

1 Apart and Yet a Part: The Dilemmas of the Dissident White 2 Writer in Apartheid South Africa

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5

6 **Abstract**

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

16

17 **Index terms**— white writer, apartheid, dilemma, censorship, language, exile, whiteness, readership,
18 alienation, reception.

19 **1 Introduction**

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

30 **2 II.**

31 **3 Discussion**

32 The policies of oppression were the driving force behind this movement of committed literature. Aimed at exposing
33 the barbarity of the apartheid system and mobilising the masses to act politically against it, this literature was
34 not left unchecked. A law to circumscribe the freedom of expression was compulsory. A big number of black
35 writers was banned compared to that of their committed white counterparts who found themselves in an uneasily
36 defended situation. Indeed, after the Sharpeville Massacre and the declaration of the state of emergency, and
37 even before this, the writers' freedom was tightened up with the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963
38 and the like. All the writings were put under the scrutiny of a board appointed by the government to decide
39 upon their validity. If found offensive to the state and the citizens, the work is immediately banned and never
40 allowed to be reproduced again.

41 Censorship laws, much as the other laws, were ambiguously issued since the standards of offensiveness were
42 undetermined. A striking example of this would be Nadine Gordimer who had two of her novels banned before

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43 the third one, Burger's Daughter, in 1979. Her second novel A world of Strangers was banned for twelve years in
44 South Africa until the banning was lifted in spite of the wave of criticism heaped on the government each time a
45 book was banned. But the international outrage and "the furore caused by the banning of Gordimer's Burger's
46 Daughter [sic] was, if anything, greater", Geoffrey Davis describes (2003, p.119 emphasis added). Outstanding
47 voices represented by the German Nobel prize receiver Heinrich Boll helped with the articles they wrote to
48 embarrass the racist government and to unban the novel after a few months though it is more politically overt
49 than its precedents. What standards the censorship committee adopted to un/ban the work is a worth asking
50 question!

51 The banning of the publications represents censorship in its narrow sense. In South Africa, everything was
52 censured: the race you belong to, the area you live in, the way you walk through, the school you attend, and
53 even the knowledge you attain. Thus, the 'ideology of the censor' cannot be seen in isolation; it proved a good
54 expedient to help advance the 'ideology of apartheid' whereby a minority aspired to exercise its power over
55 nearly 90% of the whole population. Christopher Merrett (1995) outlines three main reasons behind employing
56 this harsh censorship. First of all, the government's attention was directed towards suppressing any record of its
57 genocidal legislations, for it was under international surveillance ??Merrett, 1995, p. 3). Second, the government
58 intended to shatter the bridge between the different racial groups including whites by prohibiting any piece that
59 would prompt the exchange of ideas and the circulation of knowledge (ibid). All this to back up one of its
60 falsehoods suggesting that the discrepancies between these people are wider compared to the commonalities.
61 Thus, the whole idea of apartheid would seem to the whole world as appropriate. Cleansing the South African
62 history from the opposition of most of the population to the political system is another reason (ibid). It is clear
63 now why the rulers grappled to put into experiment the long array of censorship laws as well as other inhuman
64 plans.

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

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

82 Literature of the 1970's was part and parcel framed by the philosophy of the Black Consciousness Movement.
83 Most of the writers under influence, namely the Staffrider writers, opted for the urgent revival and more
84 importantly the circulation and promotion of the black cultural heritage of South Africa dispersed by the white
85 colonialist discourse especially after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. What is in hand, poetry and the folk art
86 in general, should be reappropriated and brought to the center even at the expense of the dominant narratives
87 as a means of resistance. Again the radical white writer had no room in this process of restoration; it was his
88 fate to suffer from the wounds of not belonging to the indigenous majority.

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

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

105 and I intend to use it" (Achebe qtd. in ??gugi, 1994, p.7). Achebe referred to this kind of language embrace as
106 'fatalistic logic'.

107 Ironically, English, generally renowned as the language of the oppressor in Africa, sustained as the language
108 of liberation in South Africa and a tool for the unification of all the races (Zander, 1999, p. 21), for the white
109 regime's wicked process to keep blacks in a state of hibernation away from the fresh movement of nationalism
110 in the continent and throughout much of the world through Bantu Education was unveiled. To writers of the
111 Shopiatown Renaissance, writing in English was perceived as a natural choice away from the historical dialectic
112 (Masilela, p. choice of language to the Afrikaans-speaking writers in particular, and the unorthodox white
113 writers in general, was easier said than done since as Sue Kossew (1996) writes: "the choice of language becomes
114 a significant political act" (19). Three choices, at least, have been available in South Africa: English, one of the
115 indigenous languages, or Afrikaans. To simply decode kossew's statement, taking one of these languages as a
116 medium of expression is an open affiliation with one of the two blocks of struggle in South Africa.

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

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

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

139 This was the case of a group of dissident Afrikaner writers in the 1960's. The exclusion of the Drum writers
140 from the literary scene paved the way for them to come into dominance. Known as The Sestigers or the 'writers
141 of the sixties', including famous figures like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and Etienne leroux, they "wished
142 to rid themselves of authority, to speak in their own authentic voice" ??Cope, 1982, p.100). They were essentially
143 concerned with highlighting the essence of Afrikaans literature to bring down the myth dictating the association
144 of this literature with the apartheid ideology. Like the case of most of the white writers with a European origin
145 in South Africa, the Sestigers were confronted with the dilemma of their contradicting culture: neither able to
146 relinquish it nor able to identify with its current situation.

147 This consciousness of the repressive policies of the Afrikaner government imposed on all the races and their
148 (the Sestigers) attempts to address all this are described by Sue Kossew as 'writing back' to Afrikanerdom (1996,
149 p.6). However, many critics agree that these writers did form a loose association of writers unable to address
150 properly "the urgent societal concerns" created by the apartheid government; hence, it is a sort of "complicity
151 with these conditions" (Herlitzius, 2005, p.115). In fact, despite the highly restrictive laws of censorship, no work
152 by an Afrikaner writer had been banned until André Brink's Looking on Darkness fell victim to the censors in
153 1974. Margreet de Lange (1997) credits this privilege to the fact of being "more interested in aesthetics than
154 in politics" (36). Preservation of the Afrikaans language and culture made them busy experimenting with the
155 language at the expense of other significant issues and above all apolitical as far as the prevailing orthodoxy
156 of writing was concerned. The Drum writer and the coloured cultural critic Lewis Nkosi did not hesitate to
157 express his harsh viewpoint of the movement: Despite a massive propaganda campaign which proclaims them to
158 be new leaders of the South African avant-garde, the group of Afrikaans writers known as the 'Sestigers' have
159 remained on the whole curiously irrelevant, even faintly comic.[Their][?] sketches [are] implausible, unreal, even
160 deliberately fraudulent. Where, one wis hes to know, is the sjambok and the gun and the stolen sexual confidence
161 on a private beach night, the whole ghastly comedy of the laboured heart transplants and the accelerating rate
162 of malnutrition and infant morality? ??Nkosi, 1981, p. 77-8) Though the white writer's task of raising the white
163 people's consciousness in the eyes of Gordimer in her "The Essential Gesture" is minor compared to that expected
164 from the black writers (1989, p.287), his sufferings like them could not be minimised. However, there was usually
165 a long list of charges levelled authoritatively against South Africa's white writer by his black counterparts or
166 commonly by the critics of the Whites, in general, by living in South Africa were entangled by a thorny question
167 constantly imposed on the self: "what does it mean to be a South African"? ??Gordimer,1983, p.117). Actually,

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168 the expression 'white African' itself constitutes an 'oxymoron' that had never been absorbed in a context of a
169 racially-torn society. Yet, it was simultaneously difficult to eschew the demands of this turbulent atmosphere,
170 for living in South Africa as a white inflicted two alternatives: whether to live as an oppressor or a supporter.
171 Embracing the first one implies certainly the deprivation of the white man's humanity. The second alternative
172 entails the politicisation of his private life. Both options had been awkward. Thus, the self-imposed exile was
173 a resort for many white writers such as Breyten Breytenbach from the psychological trauma of belonging and
174 other problems spearheaded by censorship. Most of the Works of the Afrikaner writer J. M. Coetzee, like *In the
175 Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), revolve around the psychological impact
176 of colonialism, with the various brands it may take including apartheid, upon all the races especially in South
177 Africa. But his autobiographical novel *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) brings to debate earlier
178 raised questions about his commitment and the self-exile he imposed on himself covered by his ambitions to
179 finish his studies abroad. It delves into Coetzee's early life and gives an insight into the very problem he suffered
180 from, that of identity and belonging. Absorbing his Afrikaner origin in the light of this context was difficult.

181 Because they speak English at home, because he always comes first in English at school, he thinks of himself as
182 English. Though his surname is Afrikaans, though his father is more Afrikaans than English, though he himself
183 speaks Afrikaans without an English accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner. ??Coetzee, 1989,
184 p. 124) Problems of belonging were not limited to South Africa's white writers only. Bessie Head, a coloured
185 South African writer, experienced similar symptoms. Failure to fully locate herself within the Cape Coloured
186 community, her area of residence by law, and her restless search for identity because of her white origins led her
187 to leave South Africa seeking refuge in Botswana.

188 To put it bluntly, whiteness, as whites believe, precludes the right to live in South Africa as an African. This
189 problem of identity and belonging concerning dissident white writers in particular, Badroon (2009) suggests, is
190 widened by the label 'Afrikaner', an Afrikaans word meaning African (71). Settlers with a 'white identity' are the
191 only section able to carry this emblem. Hence, the word Afrikaner encompasses within its layers the European
192 identity. An Afrikaner is never an African, and Afrikanerdom equals apartness from the South African landscape.
193 White Writing by Coetzee invests this problem of belonging which can be surpassed, he believes, by establishing
194 a discourse bringing closer Africa and its other. He wonders: "[i]s there a language in which people of European
195 identity, or if not of European identify then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak
196 to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?" ??Coetzee, 1988, p. 8-9). Thus, language, away from being a medium of
197 expression and publication, is a means which can help strengthen one's feelings of belonging as it may just do
198 the opposite.

199 Since apartheid is morally considered as a sin, the white writers of conscience in South Africa saw themselves as
200 originally sinful by belonging to the race of the white oppressor. This burden was one of the driving factors to act
201 against the racially-based regime. Yet, this gesture had been received by the indigenous masses as an impotent
202 gesture which lacks authenticity. Consequently, white writers are not accepted, in most cases, in this struggle.
203 This gave rise to the dilemma of responsibility: "[t]o whom white South African writers are answerable in their
204 essential gesture" since "only a section of blacks places any demands upon white writers at all" ??Gordimer,
205 1989, p. 293). Why to take action in a society where you are not an integral part of the struggle was thus a
206 haunting question. It had been also very disappointing for many writers to know that they were "writing about
207 and for a society that cannot or will not read" their works ??Cowley, 2003, par. 6). Desperately, they had felt
208 writing "endlessly into a vacuum of indifference" (ibid, par.1); emptiness and the sense of estrangement opposed
209 them and not apartheid. As such, to those writers who adopted a radical political posture and chose to morally
210 reject apartheid, living a private life could hardly be achieved. Notwithstanding the ambivalence characteristic
211 of their living in South Africa, they risked their lives for their beliefs.

212 Among the challenges the dissident white writers had to endure also is readership. They had been seen as
213 privileged in South Africa because of the presence of an overseas audience curious to align itself with white voices
214 from the Dark Continent. Another question subsequently came to the surface: were all the privileges (at least
215 the widespread readership, compared to that of black writers, beyond the borders of South Africa) white writers
216 enjoyed during this period accorded by their racial identity or by their talent? André Brink's reaction and status
217 as a white South African writer known abroad complicated this point. During this era, most of the black writers
218 were not known abroad not only because their primary focus was charging the majority to organize resistance at
219 the expense of "targeting an international audience" but also because of "a well-masked racism of readers abroad,
220 who preferred to read works by white writers with whom they felt they could identify more readily, rather than
221 make the effort of coming to terms with a different cultural tradition", Brink acknowledges (1998, p. .).

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

229 In this phase, any literary work that does not epitomise the historical moment of its production and does
230 not protest the racist regime directly had been viewed as inappropriate. Active writers then were supposed to

231 provide a "detailed exposé" of the miserable life of the majority under the rule of the white minority (Yousaf,
232 2001, p. x). Thus, to produce art for art's sake was another dilemma. Art for art's sake was perceived as a kind
233 of violation from the mainstream literature and an escape from one's duties as it was the case of the Afrikaner
234 writer J.M. Coetzee. Turned to a site of contention, Njabulo Ndebele invited through his essay "The Rediscovery
235 of the Ordinary" (1986) for the termination of the "spectacular" (149), the mode of writing which champions
236 portraying the horrors of apartheid. For the black writers, at this stage, it became a rampant tradition, as
237 Gordimer contends, to "choose their plots, characters, and literary style", but "their themes choose them" (1970,
238 p. 17 original emphasis). White writers who felt inclined to portray apartheid South Africa were compelled to
239 adopt and restrict themselves with the realistic mode of writing putting higher premium on content rather than
240 form. The realistic mode was pervasively the mode of the mainstream literature. Wilfred Cartey (1969) describes
241 thoroughly the literary scene at the time seeing that works of fiction "need not rely upon the highly imaginative
242 processes for the outward features of South African reality seem in themselves to be fiction" (106).

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

249 [A]novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates
250 in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's
251 schoolbook is checkable by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and
252 myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the pictures)
253 perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history -in other words , demythologizing history [?]
254 a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of
255 the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. ??Coetzee, 1988, p.3)
256 Coetzee is representative of the writers who adopted an indirect allegorical approach. He had been negatively
257 received in South Africa especially during the 1970's and 1980's since the writers were urged to be overtly political
258 in their writings. He had been accused of being too vague and difficult to locate. Nonetheless, the abstractness
259 of his fiction to many international critics is not inept rather it forms the crux of his writings where an amalgam
260 of literary techniques can be found out. The elusiveness of Coetzee's works according to Dominic Head is due to
261 the elusiveness of the writer himself whose life details are even "sparse" ??Head, 2009, p. 1).

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

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

272 4 iii. Conclusion

273 In South Africa, the oppressor did not intend only to confine the non-white majority as socially and economically
274 valueless creatures but as intellectually and culturally as well. Seemingly, the resultant Acts had constituted
275 one of the biggest dilemmas the white writers fought against. Thus, their writings were seriously influenced by
276 these exigencies and had these policies as one of their basic laboratories. Waging a drastic revolt against all the
277 crimes of conscience committed by the apartheid regime was the only way to eradicate it. This is what drew
278 many white writers to change their early liberal attitudes in favour of a more direct political orientation. But in
279 apart and yet a part position, these writers had regrettably found themselves. They had been rather newcomers
280 than people of the land. Censorship, language use, exile and problems of readership are among the long list of
281 predicaments they were set against. To survive, the white writer had to create a world of his own where he can
282 conceive himself as resistant as any other writer.

283 5 Bibliography

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