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## Apart and Yet a Part: The Dilemmas of the Dissident White Writer in Apartheid South Africa

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# Apart and Yet a Part: The Dilemmas of the Dissident White Writer in Apartheid South Africa

Samya Achiri

**Abstract-** During apartheid South Africa, it was not strange to witness a writer who belongs to the race of the white oppressor depicting daily prejudices, but to see how much inextricably as a part of the struggle in South Africa this writer regards himself. Yet, questionable during this period is his enormously evasive position since he believed that it was his responsibility to act against the government to get rid of its burdens even though he was everything for both fronts of the struggle, the government and the black majority, but an adherent. Everything seemed to undermine his efforts even the dominant mode of writing. The main concern of this paper is to provide briefly an account of some of the hardships the dissenting white writer faced during apartheid South Africa despite the privileges accorded by his light skin.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Without doubt, it is very difficult for any literature to be devoid of the cause of the day and so has been the South African literature. Since its emergence, it has been mainly preoccupied by issues of race and politics. Most, if not all, of the narratives of apartheid, whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, did not eschew the injustices of the white regime. Together black and white committed writers had taken on the responsibility of enlightening the South African mind and attacking the colonial interests. They had seen themselves as protesters producing what Paul Williams labelled in his essay "Playing with Words While Africa is Ablaze" as Protest Literature. To the critics of this period (mainly after 1948), it became a deeply-rooted tradition to see the South African writings as an anti-thesis of the government. The myth which holds that the writer is a "prophet and spokesman against political injustices became entrenched as the primary mode of South African writing, both black and white" (Williams, 1997, p. 93).

## II. DISCUSSION

The policies of oppression were the driving force behind this movement of committed literature. Aimed at exposing the barbarity of the apartheid system and mobilising the masses to act politically against it, this literature was not left unchecked. A law to

circumscribe the freedom of expression was compulsory. A big number of black writers was banned compared to that of their committed white counterparts who found themselves in an uneasily defended situation. Indeed, after the Sharpeville Massacre and the declaration of the state of emergency, and even before this, the writers' freedom was tightened up with the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 and the like. All the writings were put under the scrutiny of a board appointed by the government to decide upon their validity. If found offensive to the state and the citizens, the work is immediately banned and never allowed to be reproduced again.

Censorship laws, much as the other laws, were ambiguously issued since the standards of offensiveness were undetermined. A striking example of this would be Nadine Gordimer who had two of her novels banned before the third one, *Burger's Daughter*, in 1979. Her second novel *A world of Strangers* was banned for twelve years in South Africa until the banning was lifted in spite of the wave of criticism heaped on the government each time a book was banned. But the international outrage and "the furore caused by the banning of Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* [sic] was, if anything, greater", Geoffrey Davis describes (2003, p.119 emphasis added). Outstanding voices represented by the German Nobel prize receiver Heinrich Boll helped with the articles they wrote to embarrass the racist government and to unban the novel after a few months though it is more politically overt than its precedents. What standards the censorship committee adopted to un/ban the work is a worth asking question!

The banning of the publications represents censorship in its narrow sense. In South Africa, everything was censored: the race you belong to, the area you live in, the way you walk through, the school you attend, and even the knowledge you attain. Thus, the 'ideology of the censor' cannot be seen in isolation; it proved a good expedient to help advance the 'ideology of apartheid' whereby a minority aspired to exercise its power over nearly 90% of the whole population. Christopher Merrett (1995) outlines three main reasons behind employing this harsh censorship. First of all, the government's attention was directed towards suppressing any record of its genocidal legislations, for it was under international surveillance (Merrett, 1995, p. 3). Second, the government intended

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to shatter the bridge between the different racial groups including whites by prohibiting any piece that would prompt the exchange of ideas and the circulation of knowledge (ibid). All this to back up one of its falsehoods suggesting that the discrepancies between these people are wider compared to the commonalities. Thus, the whole idea of apartheid would seem to the whole world as appropriate. Cleansing the South African history from the opposition of most of the population to the political system is another reason (ibid). It is clear now why the rulers grappled to put into experiment the long array of censorship laws as well as other inhuman plans.

The well-known Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has adequately resembled the reason behind exercising such a harsh censorship saying, in his collection of essays *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1989), "writers have been held for saying, like the child in the story, that the emperor is naked. Indeed South African writers have been jailed and killed and exiled for this" (191). These –jail, killing and exile– are the guises whereby censorship fundamentally expressed itself and decided about what an entire society would read. Between Acts of segregation and censorship legislations, South Africa's writers' feeling of alienation profoundly affected their writings.

The repressive laws did not act as a hurdle against one or two writers rather against two outstanding black literary movements and a long list of radical white writers, whether directly or indirectly. In 1955, many of the iconic writers in the *Drum Magazine* silenced by the strict censorship laws had fled the country leading to the fading of the *Shapiatown Renaissance* which was modelled after the *Harlem Renaissance* of the 1920's and 1930's by black Americans. The rise of the *Staffrider* writers in the 1970's was a reaction to the cultural onslaught, if one can say, after the *Sharpeville Massacre* and the *Soweto Uprising*. What is common between the activist writers of both movements is they underwent the same fate; if not banned and detained without trial, they were exiled. "Most South African writers [...] are now in exile", Ngugi writes, "while those who remained [...] were slowly strangled to death by the racist atmosphere and system of violent repression" (Ngugi, 1981, p. 73). It is this atmosphere that made desperate white writers like Christopher Hope, Dan Jacobson, Daphne Rooke and Jack Cope. They lived outside South Africa in a self-imposed exile most of their lives.

Literature of the 1970's was part and parcel framed by the philosophy of the *Black Consciousness Movement*. Most of the writers under influence, namely the *Staffrider* writers, opted for the urgent revival and more importantly the circulation and promotion of the black cultural heritage of South Africa dispersed by the white colonialist discourse especially after the *Sharpeville Massacre* of 1960. What is in hand, poetry

and the folk art in general, should be reappropriated and brought to the center even at the expense of the dominant narratives as a means of resistance. Again the radical white writer had no room in this process of restoration; it was his fate to suffer from the wounds of not belonging to the indigenous majority.

Another prevailing factor that confronted the South African writers, black and white, was the 'language debate' in African literature. In South Africa, the writer's words were a paramount component of the struggle, i.e., language in the African literature in general and the South African literature in particular had "a political function and a task to perform" (Yousaf, 2001, p. x). The duty of the writer thus was to charge the population to rebel against the segregationist system via his writings primarily. Therefore, the writer in apartheid South Africa had occupied an extremely dangerous position. The choice of the language of writing was an unavoidable standard that would determine the success or failure of any writer.

This debate over language use was headed by two outstanding figures in African literature: Ngugi and Achebe. Ngugi, in his collection of essays *Decolonising the Mind*, insists that African literature cannot be registered in languages other than the African ones, "the languages of the African peasantry and working class" (1994, p.27). English is 'the tool of the oppressor'; by avoiding it, one really partakes in the struggle against the colonizer, and by writing in English, the writer announces his allegiance and submission to the colonizer's tradition. Contrary to Ngugi, Achebe sees English, even though imposed by the colonizer, as an outlet to reach larger audiences. The speech entitled "The African Writer and the English Language" by Achebe in 1964 explicitly unveils his view of language use: "[i]s it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for some else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it" (Achebe qtd. in Ngugi, 1994, p.7). Achebe referred to this kind of language embrace as 'fatalistic logic'.

Ironically, English, generally renowned as the language of the oppressor in Africa, sustained as the language of liberation in South Africa and a tool for the unification of all the races (Zander, 1999, p. 21), for the white regime's wicked process to keep blacks in a state of hibernation away from the fresh movement of nationalism in the continent and throughout much of the world through *Bantu Education* was unveiled. To writers of the *Shapiatown Renaissance*, writing in English was perceived as a natural choice away from the historical dialectic (Masilela, p.3). The other literary movement represented by *Staffrider* writers of the 1970's, in opposition, radically rejected this saga because literature written in English exerted hegemony over indigenous literatures. Unlike the black writers, the

choice of language to the Afrikaans-speaking writers in particular, and the unorthodox white writers in general, was easier said than done since as Sue Kossew (1996) writes: "the choice of language becomes a significant political act"(19). Three choices, at least, have been available in South Africa: English, one of the indigenous languages, or Afrikaans. To simply decode Kossew's statement, taking one of these languages as a medium of expression is an open affiliation with one of the two blocks of struggle in South Africa.

Few engaged white writers took on the responsibility of speaking about the wounds of the nation after the exposure of black writers to all kinds of torment. A lot of them endured what their black counterparts had to endure. Breyten Breytenbach, as an example, was arrested under the charge of high treason after he returned to South Africa in 1975. To these writers, the fetters of the colour line ceased to exist. Even if they were not "actively immersed in politics", they found themselves "suddenly involved in the hot political power struggles of the day" (Ngugi, 1981, p.73). The white writers endeavoured to place the South African literature on an international orbit to strengthen the cause of the indigenous majority depending on their overseas readers.

The work of white writers such as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee, came to hold a central place in defining an international canon of respectable, morally robust and liberal oppositional literature... Fiction by South African writers has, then, in no small part been constituted from the outside in, shaped by the international audiences upon which it depended as the consequence of its own marginalization from the everyday life and from the political and cultural struggles of the majority of South Africans. (Barnett, 1999, p. 288-9).

Although markedly helped to enrich the literature of the country, the white writer had been regarded as an outsider by both sides of the struggle. Radical black leaders, namely members of the PAC, saw no room for whites in the struggle against apartheid. The relationship between both poles according to them cannot be other than a state of warfare. In his essay "Constructions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of JM Coetzee", Barnett avers that the white writer could never be a spokesperson of the non-white majority despite his unquestionable role (1999, p.294). Even when taking into consideration the white writer's significant role and the hardships encountered in the country, it was believed that he was not the direct victim of the system given that he was not its eye target. To those who were in charge of events from another side, the white dissenting and non-conformist writer was clearly a traitor of his race and government.

This was the case of a group of dissident Afrikaner writers in the 1960's. The exclusion of the

Drum writers from the literary scene paved the way for them to come into dominance. Known as The Sestigers or the 'writers of the sixties', including famous figures like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and Etienne Leroux, they "wished to rid themselves of authority, to speak in their own authentic voice" (Cope, 1982, p.100). They were essentially concerned with highlighting the essence of Afrikaans literature to bring down the myth dictating the association of this literature with the apartheid ideology. Like the case of most of the white writers with a European origin in South Africa, the Sestigers were confronted with the dilemma of their contradicting culture: neither able to relinquish it nor able to identify with its current situation.

This consciousness of the repressive policies of the Afrikaner government imposed on all the races and their (the Sestigers) attempts to address all this are described by Sue Kossew as 'writing back' to Afrikanerdom (1996, p.6). However, many critics agree that these writers did form a loose association of writers unable to address properly "the urgent societal concerns" created by the apartheid government; hence, it is a sort of "complicity with these conditions" (Herlitzius, 2005, p.115). In fact, despite the highly restrictive laws of censorship, no work by an Afrikaner writer had been banned until André Brink's *Looking on Darkness* fell victim to the censors in 1974. Margreet de Lange (1997) credits this privilege to the fact of being "more interested in aesthetics than in politics" (36). Preservation of the Afrikaans language and culture made them busy experimenting with the language at the expense of other significant issues and above all apolitical as far as the prevailing orthodoxy of writing was concerned. The Drum writer and the coloured cultural critic Lewis Nkosi did not hesitate to express his harsh viewpoint of the movement:

Despite a massive propaganda campaign which proclaims them to be new leaders of the South African avant-garde, the group of Afrikaans writers known as the 'Sestigers' have remained on the whole curiously irrelevant, even faintly comic. [Their]... sketches [are] implausible, unreal, even deliberately fraudulent. Where, one wishes to know, is the sjambok and the gun and the stolen sexual confidence on a private beach night, the whole ghastly comedy of the laboured heart transplants and the accelerating rate of malnutrition and infant morality? (Nkosi, 1981, p. 77-8)

Though the white writer's task of raising the white people's consciousness in the eyes of Gordimer in her "The Essential Gesture" is minor compared to that expected from the black writers (1989, p.287), his sufferings like them could not be minimised. However, there was usually a long list of charges levelled authoritatively against South Africa's white writer by his black counterparts or commonly by the critics of the time without bearing in mind the dilemmas he had been caught in.



Whites, in general, by living in South Africa were entangled by a thorny question constantly imposed on the self: "what does it mean to be a South African"? (Gordimer, 1983, p.117). Actually, the expression 'white African' itself constitutes an 'oxymoron' that had never been absorbed in a context of a racially-torn society. Yet, it was simultaneously difficult to eschew the demands of this turbulent atmosphere, for living in South Africa as a white inflicted two alternatives: whether to live as an oppressor or a supporter. Embracing the first one implies certainly the deprivation of the white man's humanity. The second alternative entails the politicisation of his private life. Both options had been awkward. Thus, the self-imposed exile was a resort for many white writers such as Breyten Breytenbach from the psychological trauma of belonging and other problems spearheaded by censorship.

Most of the Works of the Afrikaner writer J. M. Coetzee, like *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), revolve around the psychological impact of colonialism, with the various brands it may take including apartheid, upon all the races especially in South Africa. But his autobiographical novel *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) brings to debate earlier raised questions about his commitment and the self-exile he imposed on himself covered by his ambitions to finish his studies abroad. It delves into Coetzee's early life and gives an insight into the very problem he suffered from, that of identity and belonging. Absorbing his Afrikaner origin in the light of this context was difficult.

Because they speak English at home, because he always comes first in English at school, he thinks of himself as English. Though his surname is Afrikaans, though his father is more Afrikaans than English, though he himself speaks Afrikaans without an English accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner. (Coetzee, 1989, p. 124)

Problems of belonging were not limited to South Africa's white writers only. Bessie Head, a coloured South African writer, experienced similar symptoms. Failure to fully locate herself within the Cape Coloured community, her area of residence by law, and her restless search for identity because of her white origins led her to leave South Africa seeking refuge in Botswana.

To put it bluntly, whiteness, as whites believe, precludes the right to live in South Africa as an African. This problem of identity and belonging concerning dissident white writers in particular, Baderoon (2009) suggests, is widened by the label 'Afrikaner', an Afrikaans word meaning African (71). Settlers with a 'white identity' are the only section able to carry this emblem. Hence, the word Afrikaner encompasses within its layers the European identity. An Afrikaner is never an African, and Afrikanerdom equals apartness from the South African landscape. White Writing by Coetzee

invests this problem of belonging which can be surpassed, he believes, by establishing a discourse bringing closer Africa and its other. He wonders: "[i]s there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?" (Coetzee, 1988, p. 8-9). Thus, language, away from being a medium of expression and publication, is a means which can help strengthen one's feelings of belonging as it may just do the opposite.

Since apartheid is morally considered as a sin, the white writers of conscience in South Africa saw themselves as originally sinful by belonging to the race of the white oppressor. This burden was one of the driving factors to act against the racially-based regime. Yet, this gesture had been received by the indigenous masses as an impotent gesture which lacks authenticity. Consequently, white writers are not accepted, in most cases, in this struggle. This gave rise to the dilemma of responsibility: "[t]o whom white South African writers are answerable in their essential gesture" since "only a section of blacks places any demands upon white writers at all" (Gordimer, 1989, p. 293). Why to take action in a society where you are not an integral part of the struggle was thus a haunting question. It had been also very disappointing for many writers to know that they were "writing about and for a society that cannot or will not read" their works (Cowley, 2003, par. 6). Desperately, they had felt writing "endlessly into a vacuum of indifference" (ibid, par.1); emptiness and the sense of estrangement opposed them and not apartheid. As such, to those writers who adopted a radical political posture and chose to morally reject apartheid, living a private life could hardly be achieved. Notwithstanding the ambivalence characteristic of their living in South Africa, they risked their lives for their beliefs.

Among the challenges the dissident white writers had to endure also is readership. They had been seen as privileged in South Africa because of the presence of an overseas audience curious to align itself with white voices from the Dark Continent. Another question subsequently came to the surface: were all the privileges (at least the widespread readership, compared to that of black writers, beyond the borders of South Africa) white writers enjoyed during this period accorded by their racial identity or by their talent? André Brink's reaction and status as a white South African writer known abroad complicated this point. During this era, most of the black writers were not known abroad not only because their primary focus was charging the majority to organize resistance at the expense of "targeting an international audience" but also because of "a well-masked racism of readers abroad, who preferred to read works by white writers with whom they felt they could identify more readily, rather than make

the effort of coming to terms with a different cultural tradition", Brink acknowledges (1998, p. 16-7).

Novels of this period deal with many pertinent issues to life in South Africa in general including racial problems. Both black and white writers tried to repudiate apartheid policies. As a matter of fact, two resultant categories of literature appeared; each takes as its focal point "one section of the racial spectrum" (Moyana, 1976, p. 87). The majority of white writers concentrated on the salient sacrifices and the life of the empathetic white minority under apartheid while their counterparts did not hesitate to portray what the black nation as a whole endured under the segregationist power that was the order of the day. This is perfectly designated as 'one-eyed literature' by T.T. Moyana in his article "Problems of a Creative Writing in South Africa".

In this phase, any literary work that does not epitomise the historical moment of its production and does not protest the racist regime directly had been viewed as inappropriate. Active writers then were supposed to provide a "detailed exposé" of the miserable life of the majority under the rule of the white minority (Yousaf, 2001, p. x). Thus, to produce art for art's sake was another dilemma. Art for art's sake was perceived as a kind of violation from the mainstream literature and an escape from one's duties as it was the case of the Afrikaner writer J.M. Coetzee. Turned to a site of contention, Njabulo Ndebele invited through his essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1986) for the termination of the "spectacular" (149), the mode of writing which champions portraying the horrors of apartheid. For the black writers, at this stage, it became a rampant tradition, as Gordimer contends, to "choose their plots, characters, and literary style", but "their themes choose them" (1970, p. 17 original emphasis). White writers who felt inclined to portray apartheid South Africa were compelled to adopt and restrict themselves with the realistic mode of writing putting higher premium on content rather than form. The realistic mode was pervasively the mode of the mainstream literature. Wilfred Cartey (1969) describes thoroughly the literary scene at the time seeing that works of fiction "need not rely upon the highly imaginative processes for the outward features of South African reality seem in themselves to be fiction" (106).

The idea of strongly linking literature in general and fiction in particular with the socio-historical context of the country through the realistic mode was met by discontent from many writers. In the 1980's, a campaign had been waged against the use of realism attacking its rigidity and prevalence of content over style and speech ornaments. South Africa's other internationally acclaimed dissident writer and second Nobel Prize winner, after Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee who announces the break with the dominant conventions of writing, i.e. realism, joined this campaign. He posits that the South

African literature should be pulled out from journalism and history.

[A]novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolbook is checkable by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process ( and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the pictures ) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history –in other words , demythologizing history [...] a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (Coetzee, 1988, p.3)

Coetzee is representative of the writers who adopted an indirect allegorical approach. He had been negatively received in South Africa especially during the 1970's and 1980's since the writers were urged to be overtly political in their writings. He had been accused of being too vague and difficult to locate. Nonetheless, the abstractness of his fiction to many international critics is not inept rather it forms the crux of his writings where an amalgam of literary techniques can be found out. The elusiveness of Coetzee's works according to Dominic Head is due to the elusiveness of the writer himself whose life details are even "sparse" (Head, 2009, p. 1).

One of the problematic issues in the white apartheid South African literature, in particular, then is this dilemma of activism vs art. Comparisons between Gordimer and Coetzee often tend to raise this binary into debate. Critics in favour of Coetzee believe that Coetzee's fiction is representative of the South African anti-apartheid concerns without playing down the artistic freedom in favour of the rhetoric of urgency. However, those in favour of Gordimer see that the explicitness of her purpose is the core of her literary enterprise and craftsmanship. Which stance to maintain, style or content, is really a problematic question for many writers and even readers. Commented on the consistent comparison between both writers, Clive Barnett says:

[A] dualism is set up in this sort of evaluation, between the novels which escape the murky traps of a society saturated with political significance, and novels which apparently succeed in rendering political reality but are , by this very same token , condemned to a lesser aesthetic judgment. (1999, p.291)

### III. CONCLUSION

In South Africa, the oppressor did not intend only to confine the non-white majority as socially and economically valueless creatures but as intellectually and culturally as well. Seemingly, the resultant Acts had targeted this majority only; but on the contrary, they

constituted one of the biggest dilemmas the white writers fought against. Thus, their writings were seriously influenced by these exigencies and had these policies as one of their basic laboratories. Waging a drastic revolt against all the crimes of conscience committed by the apartheid regime was the only way to eradicate it. This is what drew many white writers to change their early liberal attitudes in favour of a more direct political orientation. But in apart and yet a part position, these writers had regrettably found themselves. They had been rather newcomers than people of the land. Censorship, language use, exile and problems of readership are among the long list of predicaments they were set against. To survive, the white writer had to create a world of his own where he can conceive himself as resistant as any other writer.

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