore a very difficult enterprise to attempt to build a national consciousness in a country where a dozen different languages are spoken; where the

chromosomes of the ethnic groups have mixed throughout history, and yet people is superficially judged by the colour of their skin; where the only thing that people had in common in their common past was their being divided. The present Republic of South Africa is the result of centuries of colonialism, imperialism and racial authoritarianism which saw wars and alliances, deportations and migrations, bloodshed and blood mixing, repression and resistance: a chaotic history, stirred by strong counterposed ethnic identities. During the British domination, and even more so after independence in the early 1930s, the Afrikaner people constructed a strong myth of national community, that became prevalent in the public representation of South Africa in spite of their being a minority group in the country.

If we hold that colonial domination ends when the native people gain their lost freedom, then we should say that the colonial domination in South Africa officially ended with the first universal elections in 1994. Liberation from apartheid, however, did not come directly through war and violence: the institutional shift towards democracy was the result of the negotiation between the National Party and the African National Congress. The next thing to do was to give a new shape to South Africa.

To give South Africa a new shape meant first of all to change the constitution, giving the vast black majority those rights that had previously been a white prerogative. This was to grant the present of the nation; but to grant the future of the nation, its past had to be dealt with. The strong national identity that the Afrikaners had built themselves as opposed to all the other ethnic groups had to give up its being special and make room for a new concept of South African nation.

1.1 History and Literature as Nation-Building

The essential thing in a process of nation-building is the establishment of a collective myth, a great narrative of the nation that serves as an ideal image to give the coherent and unitarian form of history to the past events that contributed to create the present. As we saw in the introduction of this work, the image of national history is the product of ideological choices imposed by the ruling class, and almost always serves to the political players as a legitimization. It is a sort of historical utilitarianism: history is treated like a story, that is emplotted in such a way that actions and claims are presented as the inevitable consequence of the past. The narration of the past helps to give cohesion to a mass of people that otherwise would be just a sum of individuals, and creates a community around a shared interest or idea. This happened in Germany, whose Romantic writers and philosophers chose the Middle Ages as the time of formation of German culture, so that the Holy Roman Empire became the national myth to be used against the Napoleonic power and to unify Germany again in the 19th century. It also happened in Italy, where the Fascist regime proposed a mythicized vision of the Roman Empire to foster patriotism after the defeat of the First World War and against the capitalistic powers of the winning countries.

The important thing to keep in mind is that, with these political uses of history, it is not important whether what is narrated is true or not, because history depends on cultural construction. In this context the historical novel, as a literary genre, is a very interesting subject of analysis because it is the link between history as a way of relating past events that are supposed to be true, and novel as a fictional work of art whose aim is revealing a truth about life telling a story that is supposed to have a sufficient “semblance of truth”. The result is a vision of history lived from within, and for this

enhanced by the emotional participation to the vicissitudes of the characters, that soften the sieve through which we assess the information, so that the fictional version of history can seep into our mind. It is just a version of history – maybe biased, certainly fictionalized – but often ‘truer’ just for the fact of being real.

The ambiguous aspect of this subject is that historical representation tends to be opaque. The categories used in historical discourse seem to be natural and a-historical, and are usually out of the reach of political criticism, while on the contrary they are fabrications rooted in a specific historical context and are the product of specific ideologies. As Eric Hobsbawm notices in his *The Invention of Tradition*,

modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so ‘natural’ as to require no definition other than self-assertion. Whatever the historic or other continuities embedded in the modern concepts of ‘France’ and ‘the French’ - and which nobody would seek to deny – these very concepts themselves must include a constructed or ‘invented’ component. And just because so much of what subjectively makes up the modern ‘nation’ consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as ‘national history’), the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the ‘invention of tradition’.¹⁴

Literature can be one of the ways of making history, in the sense that it gives an interpretation of past events, and creates a set of images that can also be used and useful to interpret the present. Just like history, nations are not simply ‘there’ to be found; they require a creative element that unfailingly passes through fiction. The result is a cultural and psychological entity that, in the minds of the people, has the quality of a real thing:

Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent [...] political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: *that* is a reality.¹⁵

14 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), p. 14, quoted from Annalisa Oboe, *Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa* (Venezia: Supernova, 1994), p. 18.

15 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp.48-49, quoted from Annalisa Oboe, p. 18.

Most of the images that we have about national stereotypes are in fact the product of a work of representation that had its great moment in the 19th century. Romanticism gave its important contribution, with the recovery of the Middle Ages as the moment in which local languages started to be used in literature and national traditions could find some cultural referent to grasp. This interest in the past brought to the elevation of objects or people from common life to symbolic icons of a whole national identity: Walter Scott is the responsible for the postcard depiction of Scotland as a land of kilts and bagpipes; the Generation of '98 is the reason why Spanish gift shops are crowded with Don Quixote souvenirs; the 19th-century Gothic revival gave a taste of history to the English buildings of political power and to otherwise aesthetically insignificant English towns.

For a project – both aesthetical and political – of representation of a variegated muddle of human types and of a complex interweaving of social relationships, the most suitable means that literature can offer is the novel. Novels have the necessary characteristics that allows them to represent the complexity of reality, and are therefore the main cultural instrument for the diffusion of national identities (aside from cinema – which, however, often takes its subjects from novels). But representation – as we have seen – does not only account for complexity; it also gives form to an unsettled situation, bestowing a semblance of completeness and unity to a present that expresses such need. Becoming part of a coherent narration makes sense of one's life and unifies people toward what they feel to be their common destiny.

The past evoked by a novel is yet not exactly the past that we find in epic. Epic portrays a past that is frozen, like in a fresco or in a tapestry; it is a past that lies out of history and has not direct relations with the present, apart from the catharsis experienced

by the reader before some foundational myth of the collective unconscious. The novel, on the other hand, has the present and the reader as its referents, presents history as a “usable past”,¹⁶ that can be adapted and tailored to supply a vision of community, origins and continuity for the needs of the present. In this operation of representation, the historical novel mixes facts and myths, discovering, making up and settling national traditions, justifying them and making historical contingencies appear eternal in an organized world without contradictions. This literary genre is also closely connected with Romanticism, a cultural movement that was a main responsible for the birth of nationalisms in 18th century Europe, and had history as one of its major subjects of study and representation.

1.2 South African Nation-Building through Literature

For a better analysis of post-apartheid historical novels, it is important to situate such works in the wider tradition of the South African historical novel, in order to determine the points of contact and the differences in regard to plot, structure, themes and characters. As a thorough analysis of such literary tradition would require a much greater effort than that intended for this work, I will give an account of the South African historical novel tradition based on Annalisa Oboe’s *Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa*, which accounts for such literary genre up to the early 1990s, the last years of apartheid, and from which I also take the quotations from the novels. Oboe divides novels into four categories, according to their plots: border stories, settlement stories, war stories and crossroad stories.

¹⁶ This is the phrase used by Hobsbawm in *The Invention of Tradition*.

Border Stories

Since novels about history usually deal with contrasts between different social, political or cultural subjects, the border is a frequent trope in this kind of fiction. It is a place that separates but at the same time connects, and in South African history is often a mobile entity. Within the narration of colonial conquest, borders sometimes assume the characteristics of a frontier, that separates civilization from wilderness. The typical character of the border is a solitary frontiersman, an isolated hero who embodies the values of his culture but still keeps himself separated from the rest of the pioneer, picturing a mythology of the individual conquering the land and facing the hostile nature by himself, yet putting the basis for a subsequent settlement and foundation of a future society.

The South African novels of this kind have a plot that is very similar to the archetypes of heroic quest and initiation, usually presenting a young white man going north to the border in search of adventure, who becomes involved in violent historical conflicts that – through the adventurous life of the frontier, a land where there is no law – force him into manhood, leading him to find (or lose) his real identity. These male protagonists are often paired with romance heroines, who play a secondary function within the novel and are unfailingly white. The protagonists crisscross the northern border, discovering new territories and meeting characters belonging to different peoples and cultures, always keeping their status as superior white men (we must not forget that the majority of historical fiction is written by white authors) and imposing their white manhood by means of their guns, as John M. Coetzee explicitly states in his novel *Dusklands*:

The instrument of survival in the wild is the gun, but the need for it is metaphysical rather than physical... Every territory through which I march with my gun becomes

a territory cast loose from the past and bound to the future.¹⁷

The border is a space of confrontation, but compromise is not allowed. The South African frontiersman never crosses the boundary between races, and if he does so, miscegenation is almost always blamed; the Other is, and remains, other: a stranger and an enemy. It is necessary that the Other is constructed as the opposite of the protagonist so that he can fully develop his identity. Coetzee's *Dusklands*, coming after a long tradition of historical novels that created the image of the South African frontiersman, points out through its postmodern devices how biased and one-sided the Boers' reconstruction of history is, highlighting its Manichean and orientalist stance.

Settlement Stories

Another group of novels deals with the settlement of migrant communities into new territories. South African literature in English often ignored the first stages of early colonial history in the country (which is on the contrary a very frequent object in historical novels in Afrikaans); writers preferred to take as their subjects chiefly two nineteenth-century events: the British migration and settlement in the Cape Colony in 1820 and the Boers' Great Trek of 1836.

The 1820 British settlement project was intended to solve at once a series of problems both in the mothercountry and in the colony. The end of the Napoleonic wars had left Britain with a high unemployment; the government planned to move a large number of people to the Cape Colony, thus offsetting the Dutch majority in order to stabilize the situation there, while at the same time easing social unrest in Britain. Those people were then fleeing from difficult economical and political conditions: they were farmers who had lost their land, artisans who had found themselves unable to compete

¹⁷ John M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (1974) p. 80.

with the new factories, ex-soldiers and people who believed in the ideals of the French Revolution but saw no perspectives for that in England.

This growth of the number of the British settlers was meant to reinforce the British rule, carrying out the anglicization of the Colony. The new policies imposed by the colonial government, such as the abolition of slavery in 1834, spurred the Boers to revolt and migrate northwards in 1836. The Voortrekkers rejected the British authority and wanted to establish a new independent community in the territories then occupied by the native African peoples.

Both the English and the Boer settlers saw their migration as a divine project, like the Israelites' quest for the promised land in the Bible. The struggle against the difficulties of the journey and of the new land supplied a basis for the formation of a mythology of the founding fathers, helping to establish a first core of national consciousness among the two groups. These collective experiences have been the object of several historical novels, to the extent that settlement stories have become a sort of literary convention, which we are going to meet also in one of the more recent works that will be analysed in the following chapters: Mandla Langa's *The Memory of Stones*.

This kind of novels usually starts with an English or Boer group of people that is forced to move from their land to make a new start in the South African interior. At first they dream of a better future, but are soon faced with hardships, hostile nature and assaults by the blacks; only after epic struggles will they manage to settle in the new (promised) land of milk and honey, which will become their descendants' home. Because these are stories about the vicissitudes of a group of people, settlement stories feature a plurality of protagonists and, unlike the border stories, have a polyphonic nature, showing a community that is representative of the nation.

The initial situation is described as one that is better to escape from: a grim and

oppressing England for the 1820 settlers; a cultural and social tension that is impossible to overcome for the Boer Voortrekkers, who see the abolition of slavery as a threat to the cultural basis on which their entire way of life is based. The British settlers, leaving their mothercountry, were looking for a new, different and better life in South Africa (British Government propaganda explicitly fostered this vision). The Boers, on the other hand, having moved to Africa in the eighteenth century, missed the cultural influence of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution, so that they were extremely reluctant to accept any change that differed from what was written in the Bible. For them, the Great Trek was a chance to have a new start that would bring them back to their founding cultural origins, recreating north the kind of Afrikaner society that had been spoilt by the British colonizers. The Boer past to be preserved and on which their identity is constructed is in fact African; they do not feel any tie with Europe: they are Afrikaners.

The settler life is hard and put humanity to a test. Hard experiences make people hard: men become tough and violent; women have to endure and care for their families trying to maintain human values, resulting in the novels as the conscience and memory of their race. The blacks – the Kaffirs – on the other hand are ‘the enemies’, and the only way to deal with them is violence. Blacks are seen as part of the wilderness, so that they become just another obstacle between the settlers and ‘their’ land and are not considered as possible partners in a settlement project. They are indeed negatively represented as uncivilized, violent and cruel against the whites, so that white violence can be explained as a necessary self-defence rather than a mere way to conquer them and take their land. The creation of a literary myth of origin has therefore as consequence to endorse a white South African historical perspective, ignoring the Xhosa, Zulu or Ndebele people’s standpoint and the effects that the white migrations

had on them.

Love stories in the settlement novels do not cross the colour line. The protagonists usually stick to their ethnic group, presenting British-British or Boer-Boer couples; most of the novels, though, contain an English-Boer love story. This of course depends on the opinion that the author wants to foster, because marriage is a strong symbol for a community, and even more so in a context where such community is being created and the foundations for the future community life are being laid. In this context, a 'white interracial' marriage signifies faith in the possibility of amalgamation and cooperation between the English and the Boers, as this example taken from the British writer Francis Brett Young's *They Seek a Country* shows:

"As soon as I knew he was a boy, I said to myself: 'We will call him Adrian'. Do you think that sounds well: Adrian Grafton?"

"It's well enough. Any name you choose will do for me. It is a mixture: half Dutch and half English. And so, after all, is he. So call him that if you will."

"Half Dutch and half English... Yes, you are right," she said. "But he will be neither one nor the other, I think. When he grows up to be a man he will call himself a South African or an Afrikaner. Some day, perhaps, that will be a name to be proud of."¹⁸

In the narrative interpretation of this historical event, great importance is given to the biblical perspective, describing the journey of the white migrants with metaphors and allegories referring to the exodus of the Israelites towards the Promised Land, which is the main referent for this kind of novels. As an answer to all the problems of pioneers' life, reference to the Bible always helps them to see the God's word and will at work in their history.

War Stories

National myths are easier to find where there is an enemy to fight, or that threatens the

¹⁸ Francis Brett Young, *They Seek a Country* (1937), p. 641.

security of the community, for war compels to choose which side you support, defining the limits of the community, in an opposition that hardly ever admits graduality. Historical novels about war are the place for epic, where the sense of a community fighting for its survival or for the affirmation of that community as the founder of a new nation goes beyond the story and the importance of the individual, erasing diversity and complexity in order to focus on the fight. Literature responds to the need for incorporating war in the ethnic tradition of the group, in order to give a common interpretation of the common experience for all the members of the community. Differences are radicalized to the extent that the representation of the enemy becomes stereotypical, so that by contrast the community rediscovers a sense of common ethnicity. The existence of a common enemy is such a bonding factor that if there is none available, as George Orwell tells us, one can be invented.

Looking at its history, South Africa seems to be a place where enemies are not so hard to find. During the colonial period, almost every player on the South African geopolitical board at some point was in war against all the others: British against Boers; Boers against native people; native people against British; native peoples against other native peoples. All the possible combinations have been fulfilled. The history of South Africa is then a history of war and violence, which are the only truly shared experiences among South African people; this is evident even for literature, which accounts for this permanent state of conflict in almost all of the historical novels. All these conflicts, though, together with their representations in historical novels, had the result of radicalizing the positions and reinforcing the image of a fragmented country, making change and amalgamation even harder to imagine and to realize.

The usual pattern for this kind of novels sees an incoming war threatening a community with no hope for mediation, while nationalism becomes the dominant

emotion. When war breaks out everyone is involved, and when the fighting is over the two possible endings consist either in the winner's will to forget the past and collaborate, or in a further separation between the parties. In the first case we have the setting of a myth of coexistence that implies a revision of former relationships between the groups; in the second case we have a return to the community's myths of origins, strengthening the vision of a difference that cannot be overcome. As far as love stories are concerned, in war stories they tend to be between members of the same group, with cross-boundaries loves being bound to unhappiness. The new generation that is born from the survivors is the hope for the new country; therefore, the kind of marriage that takes place at the end of a novel is telling of the vision and the perspective that the author wants to convey about the future of the national community: amalgamation or separation.

However, amalgamation is possible only within the whites, as white-black wars never end in a way that gives hope to the overcoming of difference. While civil war between the British and the Boers is a war between different groups belonging to a wider cultural system, in which the enemy is known and shares much of their life-style, the wars against the black nations see the entire white culture fighting an enemy that is regarded as a barbarian, uncivilized and – in the white's eyes – without hope for redemption from their savage condition.

Crossroads Stories

Border stories display the myth of colonization; settlement stories narrates the origins of a nation; war stories tell about epic battles for the survival of a community; the aim of crossroads stories is to subvert these schemes of representation, based on binary oppositions like civilized/savage, white/black, friend/enemy, and go beyond the literary

canon of historical novels to show a different vision of history, that tries to compensate for the monolitical egemony of white history. The focus here is on the points of contact between blacks and whites, inevitably coming together at some point in a country with such a tangled history.

To see nineteenth-century South Africa as a crossroads of cultures/*ethnie*/races, endlessly meeting, conflicting, or interacting on the vast southern tip of the continent, means to imagine a history which is at the same time more complex and less definitive than most historians and novelists would allow. To favour moments of convergence and exchange between tribe and tribe, race and race, requires a shift of focus from the relatively easy singling out of binary oppositions to the individuation of “chiasmatic” intersections where alliances are more meaningful than wars, syntheses more momentous than antitheses. And black South African novelists seem to have understood that implicit in this perspective is a revolutionary power: the power to overturn the all-pervasive settler mythology operating both in literature and society, and to correct the harshness of the frontier/border spirit that is at the core of the white mentality.¹⁹

This kind of stories is basically represented by two novels: Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930) and Bessie Head’s *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984). Both authors are not white; both authors share the aim of undermining white South African history by showing the other side of the coin, giving voice to the complexity of black South African history.

Sol Plaatje was one of the first black novelists in English, and *Mhudi* was the first South African novel in English written by a non-European author. It is important to notice that it is a historical novel, as Plaatje was one of the first blacks to feel the need for a rediscovery of the African past. His novel indeed shows his interest in the reconstruction of an African world of oral traditions that has been lost. It is an explicit commitment: to write about black history in order to show the whites that their story is not the only one. Set during the period of the Great Trek, *Mhudi* avoids the patterns of war stories, focusing on alliances rather than on contrasts; it displays the structures and schemes of the European historical novels (the novel starts with a description of the

¹⁹ Annalisa Oboe, p. 113

black world as self-destructive and on the verge of dissolution, just like many white historical novels), but uses these literary tools to serve a black-oriented version of history and disrupt the white South African discourse.

Plaatje refers to oral sources as the narrative device for his novel, conjuring the tradition of his own culture, holding that it may be a subjective view, but nonetheless it is more reliable than written historical reports, which have already proved to be partial against black people. The story is narrated by Half-a-Crown, an old black man that is likely to be the son of the two protagonists, who himself did not witness what he narrates. The love story of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga is the romance around which South African history unfolds, and at the same time it is a tale of origins of a black race that shares all the moral virtues that the whites claim for themselves alone. Half-a-Crown's story describes a history that is already going on when the European colonizers arrive, and that is different from the accepted version that historiography used to give: the description of the indigenous civilization rehabilitates the Africans from their bad reputation, showing that all pastoral societies share the same set of values. By refusing moral superiority for the whites, *Mhudi* subverts this racial cliché and suggest that the solution for the South African situation be the individual moral change led by a universal sense of justice that is supposed to foster communication between races, staging even an interracial friendship in order to create an image of a multi-racial ethics based on human brotherhood and cultural exchange.

With *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Bessie Head gives an example of what Linda Hutcheon defines as "historiographic metafiction": the author present what seems to be a piece of academic writing, mocking historiography so that the effect is to bring it on the same level as fiction, revealing its partial standpoint. Even if she calls it a novel, however, it hardly meets the features of this literary genre. Her aim, as in Plaatje's work,

is to put white history into perspective, giving an alternative reading of the past, describing a South Africa that was already a place marked by migrations and intercultural exchanges before the Voortrekkers began their journey. Head's point of view, in this work, is the eventual birth of the Botswana nation, where she had fled from South Africa in 1964, a country where she sees "a sort of continuity that makes sense, a history that is not as repellent as the land-grabbing wars and diamond- and gold-rushes",²⁰ a country that had avoided much of the suffering that colonization caused to other territories nearby.

The novel deals with the narration of an old man, like in *Mhudi*, telling of the several migrations of his clan and the contacts and changes of habits that this migrations caused, until they finally settle in Bechuanaland, the future state of Botswana. Head positively underlines the open-mindedness of these people as long as new ideas and customs are accepted or explored in order to achieve a higher comprehension of reality and a better quality of life. What the novel expresses, on the basis of Botswana national experience, is a positive and hopeful vision of hybridity and intercultural exchange,

concoct[ing] that "compromise of tenderness" between African tradition and Western influence that perhaps only a coloured South African woman/novelist/historian, from her unique position of exile, could try (and would want) to reconstruct.²¹

The adoption of the imagery of the Israelites' exodus to characterize the migrations of the Bamangwato people is an important example of a white category applied on a black situation for the blacks' use, since this hybridity irremediably dismantles the white discourse that had built on that simile the justification for British and Boers' behaviour as 'elected people' in South Africa.

20 1983 interview, reported in *Between the Lines*, ed. by C. MacKenzie and C. Clayton, NELM, 1989), p.11

21 Annalisa Oboe, p. 118

Crossroads stories add a third dimension to the strongly white-centred picture made by the European discourse. Blacks and whites are no longer represented as anthropologically different, but able to establish good relationships with each other. Thanks to this novels, South Africa ceases to be a place of neverending fights and oppositions, and becomes a crossroads where different peoples and cultures have always coexisted, and always will.

Motifs

Apart from the above mentioned paradigms, Oboe finds some connecting threads that operate on a different level than the formal organization. These motifs create a network of recurrent figures and situations that fix into the literary imagery and posits interesting issues concerning representation.

One of such motif, for example, is the preoccupation with “blood”. It can refer to the blood shed during a war, that makes a piece of land sacred for the nation that on that land will settle and grow its descendance; or it can figuratively refer to “race”, and so it becomes something that has to be kept pure from a miscegenation that would corrupt the superiority of the white race and crack the ideological wall that separates the white from the black. This issue is particularly evident in those novels, like those written by Sarah Gertrude Millin, that are explicitly racist.

A central element in South African literature is the reference to the land and its possession through the farm. The importance of land in a historical novel consists in the fact that it becomes tied with an ethnic identity, constructing a metaphor that makes the landscape become the inscape of national identity. African land is often described as hostile and alienating, and to defeat this sense of displacement of the white conscience the farm becomes the symbol of a place tamed by the white man. A symbol that signals

the accomplishment of the relationship between man and land both when this is a positive one and when it is a negative one. In novels such as Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* or John M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, the unyielding or disorganized farm is the symbol of a failed communion of the man with his land.

In the literary tradition of South African pastoral, the farm is also the place where the true heart of national traditions and values are preserved, as opposed to the capitalistic values embodied by the British culture that rule the life of the cities; a place where "Afrikanerness" can still be displayed, and where the myth of a nation founded by the Voortrekkers finds its justification. The Calvinist ethos of the Boers has as its strongest foundation the idea that a place belongs to those who create it out of wild nature by means of their work. The fact that black slaves actually work and sweat on that land much more than the white farmer does obviously does not interfere with the pastoral myth, according to which the white man has the right of possession of his land, and by this he can feel that he is at home in South Africa: a native. Black labour here is seen just as an element of South African landscape. As John M. Coetzee says in his essay *White Writing*:

Blindness to the colour black is built into South African pastoral. As its central issue the genre prefers to identify the preservation of a (Dutch) peasant rural order, or at least the preservation of the values of that order. In (British) capitalism it identifies the principal enemy of the old ways. Locating the historically significant conflict as between Boer and Briton, it shifts black-white conflict out of sight into a forgotten past or an obscure future.²²

The farm is also the place of the family, the extended family that is the prototype of Boer social order, where the male head of the family represents the virtues (and vices) of the Boer "race", ruling a collective existence that lives enclosed within the fences of the farm and almost isolated from the outside world and its history. And when history

22 John M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), p. 5-6.

finally invades the atemporal life of the community, mainly due to the British abolition of slavery or to the Anglo-Boer War, leaving the farm becomes a tragedy: as a strong symbol of cultural identity, the farm cannot become a crossroads place and can accept no compromise. Its destruction is preferred to cultural contamination, so that its values can survive as unspoilt as possible and be transplanted somewhere else.

Love stories are another recurrent presence in historical novels. Their role in the structure of the novel can respond to two main necessities: one consists in adding romance to historical action, describing it from within by characters that are involved in the event, so that the reader is more engaged and entertained; the other one is formulating a project for the future of the country (a future which, of course, is the present time for the writer). The kind of love stories presented in a novel can tell us what vision of society the writer endorses, hopes for, or criticizes. The meeting and union of two characters in the bond of love can represent – as a synecdoche – the whole society, so that the relationship between the genders or between different ethnic groups can be intended as a sort of exempla in order to change our perception of social phenomena.

As the characters of these novels are supposed to serve the colonial writer's need to picture a history that legitimize white presence in Africa, South African frontier lovers are very different fictional creations from their contemporaries in English literature. Family constitutes the basis on which the future white nation will be built, so that the fathers and mothers must have those qualities that can provide the new nation with strength and virtues, so that their offspring can grow and prosper to become future citizens. But the symbolic power of family, like the one of the farm, can work both ways: it can become a dystopic situation, where virtues are corrupted making white marriage lose its ideality, or where sterility threatens the future of the couple and – by

extension – of the whole nation, disrupting the projectuality of the marriage.

Marriage, seen as an anthropological cultural structure, has long been a vehicle of alliances. In cultures both distant and different from each other, it was a frequent custom that the man chose his wife among the women of another community, so as to get new “blood” to mix with and to interweave a network of social relationships that could guarantee peace between peoples. In Europe, for example, marriage was for a long time a prime instrument for international politics, while Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* witnesses that the habit of fetching wives outside the community was common in Africa as well.

In spite of this widespread tradition of mixed marriage, miscegenation is generally blamed in South African historical novels, so that relationships that cross the colour line rarely end up in marriages. The stain that miscegenation would leave on the racist Afrikaner identity, for example, led to the use of censorship against Stuart Cloete’s *Turning Wheels*, a novel dealing with the Great Trek in which Hendrik van der Berg, the Boer leader of the convoys, plans to have children with a black woman. The Afrikaners could not tolerate to have their foundational myth – the Voortrekkers – tainted by a connection with black blood, and Cloete’s novel had to wait until 1974 to be issued again. From the 1940s, however, transcoloured marriages start to appear in literature, but the woman is almost always a coloured, being more acceptable than black women. The combination however is always with a white man: white women are not allowed to entertain relationships with non-white men, as much in literature as in reality. Black marriage, on the other hand, becomes an element of the requalification of black society, with novels that display monogamous love as a model for a more civilized society where women enjoy a better condition.

As miscegenation with a race perceived as inferior is a menace for the white

nation-building project, marriage is generally avoided when it comes to deal with relationships between different races. A suitable narrative stratagem is the use of adoption to establish a connection that can involve a character's feelings and culture, while avoiding any reference to the disgraceful topic concerning interracial sexual intercourses. Adoptions stands for the inevitability of the fusion, and is an ambiguous compromise that enables to overcome cultural and ideological conflicts while at the same time maintaining foundational myths of superiority.

In the conclusion of her survey on South African historical fiction, Oboe stresses the representational aspect of historical novels as testimonies of a version of the past that are at the same time influenced by the authors' cultures and productive of a national discourse. Novels reveal more about the authors and their vision of the present than they do about past circumstances:

In Walter Scott's novel²³ *Old Mortality* removes the moss that darkens the stones of the Covenanters' graves, makes sure that the words engraved on the slabs are constantly legible, and patiently repairs the decorations adorning the simple monuments – his work is a tribute to the past, but it is above all an assertion of his stance in the present and a warning for the future. Like him, South African writers have undertaken archeological-restorative operations which have produced (as a rule) heroic, pastoral, and epic versions of the country's past.²⁴

An important ideological operation was the use of the metaphor of the Israelites to describe the vicissitudes of the Voortrekkers or of the 1820 English settlers; this gave that path of history the great authoritative power of providence, which entailed the justification of the present as a legitimate social order that resembles God's will and project. Prophecy is a narrative element that is also present in the work of black novelists like Sol Plaatje and Thomas Mofolo, even if in their works the research for

²³ Sir Walter Scott, *Old Mortality* (1816).

²⁴ Annalisa Oboe, p. 176.

cultural continuity through history is more important than predestination. Biographies, too, are another way by which the present can find justification and self-recognition, tracing connections between deliberately posited past causes and the authors' present situations.

White historical writing, in South Africa, responds to a highly political project:

A contemporary reading of these novels cannot but notice the passionately political quality that pervades them and the aggressive power of the white historical subject which uses the past in order to found a nation that is conceived of as either English or Afrikaner, or, at best, as the union of the two white *ethnie*.²⁵

Against this monolithic assertions of white nation-building, Plaatje's and Mofolo's works anticipated some of the elements of the later postcolonial and postmodern counter-discursive novels. Since the 1970s, the established national discourse has been increasingly criticized, with the most important works being John Coetzee's *Dusklands* and Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroads*, which present explicitly the purposeful relativity of history and of historical points of view putting white history into perspective, and represent a shift from a central to a peripheral vision that would be "the significant change in the historical consciousness shaping [1990s] texts".²⁶ Historical novels began to see difference as a chance for contamination and not just as opposition, revealing the present-bound forgery of binary antitheses, and finding in the border story a structure that could be reshaped: a re-reading of the historical experience of the border (especially in Anthony Delius's *Border*) showed the possibility of creating a South African historical and national consciousness suitable for the changing social and political situation of those years, even if

one wonders whether this re-writing of history as marginality, as transformation of dividing boundaries into crossroads, may in fact represent the slow coming

25 Annalisa Oboe, p. 179.

26 Annalisa Oboe, p. 180.

together of the divergent trends of South African society and culture.²⁷

The work of black writers, above all, seems to set a trend that excludes the use and acceptance of binary oppositions in historical representation, moving towards a postmodern reading of history that sees no fixed positions or hierarchies among past events, and prefers relationships and hybridity to strong identities. At the end of the apartheid era and at the beginning of the new South African democracy, the first need for the country seemed to be working for a liberation of the present from the haunting past.

1.3 Post-Apartheid Counter-Discourse

The strong South African national discourse, constructed as unfailingly white throughout the colonial and apartheid years, underwent a thorough process of reshaping following the events from the 1994 democratic elections on. A massive counter-discourse regarding history and the idea of South African nation was put into being by the new democratic institutions, and found its climax during the important counter-narration of history represented by the TRC hearings.

The post-1994 period breaks the looking-glass into which the white ruling class used to look at itself, showing a grim and disturbing landscape of arbitrary violence behind. Gross human rights violations that characterized the apartheid regime – being in fact its founding ground – were given public exposure, and the whole country had to face the impressive aftermath of an age of violence. To deal with the social unrest that threatened to generate further violence, the new government opted for a nation-building

²⁷ Annalisa Oboe, p. 180.

project that could establish a new sense of national identity based not on historical continuity but on discontinuity.²⁸

South African nationalism had constructed a nation based on the opposition to “others”: the English, the blacks. The new national construction, on the contrary, was drawn from the opposition between the present self and the past “other”: the new South African nation did not found itself on a vision of ancientness (like some European countries) or predestination (like Israel or the Boer Republic), but on its historical discontinuity, its affirming of the uniqueness of the present. The past was no more a past of pride; it was a past of abuse. Pride was only to be found in resistance, by those who struggled trying to recover some sort of democratic tradition. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, being the most powerful means for the implementation of the new nation-building rhetoric, codified the official history of the martyrs of that struggle in order to institutionalize those shared, bitter experiences of apartheid, which before had been silenced, as a unifying theme in the new official version of the nation’s history.

This, nevertheless, would lead to the formation of a new national discourse, as unquestionable as the previous one: in the name of reconciliation, what came out of Pandora’s box once it had been opened had to be selectedly forget, its memory suppressed. We can see that both in *The Memory of Stones* and in *The Heart of Redness*. The risk however was that this suppression resulted sooner or later in some kind of latent social violence. The powerful institutional forms of national representation needed some counterbalance, something that art and literature felt the duty to testify, as in those years Ingrid De Kok acknowledged:

28 Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 16.

Cultural institutions and artists face an especially challenging task, of permitting contradictory voices to be heard as testimony or in interpretation, not in order to 'resolve' the turbulence, but to recompose it. This involves resistance to increasing pressure on art and the public institutions to contribute directly to the psychic requirements of 'settlement' and nation-building. If yoked to those imperatives, art too will become victim to the pressure to 'forgive and forget'. There is a strong impulse in the country, supported and sustained by the media, for a grand concluding narrative, which will accompany entry into a globalized economy and international interaction with the world.²⁹

One of the main issues to be dealt with was the cultural representation of the long-silenced black majority. For Lewis Nkosi, South African literature has widely been intended as white, English-written South African literature; what needed to be examined was the way in which the discourse of a white minority was made to stand for the whole of South African writing.³⁰ The separate identities as black and white in South Africa had been profoundly shaped by the colonial experience and the long practice of racial segregation; the total abolition of apartheid was then a prior condition for the creation of a single national culture. Experiences may have been different, but the situation was the same. What may be considered different literary traditions are actually the two sides of a same medal, complementary perspectives of a same story. However, it is not much that black South Africans never had a voice worth considering: "it was the ear that was lacking".³¹

One of the most important and interesting facts about this giving voice to silenced parts of society is the role of women in the process of reshaping the national history and identity. TRC women's hearings can be considered as a response to Gayatri Spivak's provocative question "Can the subaltern speak?" (women being, according to Spivak, at the lowest stage of subalternity, always one position behind the most subaltern of men).

29 Ingrid De Kok, "Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition" in Sarah Nuttall, Carli Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 61.

30 Lewis Nkosi, "Constructing the 'Cross-Border' Reader" in Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman, and Kenneth Parker (ed.), *Altered State? Writing and South Africa* (Dangaroo Press, 1994) p. 38.

31 Carli Coetzee, "They Never Wept, the Men of my Race: Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull* and the White South African Signature" in *Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2000), p. 12.

During the TRC hearings,

the vast majority of the testifiers were women who often talked about what had happened to someone in their family or community but were reluctant to disclose what had happened to them. Thus, special hearings were organized to encourage women to talk about their life experience as women under apartheid.³²

They demanded in fact funeral rites for dead male relatives, but found it very difficult to talk about personal violations like rape.

What is most significant is that it was people from marginal communities, mainly black women, who were the ones making claims in a forum firmly grounded in legal modernity.³³

The fact that women were the main source of testimony for the commission, together with the media coverage that broadcasted the hearings on radio and television, gave the female version of apartheid history an exposure and an audience that had no precedent in South African history.

1.4 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up by the Government of National Unity to help deal with what happened under apartheid. The conflict during this period resulted in violence and human rights abuses from all sides. No section of society escaped these abuses.³⁴

These are the first lines of the homepage of the official TRC website, which serve as a presentation of what the commission was and what its goals were. As we can immediately see, the accent here is on the phrase “from all sides”.

32 Annalisa Oboe, “The TRC Women’s Hearings as Performance and Protest in the New South Africa” in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Fall 2007), p. 61.

33 Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

34 Official Truth and Reconciliation Commission website: www.justice.gov.za/trc/

The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 established a commission whose object was to provide “as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights”,³⁵ committed between 1 March 1960 and 5 December 1993. The TRC was thus charged, in the first instance, with awakening the new democracy’s memory, picturing a situation of violence that included every aspect of the country’s life. Another central part of its mandate was to grant indemnity from legal persecution to the perpetrators of crimes committed both by the masters and by the enemies of apartheid; what it asked in exchange was not their contrition, but only their full confession of the evils they had committed or authorized during that period. The deal was then reaching the historical truth by dispensing reconciliation.

The new state institutions needed legitimization: the TRC nation-building endeavour served the parallel state-building process by legitimizing the apparatus of justice, that was still tainted by the authoritarian past.³⁶ The fact that the shift to the democratic state was conducted under the flag of reconciliation implied that processes of assessment of human rights violations committed by the apartheid state could not resemble the Nuremberg Trials, and therefore amnesty had to be granted, along with the recognition of the crimes committed by the freedom fighters. In this situation, the “from all sides” stated above became a controversial point, since black activists often refused that white structural violence and black violence should be judged in the same way, and the ANC party tried to avoid having to respond in front of the TRC of tortures and killings happened in its training camps during the struggle.

Although the several forms of resistance of the political parties about revealing atrocities committed for political reasons by both sides under apartheid, the new

³⁵ Explanatory Memorandum to the Parliamentary Bill, www.justice.gov.za/trc/legal/bill.htm

³⁶ Richard A. Wilson, p. 17.

government intended to foster a culture of human rights in the country through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The way they choose to achieve this change in national culture was reformulating justice in human rights talk as restorative justice, so that reparation joined fact-finding and amnesty in the tasks of the commission, becoming the third element of its mandate. Thus, the hearings of the victims served a double purpose of gathering evidence for assessing amnesty applications and offering a form of reparation allowing victims to relate what they had suffered, restoring their human and civil dignity.

This emphasis on the protagonism of the individuals however entailed a key limitation on the possibility to achieve a full recognition of the real extent of the apartheid crimes:

The TRC individualized the victims of apartheid. Though it acknowledged apartheid as a “crime against humanity” which targeted entire communities for ethnic and racial policing and cleansing, the Commission majority was reluctant to go beyond the formal acknowledgment. The Commission’s analysis reduced apartheid from a relationship between the state and entire communities to one between the state and individuals. Where entire communities were victims of gross violations of rights, the Commission acknowledged only individual victims. If the “crime against humanity” involved a targeting of entire communities for racial and ethnic cleansing and policing, individualizing the victim obliterated this particular – many would argue central – characteristic of apartheid.³⁷

But the nation-building project reached further, and the overall purpose of the commission’s work was to construct a revised national history and write into being a new collective memory, the formulation of a shared national past that could be simultaneously the basis for the assertion of a shared national future.³⁸ The TRC was conceived to be a part of the process of the “healing” of the South African nation. In the reconciliation rhetoric references to the South African citizens as the victims of a trauma

37 Mahmood Mamdani, “Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC)” in *Diacritics*, Vol. 32, No. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 2002), p. 33.

38 Richard A. Wilson, p. 14.

were frequent, and “healing the nation” became a popular idiom for “building the nation”, and the treatment prescribed was truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation. Following the metaphor, the TRC had to heal by opening the wounds, cleansing them and stopping them from festering. The use of this metaphor of the nation as a body was an important point for the nation-builders, as it created the basis for imagining a new “we” because it incorporated the individual in a collective cleansing.³⁹

For this metaphor of national unity to be effective, it had to be supported by a cultural framework that could merge a rediscovered African tradition with the most modern legislation concerning human rights. The result was the choice of the African ethos of reciprocity, *ubuntu*, as a rhetorical device to foster reconciliation within the country. *Ubuntu* means that a person is a person through other people. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the TRC and one of the moral fathers of the democratic South Africa, manages to blend into *ubuntu* Christian religion, African tradition and national reconciliation:

God has given us a great gift, *ubuntu* [...] *Ubuntu* says I am human only because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanize myself. You must do what you can to maintain this great harmony, which is perpetually undermined by resentment, anger, desire for vengeance. That’s why African jurisprudence is restorative rather than retributive.⁴⁰

Ubuntu became a key political and legal notion in the immediate post-apartheid order. It was used to define “justice” proper versus revenge, and so to justify the work of the TRC. It expressed the rejection of revenge, and was explicitly linked in the TRC final report to restorative justice, consisting not in punishment but resulting from reparations for victims and the rehabilitation of perpetrators. *Ubuntu*’s categorical rejection of revenge also included a rejection of retribution as a mere form of justice,

³⁹ Richard A. Wilson, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Desmond Tutu in *Mail and Guardian*, 17 March 1996.

even if based upon due process.⁴¹ It was also used to define just redress so as to go beyond justice, to forgiveness and reconciliation. Retributive justice was in fact seen as largely Western, so that they rather opted for a sense of African understanding that was felt being more restorative, able to restore a balance that had been upset. The concepts of *ubuntu* and human rights were used to bridge the new constitutionalism and the idea of popular sovereignty and representation; the adoption of an Africanist language was meant to cope with social unrest among the impoverished black population that was more inclined towards revenge.

Ubuntu should be recognized for what it is: an ideological concept with multiple meanings which conjoins human rights, restorative justice, reconciliation and nation-building within the populist language of pan-Africanism. In post-apartheid South Africa, it became the Africanist wrapping used to sell a reconciliatory version of human rights talk to black South Africans. Ubuntu belies the claim that human rights would have no culturalistic and ethinc dimensions.⁴²

Without devaluing such a noble concept in any way, the meaning of *ubuntu* have to be considered in the given historical context, with the help of a postmodern perspective like Jameson's: one of the main characteristics of nationalist ideology is to historicize and naturalize "cultural" signs as they are incorporated into the rhetorical repertoire of state discourse; *ubuntu* can be considered an element of pan-Africanist ideology fetched to fit the new discursive necessities of South Africa. In fact, stating that *ubuntu* belongs to black culture is not the same as arguing that black culture *is ubuntu*, so that this latter claim becomes a rhetorical device, a form of narrative reconstruction of the African past for the use of present ideological needs.

41 Richard A. Wilson, p. 11.

42 Richard A. Wilson, p. 13.

1.5 The Need for a New History

When it comes to the effects of the TRC on the cultural life of South Africa, things become even more complicated. The TRC has become the object of a great number of studies concerning disparate topics and perspectives: politics, legislation, human rights, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, culture studies, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics and literature. Thanks to the choice of holding public hearings, this was under many aspects an innovation in the history of truth commissions. The hearings were given massive media coverage both in South Africa and abroad, being aired on radio and television, often live. Most of the testimonies were transcribed and published on the internet and in the newspapers. In addition to this, several films were made about the commission, and a great number of books were published on the subject. All this publicity and documentation made the TRC an important event in South African public life, which reflected and at the same time influenced the political and historical transition.

The role of literature in processes like this is an important one, and South African writers knew that they would have to deal with this transition and find some ways of interpretation.⁴³ Memories and experiences of an authoritarian and violent past are multiple, fluid, indeterminate and fragmentary, so the aim of truth commissions is fixing memory and institutionalizing a view of the past conflict. This is likewise one of the tasks of literature, that is a powerful creator of images and can contribute to the formation of a collective memory and consequently of a common national identity.

In the postmodern age, in a country where the postcolonial is a major topic of debate, it would be easy to imagine that writers evade the rhetoric of nation-building to

⁴³ Sarah Nuttall, Carli Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 1.

focus more on the narration of the margin or to account for the hybridity and ambivalence of the centre. This kind of “weak thought” is hardly suitable to be chosen for a new nation-building process. The tendency to prefer univocal political options, pure ideologies, the “one legitimate script”,⁴⁴ bedevils contemporary South African interpretations of the idea of nation. The result can be the discovery that there is not just one South Africa, but a juxtaposition of different countries all present on the same land at the same time.⁴⁵ In any case, the positive reinterpretation of discordances within the historical narration is vital in order that difference and dissent can always be allowed.

As far as the topics and themes of literary works are concerned, the violence of apartheid almost compelled writers committed to black liberation to a sort of social journalism; at the beginning of the new democracy, they felt more free to explore those places and periods that before had been left aside. In the same way, spectacularization of South African life in literature could give way to the narration of ordinariness, following Ndebele’s suggestions.

Everyday life abuses under apartheid were in fact the main topic of the TRC hearings, a structural violence that resulted in a form of collective trauma. Kader Asmal, minister of the first democratic government, in *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance*, used psychologized metaphors to describe the TRC as a psychoanalysis for the nation.⁴⁶ Under Tutu’s guide, TRC hearings actually resembled a combination of psychological therapy and Christian confession, that wanted to achieve reconciliation through a theatrical public performance. It is evident the

Importance that those who believed in the TRC’s reconciliatory capacities attached

44 Njabulo Ndebele, “Liberation and the Crisis of Culture” in Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman, and Kenneth Parker (ed.), *Altered State?*, p. 1.

45 Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman, and Kenneth Parker (ed.), *Altered State?*, p. viii.

46 Sarah Nuttall, Carli Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 2.

to the cathartic effect that telling the stories of the atrocities they had endured predictably had on many of the victims. It rapidly became clear that these public displays of emotion were an essential part of what Tutu and his commissioners meant by 'reconciliation'. They meant a kind of psychotherapeutic 'healing', the efficacy of which largely depended on its taking place, not within the cloistered privacy of a confidential confessional, but in a public arena and under the scrutiny of the mass media.⁴⁷

Desmond Tutu was in the front line to carry out the tasks of the TRC, even in difficult moments, and lent it a powerful religious undertone. In his book *No Future without Forgiveness* – whose title is extremely straightforward – he linked forgiveness to ubuntu as the way to a pacific future society in South Africa. The past had to meet the present through settlement, not revolution, and the image of "the rainbow nation" was a representational attempt to forge a new national narration out of a fragmented ethnic cultural situation.⁴⁸

This historical transition, although it was characterized by a uniqueness in the endeavour to propose reconciliation and not war as a solution for the end of an authoritarian regime, can be the source of a series of problematic situations due to the fact that the conflict was suspended without a real solution; the reconciliatory rainbow that wrapped the rhetoric of the new government probably made resentment simmer, since it has never been really forgotten. According to Fanon,⁴⁹ in fact, the culture and the national conscience of the colonized peoples result from the process of liberation and cannot be separated from struggle. The coexistence of these two visions of political transition created a fundamental ambivalence in the foundation of the new nation, so that one of the first problems of the new democracy was coming to terms with the memory of the liberation struggle, in an attempt to find a non-divisive version of the story.

47 Anthony Holiday, "Forgiving and Forgetting: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in *Negotiating the Past*, p. 53-54.

48 Ingrid De Kok, "Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition" in *Negotiating the Past*, p. 57.

49 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 27.

CHAPTER 2

Bloodlines by Elleke Boehmer

Here I've been certain I'm on something, a big story, a pattern of connections and chances, but the deeper I've looked, the more complicated everything's got, and the less I've written.

ELLEKE BOEHMER

2.1 The Personal Use of History

Bloodlines starts with a bomb exploding in a crowded Durban beachfront supermarket, in the early 1990s, between Mandela's liberation and the 1994 elections. The bomber is Joseph Makken, a coloured young man fighting for freedom. Among the victims there is Duncan Ferguson, Anthea Hardy's boyfriend. Anthea is a mildly left-wing apprentice reporter working at a local newspaper, who resolves to investigate the life of the bomber's family to cope with her sorrow and discover the reasons that led him to commit such a violent crime. For this reason she tries to get into contact with Joseph's mother, Dora Makken, who at first avoids her but slowly gets to trust her, giving way to Anthea's requests of collaboration in the reconstruction of their family's story. In Anthea's opinion, this could help him in the trial, as they discover that the coloured bomber has Irish blood in his veins: while working at the archive, Anthea finds Kathleen Gort's journal written during the Second Boer War, where the young Englishwoman related the story of Dollie Zwartman-Macken, a black servant on a Boer

farm and Dora's grandmother, and her love story with Joseph Macken, an Irish soldier that went to South Africa to help the Boers in their fight for liberation against the British empire. After the discovery of this important document, and with the help of some old letters found in Dora's odds-and-ends wooden chest, the two women start to write together the missing pieces of Dollie's story, filling the gaps that separate the untold past from the violent present.

The narrative structure of the novel is not uniform: there is a third-person omniscient narrator that cannot be identified with any of the characters, just a narrating voice; but this is true only with regard to the "present" of the novel. There are in fact many chapters that introduce documents, old forgotten letters and notes written mainly by Kathleen, which the reader gets to know before the characters find them; there are also excerpts taken by Kathleen's journal, which see the young woman as the first-person narrator of her own story first, and of Dollie's story after the two women meet in South Africa. Dollie Macken's story, "as told by Dora and Anthea and written into Anthea's notebook",⁵⁰ sees the woman as the first person narrator of her story as well.⁵¹

Boehmer privileges the points of view of Dora and Anthea, and only toward the end of the novel are we given an insight of Joseph's thoughts, prefaced by the small comment "*What he thought*" (262). This, together with other similar comments in the same chapter ("*What she thought*" (265) and "*What they said*" (268)), draws our attention to the structure of the novel as an organized set of stories, letting us peer behind the surface of the narration. This is in fact one of the interesting aspects of the novel: the postmodern approach to narration.

In fact, *Bloodlines* can be classified under what Linda Hutcheon calls

50 Elleke Boehmer, *Bloodlines* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), p. 199.

51 Fiona McCann, "Revising the Past: Memory and Identity in Elleke Boehmer's *Bloodlines* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and *Playing in the Light*", in Jaspal K. Singh, *Trauma, Resistance, Reconstruction in Post-1994 South African Writing* (New York: Peter Lang Pub, 2010), p. 36.

“historiographic metafiction”: a fictional work that provides invented documents and historical evidence, giving them the same authority as with actual historical documentation, in order to undermine the discursive power of history and give voice to credible, but invented, characters that never had the chance to get out of the shadows of history. Within this kind of invented documents we can find testimonies by invented characters, like Kathleen’s journal and correspondence, but there are also forged letters supposedly written by real people, such as the Irish poet W.B. Yeats and the Irish feminist revolutionary Maud Gonne, resulting in the overall effect of blurring the borders between what is history and what is fiction.

As a historical novel, then, *Bloodlines* shows many peculiarities: there is no narration of the past that is directly written by the author in order to feign an objective view of past events; all we have is past narrations provided by characters, both in the past and in the present, as if the author wanted to make explicit that there can be no objective account of history, but only biased and partial versions of it. The structure of *Bloodlines* shows a great awareness about postmodern and postcolonial issues concerning history, which the author of *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* seems to apply by the book. Since the underlying principle of the novel is that history is always partial, Boehmer makes her characters use history for an explicit purpose, that is to save Joseph from life sentence.

The country is going through a process of negotiation to give up apartheid legislation, it “was turning itself round, the Old Man was free, rumors of big change dusted the air” (2), but “justice is still white justice” (121), and “in gaol a guy could still be chocked close to death with a bit of hosepipe for having shouted no more than ‘Power!’ in a crowd of protesters” (3), so that Joseph is not supposed to obtain any sentence reduction on the basis that what he did was a political action. The court has to

ascertain the truth about the facts, but this judicial truth is seen as something that can be changed if seen as the product of a different history. Thus, historical truth challenges judicial truth; it runs a track that is parallel to justice, going upstream; they interfere with each other. If the two women manage to prove a different version of history, the trial might take another course. The aim of both disciplines is in fact to achieve a knowledge about how things happened, but history can change our perception of today's sense of justice, as well as the narration of a trial can change our outlook on history. As Gertie Maritz, an old family friend of Dora's, says while informing her about Anthea's discovery of the old journal in the archives,

‘If it’s true what this girl has found out, if it fits and the connection works, it might help get our Joseph off the hook. I’m sorry, what’s the word, it gets his sentence changed, commuted, he’s declared a proper prisoner of war, an Irish-origin soldier. Your history can save him, if you can manage to piece it together, if the name fits right.’ (145)

This actually seems quite unlikely to realize, but the issue here is not whether they can manage to get a fictional character out of prison (the novel in fact ends leaving this aspect unsolved), whereas how a new vision of history can change the readers' opinion about someone who plants bombs.

The white account of history is already written: it is the Irish nurse's log that lies in the archives, that are for classic historiography a symbol of accuracy of historical evidence, the storehouse of official history. Just for being there, the journal is already part of the corpus of South African history, even if it has never been brought to public awareness. The black point of view is on the contrary still to be accounted for: Anthea and Dora take on the job of filling the gaps between the white version of history and the family memories of the Makkens, so as to add this story, through its publication in the *Natal Times* (the newspaper where Anthea works), to the corpus of South African

history. During their writing sessions, Dora tries to figure out Dollie's voice, how she may have felt, resulting in an emotional rather than objective account of her presumed vicissitudes, which Anthea helps to tell and write.

Dollie's story, as written by the two women, is exactly the kind of story that wants to present history as the chain of events that necessarily had the present situation as its outcome, showing that Joseph was bound to become a freedom fighter because of his family tradition that tracked back to the Boer War. Anthea and Dora, while "filling the gaps" of Dollie's story, do not just try to figure out what she did, but even how she felt and what she thought, so that the present looks like a fulfilled prophecy. A prophecy that justifies the present from the lines of an Irish song-sheet:

*Though many a sigh and tear it cost
For those who rose at Freedom's call,
'Tis better to have fought and lost
Than never to have fought at all. (226)*

A prophecy that is entailed in the name chosen by Dollie for Joseph's son: "Samuel, the name of a prophet" (227).

As the writing sessions go on, Anthea's role in the process of telling Dollie's story is more and more marginal. In the end, as the final chapter of the novel, Dora writes herself – not just tells on records – a letter that Kathleen could have written to Dollie once she had got back to Ireland, putting herself in the white woman's shoes: a piece of writing that claims to be white history, telling how Joseph Macken has ended. Just as Anthea wants to fill the gaps of a coloured family's history, Dora ends up filling the gaps of a white man's life story. Interrelatedness is the central point of the novel, together with the effects of violence on the survivors, which Gertie summarizes to Anthea when she attends a party at Dora's:

‘We’re all survivors, the relations of victims, Joe Makken’s relations, here we are carrying our cocked-up history with us. In any woven cloth it’s useless to look for a thread that hasn’t taken the bend of the others. Nothing’s whole wasn’t once mucked. And vice versa.’ (105)

What Boehmer seems to say at the end of *Bloodlines*, after having experimented multiple perspectives for the narration of an interwoven history, is that if you undertake the job of writing history from another perspective, you must accept the possibility that this story will change the narration of your own history.

2.2 A History of Women; A Women’s History

Bloodlines presents history as seen through the eyes of women. They are the protagonists of the novel, while male characters are relegated to minor parts. Men’s role mostly consists in their being absent. Duncan dies as the novel starts: he is described through Anthea’s memory as a quiet, meditative young man, a well-educated white endorsing the fight of liberation from apartheid; his presence in the novel recalls some sepia flashback sequences in movies, and his memory gradually fades away as the novel unravels. Joseph is in prison; he appears at the trial hearings to give testimony and answer questions, or in some phone calls with his mother. He is the main topic of conversation between Dora and Anthea, the former describing him as a good-hearted caring boy with nothing to be ashamed about, the latter willing to understand the psychology of the bomber. Then there is the Irish soldier Joseph Macken, whom we know nothing about, except for the Irish songs he taught Dollie, and whose presence in the novel is completely metafictional, as Dora and Anthea try to figure out his relationship with Dollie and his adventures (the picture we get from their story is that of

a sort of war frontiersman fond of Irish poetry and resistance songs). Anthea's eventual Indian boyfriend, Arthur, plays no actual role in the novel, apart from being instrumental to a vision of interracial love at the end of the novel.

Anthea is put by Duncan's death in the awkward – if not ironic – position of being a white liberal educated woman whose life is shaken by a bomb planted by one of those freedom fighters for whom she had protested and picketed when she was at university. Her reaction to her grief is not anger, unlike the other bereaved (all the victims of the explosion are white, all women – again – except for Duncan) who have been connected together by that act of violence, and yet they seem to think that they

have nothing in common with them [...] And sometimes they went so far as to allow themselves to think, they are total strangers to us, these people, it's impossible their loss has the depth of ours. (14-15)

Anthea, driven by Boehmer's postcolonial narrative project more than by the character's necessity, wants to go beyond this feeling of individuality before the fatality of history, and resolves to discover what lies beneath violence to defuse it and find a reason for her sorrow. The following passage summarizes many of the important aspects of the novel:

The depression she knew was not about any particular loss – Duncan, the bomb dead. Or the other loss she could at last accept as a simple fact. The death of her idealism about violent opposition to a state of injustice. The accumulation of her weariness and sorrow had rather now been tamped down, impacted, by the news of the sentence – by the hopeless predictability of it [...] A judge, as if without thinking, must make an uncompromising example of Joseph's act. And that meant danger, the trial swinging round once more the deathly cycle of retaliation and sorrowing, of mourning calling out further mourning, and weeping weeping. Unless, no. Unless people ignored the old cycle, looked elsewhere. Unless a different script was possible, and not only among leaders and parties, but one to one. A different script *must* be possible. Each night before bed that week Anthea stood at her kitchen table with her green notebook before her, which remained closed. Unless. Unless there was a different pattern of connection; a web, not a cycle. A ravelling web, a thicker story, bigger pictures. (128)

What both Boehmer and Anthea want to achieve is a sense of interrelatedness that goes beyond race, space and time, and covers political, ideological and emotional aspects, rediscovering human brotherhood through the aftermath of violence in a way that recalls Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In an imaginary conversation with Dora, Anthea says:

What I wanted to say was this, I wanted to say, Your sorrow, Dora Makken, has become my sorrow, our sorrow. I remember the first days after Duncan's death, after the bomb, that terrifying silent chill of my grief, and I think of you. Despite everything that might divide us, I think of you. (122)

Dora Makken embodies in many aspects the ordinary life and hardships of being coloured in South Africa, the living evidence of the possibility of a relationship between races and despite this deprived of any prospects for a better future, confined to a mimicry of European culture, having to cope with the violence of society:

Amazing that no matter how hard you struggle, pull yourself up, read and learn, learn your kids, you can land up at the bottom of the ladder again. After leaving school she began like this. Never mind getting her Shakespeare off by heart, never mind the accountancy correspondence course. Bright but black, her father Sam said, our lowliness depends on our blackness, you can't change the system. So house work it was at first, house work and nanny work, waking dizzy-headed at four in the morning, rocking with back pain, seven days a week. (52)

At first Dora is suspicious about meeting Anthea and talking to her. Then she does not want to be found anymore after the sentence. When Anthea finds Kathleen's journal, she gets angry because she does not want the girl to mess up with her and her son's lives.

'Miss Hardy, who is this we who will so very kindly, big-heartedly do something for my condemned son? What gives you the right to be part of that *we*? This right to be excited? Approaching my family story with its hidden sorrows and shame like a *discovery*. Setting out with hardly a moment's pause to convert it into an article for your paper, the story that I myself don't know the beginning or end of and don't anyhow want to touch. Mn? What gives you that right?' (176)

Her figure is of a proud mother, facing the journalists and the cameras with her head held high, though infantilized by an addiction to chocolate biscuits. Her persona shows some unevenness as her emphasised ordinariness clashes with her language register and tendency to sermonizing.

After beginning to write down Dollie's story, she accepts Anthea's presence in their lives. In a strongly symbolical scene set in Dora's house, she accepts to let Anthea try on Joseph's t-shirt. As Dora neatens the t-shirt on Anthea's back, she feels natural as if she were dealing with a daughter. Dora in fact did have a daughter, Desirée, who died as a young girl and would be the same age as Anthea. With letting her try on her son's t-shirt, a link is created between Anthea and Dora's lost daughter, establishing a symbolic adoption that lets her forget her sorrow:

Without warning her heart feels suddenly filled out, closer to whole. It's like forgiveness must feel, she thinks, the relief of forgiveness – if there was anything about this situation she had to forgive. [...] She reaches inside her memory checking, but, no, it's gone, the resentment's gone, a wound that's closed. (231)

This is the dream that Boehmer proposes for the new South Africa: the possibility that ages of violence, oppression and division might be overcome by a common endeavour to find an alternative to the "old cycle" and reach a sincere human relationship that crosses any colour lines and make society whole. And if on one side Dora experiences a sense of forgiveness that enables her to let go the resentment she has been cherishing all her life, on the other side Anthea feels that sense of acceptance that she had been longing for, and resembles that "please/take me/with you"⁵² that closes Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*:

Anthea smiles at her, hungrily drawing in Dora's touch. She runs it through her body, drawing in its distinctness, its definite warmth. *I asked her to press harder so I might feel her fingers through the numbness of my skin.* (232)

52 Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), p. 365.

The line in italics is an internal self-quotation, as it is taken from that Dollie's story Anthea herself has written. It lends this scene a further, historical, dimension: in Dora's kitchen a symbolical adoption takes place, that finds its correlative in the similar relationship between Kathleen and Dollie at the Boer hospital camp in 1900. Here the terms of the adoption are inverted: it is the white Kathleen who "adopts" the coloured Dollie, giving her care, protection, as well as clothes, money, and the wooden chest that will become a family heirloom for the Makkens. As we have seen in the first chapter, adoption is a frequent motif in South African historical fiction, and it has been used as a narrative stratagem to skip the topic of interracial sexual intercourse while accepting other types of connections. In *Bloodlines* this narrative element is presented just at a symbolical level, and differs from its tradition due to the fact that it is a uniquely female relation, while in the firmly patriarchal South African tradition it used to be only a male prerogative to accept a stranger among their own community. With this appropriation of a classical South African literary motif, Boehmer subverts the patriarchal authority giving women the power of establishing their own – at least symbolic – bloodlines. Another aspect under which Anthea mirrors Dollie is the fact that both women have a relationship with men committed to freedom (respectively Duncan and Joseph Macken) and surrounded by a poetic air, who leave them and whose stories set the tone for their subsequent lives. The writing of Dollie's story is at the same time Anthea's story: two women connected by a story of hybridization that is going to leave its mark on them in an interwoven pattern of relationships.

One of such patterns, inside the novel, is the repetition of names, a common feature in literature dealing with different generations of the same family: Joe Makkens takes his name after his Irish great-grandfather; Dora and Dollie are both diminutives of

Dorothy. Dollie Zwartman-Macken is in fact a central character in the novel. Her two surnames bear witness to the twisted history that she embodies: she is herself already a coloured, so she does not represent the point of mixing of black and white.

‘My mother’s people belonged to a Basotho mountain clan, so she said. [...] She came from the blue hills beyond the Free State, but who knows, some said her father was her mother’s baas. [...] A European master.’ (203)

She is then already part of a mixed South African history. She is an orphan, adopted – another adoption – as a servant by a childless Boer couple of farmers who treat her well but discharge their frustration and anger on her and the other black servants when the British evict them from their farm. As the soldiers bring out the furniture from the house to light a fire, Mevrouw, the Boer woman, cries out her despair:

‘*Ag Meneer, skiet my.* Shoot me, we’ve nothing to live for if our farm’s burnt.’ (220)

But Dollie, unlike these Boers that are “full of themselves, full of their country”⁵³ (169), has nothing to lose, no strong symbols of identity whatsoever, and runs away from the burning farm to make a new start with her beloved Irish soldier, whose baby she is carrying inside her. The man will not come back; a common story in a situation like that. But Dollie keeps his memory alive: she takes his surname, Macken (that will later change into Makken, losing the Irish orthographic root), his Irish accent, repeats the songs she has heard from him on and on. This is what we know on the basis of Kathleen’s journal. Dollie bears a baby that is not the bastard son of a war, but is as much the fusion of two worlds as she can manage to pass down to him. She is a custodian of relationships: the charmed jacket she makes for Joseph to protect him from

⁵³ The passage follows with “Like a possessive woman loves a man they love it, crushingly”. Boehmer disrupts here another Boer male colonial myth, that of the man conquering his land with the same authority as he conquers a woman: here the love of a people for their country is compared to a woman’s love, not a man’s one.

danger is a bond that will not be severed even when he gets back to Ireland, and will torment and obsess him to the point of driving him mad.

Boehmer outlines a history as seen by women and written by women, giving voice to someone who is often given a subaltern role in the play of history and has therefore little space and chance to be heard. Anthea and Dora as authors – though we could also count Elleke Boehmer in this metafictional interplay –, and Dollie and Kathleen as narrative agents, share a common enterprise consisting in a new writing/inventing of the past. They want to be effective, to

Make things happen. Make things happen by understanding otherwise. Throw a new pattern like a diviner scattering bones. (129)

Not properly for the sake of truth, but to obtain the effect of setting a new – postcolonial – possible vision for the future of their country. The important thing, Boehmer says, is learning to leave the past behind, even if it is hard and painful.

In the last chapter, Dora's Kathleen writes a letter to Dollie asking to release Joseph from the magical bond that is haunting him and driving him mad:

I beg, Dollie, that you show mercy. [...] He is fastened to his torture, yet so desperately needs release. Therefore we ask ourselves, would not some word from you help draw out the charm? Could you not write to say the past is behind us? We might then show him, in private, the letter. Or if it is too much to ask, could you not send a single clean page, a sign of forgiveness, on which you might have made an identifying mark, or simply pressed your soft hand? (277-278)

Dora, the coloured female symbol of the oppressed people, is asking her own past to forgive; to set them free from its haunting presence; to let past sorrows behind.

2.3 A Problematic Coloured Identity

As the title of the novel suggests, *Bloodlines* is largely a reflection about identity and its influence on the life of people. Coloured identity has been a problematic one in South Africa, presenting a variety of circumstances and embodying a disturbing hybridity that for a long time the majority of the population preferred to ignore.

South African apartheid legislation always pushed towards a society of clearcut divisions: the 1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act sanctioned the impossibility of social recognition of unions of people from different ethnic groups; the Immorality Amendment Act, issued the following year, went so far as to consider interracial sexual intercourses as crimes, pursuing the eugenic project of keeping races separate, unlike the history of South African society had always witnessed; the 1950 Race Classification Act divided the population into four racial groups (White, Black, Coloured and Indian) on the basis of pseudo-scientific categories, and later appointed such groups to separate areas of land where they were compelled to live, so that contacts between the different layers of society was hindered even further; other laws were designed to keep the non-whites in a subaltern position and let the whites have all the privileges. In every possible way, the apartheid state acted ignoring the fact that identity is something that is continuously under revision and cannot be forcibly fixed forever.⁵⁴

As Mohamed Adhikari says, the coloured community generally felt that they were culturally closer to the European white minority than to the black majority of the country, and always tended towards assimilation “on the principle that it was ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’ rather than colour that mattered”.⁵⁵ This was of course connected to

⁵⁴ Fiona McCann, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Mohamed Adhikari, “Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910-1994”, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32.3 (2006), p. 475.

economical and social reasons too: the black Africans were regarded as an inferior race within the South African social hierarchy and were relegated to a lower condition in every field of social life; in order to distance themselves from the black, the coloured applied to them the same racial categories used by the white to exclude the coloured from the benefits of supremacy, thus fostering racial stereotypes to defend their position of relative privilege.⁵⁶ *Divide et impera*.

Coloured assimilationism together with the insecurities engendered by their intermediate status meant that the most consistent, and insistent, element in their expression of identity in daily life was an association with whiteness, and a concomitant distancing from Africanness, whether it be in the value placed on a fair skin and straight hair, the prizing of white ancestors in the family lineage or taking pride in their assimilation to western culture.⁵⁷

They were defined mostly by their not-being something, either black or white, and their intrinsic miscegenation was despised by both categories because of a supposed lack of racial purity and cultural authenticity. And it is precisely culture what Boehmer stresses as the linking bond nourishing Dora's hope for a better social recognition; despite being a British-oriented colonial education, Dora holds it in high esteem. References to white culture are common throughout the novel – mostly Irish songs and poems; and Shakespeare, a major symbol of European culture – and constitute the only cultural background for the Makkens:

her treasured books, the Standard Nine Reader, her tatty schoolroom *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, underlined in at least four different ballpoints, a *Great Expectations*, the jumble-sale copy of *Jane Eyre* she's read so many times she's lost count [...] And worst, worst for dusting, is the soft leather hat hung on its hook that draws the dust like a licked ice-cream on a windy day.

'Throw it away, ma. What are we doing with that thing anyway? A Boer hat?'

'It's in the family, Joseph, somehow. Since when didn't us Coloureds have a bit of Boer inside?'

But each time she says it she feels her cheeks grow hot. Doesn't know for sure anyway, the family story full of those twists and snags. The past's a sleeping beast that's best left undisturbed. (57-58)

⁵⁶ Mohamed Adhikari, p. 478.

⁵⁷ Mohamed Adhikari, p. 479.

The Makkens feel uncomfortable with their past and its physical symbols: the Boer hat; Dora's sister's red hair; the wooden *kas*, that represents a synecdoche of their family history, left lying outside for years, on the stoep, full of testimonies about their ancestry and ignored. But once Dora agrees to dig into her past with Anthea, the *kas* is taken inside the house and varnished, the past is accepted as part of their life.

Being coloured is not that easy though; there is an ambivalence towards the past: they miss a sense of belonging, but at the same time they are afraid of what may come when they set to find out something about it.

‘You see, being Coloured, Anthea, it's not easy. Every thing feels like a hand-me-down, Second-hand Rose. Your name, your colour, leavings. Nothing's straight and simple. And you want it straight, you want it pure, simple as pie. Something you can take hold of, not a messy muddle, a bit of Boer hat or Irish soldier to add in with the rest. And the vomity stink of betrayal – just *everywhere*. I mean, what about this devil-may-care soldier Macken inside here?’ Tapping the folder on Anthea's lap. ‘Did he ever come back to own his child? Bet one hundred bucks he didn't. Same old story.’ (181)

Paradoxically, the same past that could save Joseph from life imprisonment may at the same time spoil his commitment to the liberation struggle, so that Dora is not enthusiastic about Anthea's discovery:

‘So deep inside he was a delinquent Boer supporter all along. Or if not a delinquent Boer, some adventuring settler's offspring. Descendant of a troublesome bastard, a Boer mercenary and an untrustworthy Irishman. Just like any one of his black or white nationalist enemies might say. He screws up the freedom process because he's one twisted half-breed.’ (176)

Interestingly, Joseph feels that he belongs more to the side of the oppressed than to the oppressors. For a foreign observer, this may be expectable, but as we have seen it was rather unusual for a South African coloured. To mark his ideological position and give legitimacy to his fighting alongside the black, Joseph invents a past of his own, a family

tradition of African resistance against the colonizers that he can be proud of:

[Gertie:] ‘As for Joseph Makken, he once had a story that an ancestor of theirs, some great induna,⁵⁸ fought the British in the Zulu War. It wasn’t true of course, he was making it up, but that ancestor was a symbol for him, a banner he could fight under. And fair enough.’ (134)

This is ironic because his ancestor did fight the British, but he was a white friend of the Boers. Gertie knows it, and he is the only one to know about the real origins of the Makkens, because Dora’s father told him. However, he admits that it is something that is not easy to deal with, the consciousness that in your veins runs the blood of a supporter of your enemies, which threatens to make you feel an accomplice, a sort of historical short-circuit.⁵⁹

‘Remember, the past’s inside us but we can do new things with it. Dora must know that, Joseph too. [...] And why do I say that? I say that because Dora Makken’s father Sam was a Boer baby, born during the war. His father was a decorated soldier from overseas, a white man. It was a mixing, something like what your reports there say. I know this because Sam once told me, when we were first mates together, often drunk. If he passed it to Dora, I’ve no idea, it’s not a story that’s easy to tell. [...] Sam Makken’s father, Dora’s oupa, fought in the war on the other side, the black-hating side, with the Boers. It was there, in the Afrikaner trenches, where the family tradition of sabotage began.’ (135)

Coloured history can be very hard to trace back, confusing, disturbing, even shameful. Moreover, it can easily fall into that category of historical sublime that Jean-François Lyotard indicates as a feature of the postmodern awareness regarding historical discourse: you cannot take in all of it, all of your history, even less if it has ambivalent and obscure parts; and “you want it straight, you want it pure, simple as pie” (181). As we have seen, Dollie was herself already a coloured, so that the complexity comes from an even farther past than that accounted for in the novel. It is easier to invent a simpler

58 A Zulu title meaning advisor, great leader, ambassador, headman, or commander of group of warriors. (source: wikipedia.org)

59 Fiona McCann, p. 39.

version of it, picking those elements that fit your present needs best, and forgetting all the rest.

‘The act of native dispossession. Four in five people lost their land. That’s where we date ourselves from, that’s our anger. Coloureds were better treated, yes, but Dollie was black, looked black. The rest of the history, we put it behind us, don’t hear it. It’s too confusing, gets in our road.’ (182)

The 1913 Natives Land Act is their beginning, the startpoint of hate and therefore of their identity and history, assimilating themselves to the African oppressed people. Digging further beyond in the past would mean to recognize hybridization and complexity, and that is best avoided. That is what the Makkens have done; it is Anthea who wants to cast light on the lost pieces of their story, an urge that goes beyond her job as a journalist:

‘I was interested in the larger history because I wanted to see how we reached where we are. [...] It was important to see how we are related, not apart, mixed-up in a shared history. [...] Filling the gaps made things feel less empty.’ (178)

But what is the importance of the individual in this process? And what is the weight of a community of belonging (which, in the novel, is more or less absent)? Can you be someone without having a past, a past that connects you to the bigger picture? The whole rewriting of history is carried out by the two women without the intervention of Joseph, who is the one that is supposed to take advantage of this new revisioned past. In the only passage where we are given access to his thoughts, he is more than skeptical about the project, and while Dora and Anthea have been changed by their relationship, he is still suspicious and has not lost his feeling of revenge against the crimes of the white people, to which Anthea belongs:

‘I can’t not see the colour. Our colour is still the issue, whatever the politicians are talking.’ [...] Being with whites, around white skin, still gets me down. Thinking of

the half-white skin wrapped around me, it can get me down. [...] Us and the Boers, you check, have piles of business left to do, they've years of explaining yet to do, hours of counting how many they themselves have smashed into pieces. (265)

The climate of forgiveness that would be the future democratic government main concern seems bound not to have any appeal to Joseph. Anyway, colouredness and peaceful interracial relations seem to be the perspective future Boehmer foresees for South Africa. Anthea, after losing her white boyfriend, falls in love with an Indian man, whom she accepts to marry. She has not left behind her prejudice though, a burden that is hard to deal with even for the best-intentioned liberal educated person, but she has nonetheless learned how to overcome it.

2.4 Resistance Struggle

Frantz Fanon puts it clear from the very first line of his *The Wretched of the Earth*, a sort of handbook for freedom fighters: decolonization “cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding”.⁶⁰

National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used of the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. [...] The native who decides to put the programme into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute violence.⁶¹

The political use of violence is another important element in *Bloodlines*. Elleke Boehmer takes into account different kinds of resistance struggle in order to underline the similarities between the reasons that originated them and then compare how they

⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 27.

⁶¹ Frantz Fanon, p. 27-29.

can be perceived in very different ways on the basis of the same assumptions.

The South African white struggle for freedom and independence saw the Boers as protagonists, fighting against the imperialist Britons, and has been framed in a literary tradition celebrating the resistance that led to the apartheid state (mostly war stories), through the creation of the foundational myths of the Great Trek and of the Boer Wars. Along with this, the novel presents a parallel struggle for liberation, the one going on in Ireland: the Irish volunteers go to South Africa led by a feeling of ideological brotherhood with the Boers, with whom they share a common enemy, and by the strategical aim of weakening their British colonizing neighbour in a war that is already going on in one of its colonies. As Joseph Macken says to his fellow soldiers in Dollie's story:

'Lay England by the heels, he told us, Do your duty and strike hard, for we cannot do so at home.' (204)

This is the reason for the Irish-Boer alliance. History – the officially recognized one, at least – is written by the winners, and to today's eyes Irish and Afrikaner resistance to the British oppression is seen as something good that brought to present independent nations in the Republic of Ireland and the Republic of South Africa. The status quo is justified, and at the same time itself justifies the process that brought to its constitution.

On the other hand, the black struggle for freedom and independence is far from being seen as a right and good thing by those white people that exalt the ideal of freedom and self-determination when they talk about white resistance. This is because black violence aims to undermine and modify that white colonial discourse of nation that in the past had caused the whites so much suffering. Black warriors in the struggle

for a real democratic South Africa actually do the same things, perform the same violence as the Boers did, but their deeds cannot be seen as just and legitimate because they are regarded as inferior and cannot attempt to change the order that God gave to society and the world.

The point here is not that the author wants to justify violence, be it black or white, because “a violent and unjust state breeds a violent and unjust society even years after it has itself died” (120); she wants to draw the bigger picture, see things as interrelated and not just as single actions, even if this complex interrelation is really hard to be accounted for and requires some mental work as long as it blurs straightforward solutions and definitions, resulting in a number of shades that water down any attempt to address some strong critics or judgments.

When she sets to find out the reasons that led Joseph to plant the bomb, what astonishes Anthea the most is the ordinariness of his life:

The ordinariness of it, this was what defeated and crazed her. This plain ordinariness, the irreproachable human plainness and poverty exposed by its cleanness. The chipped stove, the plastic-lined dresser, how rubbed they were, how they gleamed! How nakedly the furniture was queued up long the walls, the surfaces so reassuring, solid, clean and plain. So baldly plain. It became offensive to her. Through what process did this plainness become terror?” (105)

As Njabulo Ndebele points out, “the history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle”,⁶² and this focus on violence had as consequence the fact that interiority has been devalued and ignored. The rediscovery of the ordinary – or, to white’s eyes, the *discovery* of the ordinary⁶³ – of non-white lives faced by Anthea has the effect of questioning her prejudice and make her think more deeply about the system that brought all this violence into being, to the

62 Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: Cosaw, 1991), p. 31.

63 Here again, another case of Boehmer’s careful application of postcolonial guidelines in her novel.

point that she gets to see resistance as a fascinating, almost exotic thing:

‘You and your Irish ancestors, them and the Afrikaners, an intertwined history of resistance.’ (175)

The novel indeed often indulges in the idealization of Joseph’s dissident figure, to such an extent that forgiveness and repentance look unlikely for him. Joseph, however, as we have seen, searches his family tradition of resistance in the other half of his blood, inventing a Zulu ancestor who inspires his fight against the Afrikaners, even if “it was there, in the Afrikaner trenches, where the family tradition of sabotage began” (135).

This historical irony is not appreciated by Joseph’s fellow activists in the MK. One of the problems concerning the coloured’s hybrid identity consists in their being considered unfit to fight the apartheid government because of their lack of “racial pureness”.⁶⁴ Joseph’s initiative remains officially unsupported by the Movement, and though at first this is attributed to the political inexpediency of the bomb, it is later suggested that it may have something to do with the colour of his skin, as Anthea notices the “low black attendance at the trial” (87).

The other strong image of commitment against imperial domination is a woman, Kathleen. She is English, but her mother comes from an Irish family (again the female line) and when her parents die she is adopted by an aunt who is a fervent activist for the cause of Irish independence: she is active against evictions in West Ireland, and also writes political articles. It is she who inaugurates Kathleen’s political education, as the girl notes down in her journal:

The English Queen, she writes, is Satan on Earth. She cannot yet comprehend how Mother, her own young sister Eileen, could have worked for the Empire by teaching in India with Papa. Her vehemence startles me but I am moved by what she says of the trouble people have here, and their pride in what is their own, their land, their songs and stories. [...] Ireland as a small country should join the Boers in

64 Fiona McCann, p. 33.

their efforts to hurl themselves against the great, to stand up for land, language, liberty! (148-149)

She starts distributing anti-English pamphlets and posters, until she decides to leave for South Africa to take part in the Boer war for freedom as a nurse:

I believe a strong symbol *for* freedom and *against* tyranny can be obtained from showing solidarity with the Boers. (164)

This statement sounds extremely ironic to our historical standpoint, and to Joseph's ears it must sound even insulting. It is Dollie who counterbalances the epic narration of freedom fighting by expressing her perplexity about the fact that the two white peoples are at war to defend principles of civilization that they are not willing to apply to the native Africans:

'It is strange to me. A country full of white people and yet suffering under oppression.' (171)

The ambivalence of perception about resistance has its objective correlative in the statue of the Irish soldier that Dora finds on the Cape Town waterfront: the Irish freedom fighter is celebrated with a public monument, but his freedom fighting breed is in jail. In spite of her optimistic vision of this interrelating history, Boehmer cannot avoid pointing out the problematic nature of her fantasy. "Joe Makken the freedom fighter freed from his own past by the past?" (242), Dora asks herself. But Joseph does not want to accept easy solutions for a battle that he feels far from being over, and refuses the women's story suggesting a sort of predestination:

'When I heard the story you were making I thought, no, that's shit. It lifts responsibility from my shoulders, to have rebellion in the blood, chip off the old block. I'm sorry for the deaths but always I'm responsible.' (268-269)

And at this point, when the women's fictionalised history reconstructed lost memories and found a linking pattern that gives sense to the violent present, Boehmer short circuits her story by making Joseph tell an anecdote referring to his last days of freedom in Ladysmith, the same town where his Irish ancestor took part in an important battle against the British. He tells of an old *izinyanga*⁶⁵ offering *muti* – traditional African medicine – for the soldiers to eat, so as to make them strong; a *muti*, he later discovered, that had been made from the crushed bones of dead soldiers coming from the Anglo-Boer graves.⁶⁶

[Anthea:] 'I can't bear to think. It could've been – ' [...] 'It would be like magic, almost. The story coming alive, if you see what I mean, the bones living through you – ' (270-271)

With *Bloodlines*, Elleke Boehmer seems to try to put into literary practice the postcolonial theories she deals with as a critic all at once, creating a coherent theoretical framework including concepts of cultural hybridity, ambivalent identity, subalternity, feminism, postmodern historiography and nationalist counter-discourse representation. The sometimes sloppy representation of the characters, however, sometimes does not match up to this carefully constructed structure. Boehmer then manages to convey her message "technically" through the underlying structure of her novel rather than through an accomplished literary work.

65 Boehmer uses the term "*izinyanga*" to describe a traditional healer that gives Joseph *muti*; the Oxford English Dictionary, however, gives a definition of *izinyanga* as the plural form of *inyanga*.

66 This image is the central element of John Conyngham's novel *The Desecration of the Graves* (1990), where the link between the Anglo-Boer War and the conflict between blacks and whites recalls some of the key elements of *Bloodlines*. (See Annalisa Oboe, *Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa*, p. 97).

CHAPTER 3

The Memory of Stones by Mandla Langa

*Now – although the melodies and cadences hadn't undergone a transformation – the songs were different. They spoke of struggle and victory and the need to carry this heavy load of responsibility. Stammering beneath the lyrics was an understanding that, yes, the political struggle might have been won, but greater obstacles lay athwart the route to genuine independence.*⁶⁷

MANDLA LANGA

3.1 The Future of a Community

With the end of apartheid, all the legislation that, from the 1913 Natives Land Act on, had confined black people to restricted areas of the country was repealed by the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act in 1991. From that moment, the non-white population was given back its right to move within the country and the possibility to own land. People who had been displaced in compliance with apartheid laws could then find their way back to the land they used to call home. *The Memory of Stones* deals with a similar experience: a community that had been dispersed under the apartheid regime that gathers to take possession of their land – Ngoza, in KwaZulu-Natal – once again, facing the difficulties of reconstructing a lost social unity.

Baba Joshua is the old chief of a community that undergoes a diaspora due to forced removal from their native Ngoza. Many of them move to KwaMashu township,

⁶⁷ Mandla Langa, *The Memory of Stones* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2000), p. 161.

Durban (the same township where Langa grew up), and live there in extreme poverty working in the city factories. After the death of Joshua's wife, Nomonde, he starts to dream and have visions about Ngoza: an angel comes that appoints him "the chosen one", giving him the mission to "lead the people from the land of strife to the unclaimed ancestral plains of Natal" (24), where they will build the Temple of the New Jerusalem and praise God. After the democratic elections, the new government decrees that they have the right to go back to their land and settle there. The New Jerusalem community has then to face a situation that has changed during their absence and the threats of the local warlord Johnny M, who has his own vision of how the future of Ngoza must be and wants to build a casino. Johnny M uses Mbongwa, Joshua's brother, as a puppet in order to take control over the community and pursue his ambitions of power. The interests of the clan are secured by Zodwa, Joshua's daughter, who reluctantly accepts to continue her father's mission and faces Johnny M to put an end to his violence.

The actual time of the story is quite short, but is often interrupted by several flashbacks, that are the main narrative feature of the novel: they divert from the main narration in order to give an insight into the characters' mind and personality and let us know their previous experiences, and mostly refer to a period before the first democratic elections. Unlike *Bloodlines* and *The Heart of Redness*, in this novel the past narration describes a recent past, so that the protagonists are more or less the same as in the present. In the first part of the novel there is little action, and the characters do not relate to each other in a significant way. The construction of their psychology through flashbacks describing their relationships and way of thinking is given more place, letting us understand their present point of view towards the situation in Ngoza. After the arrival of Mpanza – an ex-MK guerrilla who was ordered to kill Joshua's son, Jonah – the story starts to develop and the latent conflicts become manifest.

Although the fight between Johnny M and Zodwa's community is quite thrilling, the focus of the novel is not so much on the action as on the characters. We are presented a range of personal situations that are paradigmatic of life in South Africa: the old chief of the community; the first-born son who went into exile to fight for freedom; the daughter who wants to leave her past behind and blend with the anonymity of urban life; the ex-guerrilla who strives to be forgiven his past; the gangster who sees in the change of government a chance to extend his power; the foreigner who wants to understand the South African situation but cannot feel at ease; the good white policeman and the bad white policeman; the old inyanga; the fallen black woman who regrets her situation; the black women's collective who try to start a new local economy. The novel gives us a picture of different characters acting on the stage of a new South Africa where new relationships have to be established in order to fill the new spaces created after the fall of the apartheid regime. A situation of transition that calls for a new order, triggering a scramble for power that reaches Shakespearean levels of intensity and cannot but lead the overambitious Johnny M to ruin.

Puzzlingly, this novel shows some evident incoherences in its structure and writing, which may lead to think of a hasty copy-editing and publication: it sometimes shifts from present to past tense without consistency; there are sentences that look unpolished or incoherent as if they had not been revised; most glaring of all, towards the end an entire passage is repeated verbatim as if the author cut and pasted it without remembering to delete it from the original position. But apart from these formal flaws – which nonetheless distract the reader from the story – in the second part Langa's careful representation of his characters does not result in a fulfillment of the initial narrative premise, leaving some aspects of the characters' personalities pending.

The novel is basically a settlement story. It shares many of the features that in

chapter one we recognized as common of this kind of literature, with the fundamental difference that here the settlers are black. Like the “white” settlement stories, *The Memory of Stones* presents a community that has left behind an oppressing situation and is looking for a better future in a place where their traditions can be preserved; but unlike the white experience, for them the place is not a new one: it is the return to a place after years of exile. The return is not easy, and the enthusiasm of rebuilding a community in “the place where [their] umbilical cord is buried” (34) has to face the difficulties of keeping together a group of people whose common identity has striven to survive the diaspora, in addition to facing both external and internal enemies of the settlement project, who are not eager to see Joshua’s dream realized.

[Zodwa:] ‘He had a dream. Only this fucking country cannot deal with dreams and visions, did you know that?’ (172)

The fact that the newly founded settlement is going to be called “the New Jerusalem” indicates this vision of returning after a diaspora, but also has a strong religious connotation (Joshua is in fact a spiritual leader in the first place). Moreover, this name recalls a fundamental topos for the Afrikaner nation-building ideology, that of being a chosen people, a settlement stories commonplace that here is subverted in favour of the blacks, showing that God’s range of choice about peoples is wider than the colonial discourse would accept.

With their strong projectual symbolism, love stories in settlement novels are indicators of the direction the writer imagines or promotes his country to follow. In *The Memory of Stones*, love stories attain to the settlement scheme, but here the protagonist couple of lovers is black. Even if the community is committed to the Zulu tradition,

Joshua's marriage with a Xhosa woman is seen as a wise thing, while it is not the case with Zodwa's initial flirt with the white Horwitz, which is frowned upon by the elders because it crosses the colour line:

That was the thing that had almost led Joshua to lose the respect of his peers. Much as people understood that there were changes in the government, that the Immorality Act had been scrapped, his people still couldn't accept that black and white people could have a friendship that had sexual implications. (141)

From these words we can see how a law set up by the apartheid government to prevent miscegenation and "contamination" of the white race is endorsed by the black community as well. The only positive mixed relationship in the novel is between the Afrikaner policeman Jannie Venter and the coloured Scotswoman Benedita, whose father is a black South African. Amalgamation is seen as the direction that the country is bound to follow, but it is not presented as an idyllic situation and mixed couples in the novel have to suffer criticism and discrimination.

The scheme of relationships is a very classical one and does not foster revolutions concerning the social status quo: Nerissa, the uneducated mistress of the local shebeen falls in love with the voracious workman Reuben, while the graduated chief of the community marries the war hero of the resistance. The villain, Johnny M, is presented as being a bisexual after his experience in prison, and the homosexual relationship he entertains with a young henchman of his ends up in a tragic and violent way. Homosexuality is regarded as something that simmers under the surface of social acceptability, still causing resentment even if the democratic South African constitution sanctions the end of any discrimination. Johnny M is the most violent character in the novel, always harassing the women that work for him and treating them like objects he owns. He embodies the male violent supremacy that rules South African society, and the fact that Langa makes him become a bisexual is a very interesting choice: bisexuality,

maybe even more than homosexuality, is a hybrid category, hard to define, and defies all traditional sexual identities; in this way, Langa – following the postmodern and postcolonial distaste for strong identities – wants to strike male violence undermining the patriarchal construction of a strong male identity, something that, in a sort of ironic revenge, almost makes Johnny M be pitied by the other characters for his inability to come to terms with his own personality.

3.2 Democracy, Tradition, Power

The difficult birth of a new form of social organization is one of the main themes of the novel. As we have seen, the main plot consists in the conflict between the right of possession of the land granted to Joshua's community by the new democratic government and the structure of personal powers that grew during apartheid, made of black gangsters threatening the town and corrupted policemen. The legitimate power of the democratic state is put into question by local criminals who use violence and intimidation to maintain their position of power. On the other side, the development of democracy has also to deal with the inertia of tradition in a moment when the radical changes in the country would cause some people to seek refuge into old certainties. The whole thing is set in an atmosphere of impending violence, with continuous rumors about bloody battles and fights in the nearby region of Upper Ngoza. This may be a reference to the hostilities that went on in KwaZulu-Natal between supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party and those of the United Democratic Front, both anti-apartheid movements.

Zodwa and Jonah were born in Ngoza, but they grew up in KwaMashu, where the

tradition of their people were hard to keep alive. Jonah joins the MK and goes abroad to train for the armed struggle; Zodwa instead goes to university in Fort Hare (the university where Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, along with other eminent figures of the anti-apartheid movement, studied) because she wants to become a lawyer and leave her native traditional world behind to merge with the anonymity of the big city; she does not want to be involved in the problems of Ngoza, not even when her father falls ill:

‘Why are people so concerned with meaningless things?’ Zodwa asked, more to herself than Khaya. ‘What’s there to be top dog about in Ngoza? The squatter camp? The road leading to nowhere? The peasants trying to make a living? Papa’s followers are just so pitiable I could scream.’ She laughed. ‘Reminds me of the Polisario Front and the Moroccans: people fighting over a barren desert.’

‘It’s their land, Zodwa. Their shrines and their memory.’ Khaya regarded her. ‘What would happen if they wanted you back there?’

‘Not on your life. Me, I’m a city woman, give that smoky bundu to someone else.’ (88)

In spite of her career dreams, Joshua manages to make her promise that she will take his place as the chief of the New Jerusalem

‘I implore you, Zodwa,’ Joshua persisted. ‘For the people.’ (173)

The people seem in fact to need some sort of leader. The western democratic categories of people’s participation to public life are not common among these people who have voted only once in their lives, so that when the oppressive and alienating white regime ended they went back to the only form of politics they know how to deal with: the traditional forms of chieftaincy. Community life is then still rooted into tradition, in fact Zodwa is warned that “the traditionalist cannot bear the idea of being ruled by a woman” (221), even if she also has some supporters in the settlement, above all among women. Zodwa finds herself in an ambivalent position: she knows for her

education what kind of democracy the new state intends to apply, but her commitment to Ngoza and the memory of her dead father and brother compel her to deal pragmatically with tradition:

‘You’ve got me there, mister,’ she said. ‘I suppose I’m one of the most immediate examples of the past standing in the path of development.’

Her ready admission that the whole system of chiefs was an anachronism surprised him. [...] ‘But’, she said, ‘whether we believe it or not, we have to engage in these traditional forms of governance, don’t you think so?’ (323)

Zodwa – the resolute, sometimes bad-tempered, educated daughter of a political and spiritual leader – embodies the double nature that Langa sees as a possible foundation for the new South Africa, “a country still struggling to define itself” (80): a mixture of western democracy and development and of traditional African values, combined together by a love for the country and commitment to its people. A political possibility that Langa sets in a rural town, where the influences of the city are just an echo even if national politics are often discussed and politicians criticized. Mpanza, the ex-guerrilla, often complains about the fact that it was only those people who did not commit themselves in the armed struggle and endorsed a mimicry tension towards the white system of power who got to the highest places in the state administration:

‘Years of the bush and years of gleaning knowledge from far and wide didn’t count. *What degree do you have?* This was the operational question. In the government, people who had spent the years of struggle grappling with *-isms* and arcane and abstruse concepts occupied some of the senior positions.’ (182)

At a practical level, they feel that the country is still ruled by the whites:

Everywhere you go you see white people, secretaries and officials. They walk like they own the place, never mind that the minister is a black person. The people who play the *katara* are white. Do you think that they have any interest in developing us? (180)

In addition to this, Langa's characters see that black people are still entrapped in a subaltern condition, that leads them to perform a mimicry of the white people and culture, something that Frantz Fanon⁶⁸ and Homi Bhabha⁶⁹ identified as one of the features of the colonized conscience and Langa sees as a great obstacle to true black independence:

A truth that was painful as it was damning was that certain sections of black society tended to judge people on their ability to imitate the white man. The closer the pale ghost was to the ways of the masters, the higher he was elevated in people's eyes. (181)

The black majority of the country, in spite of the massive rhetoric of reconciliation and nation-building, cannot find a commonground to project a collective future, and in the moment when they find themselves free from oppression they cannot easily make up their mind:

[Zodwa] comprehends, now, that, like most young people of their generation, political comprehension resides cheek by jowl with illusions, that there is no strong political basis for their campaigns beyond being united in discrediting the white regime. (163)

In such a situation of uncertainty, democratic life is easily preyed on by profiteers in search of power. Mbongwa, Zodwa's uncle, is ready to sell his people to Johnny M if this will guarantee that he can be the leader of the settlers, but he is unfit to lead a community properly because of his greed of power, and would just become Johnny M's puppet. He wants to exclude Zodwa from his brother's succession, and resorts to traditional law to obtain that she is not considered, saying that "under the Bantu Native Law, a woman is a perpetual minor and can never take over unless she's the first wife" (228). Zodwa does not give up though, because she feels that she is living a key

68 Frantz Fanon, "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples", *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Pr., 1952)

69 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

historical change and knows that all forces are needed. As in the ancient times chiefs had defended their people from external attacks, she now has the responsibility to face the threats coming from Johnny M:

Casting around in her mind, she recalled her earlier studies in law where they commented on the integrity of chieftaincy in ancient African society, which was under constant threat from both external attacks and the fragmentation caused by the political process itself. In the past, the threat had taken the form of raids of cattle, conflicts over grazing. Sometimes there would be a threat from a rival chieftaincy. But greed and the capacity for mischief occasioned the threat, which she knew existed today, from Johnny's people. (219-220)

Johnny M is the local gangster, whose crave for power is both economical and about relationships. He runs a number of illegal trades and business, he collects levies from almost anyone in Ngoza and is inclined to violent overreactions whenever he feels betrayed or provoked. He is the typical black criminal that prospered under the apartheid regime with the connivance of corrupted officials like Grey.

Joshua had marvelled at the way people like Grey played with power, not understanding that it possessed its own inner logic and momentum. Those who wore it around themselves, who flaunted it and caused people to cower, were themselves preyed upon by the same power. It claimed them and had them dangling, like marionettes, at the end of a string. (28)

As a young man, Johnny is fond of "picaresque adventures on celluloid" (111), whose emulation leads him to prison. There, he is gang-raped and is given the *Collected Works of William Shakespeare* by one of his rapists. He gets to know all the *Works* by heart, and "in Macbeth's world he sees a little of himself" (114). He is indeed a Shakespearean tragic figure, and especially in the final pages he is described as "a latter-day Macbeth or Richard the Third" (337); his crave for power has no limits, and he wants to shape Ngoza to his liking:

In his mind's eye, Johnny M saw bulldozers levelling off shacks and abandoned

houses, making room for the cattle ranch or the casino of his dreams. (115)

Under the apartheid state, gambling was illegal in South Africa; it was the new South African democratic government that legalized it in 1994, and in 1996 a legislation instituting a system of casinos was issued.⁷⁰ We can see then that the construction of casinos was actually at issue during the period when Langa's story is set. Certainly, a casino is not the best development project for a town, since it does not yield actual wealth for the community and is often associated with crime, drug and prostitution, so it is understandable that people may stand up against them. *The Memory of Stones* describes a clash between two ways of intending development, but even more between two ways of conceiving power.

Johnny M was chairman of the Two Rivers Squatters Development Board. Owing to the confusion deriving from the transition from apartheid governance to community structures, there was a leadership gap. But development needed to take place. (177)

Johnny M does not believe that democratic institutions will succeed, so he tries to run a parallel structure of power, using for his purpose even legal means.

'Let's be fair, now, ok?' Johnny M was getting heated. 'Those people wouldn't know how to elect the village dogcatcher if that opportunity presented itself with their breakfast cereal. I've heard all this talk about democracy and accountability. Big words, nice on the tongue, but meaningless in the real world.' (178)

He symbolizes that state of society where people cannot have what they are entitled to simply because it is their right, but they have to please the master to obtain it. In fact, he opposes all independent forms of business venture, like the one the women of Two Rivers have started:

The Two Rivers Women's Collective; they had schemes to appropriate some land

⁷⁰ National Gambling Act, 1996 [No. 33 of 1996]. http://www.saflii.org/za/legis/num_act/nga1996156/

which they would cultivate. [...] These were going to be a headache, Johnny M knew. Once women organized themselves into some collective, there would be no end to their demands. (116-117)

Women are – here as they were in *Bloodlines* – the protagonists of development. It is the women who start the mob to contrast the power of Johnny M after he made his men kill all their goats. To respond to this act of intimidation, they resort to Zodwa, “it was an instinct borne of the realisation that men could not be trusted” (208). To contrast them indirectly, Johnny M sends for all the people to be called out of their houses at night under menace that he would burn their houses down if they did not obey, in order to form a counter-mob that has to march to the New Jerusalem to banish Zodwa from the settlement. In the very moment she accepts to help the women, Joshua dies in his tent, signalling the fact that he has passed down his leadership to his daughter.

Male characters, on the contrary, are hardly positive figures. We know that Venter suffered from sexual frustrations with his former wife; the stress connected with his job as a military guard resulted in impotence, and his wife treated him as a “sexual cripple”. This can be a dystopian view of the loving couple who cannot foster a new generation positively, while the black family, despite the violence it has suffered, manages to start another generation. Moreover, it appears like some sort of revenge on the white race: Venter is depicted as a sexually impotent man, and the other white policeman, Grey, is sexually mutilated while he tries to rape Benedita at the end of the novel. The only other white man, Horwitz, is a drunkard Jew who is killed by Johnny M’s men. He is strangely the only character who is not given any flashback, so that we know nothing about his past and inner thoughts.

An external point of view on the life of the New Jerusalem is given by Benedita, who is perhaps the most interesting character because she is given the deepest and most

detailed psychological description, beyond what her role in the novel would require. She was born in Glasgow, by a Scottish woman and a black South African who soon leaves the family. After the release of Mandela, and following a vision she had in a state of confusion, she decides to go to South Africa for the first time, where she marries Jannie Venter, an Afrikaner policeman who saves her from a rape.

Benedita is a very ambivalent character: she feels black at home and white in South Africa; she has a genuine curiosity towards African life and she is empathetic to the people in the New Jerusalem, who are her neighbours, but nonetheless she is subconsciously afraid of Africans. While she sees on tv De Klerk announcing Mandela's liberation, she becomes aware of her inner egodystonic thoughts:

though she was a member of a progressive movement – she has never really subscribed to the ideal of African liberation. Hers has always been a case of human rights. That the people at the bottom rung of the racial totem pole are African is always balanced against a subliminal admiration for the progress with which she credits white involvement in Africa. She is surprised that it takes Mandela's release for her to admit that she doesn't really care how Africans deal with power, just as long as it doesn't set the country ablaze. (66)

Seeing that Langa is not really optimistic about the ability of his country to cope with the democratic transition, Benedita may embody the external perception of unreliability and uncertainty that South Africa supposedly gives abroad.

3.3 Going Home from Diaspora to the Land of the Fathers

The subject of the novel is the reconstruction of a community that underwent a diaspora during the apartheid years. Some people have been displaced to an anonymous township in the outskirts of a big city and forced to find a job in a factory; others have joined the

armed struggle and gone to exile, some of them never to come back. After 1994, they feel the need to go back to the place they used to call home, with the intention of changing its name to “New Jerusalem”, like the Israelites after their diaspora, a name with a strong connotation and claim of moral exemplarity. A sense of predestination and uniqueness permeate the settlement in the novel, but Langa is often ready to depict a surrounding environment where the ordinary life of people goes on without considering the problems of Joshua’s community, which is not a colony on the frontier, but a new settlement in an already existing rural town, so that the powerful confrontation of tradition, power and democracy seems confined only to the New Jerusalem area.

The displacement of a community from the land they had inhabited for generations is a traumatic experience that Zodwa can still remember from her childhood:

In her mind, Ngoza could be reduced to abstract terms, a place that was caught up in the maw of contending forces. This was where the might of the government – *their* government, she mentally corrected herself – had removed the inhabitants to make way for white progress. The memory of it all was very unreliable. But she could still remember the shouting and the carrying on, the sound of the trucks, her mother’s dull eyes as she watched Joshua remonstrating with a burly police officer who seemed bored and detached, his own eyes under the peaked cap as soulless as cut glass. (5)

The night before their removal, all the people of the village gather in the cave where their shrines are kept and where they store the symbols of their community to save them from destruction. Joshua then addresses the people with a speech that sounds like a prophecy, full of hope that that is just a period that will pass and that they may return to their land:

‘The most important thing, however, is how we shape our future. [...] Our concern is the future, which is buried in the ruins of our past, in the dwellings razed to the ground and in how faithfully we preserved the memory of the time when we were human beings. We shall move and seek work and carry out orders on the terms set by those in power. [...] But we shall return to this land which was given to us by our forebears. What matters, then, is how we conserve our energy to ensure that we

do return.’ (13)

This call for commitment to a cultural resistance will see Joshua as the protagonist of the return, like Moses leading his people back to the promised land. The huge responsibility that Joshua takes on his shoulders is not confined to logistic matters and political representation; it consists in the more thorny question of dealing with the people’s expectations, working on their collective memory in order to convince them about the possibility of a project for the future of their community that can be a continuation of their local traditions:

‘People of God’, he began, ‘we are all gathered here, on the fifth year of our arrival in this holy place. I remember how many of you who in their fervour for upliftment trudged with their humble bundles across this bleeding land. You were no different from those men and women of yore, who traversed the hills and valleys, through rivers and mountain passes, in search of a land where they could be free. But their freedom was faulty, a hollow sacrifice, because it was not inspired by God or his angels, but by a greed to enslave, which beats in some people’s hearts like a pulse. Our freedom has nothing to do with dispossessing others; we are here to hearken to the voice of God, to praise him and submit ourselves to his will.’ (26)

This sermon compares the New Jerusalem settlement to the myth of the Boer’s Great Trek, blamed for being founded on racism and discrimination disguised in the ideals of freedom and independence. Another blow to the Afrikaner’s national discourse. A strong community-building rhetoric – in this case, an anti-white rhetoric – is needed to put together people that during the years of exile have taken on other traditions and forgotten some of their original ones:

“how do you create favourable conditions for families that have imbibed other influences, some inimical to the vision of Joshua and the Elders. What is their vision?” (106)

In addition to this, people like Mpanza must be considered, who are “no longer in touch with traditional rituals” (215), but are looking for a sense of belonging that starved

during the long years of exile.

On her arrival at the New Jerusalem, Joshua takes Zodwa to visit the cave, where nothing has been touched in all those years:

‘When the police removed us,’ Joshua says, ‘these are the things we salvaged. Each item represents a family.’ He sighs. ‘We wanted to be able to remember something of ourselves that was left behind.’ [...] ‘Many people died in the long exile. We have a duty to bring their bones back here.’ (105-106)

Their sense of community imposes a duty of collecting even the bones of those who have died in exile (like Joshua’s wife, Nozizwe), so as to stress the importance that they see in being buried in the same land as one’s umbilical cord, for a community is not composed just of the living, but also of the dead and the memories they carry with them. This awareness about the importance of wholeness in a community is passed down to Zodwa, who uses it as a persuasive argument in her public speech when she has to convince the mob to stand up for their land against Johnny M:

‘For many of us, it is the place where our umbilical cord is buried but, much more importantly, this place is the repository of our collective memory.’ (340)

For Zodwa, committing herself to the cause of the New Jerusalem means to give up her life project as a lawyer. Tradition and belonging find their place in the land, and are opposed by Langa to cosmopolitanism and individuality that are symbolized by the city:

Alone in the quarters provided for visitors, she senses that she is being sucked into something that is beyond her. Remembering that she just wants to become a lawyer, Zodwa determines to return to campus. The collective vision of the people who have returned is the least of her worries because, she knows, understanding implies taking some measure of responsibility. Her spirit on campus and the cities of the country, as well as the route to her chosen career, cannot be nurtured in this land of symbols and skins and the stammering memory of stones. (106)

The seal to her transformation into a leader is a sort of time travel that she experiences during her final face-off with Johnny M. They agree to challenge in the test of the Humiliation Tree, a traditional way of settling controversies consisting in a mystical rite during which Zodwa meets the ancient Zulu king Dingane, who enacts a sort of lesson of politics and leadership, speaking of his brother Shaka's ambitions of power, and afterwards tries to kill her. Zodwa manages to escape and wins the challenge, reinforcing her leadership role so that the mob revolts against Johnny M.

Another perspective on the matter of return is given once again through Benedita, whose motivations to go to South Africa are barely explicable:

Benedita, formerly a staunch member of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (A-AM), left London in 1992. The journey to South Africa had as much to do with the emptiness left by the release of Mandela as finding a connection with a lost father. (60)

The impression we have from Benedita's thoughts is that she experienced apartheid from far and outside, cherishing a sense of belonging and solidarity with her father's people based only on the empathic participation to a human right cause against an oppressive government, but in the moment this pitiable condition ceases she cannot find a sense of identity anymore:

And, she asks herself, who are my people? When she arrives in South Africa looking for her father [...], part of her claims his people, but her whole upbringing shrinks at the powerlessness he represents. Benedita reaches this conclusion after a long hour of soul-searching. She sees the potential political power in the hands of the black, but that is all. Here and there they've climbed the economic ladder, but their footing is unsure and the rungs are slippery. I am black, she tells herself repeatedly, but this is accidental. Here, she remembers the conundrum faced by James Baldwin, the black American writer who found no connections with Africa. The palpable poverty of Africans – for whose cause she braved the winter chills as she stood at picket lines in front of South Africa House near Trafalgar Square – horrifies her. It is not lost on her that she is also a victim of a curious form of self-hatred. Her education and training and exposure to the best institutions of culture have given her tools with which to analyse the world. [...] Even though Venter's people cannot be said to symbolise civilisation, they haven't sunk so low as to kill peoples the way blacks do. But these are private thoughts, because she cannot

express that she fears the blacks, not so much for the intelligibility of their tongues as the randomness of their violence. (78)

She goes to South Africa with an almost anthropological sense of curiosity that clashes with her more or less subconscious fear of the black.

She knew very little about black people and could therefore not claim to be an authority. The books she had read which had added up into an unfinished film script had not prepared her for the existential reality of living in a country where black people were the majority. (151-2)

Her contradictory behaviour leads her to marry an Afrikaner policeman, but also to become a good friend of Zodwa and help her to deal with the death of her father and the other women in the settlement. In a flashback we see her daring to attend the funeral of Chris Hani, the secretary-general of the South African communist party who were shot dead in 1993, even if she is warned that “no sane white person would go anywhere near [there]” (232). While trying to approach the stadium where the ceremony is held, she faces the most violent rage of the black Africans, risking to be killed and raped. Her ceaseless will to understand is linked to her visions and her peculiar sensitivity:

‘The thing that happened to you,’ she said, ‘we call it *ukuthwasa*, when the ancestors pick you out for a special healing task. [...] Women who’ve had your experience are rare,’ she continued. ‘And most of them, if they listen to the call of the forefathers, become *isangoma*.’ [...]

Benedita had no intention of becoming an *isangoma*. ‘What happens’, she asked, ‘if they ignore the call?’

‘They go mad,’ Nozizwe said simply. ‘Stark raving mad.’ (154-155)

A sort of predestination pushes Benedita towards the acceptance that she belongs to Africa, even if her ambivalent attraction for this land makes her reluctant to take on this bond. Unfortunately, Langa’s novel ends quite hastily resolving only those parts directly connected with the plot. Benedita returns to London, and in a short paragraph we are given just a hint of the solution of her psychological vicissitudes, frustrating the

narrative potential of a carefully chiselled character:

Nozizwe reassured [Zodwa] that Benedita would return; she was just at the beginning of her journey. She also needed to recover from the ugliness she had seen in South Africa, and what it had forced her to become. *I was black in London*, Benedita wrote, *and became white in South Africa, only to realise that I'm back to the consciousness of blackness that only London can evoke. Love.*

3.4 Black Violence, White Violence

Annie Gagiano, in her 2004 article about the issue of national identity in post-1994 South Africa, notices how, aside from the structurally central subject of the relocation of a black community,

Langa's novel is commendably courageous in taking up, as *centrally* as it does, the uncomfortable issue of black-on-black betrayal, co-optation and predatory behaviour. For these are the pressures that complicate and compromise the more usual, stark, black-and-white opposition of most apartheid-era narratives, but they are nevertheless, at this stage, still very sensitive issues.⁷¹

The structural violence of apartheid is not in fact a topic in the novel; it is rather assumed than described. The resistance struggle occupies an important part of the flashback passages, but instead of narrating successful missions against the oppressors, Langa focuses on the disagreements and quarrels among the MK activists, giving a problematic connotation to the liberation movement. The novel wants to avoid a whitewashed version of history portraying good resisters against the evil regime, through

the South African writer's explicit complication (or 'complexifying') of a struggle

⁷¹ Annie Gagiano, "Adapting the National Imaginary: Shifting Identities in Three Post-1994 South African Novels" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (Taylor & Francis, Dec., 2004), p. 821.

history which often simply heroises (or else romanticises) the contribution and workings of the ANC.⁷²

This narrative choice is due to autobiographical reasons. Langa's brother, himself a MK soldier, was killed because of an alleged betrayal. At the beginning of the book, in the acknowledgments, the author expresses explicitly the reasons that made him write *The Memory of Stones*:

this novel was written as an act of exorcism, for my family to come to terms with the death of my brother, Ben. He was shot dead in May 1984, in an act of supreme political irony. Those who had labelled him an enemy agent and caused his death turned out to be handmaidens of the Apartheid State.

The same thing happens in the novel, where Jonah, Baba Joshua's son, is killed under the order of MK officials who are later discovered to be themselves traitors.

Another character featuring autobiographical traits is Mpanza: his life in exile is similar to Langa's, including missions and stays in Angola and Budapest. It is quite interesting that Langa makes his autobiographical character kill the character interpreting his brother; that the sibling of the dead brother is a female character; and that these two people – Mpanza and Zodwa – finally become a couple. A relationship with a hint of incest, as the author himself suggests in the final pages:

In a strange way, then, when she finally made love with him, Jonah's face superimposed itself on Mpanza's, giving the act a curious quality of incest. (360)

All the characters have some reason to reflect about black violence, coming to a range of conclusions that goes from justification to fear. On one thing they all agree: white violence is not going to be forgotten. White characters are always looked upon with suspicion, and none of them is a fully positive character. It is a strong judgement on the responsibilities of white people under apartheid, that Langa asserts in an

72 Annie Gagiano, p. 821.

interview in 2000, the year *The Memory of Stones* was published, questioning even the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

It is still my personal feeling that there are people who were pardoned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission who should not have been pardoned and people who could have been pardoned but who were not.⁷³

His point of view, that is evident in the novel, is that black violence and white violence are not to be regarded as similar:

I would like to address an issue you have raised: namely, the question of whether apartheid crimes are equivalent to the crimes of the liberation movement. It is difficult for me to seriously deal with that idea of parity except in individual instances.⁷⁴

The carefully designed structure of oppression of the apartheid state was the reason why black people had to resort to violence:

White South Africa, he reasoned, tended to act this way, putting into motion a series of self-fulfilling prophecies. We call blacks jailbirds and then we create conditions whereby they have no option but to resort to crime – and then we lock them up. (188)

For that reason, the black liberation struggle is justified by the ideal of freedom. When Jonah joins the resistance and goes to a MK Angolan training camp, as he hears the troops singing *Sobashiya abazali ekhaya* he hears the cry of pain of his people, and his heart feels a thirst for revenge and hopes that a future without oppression is possible:

They sing, and something happens in Jonah. He hears in the singing all the things which have waited to be expressed but were snuffed out in the villages, towns and cities of his native land. [...] This singing has been there all along in the dirges sung at funerals – where the preachers intercedes for the spirit of the departed; it is there in the syncopated rhythms of women rejoicing at the entry of a new life into this world. [...] It has been in the eyes of children witnessing the humiliation of their heroes. It has been in the young men dreaming dreams, declaring with steel in their

73 Allison Drew, "Interview with Mandla Langa", in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XX Nos. 1&2 (2000), p. 153.

74 Allison Drew, "Interview with Mandla Langa", p. 154.

hearts that the country would change and the evildoers would get their comeuppance, and the people would remember everything and forgive nothing. It is as if Jonah has waited all his life to hear these voices raised, not in despair but in an affirmation that is as enduring as fire. (101)

Victim of an unjust and misled MK killing, Jonah is the absent protagonist of the novel; or better, the protagonist is his absence, as he is pictured only in the flashback parts. The sorrow and the lack of information about his death are the elements that structure many of the psychological passages of the novel, and around which the characters relate to one another, since many of them were in some way related to him and need to elaborate his loss. His death is a sort of common experience for the rest of the community:

For some reason which escaped [Zodwa], the memory of Jonah became a memory of the community and her family's exile from Ngoza. (9)

Jonah was killed because he was thought to be an *impimpi* – an informer – even if all allegations were proven false. In a confused situation like that, under constant pressure about treacheries and with great obstacles with obtaining information, assessing the truth is a difficult task for the victim's family.

'So,' [Mpanza] asked, knowing the answer, 'what do you feed your hate on now?'

'People who killed my brother,' she said, so readily that the answer must have been rehearsed numberless times in her mind. 'It's not so much the act itself, or the activity of dying on his part. It's the not knowing that kills me.'

'Not knowing what?'

'There's the truth and reconciliation process,' Zodwa said. Then she paused. [...] 'But my problem is that there were many people, for whom the ANC has apologised, who *were* informers, and whose deaths, if we operate on the morality of struggle, could be justified. My problem, my *pain* is whether Jonah was one of those people.' (324-325)

Black betrayal was in fact a shameful event, because race division was so deeply politically and ideologically connotated that for no reason it was conceivable that a non-

white could for any reason support the white cause. This is also, as we have seen in the previous chapter, one of the reasons why the coloureds were generally despised by the blacks – because of their tension towards assimilation with the white oppressors. Betrayal by a fellow black was seen as a totalizing betrayal of the very category of blackness:

‘Because, if you study the configurations of this country, and its process towards self-discovery, you’ll realise that, without the enemy within, the enemy outside would never have managed to penetrate our armour. [...] Because, however elegantly we put this in obscuring political language, to be black and to betray was the greatest, most unforgivable sin in our eyes.’ (359)

The retaliation on black informers – who were themselves part of that black community that the struggle intended to liberate – was seen as a necessary tax to be paid for the cause of black freedom. These executions, however, gave the occasion to discharge all the rage and resentment the soldiers felt towards the whites:

The curious paradox, however, was the harshness of measures taken against black transgressors, whether inside or outside the formal liberation struggle. Informers or suspects who were mostly black – and thus accessible – were treated with callousness beyond imagination. (182-183)

Such violence is used by white propaganda to describe black activists as dangerous terrorists who have no respect even for their fellows (a common thing in all episodes of resistance). We can see the opinion of a foreign observer in the point of view of Benedita, whose most intimate feeling towards Africans in fear:

Even though Venter’s people cannot be said to symbolise civilisation, they haven’t sunk so low as to kill peoples the way blacks do. But these are private thoughts, because she cannot express that she fears the blacks, not so much for the intelligibility of their tongues as the randomness of their violence. (78)

A kind of violence which can be seen symbolized by the eerie figures of the

Vulture-Men, a group of men who, “by some root they had eaten” (271), were transformed by Hodoba (another mean aspirant chief of the community) into mutants “straight out of a B grade horror-movie”,⁷⁵ half human and half vulture, craving for human flesh, establishing a symbolism between black violence and the abomination of cannibalism.

3.5 Forgiving and Forgetting

While white violence is definitely not going to be forgotten nor forgiven by any of the black protagonists – in spite of the democratic reconciliation rhetoric – the conclusion of the novel fosters an overcoming of black-on-black violence through Mpanza’s atonement. The man could not come back from exile to bury his parents when they died, and he feels this as a betrayal. This, together with the guilt of having killed Jonah, makes him resolve to leave his pointless and slothful life and look for Jonah’s relatives to ask for forgiveness:

He tried to imagine how Jonah’s parents must have felt when the news reached them that their son was dead. It was something he couldn’t bear pondering. But the scene returned, like a demon refusing to be exorcised. I was a soldier, he thought. I’m a soldier. (124)

The inner clash between having been loyal to the orders of his superiors and the awareness of having committed a crime towards an innocent makes him unsettled. Joshua’s death, short after Mpanza’s arrival in Ngoza, is “a shock for [him] because he hadn’t managed to make peace with the old man” (175). The only one left who can ease him from his guilt is Zodwa, with whom he falls in love and gets together. As soon as

⁷⁵ Annie Gagiano, p. 823.

she knows that he was in the MK, he becomes evasive to her questions because he is not ready to confess:

‘We’re in the new South Africa, now. Secrets are supposed to have died with the past.’
‘That is,’ he said gravely, ‘if the past is really dead.’ (323)

It is Johnny M who gives him away in front of Zodwa, so he is forced to admit his deed:

‘We killed Jonah –’
‘We? Zodwa cried. ‘What fucking we?’
‘We the Movement,’ Mpanza explained.
‘Oh,’ Zodwa said, ‘so that’s supposed to explain everything?’ (358)

And in a long speech, Mpanza expresses all the grief of a soldier who left to fight for freedom and found himself cheated by those he thought were his allies, having to kill a friend to discover that his death was a mistake. His repentance is sincere,

‘Through all these years of wandering, of pretending to live, I have been trying to atone for Jonah’s death, exposing myself to danger, hoping to die.’ [...] He wept. Zodwa realised that what she had taken to be her own private sorrow, actually belonged to more people than she would know. (360)

The Memory of Stones ends with this reflection on the memory of the “private sorrow”, which the history of South Africa prevented to be grieved privately, being exposed to become some sort of symbol whose meaning cannot be controlled. Zodwa finds herself to be in love with her brother’s killer, and she has to forgive him – she takes some time on it – in order to go on with her life. The “exorcism” of the past is accomplished; but memory is still there, the base for building the future of the country.

CHAPTER 4

The Heart of Redness by Zakes Mda

*After the war, what do we do
with the guns and the machetes?
After the war, when the men and the boys return
What do we do with the guns and the machetes?
Do we toss them into the deepest of pits
Never to see them surface again?
Or do we keep them, intact, just in case*

*After the war, what do we do
with the guns and the machetes?
When the men and the boys are worn
and torn and dead!
What do we do, with the guns and the machetes?
Do we melt them into our walls as amulets?
Or do we pass them on to next brother
or stranger or buyer?
Just in case we need another war
After this one
After the war
What do we do with the guns and the machetes?
After the war*

NATALIA MOLEBATSI

4.1 The Scars of History

Like the two novels analysed in the previous chapters, *The Heart of Redness* deals with the past to show its effects on the present. The novel is divided into two main narrations, relating events separated by a century and a half: the early post-apartheid years and the mid 1850s, the time of the Xhosa cattle-killing. Unlike the other novels, where action was given a minor role, in this one a lot of things happen, and if we consider the two parts separately they stick to a unity of time and action that would make *The Heart of Redness* the most conventional of the three novels regarding this aspect.

The historical part deals with one of the most controversial events in South African history: the prophecies of the prophetess Nongqawuse, that led thousands of people to kill their cattle and destroy their crops in the hope that their ancestors would come from the sea bringing new herds of cattle, and chase the white colonizers away from their land. In this historical setting, along with really existed characters like Nongqawuse and the British Governor Sir George Grey, who “aimed at civilizing [the Xhosa people] and bring them to the supreme levels of the English”,⁷⁶ Mda situates a couple of twin protagonists, whose names are Twin and Twin-Twin, respectively the heads of the Believers and of the Unbelievers in the visions of Nongqawuse.

In the narrative present, Camagu returns to South Africa after a long exile in 1994 to vote and decides to stay there because he wants to put his top-level education to use in the reconstruction of a democratic society. Unfortunately, he is always denied any kind of job either because being an exile he is not familiar with South Africa and its problems, or because he is considered overqualified and could represent a problem for the mediocre bureaucrats that occupies positions of power. Disappointed by this situation, he is determined to fly back to the USA, but having met a charming woman in Johannesburg he decides to go and look for her in Qolorha-by-Sea, the village of Nongqawuse’s visions. There, he becomes involved in the life of the village, marked by the quarrels between the two opposed groups of descendants of the Believers and of the Unbelievers, represented by Zim and Bhonco. In the present day, Unbelievers

spend most of their time moaning about past injustices and bleeding for the world that would have been had the folly of belief not seized the nation a century and a half ago and spun it around until it was in a woozy stupor that is felt to this day. They also mourn the sufferings of the Middle Generations. That, however, is only whispered. (3)

⁷⁶ Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (New York: Picador, 2000), p. 136.

On the other side, Zim and his family of Believers are described as having a strong bond with nature, a nature that sometimes shows somewhat magical elements. They “talk among themselves in the language of the birds” (39) and repeat the old stories of prophets and magical animals.

Camagu finds that the main question at issue in the village is about what kind of development project promote to bring work and wealth to Qolorha, even if the reasons that lead Zim and Bhonco to quarrel are usually quite trivial:

The early manifestation of this competition happened a few years ago when the Ximiyas bought a pine dining table with four chairs. The family became the talk of the community, since no one else in the village had a dining table those days. But Zim, of the family of Believers, had to burst the Ximiyas bubble by buying exactly the same dining table, but with six chairs. That really irked the son of Ximiya and his supporters. (5)

While living there, Camagu swings between feelings of attraction towards Xoliswa Ximiya, Bhonco’s daughter, and Zim’s daughter Qukezwa, two extremely different women under every aspect. He becomes friend with John Dalton, the white trader of the village who

looks like a parody of an Afrikaner farmer. But he is neither an Afrikaner nor a farmer. [...] Dalton is a white man of English stock. Well, let’s put it this way: his skin is white like the skins of those who caused the sufferings of the Middle Generations. But his heart is an umXhosa heart. He speaks better isiXhosa than most of the amaXhosa people in the village. (8)

Dalton is the descendant of another John Dalton, who lived in the years of the cattle-killing and worked as a soldier and magistrate for the British colonial administration before settling in Qolorha and start a business as a trader. In spite of his family’s “blood-soaked” history, the present Dalton is completely far from any sense of colonial superiority and is perfectly integrated in the community:

In his youth, against his father's wishes, he went to the initiation school and was circumcised in accordance with the customs of the amaXhosa people. (8)

Thanks to his friendship with John Dalton, in the end Camagu succeeds in having Qolorha-by-Sea declared a national heritage site by the government, against Bhonco's project of building a luxury casino for rich tourists, and decides to marry Qukezwa and build a new life in Qolorha.

Camagu is an autobiographical character: Zakes Mda has in fact stayed for thirty years in exile in the USA, where he started his artistic career as a painter and a playwright focusing on anti-apartheid themes and social problems such as HIV, and came back to South Africa after the apartheid had ended. Camagu feels a stranger in his own country: he is a PhD in Communications, but he is unable to dance the freedom dance that was invented while he was in the USA, something that prevents him from getting good jobs opportunities. *The Heart of Redness* is for Camagu the tale of the recovery of his sense of community: at the beginning he does not want to take part in the quarrels of Qolorha, his ancestors did not live there, he is a stranger to that place; it is through Qukezwa that he is able to find his place again in the African society. He is a positive character because he is able to mediate between the two groups and find a synthesis of their two visions.

The dispute between Believers and Unbelievers represents on a small scale the difficult and complex relationship of South Africa with its history. While in classical historical novels all the implications and interpretations about the influence of the past on the present are usually implicit, Mda puts the topic on stage, making his characters deal with the problem. In the past narration the "war story" goes beyond the classical patterns, including a sort of civil war between the two groups of Xhosa, which is seen as a profitable opportunity by the British. The tragical point for the black is their being

divided before the colonial oppressor, black against black, instead of joining their forces against it. It is there when the Xhosa decline starts: when they lose their unity. As we have seen in *The Memory of Stones*, black betrayal was considered the worst thing possible, so that in the present the cattle-killing episode risks to be interpreted in the same way as black sabotages during the liberation struggle, a historical scapegoat for the appalling conditions of black people under apartheid:

[Bhonco's] role in life is to teach people not to believe. He tells them that even the Middle Generations wouldn't have suffered if it had not been for the scourge of belief. (6)

The novel shifts between the present time and a colonial past, where we can see that a division in society at that time is still active in the present, becoming more a sort of attitude towards the possibilities and the limits of development now that black people can once again rule themselves. Between the moment when their Xhosa community lost their autonomy and the moment when they get hold of it again there is an ellipsis, a gap of narration. The in-between years, the years of colonization and apartheid, are not taken into account, or just referred to as the generations that suffered, the "Middle Generations", that "fleeted by like a dream. Often like a nightmare" (4). In addition to white oppression, the Middle Generations had to suffer also the tragedy of division, but after white domination has ended an overcoming of such division becomes necessary, so that history can find its way on. It is as if that was just a parenthesis in their African history, a period that they long waited to close, in a historical perspective tending to a representation that justifies the present. It is however a telling silence, which Mda seems to blame on the reconciliation rhetoric that wants to wipe the slate clean and forget all that suffering:

The sufferings of the Middle Generations are only whispered. It is because of the

insistence: *Forget the past. Don't only forgive it. Forget it as well. The past did not happen. You only dreamt it. It is a figment of your rich collective imagination. It did not happen. Banish your memory. It is a sin to have a memory. There is a virtue in amnesia. The past. It did not happen. It did not happen. It did not happen. It did not happen.* (137)

“It is a sin to have a memory” may be a suitable expression to explain the attitude of the Unbelievers towards the behaviour of the Believers. Tradition is in fact a positive value for the Believers, while for the Unbelievers it represents backwardness.

[Bhonco] is passionate about development. His wrath is directed at the Believers who are bent on opposing everything that is meant to improve the lives of the people of Qolorha.

‘They want us to remain in our wildness!’ says the elder. ‘To remain red all our lives! To stay in the darkness of redness!’

The Unbelievers are moving forward with the times. That is why they support the casino and the water-sports paradise that the developers want to build. The Unbelievers stand for civilization. (70-71)

The “redness” of the title, referring to the red ochre that people traditionally smeared on their skin, is an ambivalent element; as it is the symbol of tradition, it is regarded differently according to the different ideas of the two groups. The term “redness” then stands for the opposition between “progressive” modernity and traditional African custom, therefore between the urban and the rural, between the center and the periphery; an opposition that, following Rita Barnard’s analysis,⁷⁷ comprehends also aesthetic judgements. In fact, what is inside tradition, from clothes to the physical shape of women, is considered beautiful by the Believers and ugly and shameful by the Unbelievers and, vice-versa, what is modern becomes for the Unbelievers synonym of beauty, while for the Believers it is just weird and inexplicable.

Red is said to be the colour women use to beautify themselves, but in the past it was connected with the prophecies of the cattle-killing in 1856-57, the catastrophic event that made the Xhosa lose the war against the British and become subaltern to

⁷⁷ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 163.

them. After having performed Nongqawuse's indications, the Believers wait for the dead ancestors to rise at dawn, but their expectations are frustrated, so the Believers blame the Unbelievers for the failed prophecy because they had not killed all their cattle, while the Unbelievers suspect that Nongqawuse is part of a colonizers' conspiracy to defeat them. Here starts the division between the two groups, which weakened them against the British, and Mda suggests that the old divisions rooted in the ideological schism that emerged during that period has been re-ignited by the contemporary South African politics of rural development.⁷⁸

This division runs through the history of the Xhosa, being passed down generation after generation up to the present. It is the first thing the reader finds at the beginning of the book: a genealogical table with two branches separating at the time of Nongqawuse, with Twin and Twin-Twin as the head of the two lines, whose descendancy is traceable through history (although during the "Middle Generations" they are omitted). As often happens in historical fiction, the names of the characters are recurrent so that we have a present and a past Qukezwa, a present and a past Twin, and so on. Even the horses are similar in the past and in the present, and John Dalton, the only white character in the novel, bears the name of his namesake ancestor who killed Xikixa, the father of the twins, Zim and Boncho's forefather. History seems to be circular rather than linear.

Mda's choice of intertwining the two narratives with same-name characters highlights the intervention of the past in the present. The construction of the cattle-killing narration around a couple of twins that "were like one person" (13) gives even more stress to the fact that it was something that tore society irremediably apart, driving brother against brother; Twin will even lead a mob of Believers against his brother to burn down Twin-Twin's homestead. In such occasions, when the Believers get down to

⁷⁸ Leslie Bank, "Beyond Red and School: Gender, Tradition and Identity in the Rural Eastern Cape" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 28, Number 3, (September 2002), p. 631.

upset him, the scars that Twin-Twin has on his back because he was flogged “after he had been identified as a wizard by Prophet Mlanjeni” (13) starts to hurt. These scars are called “the scars of history”, and are the memory of an unjust violence that marks the first point of division of the two brothers. The scars appear on the back of every male first-born of the Unbelievers. Bhonco has them too, and they itch when he is angry about Zim and the Believers:

On nights like these his scars become itchy. [...] Why he has to be burdened with the scars of history, he does not understand. Perhaps that’s what prompted him to bring the Cult of the Unbelievers back from the recesses of time. (12-13)

History is referred to as a scar, the memory of a wound, a wound that is still itching in its healing after a century and a half. In the present, the Believers feel the duty of keeping tradition alive, and the memory of their people with it. For Zim, tradition is a live thing, and he deals with it in a personal, creative way. As time passes, he becomes more and more meticulous in displaying his traditional beliefs: he takes on the teachings of the prophetess Nonkosi, dressing in white, shaving and waiting on the top of a hill for the Russian ships to come.

It is with a sense of pride that he stands on the hill. That he pines. That he waits for the Russians even though he knows they will not come. They have already come in a guise that no Believer expected. They came in the bodies of those who fought to free the Middle Generations. It is an honour to pine on behalf of those who waited in vain. (177)

Prophecies are many and very important in this novel. In order to find a sense in them, history can be interpreted as a fulfillment of these prophecies, seeing the mythical Russian saviours in the men and women who fought the liberation struggle. Besides, the presence of a number of prophets at the time of the cattle-killing testifies the absence of a presumed coherence in the past, as every prophet gives different and contradictory

prophecies. For this reason, Zim is almost absurd in his following the indications of a prophecy that was long proved false, shaving his eyebrows and purging continuously, but in the novel his actions parallel those of Twin, whose tragical and uncompromising believing in the prophecies and attaining to them led him to die a miserable death, casting on Zim a sense of nostalgic empathy.

The presence in the novel of elements of magical realism, a literary model which is born into the postcolonial context, enhances the vision of African culture championed by the Believers. The rural setting is one of its typical features, and Qolorha represents that part of the African country where the importance of magic, along with tradition, has not been overcome by modernization yet. Like in the white historical novels, the country and the city are two counterposed worlds symbolising different and opposite sets of values: the rural village is the place where the traditions of Xhosa people can be preserved, while the city embodies alienating capitalistic values that are bound to lead people to ruin. From Nongqawuse's visions on, the Believers have always had a strong bond with the supernatural and the legends of gods and magic.

During the Middle Generation the cult of both groups was interrupted because people "were more concerned with surviving and overcoming their oppression" (5). It is Bhonco who restores the cult of the Unbelievers; Twin-Twin had paradoxically "elevated unbelieving to the heights of a religion" and now Bhonco becomes their leader, being affected by the same scars as his revered ancestor. But Twin-Twin, at the end of the novel, bitterly regrets not taking his revenge over Twin and John Dalton when he had the chance:

It is too late now. It is left to the future generations to avenge the headless ancestor. If they think it is worth it. He himself has a lot to lose. (272)

Bhonco, on the contrary, “thinks he has nothing to lose” (272) and decides to go and hit John Dalton in the head with his stick to avenge his beheaded ancestor, performing an act that clashes with the modernity professed by the Unbelievers, and taking to violence the inner contradiction of unbelieving that he embodies throughout the novel. History can become the excuse for starting again ancient battles and justify contrasts that had already been settled in the past. It is interesting to compare Bhonco’s violent behaviour at the end of the novel with what his mind is at the beginning of the story:

Bhonco does not believe in grieving. He has long accepted that what has happened has happened. It is cast in cold iron that does not entertain rust. His forebears bore the pain with stoicism. They lived with it until they passed on to the world of ancestors. [...] This is a new life, and it must be celebrated. (3)

The change takes place when he finds himself alone: his daughter gone; his wife working for the project he opposed; his rival Zim dead. In the context of a novel concerned with the life of a community, Bhonco’s vengeful deed can be explained with his isolation: if one is deprived of their relations, they are more likely to find self-assurance in what have been the values of one’s life – in this case the perpetuation of memory.

Finally, the twinned characters of the two Heitsi seem to give an interpretation to the question of the use of the past and the presence of it in present life, as they are given in both cases the mission of taking on the line of the tradition. In the last chapter Mda presents a scene that is purposefully ambiguous, where we cannot tell if Qukezwa and Heitsi are in the present or in the past, so that past and present merge together. The present Heitsi – Qukezwa’s son – has the same name as Twin and Qukezwa’s son; his father is unknown, but Camagu claims him as his child. Camagu is a rational character, while Qukezwa is characterized by irrationality and emotion; their union is symbolical as far as the future of the community is concerned, and Heitsi as its physical result, the

new generation that represent the project for the future country. In the final scene, mother and son are on the beach:

Oh, this Heitsi! He is afraid of the sea. How will he survive without the sea? How will he carry out the business of saving his people? (277)

David Attwell gives an interpretation of this final scene, unravelling Mda's symbolism:

Qukezwa wants Heitsi to learn to be comfortable in the sea, water being the element from which the shades will return; it is the element of prophecy, of millenarism, of salvation. But the story is too multi-faceted, the tensions of Xhosa symbolic life are too contradictory, for Qukezwa to have the final word. It is given to Heitsi, who chooses not the sea but the village, therefore people over prophecy, and the future over the past.⁷⁹

Thus, people over prophecy. Camagu enters Qolorha society and history through his relationships with its inhabitants, above all women. He is a ladies' man, and it is first thanks to NomaRussia (the woman he meets in Johannesburg) and then due to his interest in Xoliswa Ximiya and Qukezwa that he becomes involved in a community that he will eventually choose as his own. It is through people then that he establishes a connection with a place, following his emotions – if not his instincts. A commitment to people is a necessary condition for a cultural commitment, which would be pointless if unconnected with the real life of real people. People come first, then culture follows.

4.2 Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial

The past narrative of *The Heart of Redness* relates the beginning of the end for the

⁷⁹ David Attwell, "The Experimental Turn in Black South African Fiction" in Leon De Kock, Louise Bethlehem, and Sonja Laden, *South Africa in the global imaginary*. Vol. 4. (University of South Africa, 2004), p. 154-179.

Xhosa people, threatened by the colonizing power of the British, whose “white man’s burden” stubbornly imposed the domination and cultural education of those people that were unfortunately behind them in the path of human civilization. This account of the fall of an African civilization, rich with direct references to the native culture, religion and customs, recalls one of the most classic African novels: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe’s novel is set in Nigeria and, like *The Heart of Redness*, deals with the impact of an African culture with the arrival of the European colonizers, with their administrative structure, military power, christening mission and sense of cultural superiority. Achebe’s aim was to remind his own people of their past and to assert that it was valuable, and so does Mda, reflecting on the importance of tradition of the sense of identity both of the single person and of the community as a whole. The European thought that Africa had no history and culture worth considering, lacking the sensibility to understand that no absolute and objective assessment of reality can be possible, and that the important thing is that a culture makes sense in its own and to the lives of people who live within its frame of meaning.

This is why Mda writes about the traditions of the Qolorha community in almost ethnographic terms, taking as one of its main sources for the story of Nongqawuse J. B. Peires’s *The Dead Will Arise*, as David Attwell identified,⁸⁰ to which Mda sticks closely and recognized his debts. Using the external point of view of Camagu, Mda introduces the reader into Xhosa everyday life, while on the other side the village is exposed to the influences of globalization coming from all over the world. To keep this atmosphere of ordinariness, the past narrative presents a historical world where the mythical ancestors are people of flesh and blood, living in first person what for today’s people is almost a

80 Attwell, David, “Mda Turns to Nongqawuse for Inspiration.” Rev. of *The Heart of Redness*. *The Sunday Independent* (28 January 2001).

legendary tale.

It is the founding feature of postcolonial literature: creating a counter-discourse that can challenge the rigidity of colonial discourse, flowing alongside it, blurring its boundaries. The narration of a people torn apart by different visions about how to resist the European invasion, with epic battles and heroic idealism, without allowing spectacle to cast a shadow on that ordinariness of life that is even more vivid in tragic situations of war and famine. To hybridate the established version of history (represented in the novel by Sir Grey's memories, which recall the book about the pacification of the native peoples imagined in the final line of *Things Fall Apart*), a history that is too "firm in cutting out details" and excludes a plurality of voices from the stage of history.

With its focus on the pre-colonial past, the Middle Generations are not a topic in the novel; they are hardly dealt with. Mda does not talk about apartheid here, if not incidentally. He does not want to forget it, but his aim in *The Heart of Redness* is to rehabilitate Xhosa pre-colonial culture, something he can do only after apartheid ended. As in the other two novels, past traditions are seen in their relationship with a renewed freedom for the Africans. The protagonists are yet learned people accustomed with Western values, so that there is not actually a going back to origins, but rather an attempt of giving continuity to culture through hybridization, taking what is good of both sides. However, the novel does not refer to a past of glory and dignity, the nation-building project does not provide for a great narration of an ancient golden age, but to a past when the crisis began, an already spoiled situation.

Skipping from the pre-colonial society to the post-colonial one, the place of hybridity and intertextuality, Mda makes the two stories find their meaning in their being juxtaposed; not only does the present make sense as the result of the past, but also the past is reinterpreted according to the needs of the present. As André Brink argues,

if stories are retold and re-imagined, the re- is of decisive importance: each new invention happens in the margin of the already-written, or against the background of the already-written.⁸¹

The interesting aspect of Mda's intertwined past and present narratives is that he presents in the same novel both the re-writing and the "already-written", separated by a hundred and fifty years of amnesia. After the exile (itself a form of ellipsis) Camagu finds corruption and nepotism in the new country and cannot find a place in that society. The problems concerning the sense of belonging, that we have already met in *The Memory of Stones*, are solved by Mda in the same way Langa did: making the long-time exile marry a heiress of a rural tradition, with whom he will find a new way of leading community life through a synthesis between tradition and the highest values of western culture. *The Heart of Redness*, too, follows Njabulo Ndebele's manifesto of post-apartheid aesthetics, letting the reader rediscover the ordinary community life of Qolorha, with its parties, funerals and social gatherings, through which the male stranger protagonist can restore his sense of belonging.

Belief in tradition is a divisive element in the novel, both in the past and in the present:

Mda's novel portrays these events as driving a deep wedge in rural Xhosa society between pro-westernisation 'believers' and traditionalist 'non-believers', collaborators and resisters, which continues to be a salient social cleavage in Eastern Cape rural communities.⁸²

Qukezwa tells Camagu about the shame of the inhabitants of Qolorha that do not want Nongqawuse's memory to be celebrated, because the memory of the cattle-killing

81 André Brink, "Interrogating Silence: New Possibilities Faced by South African Literature" in Derek Attridge, and Rosemary Jolly, *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 14-28. - Cited from David Bell, "The Persistent Presence of the Past in Contemporary Writing in South Africa" in *Current Writing: Text and reception in Southern Africa* (June 2011).

82 Leslie Bank, p. 631.

period is too painful even nowadays. Leslie Bank notes that the bitter division between Believers and Unbelievers is one of those identities people seek refuge into in times of trouble and uncertainty, while a new national identity is being formed.

The fact that, even if Red [Believers] and School [Unbelievers] are no longer as visible as embodied identities as they were in the 1950s – people do not, for instance, wear red blankets any more – they are nevertheless inscribed in the collective social memory of many rural communities. This means that they can still be evoked and even reconstructed, as rural communities grapple with the uncertainties of change.⁸³

What Bank underlines, however, is that the actual contrast between the two groups, in the non-fictional world, is focused more on having their share of the economic development rather than on how this development should be directed.

As far as ideological coherence is concerned, the figure of Xoliswa Ximiya is interesting from this point of view, because she is maybe the only true Unbeliever, or better a true non-believer. For her, tradition means absence of civilization, and although she may be accused of cultural and psychological colonialism (a sort of black skin-white mask woman), she consistently leaves Qolorha to work as a civil servant in the Department of Education; a job she had studied for, even in the University of Athens, Ohio, Zakes Mda's alma mater.

'Don't you understand? People I have been to school with are earning a lot of money as directors of departments in the civil service. I am sitting here in this village, with all my education, earning peanuts as a schoolteacher. I am going. I must go from this stifling village. I have made applications. As soon as I get a job I am going,' says Xoliswa Ximiya with finality. (12)

83 Leslie Bank, p. 633.

4.3 Development Perspectives

While one character leaves her home to build a career in a cosmopolitan city, the rest of the community stays on their land trying to find a way to get the best out of it. Rita Barnard points out that

both in his fiction and in his academic writing, Mda places impoverished and marginal communities at centre stage and emphasizes the importance of a kind of territorial macropolitics to grassroots emancipation⁸⁴

It is in this context that Camagu shows another of his autobiographical traits: Mda's commitment to grass-root development projects. John Dalton is involved here too. Dalton and Camagu are complementary opposites: Camagu is a black man that wants to quit his white mask, while Dalton is a white who is continuously working on his black mask. Together, they work to prevent the realization of the overwhelming casino project, preferring to undertake an ecological enterprise aimed at establishing a form of sustainable tourism.

Of course the issue of the village economic development falls under the Believers-Unbelievers contrast. Zim wants an African cultural village where traditional dances, costumes and life styles will be artificially preserved for the tourists; Boncho dreams of building a casino and a luxury tourist resort with watersports leisure activities. The only problem is that the inhabitants of Qolorha-by-Sea are not very fond of democratic participation, refusing to vote at the local elections and pay their share for installing water pumps, causing Dalton's irritation because they have to "learn to fight for their rights" (165). The difference between doing things *for* the people and *with* the people is central in Dalton and Camagu's vision (that is to say: Mda's vision), even if in the end

⁸⁴ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, p. 148.

the two of them will be the ones who manage to take advantage of the new tourism.

Tourism is in fact the only economic spring in the village. The Blue Flamingo Hotel is the only business we know of apart from Dalton's shop; the women cooperative sells their sea-harvest to the hotel; Zim's son Twin carves artistic figures to sell them to tourists. Qolorha seems to offer nothing more, and the local entrepreneurs have also to suffer the reluctance of the banks to support private-enterprise:

Business would be booming if the banks were interested in assisting small business-people. [...] It was the same in Johannesburg too. [...] History is repeating itself. His cooperative society is on the verge of success. But the South African banks are determined that it should not succeed. So much for black empowerment! (178-179)

Although this lack of trust in the ability of people to find their own way to economic development pairs the lack of participation to public life of the rural population, Mda is very clear in describing that the same thing goes on in the city as well. In spite of the democratic values of the new government, meritocracy is not to be found in the country, and even a skilled and educated man like Camagu find it hard to get a proper job without dealing with corruption:

Camagu discovered that networking and lobbying were a crucial part of South African life. [...] He had not known that jobs were advertised only as a formality, to meet the requirements of the law. When a job was advertised there was someone already earmarked for it. (32)

The "Aristocrats of the Revolution" (33) have everything under their control, fostering the creation of a separated level of society that is busy settling within the structures of power recently left by their white predecessors. Something that in Camagu's – and Mda's – eyes cannot represent the fulfillment of the dream of freedom and democracy of the revolution:

“The message was clear: to get your way with the government you must break the law... kidnap somebody... burn a building... block the roads... thrash South Africa!” (35)

If political life is characterized by ambition, Qolorha rural life is characterized by passiveness. The casino project endorsed by the Unbelievers would be conducted by external “developers”, and the main objection to it is indeed that it would be something out of the locals’ control; it would start another kind of western colonialism, an economical one, that would exploit the village as long as it is profitable, with no lasting impact on the local economy and society. The project of having Qolorha-by-Sea declared a national heritage site is carried out by Dalton and Camagu following Zim’s ideas and foiling the construction of the gambling city. They want to foster a more locally rooted development, something that can involve the inhabitants actively.

Passiveness is not overcome in the end though, and the only two new business activities connected to sustainable tourism are Camagu’s and Dalton’s ones. Their ideas are however different on the point. Cultural tourism sponsored by John Dalton consists of a cultural village that would “show various aspects of the people’s culture in one place” (247), but

‘That’s dishonest. [Camagu says] It is just a museum that pretends that is how people live. Real people in today’s South Africa don’t lead the life that is seen in cultural villages. Some aspects of that life perhaps are true. But the bulk of what tourists see is the past... a lot of it an imaginary past. They must be honest and say that they are attempting to show how people used to live. They must not pretend that’s how people live now.’ (247-248)

Here we find a confirmation of what Leslie Bank certifies: that today’s Xhosa – even those belonging to the “Red” group – do not go around wearing red robes anymore. Camagu strikes at the heart of the issue of representation, as Dalton’s village would be a forced juxtaposition of cultural elements displayed without an coherent

project. This collapse of time and space into a superficial representation becomes what Jean Baudrillard called “hyperreality”, a postmodern view of history, domesticated and commercialized, where complexity is left aside and everything floats in an eternal present untied from the past. Camagu makes it very clear:

‘It is an attempt to preserve folk ways... to reinvent culture. When you excavate a buried precolonial identity of these people... a precolonial authenticity that is lost... are you suggesting that they currently have no culture... that they live in a cultural vacuum?’ (248)

Is Mda asking this question to himself through Camagu? His considerations reflect on the novel itself, with its description of the village life and of the history of the precolonial culture. Is then Mda suggesting that black South Africans “live in a cultural vacuum”? This is a prickly question, but the answer may be found in that one-hundred-and-fifty-year long historical gap that looms over the novel, and influence the representation South Africans have to build for themselves, coming to terms with their history. If they cannot manage to elaborate their past, it will stand in their way and become a sort of cumbersome heirloom.

Significantly, it is a postmodernist narrative that dominates in ‘storifying’ the past, a past that is explored with the intention of seeking an understanding of the present. This relationship is, however, not one-dimensional but mutually interactive, according to which the past impinges on the present and the present provides the context from which to examine the past.⁸⁵

Unlike Dalton’s, Camagu’s business project can be considered a third way out of the binary contrast between tradition and progress, with the active participation of the people:

‘I am talking of self-reliance where people do things for themselves. [...] I do not want a piece of any action. This project will be fully owned by the villagers

⁸⁵ David Bell, “The Persistent Presence of the Past in Contemporary Writing in South Africa” in *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* (2003), p. 71.

themselves and will be run by a committee elected by them in the true manner of cooperative societies.' (248)

This sounds a little bit pedagogical, but Camagu has a doctorate degree in economic development, so we can suppose that he knows what he is doing. He got that degree studying at an American university, so that he is trying to apply western categories of development to the rural African village of Qolorha. However, unlike Xoliswa Ximiya he is able to avoid an unthinking adherence to the superficialities of the contemporary western culture, and with the teachings of Qukezwa he is able to see people as the protagonists of development, not just the means of it.

He chooses to have women in his cooperative. Qolorha women in fact show a greater enterprising spirit and desire for independence than the village men. They are more open to innovation and respond to the new development initiatives even against the will of their husbands, who can be sometimes very violent, one of them even getting to set fire to his own house because his wife refused to give him his marital rights before he had had a shower after a day of work. Leslie Bank treats the subject of woman protagonism in Xhosa society with great interest, as they usually can go beyond traditional divisions:

I explore local-level responses to the new market-oriented development policies of the 1990s. In this period, I have been struck by the ability of women to put aside old divisions and construct new identities and strategies that have allowed them to take advantage of the new opportunities. The intriguing aspect of these responses, by comparison to those of the earlier period, is that women have not turned their backs on 'tradition' in order to embrace 'modernity'. Instead, they have worked within and around notions of tradition to create new identities that not only blend aspects of the older Red and School responses, but also transcend them in significant ways. I conclude by suggesting that the ability of women to establish new identities, in a context where men have generally remained trapped within an older style of identity politics, has allowed them to express increasing amounts of power and authority, not only in the home, but in public as well.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Leslie Bank, "Beyond Red and School", p. 634.

The Heart of Redness then undoubtedly shows Mda's pedagogical suggestion that women should play a more important part in economic and public life, but it also accounts for a change in society that was already happening in the late 1990s, that saw women engaging with their tradition as a means of opening up new economic opportunities, and simultaneously reshaping their rural identities. Rural men, on the other side, tended to stick to traditional identity divisions since their social position as males was much more strongly shaped by the apartheid ideology.⁸⁷ Mda's novel, however, does not endorse an unthinking adherence to tradition or a rejection of it; rather, the author proposes a flexible and adaptive use of tradition that enables and facilitates life in the contemporary world.

Finally, like a sort of historical revenge, Mda makes with his novel a fortune of what in the past had been a misfortune for the Xhosa people:

[*The Heart of Redness*] maps out the location of culture in postapartheid South Africa [enabling] a mediation on the transformation of the country's cultural geography from the old landscapes of oppression to the new mediascapes of leisure and tourism, which have often subsumed the old sites of deprivation in a new logic of display.⁸⁸

Nongqawuse and her story become the model for a sustainable development that can bring wealth to Qolorha (and certainly Mda's novel itself contributed to spread the fame of this place), while in the past she had been the reason for the loss of the Xhosa's power and independence.

⁸⁷ Leslie Bank, p. 649.

⁸⁸ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, p. 150.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this work, I can try to highlight some of the themes or features that are recurrent in the novels I have analysed. Of course trying to define a theme out of a corpus consisting of three novels may not be representative of the whole literary scene of South Africa, but there are undoubtedly some elements worth considering.

We have seen that these novels deal with the national past not in the classical way a historical novel does, but rather stressing the kind of relationship it has with the present and the way this is influenced by the past. As I wanted to suggest in the title, what emerges is the discomfort of the characters of having to deal with a past that would be easier to ignore, and yet inevitably gets in their way as an important element for the construction of their future. The comparison with a ghost haunting a place can be suitable to describe the presence of the past in the South African present, like a dead spirit that cannot find peace because they have left some outstanding matter.

This is not surprising. After World War II, for example, many countries found it extremely difficult to deal with the traumatic experiences they had lived and start a discussion about the issues of memory. The Holocaust, a massive human rights violation that has some similarities with the apartheid, became a sort of cultural taboo, above all

in Germany, where only decades after the war could the sense of shame allow national pride to express itself. It is understandable, then, that South Africa goes through a period of uncertainty, despite the cultural effort represented by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which, interestingly, is hardly ever mentioned in these novels: *The Memory of Stones* is the only novel where we find a quick reference to it. Except for Boehmer, who sets her novel before 1994, these writers avoid the topic, remove it almost physically in the case of Mda, as he obliterates the “middle generations” who lived under the white domination from the genealogical scheme at the beginning of his novel.

One thing we can tell is that, although the narrative structure of these novels present interesting innovations in the postmodern direction, the categories of the South African historical narrative canon are still there, so that we can see how typical features of settlement stories are present in *The Memory of Stones*, and war stories underlie the historical parts of both *Bloodlines* and *The Heart of Redness*, where we can find crossroads stories element in the narration of the present. In all three novels, the research for cultural continuity through history is very important, even if not always well accepted by some characters who feel their history as a history of shame, like the Makkens in *Bloodlines* or the Unbelievers in *The Heart of Redness*. There is a common use of prophecy as a literary device to enact in the present the unsettled problems of the past; prophecies that are refused by the characters, who claim their freedom to choose their destinies by have eventually to face the challenging presence of history. Unlike classical historical novels, however, these post-apartheid novels exclude the use of binary oppositions in their historical representation and proposals for future solutions; on the contrary, cultural hybridization between past and present or different traditions is seen as the only successful way to avoid too strong positions that could be the reason for

perpetuating ancient conflicts.

The sense of belonging to a community is a fundamental element, above all in Mda's and Langa's works. The reconstruction of communities after apartheid seems to be a strong concern in the first years of democracy, and this process has to pass through the elaboration of the past, which is almost always a painful one. Projects of development exclude the uncritical application of Western categories of modernity and capitalistic exploitation, and tend to find a synthesis between that and African tradition, with democratic participation as one important issue to be promoted.

The recovery of tradition goes parallel to a process of forgiveness of the violence of the past, so that only once the protagonists manage to come to terms with their past and the past of their communities can they approach tradition in a positive way. The element of magic in all three novels is an interesting fact that accounts for the live presence of the supernatural in South African life; magical realism is telling of a situation where different cultures have difficulty finding a way to coexist and giving a coherent representation of identity, as well as of the contrast between two visions of the world (the "rational" colonial one and the "imaginative" native one) that are incommensurable, impossible to be judged by the same standards.

The most important element these novels have in common, however, is the role they assign to women. They are the most important characters, even when they are not the protagonists, and are those around whom all the other characters play. It is important to notice that two of three authors are men: if Elleke Boehmer writes an almost completely female novel, Mda puts two women as symbols and only heirs of Xhosa cultural traditions, and Langa places the young Zodwa at the head of a traditional patriarchal rural community.

Why is this widespread importance given to women? It may be because under the

apartheid years the male ruling power imposed a subaltern position to them, and when democracy came their starting point was a worse situation of violence and oppression, which is evident in these novels, so that the difference with the new social context is even more evident. Another reason, more counter-discursive, may be that violence under the apartheid was administered almost exclusively by men – on both sides – and that could be the reason why these writers chose women as the protagonists of change in South Africa, because they are not tainted by violence and can be the agents of a real social change. In *The Memory of Stones* this is made explicit when Zodwa is supported by a group of women who sees her as their leader because they are tired of the way men rule. In *The Heart of Redness* we are presented women leading projects to start a local handicraft development, often going against the will of their husbands. In *Bloodlines* women take on the authorial power and defy the established rules of history and law in order to formulate a history that sees everybody connected in one great picture, where differences between friends and foes lose their meaning.

As it often happens after a war, when a lot of men died or are too shocked to give up their anger towards their enemies, it is up to women to restore a civil situation. Women who brought up their children alone while their men were away working in the factories, or working to make ends meet while men were away fighting for freedom. These novels seems to say that the time has come for women to see their fundamental role in society recognized and take an active part in the reconstruction of the national social fabric and identity, hopefully doing better than men.

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