

Afrikaans Literature In The Rainbow Nation

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## **Luc Renders**

### **Afrikaans Literature in the Rainbow nation**

#### **1 Towards a new, democratic country**

##### **1.1 The end of the struggle**

Currently the novel *Na die geliefde land* (To the beloved country) by Karel Schoeman, one of the most prominent contemporary prose writers in Afrikaans literature, is being shown at film festivals around the world. It was retitled *Promised Land*. At the Tokyo African film festival it was awarded the prize for the best screenplay. Schoeman's science fiction novel was published in 1972.

The events take place in a post-revolutionary South Africa. The white government has been replaced. George, the main character, grew up and still resides in Switzerland. His father was a diplomatic representative of the old regime. After the death of his mother he travels to South Africa with the intention of selling the family farm. The Hattinghs, an Afrikaner family who live near his mother's old farm, offer him accommodation. Like all Afrikaners they have to endure hardship and poverty.

During his short stay George discovers that the world of the Hattinghs is completely different from his own. He only has the Afrikaans language in common with them. As a result he remains a complete outsider. His trip, undertaken as a pilgrimage, has not instilled any sympathy for his people in him. On the contrary, George empathizes with the two children of the Hattingh family, Carla and Paultjie, who reject the values the Afrikaner community holds dear. Only they are not ridiculed. The author makes it plain that the alternative of Carla, namely to fully commit herself to the new society, offers the only hope for the future.

The other members of the Hattingh family are plotting against the new rulers. They idealise the past and want to bring about a return to the old order. However, they are fighting for a lost cause. The novel makes it plain that the Afrikaners should put their past behind them and join forces with the blacks in the building of a new South Africa.

The reactions of the reviewers when Schoeman's novel first appeared were not unanimously favourable as Henriette Roos points out: "Die bekendste kritici het die striemende uitbeelding, wat in 'n tipiese koel Schoemanstyl gedoen is, op literêre vlak probeer afkraak, waartydens hulle politieke afkeur moeilik verborge kon bly. Van dié verhaal wat lees asof dit gebaseer is op die koerantberigte van vroeg-1994, sê Botha in 1974 dat "die boek 'n verre, vae sprokiesagtigheid behou ... en dat daar geen sprake

is (nie) van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse ... aktualiteit ... (V)an fantasie het die boek veel, ... van profesie is daar geen sprake nie'" (Roos 1998: 68) (The most well-known critics have tried to slate the cutting depiction, which is done in a typically cool Schoeman style, during which they could scarcely hide their political antipathy. Of this plot, which reads as if it were based on newspaper stories from early 1994, Botha says in 1974 "that the book retains a distant, vague fairytale like character ... South African reality is completely absent ... The book is filled with fantasy ... it has nothing at all to do with prophesy\*).

From the vantage point of 2002 *Na die geliefde land* is much closer to science than to fiction. Reality has caught up with what was for most critics an all too imaginary plot. In 1972 Afrikaner power was in its heyday; its crumbling was for most white South Africans quite inconceivable. What interpretation does the film give of the novel? Will it highlight the Afrikaners' unwillingness to accept black rule or will it propagate the need for foresaking the old tribal ties and hence for forging new bonds across the colour divide?

More than twenty years later Elsa Joubert addressed the same theme in the short story 'Volkstaat' (White homeland) (1993). Once again the setting is an undetermined future. Most Afrikaners live in the townships near the cities where they eke out a meagre existence. Some live in an impoverished homeland. The whites have become the new underclass. They are the victims of a reverse apartheid system: they have to carry out the unskilled jobs once done by the blacks; they are subjected to the same humiliations the blacks had to undergo; their lives are a continuous struggle for survival. Joubert's message cannot be misunderstood: do not do to others what you do not want to have done to yourself. When the *Dansmaat* (Dancing partner) collection, in which 'Volkstaat' featured, appeared, the political transformation process was already well under way. Joubert's short story therefore did not create the same stir as the publication of *Na die geliefde land* twenty years earlier.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century the momentum for political change became unstoppable. The democratic elections of 1994 were a watershed in South African history. The result of the popular vote was an overwhelming victory for the ANC and the installation of Nelson Mandela as the country's first black president. The general election was the last stage in the liberation struggle of the black peoples. Since the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 South African history has been

characterised by interracial and intraracial conflict. Not only did whites fight blacks but blacks also fought against blacks and whites against other whites.

The Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902), the election victory of the National Party in 1948 and the 1994 general election are the three pivotal events in twentieth century South African history. All three are closely intertwined. The loss of the Anglo-Boer war was a bitter blow to the Afrikaner people. The Afrikaners reacted by developing a strategy aimed at wresting political control from the English. It resulted in the 1948 victory of the National Party and subsequently, in order to lock their hold on power, in the gradual institutionalisation of racial segregation in the apartheid system. A deeply divided society came into being. Growing polarisation, spreading disenchantment and outright revolt were the inevitable consequences. The freedom struggle ultimately led to the downfall of the National Party regime. The first democratic election of 27 April 1994 brought the blacks equality and political power.

### **1.2 The first general election**

From a society strictly organised along racial lines South Africa was turned overnight into a non-racial paradise: a rainbow nation in which the different racial groups would live peacefully together. However, for the whites this democratic utopia meant the loss of their privileges. Moreover, the Afrikaner establishment had to give up the moral high ground, which it had always claimed, as a result of the shocking exposure of the utter callousness of white rule during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In *Country of my skull* (1998) Antjie Krog sketches a searing picture of the brutal oppression of the mainly black opposition, which came to light during the nationwide hearings.

Not only the Afrikaners, but also Afrikaans lost its standing in South African society. Under apartheid it was the main language of the National party government, of the police and of the army. It thus became stigmatised as the language of the oppressor. The language dispensation in the new constitution puts 11 languages on an equal footing. Afrikaans now has to vie with ten other languages for a place under the South African sun. Obviously the ANC government does not accord it a privileged position. Its diminished status and reduced public use is heavily contested by certain segments within the Afrikaner community, which fear that English will, for all practical purposes, become the *lingua franca* of South Africa.

This process seems to have gained an almost unstoppable momentum. Can the fact that during the Big Brother reality television show only English may be spoken

by the participants be interpreted as the writing on the wall? Both the government and the business world seem to distance themselves from Afrikaans. Advertisers increasingly promote their products in English, the SABC broadcasts mainly English language programmes, the government apparatus seems to be run solely in English, unilingual Afrikaans universities have become dual medium institutions. The number of students taking Afrikaans has fallen sharply, which even resulted in the closure of some university departments. It is a very dramatic and for some even traumatic turnaround.

The reduced use of Afrikaans in the public domain has led to a fierce debate about its future and even to a new language struggle. The believers in a free language market are at loggerheads with the language protectionists. The former are of the opinion that Afrikaans should not be given special protection. Its fate depends on the market. If there are no speakers anymore then Afrikaans will disappear. In the same breath they point out that Afrikaans is flourishing. Afrikaans literature and the Afrikaans newspapers are doing very well, Afrikaans festivals such as the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefestival in Oudtshoorn and Aardklop in Potchefstroom go from strength to strength. Karen Zoid, a singer, definitely is a strident non-activist. “Ek voel sterk oor die taalstryd in die sin dat ek niks daarmee te doen wil hê nie.” (I feel strongly about the language struggle in the sense that I do not want to have anything to do with it.) she forcefully asserted at the recent Aardklop arts festival in Potchefstroom.

Others, however, insist on structural protection for Afrikaans. They point out that a small language cannot survive when it loses its public usefulness; this means that Afrikaans has to remain an official language of instruction in schools and that it should be possible to use it in the public domain. It speaks for itself that it is mainly the group of protectionists which makes itself heard. PRAAG and the Groep 63 are the self-proclaimed protectors of the rights of Afrikaans and of those of other minority groups and languages. They insist that the rights of the minorities to speak their mother tongues have to be protected and vociferously voice their protest against any form of English language imperialism. The government seems to be taking heed. In the new language policy for institutes of higher education the present position of English and Afrikaans is recognised but no university is allowed to offer courses only in Afrikaans. All universities have to provide parallel or double-medium instruction.

More effort will be devoted to the development of the African languages in higher education.

Of course the apartheid past of Afrikaans seriously bedevils matters. Action committees defending the interests of Afrikaans are justly or unjustly suspected of having a conservative agenda namely the preservation and the entrenchment of the privileged position of the Afrikaners. Hein Willemsse makes the point that the debate about Afrikaans ignores the wider South African community: “Die aandrang op die priviligering van Afrikaans openbaar ‘n selfbeheptheid wat gewoon nie ander mense in die land in ag neem nie. Want die kruisvaarders word geslaan met ’n blindheid wat weier om verby taal en groep te kyk. Inisiatiewe rondom Afrikaanse protes en soortgelyke aksies het in hul dieptestruktuur weinig te doen met die res van Suid-Afrika. Die aksies verval in beperkte en beperkende gesprekke oor Afrikaners tussen Afrikaners (en Afrikaanssprekende).” (The insistence on the privileging of Afrikaans demonstrates a narcissism which does not take into account the other people in this country at all. Because the crusader is affected by a blindness which refuses to look beyond language and group. Protest initiatives concerning Afrikaans and similar actions have in their deep structure little to do with rest of South Africa. These actions are limited to restricted and restricting discussions about Afrikaans between Afrikaners (and speakers of Afrikaans.)) (Willemsse ...)

The debate is continuing. The historian Herman Gilliomee insists that its importance should not be underestimated: “In ‘n belangrike mate hang die toekoms van Afrikaans van die uitslag van die burgeroorlog in eie geledere af. So lank daar Afrikaanse mense is wat verkondig dat Afrikaans (anders as ander klein tale in ander wêrelddele) op die vrye mark met Engels kan meeding, of vir lief moet neem om net private funksies te verrig, sal die Regering en groot sakeondernemings voortgaan om die doel van Engels as *lingua franca* na te streef, al weet ons dat die groot meerderheid Suid-Afrikaners geen erg aan so’n beleid het nie. Dit is werklik net die wit en swart elite in ons samelewing wat hulle veroorloof om speletjies te speel met die toekoms van die land se nie-dominante tale, waaronder ook Afrikaans is, en die ontwikkeling en die lewenskans van die mense wat hulle praat.” (Gilliomee ...). (To a large extent the future of Afrikaans depends on the outcome of the civil war in its own ranks. As long as there are Afrikaans speakers who proclaim that Afrikaans (in contrast to the other small languages on other continents) can compete with English in the free market, or accept that it is reduced to the private sphere, the Government and

big business will continue to strive for the objective of English as the *lingua franca*, in spite of the fact that we know that the large majority of South Africans does not want such a policy. It is really only the white and black elite in our society who can afford to play games with the future of the non-dominant languages, amongst whom is Afrikaans, and the development and opportunities of the people who talk them.) In the light of the deliberate exclusion of non-white speakers from the Afrikaans language community throughout the 20th century, this argumentation comes belatedly and therefore rings hollow.

During the apartheid years few Afrikaners spoke out against the nationalistic and racist policies of the National Party government. Among these dissenting voices were a disproportionate number of Afrikaans writers. From the beginning of the seventies onwards they played a major role in the subversion of the apartheid system from within. Afrikaans literature made a substantial contribution to the demythologisation of the ideology of the National Party. Writers such as Breyten Breytenbach, André P. Brink, John Miles, Karel Schoeman, Elsa Joubert, Jan Rabie, Abraham de Vries, Antjie Krog and others forcefully expressed their opposition to all forms of racial segregation and passionately pleaded for a democratic South Africa. Their works contributed to a climate, which, ultimately, made a relatively peaceful transfer of power possible.

The 1994 election was seen as the end of a long nightmare. South Africa did not slide into civil war and the election day itself was, on the whole, experienced as a joyful occasion. The dire predictions had not come true. Afrikaans writers were euphoric. *S.A. April 1994* is a compilation of the reactions of a cross section of South African writers, black and white, to this memorable event. André Brink describes the atmosphere on election day as follows: “We have all become members of one great extended family. Black, brown, white: in the course of this one day a quiet miracle has been taking place. A mere week ago some people have begun to barricade themselves in their homes, expecting a wave of violence to swamp them today. What is happening here is the opposite. We are discovering, through the basic sharing of this experience, that we are all South Africans. It is as simple and as momentous as that. Most of us will return to our separate existences tomorrow. In the commotion of the coming days, months, years, much of this day may fade. But one thing we cannot, ever, forget: the knowledge of having been here together; the awareness of a life, a country, a humanity we share. By achieving what has seemed impossible we have

caught a glimpse of the possible" (1994: 34). A fully and truly multiracial and multicultural nation seemed to be in the making.

In Afrikaans literature too the new dispensation is warmly embraced. A new dawn is indeed rising. The main character of *Casspirs en campari's* (Casspirs and Camparis) (1991) by Etienne van Heerden cuts his ties with his past and starts digging a tunnel to the new South Africa. He gives his newborn baby girl the African name Nomso Naomi which means: "die môre wat aanbreek" (595) (the morning that is breaking). Kristien, the main character in the novel *Sandkastele* (Imaginations of Sand) (1995b) by André Brink, returns, on the eve of the first free election, from London to South Africa to be at the deathbed of her grandmother. Back in her fatherland she comes to the realisation that, despite her own people's failings, she has a strong bond with her country: "Ja. Ondanks alles. Ten spyte van alles. Dis my plek dié" (Yes. Despite everything. In spite of everything. This is my place) (444). She discovers that it is her calling to stay and to fight against male domination and to make a positive contribution to the new South Africa. Belle from *Die reise van Isobelle* (The trips of Isobelle) (1995) by Elsa Joubert arrives at a similar conclusion. In the closing scene Belle experiences an epiphany: all racial and political differences evaporate. The country is no longer divided into an 'us' and a 'them'; all South Africans become "Mý mense" (My people) (614). It is a vision of the new South Africa.

The optimism generated by the election is intoxicating and infectious. The bad old days of interracial conflict have been left behind. This is also very much the point J.M. Gilfillan makes in *Pouoogmot* (Peacock-eye moth) (1997) which is set against the background of the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The antagonism between the different races is replaced by a profound empathy and a desire to make things work. Colour has become irrelevant; all South Africans belong to one big, happy family. E.K.M. Dido shares the same belief. In *Die storie van Monica Peters* (The story of Monica Peters) she asserts that through the power of love the barriers separating the different races can be removed. In this way South Africa can be a country that fulfils God's objectives by proving: "[...] hoe mense van verskillende rasse, kulture, gewoontes en geloofsoortuigings saam in liefde en vrede kan leef" (1996: 15) (How people from different races, cultures and religious convictions can live together in love and peace).

Of course the euphoria surrounding the election could not last. In 1995 27 *April een jaar later/One Year Later* appeared. While in its predecessor the elation and



the high expectations made expressions of caution and scepticism look unseemly, now a new realism has set in. The first enthusiasm has ebbed away and has been replaced by sober-mindedness and even disillusionment. There is a growing sense that history is repeating itself. The slow pace of change, the crime and the violence, the corruption, the dire state of the economy and a new form of racism, this time in the guise of affirmative action, all conspire to make the initial optimism suddenly look very naïve. In his contribution Abraham de Vries writes the following: "Nou huiwer ek soms en wonder: het die patrone van magsmisbruik, van korrupsie, van dom oneerlikheid, van politieke opportunisme, van geweld, van gewone mense se leed en lyding dan werklik so dieselfde gebly? Leef ek my lewe twee maal oor?" (De Vries 1995: 51) (Now I sometimes shudder and wonder: have the patterns of abuse of power, of corruption, of stupid dishonesty, of political opportunism, of violence, of the pain and suffering of ordinary people really stayed so much the same? Do I live my life twice over?) Since 1995 there has been no discernible improvement in the socio-political situation.

During the apartheid period Afrikaans literature was unequivocally on the side of the underdog and fiercely committed to exposing the dark side of the apartheid system. The writers considered themselves to be public prosecutors, white knights bravely fighting evil and injustice wherever they found it. In the new South Africa they still see it as their moral duty to play the role of watchdogs by raising public concerns and by denouncing all manner of political skulduggery and social ills. They find plenty to set their teeth into despite, or perhaps precisely because of the fact that they are fully committed to the establishment of a free and fair South Africa. How is the current malaise in South African society reflected in Afrikaans prose published after 1994 and how do Afrikaans authors look upon: "[...] the state of our humanity, at this crucial juncture where a variety of cultures and languages and talents are groping towards intimations of a larger South African identity" (Brink 1994: 8)?

## **2 New parameters**

### **2.1 Adapt or die**

The transition from white to black rule heralded a monumental change. The old parameters had suddenly lost all relevance. The whites found themselves in uncharted territory. They reacted to it in different ways. Some embraced the new order with enthusiasm, others took some convincing. In Elsa Joubert's short story 'Dogters van Afrika' (Daughters of Africa), from the collection *Dansmaat*, a daughter and her

mother attend a multiracial conference on social issues. At first the mother feels somewhat ill at ease in the multiracial gathering. As a “gebreinspoelde Afrikaner” (1993: 5) (brainwashed Afrikaner), as her daughter jokingly refers to her, she finds the presence of the black women, who outnumber the whites by far, very intimidating and even oppressive. In the course of the proceedings, however, she discovers that the problems faced by black women are the same as those she had to deal with in her own community. The women of Africa share the same experiences. No matter what skin colour they have, they are all sisters of each other, all daughters of Africa.

This insight allows her to see her black compatriots in a completely new light. She is reborn, which is graphically illustrated by her falling into the venue’s pool, into a different, colour-blind South Africa. Her old values have lost all significance; her inhibitions have disappeared: “Waar of hoe of wat ons voorouers ook al was, hare en myne, ons leef nou, en net één keer. Eintlik is ons niks verskuldig aan verbygegene geslagte nie” (9). (Where or how or what our ancestors were, hers and mine, we only live now, just once. In actual fact we do not owe anything to the previous generations.) This statement is no less than a unilateral declaration of independence. The mother draws a firm line underneath the past with its obsessive focus on race. In her new world a common humanity and a shared destiny unite the women of Africa. Indeed, as soon as the racial prejudices are stripped away common ground can be found and a meaningful relationship established. This is also the point in the humoristic short story 'Meneer Visagie kom tot 'n besluit' (Mister Visagie takes a decision) by Izak de Vries (in Ferreira 2001).

Other whites, however, cannot be swayed. They vehemently resent the installation of a black government. In 'Tandeka' (2000), a short story by Eben Venter, Tandeka Radebe and her family have worked on the farm Beskuitfontein for forty years. When the elderly farmer and his wife decide to sell the farm their black labourers are not given their due. Tandeka confronts the farmer's wife about this unfair treatment but she is scathingly told that now the newly elected black government has to look after the farm labourers: "Hierdie land behoort nou aan julle en julle kan daarmee maak wat julle wil, want ek sal gelukkig nie meer hier wees om dit te aanskou nie. Maar wat ek en die Baas hier op Beskuitfontein gebou het, is nie julle s'n nie. Jy moet dit baie mooi begryp" (93) (This country now belongs to you and you can do with it whatever you like, because luckily I won't be here to see it anymore. But what I and the Boss have built here on Beskuitfontein does not belong

to you. You have to very clearly understand this.) Old habits and paternalistic attitudes apparently die very hard.

Some whites find it quite unacceptable to live under black rule. In the short story 'Die laaste winter' (The last winter) (1998) by Izak de Vries an ultra-right religious sect, who sees the Afrikaners as God's chosen people, is convinced that the handing over of political power to the black majority gives free rein to the anti-christ and to communism in South Africa. Oom Hans (Uncle Hans), their spiritual leader, has proclaimed that they have to prepare themselves to meet their Lord in the coming spring. The author does not clarify whether Oom Hans is planning for his flock to commit mass suicide or expects Armageddon to take place. In the eyes of these religious fanatics the blacks are devils incarnate and majority rule is tantamount to blasphemy. For them the arrival of spring brings an apocalyptic rebirth.

Other Afrikaners equally fanatically cling to the heroic past of their tribe. Indeed, the similarities between the past and the present are striking. Once again the Afrikaners are threatened by an overpowering enemy as they were in the Anglo-Boer war. In the short story 'Boeta, wat nou?' (Brother, what now?) by Christiaan Bakkes (in Ferreira 2001) two brothers and their father attend a service to commemorate an ancestor who was killed in the Anglo-Boer war. The brothers are dressed up as confederate rebels from America's civil war. The latter, like the Afrikaners, had the courage to stand their ground. Southerners and Afrikaners lost the war but were not defeated. Frank and Jesse James, the heroes of the two Afrikaner brothers, are compared with the Boer fighters who did not want to surrender to the English: "Maar op hulle manier was hul bittreinders, dapper genoeg om hulle te verset teen 'n nuwe bedeling wat hulle en hul mense onregverdig behandel" (14) (But in their way they never gave in, courageous enough to resist a new dispensation which treated them and their people unjustly). However, faced with a clear and present danger, namely the wave of violent crime in South Africa, the Afrikaner brothers, who are described as romantic adventurers with a distaste for senseless violence, are at a loss as to how to react: "Boeta, wat sou Frank en Jesse gedoen het?" (15) (Brother, what would Frank and Jesse have done?). The answer to the question is evident but so is its tragic consequence namely death. Are the brothers prepared to take their hero worship to that extreme?

## **2.2 In dire straits**

Most whites accept the new regime as a *fait accompli* but without any enthusiasm as they do not know what lies in store for them. As a result of affirmative action programmes advantaging the blacks, their opportunities have dwindled fast. They find themselves in dire straits and often do not know how to make ends meet. Small wonder that so many misfits and depressed people roam the present-day Afrikaans prose scene. Feelings of frustration, isolation and despair are pervasive. In *Erdvarkfontein* (Ant-bearspring) (1998) and *Stinkafrikaners* (Smelly Afrikaners) (2000) Tom Dreyer puts a tragi-comic gloss over the existential crisis in which the Afrikaner finds himself. *Erdvarkfontein* is a village in the arid north-west of the country. Anyone who lands there has little or nothing to lose anymore. Nevertheless, the characters keep on dreaming, against all the odds, of a rosy future. The plans they concoct inevitably end in disaster either as a result of their own foolishness or through sheer misfortune. For most characters violence seems the only way of reaching their objectives. The culture of violence and lawlessness suggests the loss of all values. Tom Dreyer's characters behave like larger than life cartoon figures. They go their own crazy ways until their world gets destroyed in an orgy of violence.

Not only the novels by Tom Dreyer but also the collections of short stories *Paartjie by Jake's* (Party at Jake's) (1997) by Jaco Fouché, *Verdwaal* (Lost) (1997) by Herman Wasserman and *Sweisbril* (Welding glasses) (1999) by Jaco Botha are populated by losers and outcasts. They are imprisoned in the bleak present; they have a past they do not want to be reminded of and even less of a future to look forward to. They have no history and are thus without an identity. They are adrift. What remains is a gaping emptiness. Also the short stories 'Om jou dag in te kleur' (To colour your day), 'Pretorianers op 'n kusedorpie' (Pretorianers in a small coastal village) and 'n Vreemdeling in Zululand' (A stranger in Zululand) from the collection *Agter die suikergordyn* (Behind the sugar curtain) (1997) by Alexander Strachan convincingly portray the aimlessness and the boredom of lives lived without an ulterior purpose. In the collection of short stories *Die aptyt van Anna Blow* (The appetite of Anna Blow) (2000) by Emile Joubert the impossibility of establishing a meaningful relationship is a recurring theme. The illusion of happiness and love is shattered time and again. That these stories are situated against the backdrop of the new South Africa is not coincidental.

The Afrikaner traditions and values have been thrown into the dustbin of history; they have outlived their useful life. They do not offer a way-out anymore. The

past is demythologised. On the occasion of the commemoration of the centenary of the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902) a penetrating re-appraisal of the Anglo-Boer war has been undertaken especially in the Afrikaner community. Indeed, the redefinition of Afrikaner identity within the context of the new South Africa has necessitated serious soul searching. The unique significance of the Anglo-Boer war in Afrikaner history makes it into the obvious target for the revisionists. It can be no surprise therefore that Afrikaans authors have found a major source of inspiration in the Anglo-Boer war.

The new writing about the Anglo-Boer war turns the bitter conflict between the Boers and the British into a new, perhaps even more ferocious, battleground, this time for the soul of the Afrikaner. It is an obvious choice of terrain because the Anglo-Boer war is together with the Groot Trek of 1836 one of the seminal events in Afrikaner history. The loss of the war nips the Afrikaners' yearning for freedom and independence, of which the Groot Trek is the embodiment, in the bud. Once again the Afrikaner people is brought under the yoke of the English. The Afrikaners suffered a severe setback. About 4.000 Boer fighters lost their lives. More than 27.000 women and children perished as a result of malnourishment and diseases in concentration camps. The countryside was destroyed, farmers were ruined. The capitulation leaves the Afrikaners with a severe trauma. It means that the hardship and suffering experienced during the war cannot be sublimated; it was all in vain.

However, the defeat and the attendant resentment form the impulse to the development of a strategy which allowed the Afrikaners to regain a dominant position in all spheres of life. The memory of past injustices is used to create and consolidate Afrikaner solidarity and, once power is obtained, to justify and defend Afrikaner rule at all cost. The loss of the Anglo-Boer war is used as a signpost to indicate that the Afrikaner people cannot allow something similar to happen again; it would lead to their destruction. Power is equated with survival.

The older generation, brought up on a diet of nationalistic propaganda, unwaveringly believed in the righteousness of the Afrikaner cause, to which the Afrikaner churches gave further credence by designating South Africa as the promised land. The younger generation no longer obligingly accepts the traditional values of Afrikanerdom. It has come to the realisation that the nationalistic ideology has led the Afrikaner to the brink of the abyss. Because of its mythical status a thorough revision of the Boer war implies adherence to a radically different set of values. The attitude towards the Boer war draws the dividing line between the older

and the younger generation. In a considerable number of contemporary Afrikaans texts the traditional interpretation of the Anglo-Boer war is thoroughly debunked. This is the case in the novels *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (In search of general Mannetjies Mentz) (1998) by Christoffel Coetzee, *Verliesfontein* (Spring of defeat) (1998) by Karel Schoeman and the recently published *Niggie* (Little niece) (2002) by Ingrid Winterbach.

It is undoubtedly significant that even in the historical novels the past is often looked at from a present-day vantage point which allows for its re-interpretation. The process of the gradual discovery of the truth is often given thematic relevance. From a nationalistic perspective the past leads in a continuum to the present. In contemporary Afrikaans literature this continuum is broken. The war is debunked and deconstructed with the result that it is robbed of its nationalistic connotation. The blood soaked shirt has lost its emotional appeal. In 'Ons mond' (Our mouth) by P.G. du Plessis it is indicated that the Boer war has for all too long been a "grievous wound" (in Ferreira 1999: 119). The past does not forge the Afrikaner's identity any longer.

History has to be revisited and rewritten. Contemporary Afrikaans writers accept that they have a singular responsibility *vis-à-vis* the past. When in the novel *Kikoejoe* (Kikuyu) (1996) by Etienne van Heerden the first-person narrator visits a fortune-teller, the following exchange takes place: "'Jy moenie die verlede ontken nie," het sy nà 'n ruk gesê. "Wat is jou beroep?" "Ek is 'n skrywer." "Dan moet jy daaroor skryf." "Is dit 'n opdrag?" Ek het geglimlag. "Dié opdrag kom alleen uit jouself.'" ("You must not deny the past," she said after a while. "What is your occupation?" "I am a writer." "Then you have to write about it." "Is that an assignment?" I smiled. "This kind of assignment only comes from within yourself.'" (168)

The total disintegration of the old system is also ruthlessly analysed in *Triomf* (Triumph) (1994) by Marlene van Niekerk. This novel unflinchingly dissects the degeneration of an Afrikaner family and by extension of Afrikanerdom. The novel is set against the 1994 elections. The Benades are an utterly dysfunctional family. They live in Triomf, a white suburb, which was built on the ruins of Sophiatown, a vibrant melting pot of black cultures. The Benade family have completely lost their bearings. However, ultimately they are resourceful enough to accept the new rulers and their new black neighbours: "En as sý 'n kanon gehad het, mind you, sou sy ok sommer 'n skoot geskiet het, hier uit die hartjie van Triomf uit, vir ou Mandela, oorlat hy so

regop stap en oorlat hy so mooi hande gevat het en gesê het wat verby is, is verby en almal moet nou vorentoe kyk en hulle moue oprol" (449) (And if she had had a canon, she would also have fired a shot, here from the heart of Triomf, for old Mandela, because he walks so upright and because he shook hands so nicely and said that what is over, is over and everyone should look forward and roll up their sleeves).

### **2.3 New relationships**

Most whites have no choice but to accept, albeit grudgingly, black rule. In 'Walhalla', a short story by Jaco Fouché, a group of white reservists is called up for a last training camp. The army is going through a process of transformation. Military camps are closed down and blacks from the liberation movements have joined the army ranks. The macho behaviour of the white reservists is only a smokescreen to hide their unease and disaffection. Their uniform, their white skin and their affiliation to the Afrikaner tribe gave them a privileged status. Those days are gone forever. Now they even have to salute black officers. The future looks dismal: "Hy tik met sy vingerpunte teen sy bors. "Jy stap daar uit en jy weet jy is 'n Afrikaner, maak nie saak wat die wêreld sê nie." "Those days are gone," sê Lawrence. "From now on it's us who say ja baas, ja baas." Hy lag, maar dit het niks met humor te doen nie, besef Reitz in 'n onaangename oomblik." (1997: 125) (He taps his breast with his fingertips. "You leave there and you know you are an Afrikaner, no matter what the world thinks." "Those days are gone," says Lawrence. "From now on it's us who say yes boss, yes boss." He laughs but it has nothing to do with humour, Reitz realizes in an unpleasant moment). That their personal lives too are in a hopeless tangle only serves to make their desperation even more acute.

That the blacks hold the levers of power does not mean that the country has fundamentally changed because the same patterns of violence still persist as the short story 'Sipho se skoen' (Sipho's shoe) by Murray la Vita or 'Extension lead' by Charles Fryer (both in Ferreira 2001) make abundantly clear. And where the coloured community had put high hopes in the new black government it finds its situation basically unchanged. Under white rule the coloureds were considered too dark to be white, now they are seen as too white to be black. In the short stories 'Doktor Olraait' (Doctor OK) by Peter Snyders and 'Introspeksie' (Introspection) by Anthony Wilson (both in Ferreira 2001) the continuing discrimination of the coloureds, which leaves them in limbo, is fiercely criticised.

Nonetheless, the black takeover means a dramatic turnaround for the whites. While under white rule they could behave with near impunity they are now no longer above the law. They are called to account for their irresponsible and brutal behaviour as the short story 'Langnaweek op Rietkuil' (Long weekend at Reedhole) (1998) by P.J. Bosman indicates. In another short story 'Die verlede lê nog voor' (The past lies ahead) (1998) by Izak de Vries, Jan Coetzee lives a contented and carefully planned life. He is happily married and his future looks rosy. Everything would be nicely under control were it not for his fear that he will be called up to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for misdeeds committed during his last army stint. His dark past, about which his wife knows nothing, hangs as a sword of Damocles above his head.

In 'Ons moet vir jou 'n bees slag' (We have to sacrifice a cow for you), another short story by Izak de Vries, Johannes too is haunted by the atrocities he committed while in the army. Ultimately he subjects himself to a Zulu cleansing ritual in which he confesses his guilt and is forgiven by the black collective: "Dit is so maklik. *Phosa ngemva*, sit dit agter jou neer. Dit is verby. Die heling kan begin" (1998: 89) (This is so easy *Phosa ngemva*, put it behind you. It is over. Healing can start). Johannes admits his guilt to the black community and finds redemption. A similar desire to make amends, but this time for the injustices perpetrated in the name of colonialism, is what motivates Estienne Barbier, the main character of the historical novel *Inteendeel* (On the contrary) (1993) by André Brink to go and seek the forgiveness of the Hottentot. As part of the atonement ritual he is harshly punished by them.

The awareness that in the past unacceptable wrongs were committed, is not restricted to literary works. In the beginning of December 2000 Carl Niehaus launched the 'n Tuiste vir almal' (A home for all) campaign. All white South Africans were asked to sign a declaration in which they admit to the damage caused by apartheid and to its lasting consequences. According to the declaration the whites have the moral duty to try and rectify inequalities because they, directly or indirectly, benefited from apartheid. By supporting the empowerment of the disadvantaged communities they can make a contribution to reconciliation and to the weeding out of racism (Niehaus 2000). A number of Afrikaans writers have signed the declaration. Antjie Krog is a member of the steering committee. The campaign was not very successful; after a while it fizzled out. We are tired of the blame game, was the common white reaction.



Forgiveness has to come from the erstwhile victims of apartheid: the blacks and the coloureds. Abraham Phillips, E.K.M. Dido and A.H.M. Scholtz are coloured writers who have come to the fore in the nineties. The plea for forgiveness in Dido's *Die storie van Monica Peters*: "Onthou, geen haat of wraak nie, laat regverdigheid seëvier" (Remember, no hatred or revenge, let justice be victorious) (1996: 12) is echoed by A.H.M. Scholtz in the foreword of *Langsaan die vuur* (Beside the fire) (1996) and by Abraham Phillips in *Die verdwaalde land* (The lost country) (1992).

Obviously this is not as easy as it sounds. In the short story 'Wintervoorraad' (Winter stocktaking) (1997) by Abraham de Vries, Abigail, the coloured manager of a supermarket, one day catches sight in the shop of the headmaster who in the apartheid days sent her away from the white school where she was a pupil. It ruined her youth. She considers confronting him but she decides against it when she hears him tell a coloured customer that he is so proud that the school now has a coloured prefect to which he adds that he has always tried to change the system from within. The headmaster's cringing attempts to justify himself are ample redress for Abigail: "Van al die heldhaftigheid sal hy nog baie moet vertel. Hy het nog ver om te kruip" (He will still have to recount his heroism very often. He still has far to crawl) (43).

The whites now live in a different country. The changes are not always very visible but they are nonetheless sweeping as the short story 'Wesenlike werklikheid' (Fundamental reality) by Rachele Greeff (2001) points out. The whites no longer call the shots. The short story 'Regstellende aksie' (Affirmative action) (1997) by Herman Wasserman sketches an ironic reversal of roles when a black charwoman pays her white employer for a bout of casual sex. Only occasionally do the whites manage to get their own back. In the short story 'My naam is Anna' (My name is Anna) by Anna Kemp (in Ferreira 2001), Anna Labuschagne uses the pen-name Anna Mofokeng, obviously a black surname, in a short story competition organised by a supermarket chain. She wins it. Of course the organisers expect the laureate to be a black woman. When the white Anna Labuschagne turns up, they are taken aback but she gets her prize nonetheless. For once the new ruling class has been beaten at its own game. Ironically, Anna's story of her life is not different from that of any black woman.

#### **2.4 Changed mores**

Not always does the transformation process take as innocent or comic a turn. It also has a much darker side. In the short story 'Boek' (Book) by Riana Scheepers from her latest collection *Feeks* (Witch) (1999), a lecturer of Afrikaans is angered by the fact

that a black student throws an Afrikaans book she has given to her into a bin. Moreover, the lecturer had gone to a lot of trouble getting hold of the book in question, which she found in a second hand bookshop in Cape Town. It is the play *Kanna hy kê hystoe* (Kanna is coming home) by Adam Small, a coloured writer. The white woman who had taken the book to the bookshop is on the verge of leaving the country after experiencing a traumatic night, during which she was assaulted and raped, some months earlier.

The lecturer retrieves the book from the bin but then puts it back into it: "Ek is ook 'n Kanna, dink sy. Ek kan nie hierdie mense help nie. En ek kan nie klasgee met hierdie woede in my nie, ek sal Duduzile Nkule terstond druip as ek weer iets van haar moet nasien. Laat ek vergeet dat ek ooit hierdie boek gesoek en gekoop het!" (1999: 80). (Me too, I'm a Kanna, she thinks. I can't help these people. I can't teach with this anger inside me, I'll fail Duduzile Nkule immediately if I have to mark anything by her. The best thing is to forget that I ever looked for and bought this book).

The feelings of the two white women, the lecturer and the emigrant, are explicitly clarified. Also the black student's reasons for her behaviour are explained. In a flashback a black class scene is described in which a slow black schoolchild is sent away from school by his teacher for failing to do his homework properly. To add insult to injury the teacher rips the pupil's notebook apart to which he adds: "As iemand gedink het dat hy hierdie boeke kan oorneem, wil ek waarsku: lees die boeke van hierdie stommerik en sy dom siel trek in j'ou in!" (1999: 80) (Anyone who thought that he could take over these books, I want to warn: read the book of this fool and his stupid soul will move into you!). This warning explains the behaviour of the university student but the white lecturer is not aware of it. Between them gapes a chasm of misunderstanding. From the lecturer's perspective the black student acts completely irrationally. Also the black teacher's sending away of a schoolchild is extremely insensitive and even humiliating. Moreover the teacher's tearing apart of a schoolbook and the black student's throwing away of a book she has received as a present are sharply contrasted with the love of books by the white characters: the lecturer, the emigrant and an antiquarian. Besides the black students rather spend the little money they have on buying clothes and jewellery than on books.

Obviously whites and blacks have different attitudes towards learning and supporting others. The end of the short story suggests that the lecturer decides to

forget about the whole episode because otherwise her emotions will cloud her professional evaluation of Duduzile Nkulu. The ending suggests that the white lecturer is able to rise above her emotions in contrast to the blacks who allow their emotions to get the better of them. As mainly the white perspective is foregrounded, it becomes the dominant one. 'Boek' makes it abundantly clear that there is a wide gulf between the attitudes of whites and blacks. The whites have to adapt to the changed political and social circumstances in South Africa. But the changes taking place are definitely not for the better.

Black rule indeed seems to usher in the end of European traditions and values despite the fact that the whites are constantly called upon to provide jobs and financial and material assistance to destitute blacks. The short stories 'Extension lead' by Charles Fryer and 'n Dag in die wingerd' (A day in the vineyard) by Helen de Kock (both in Ferreira 2001) deal with this topic. The short story 'Die aansakkie' (The evening bag) by Elsa Joubert (in Ferreira 2001) suggests the end of a European way of life as even going to the concert has become a risky undertaking. Moreover, the confrontation with the harsh realities of Africa, in the guise of the homeless black streetchildren who rob the concert goers in the foyer of the concert hall during the interval, makes it impossible to contentedly enjoy western classical music. An era has gone for good.

However, much more is at stake than the luxury of enjoying the products of western civilisation, the moral pressure to extend a helping hand or the imposition of new norms. The blacks are accused of using force as a means of gaining the upperhand. The novel *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee caused quite a stir in South Africa for its unflattering portrayal of extreme black ruthlessness. A similar situation is sketched in 'Kompos' (Manure) by Henning Pieterse (in Ferreira 2001). Together with an accomplice the garden boy one night breaks into his employer's home. The latter is battered to death and his wife, Mariana, is raped. Mariana gets pregnant, presumably kills the baby at its birth and buries the corpse in the garden. When the garden boy - still the same one - discovers the tiny body, he digs it deeper into the soil where it will become manure. South Africa has always been and will continue to be a breeding ground of violence and death. It is a cycle, which apparently cannot be broken. The fact that the kind treatment of their black gardener by the white couple is repaid with the cruellest violence obviously reflects very negatively on the former's humanity.

It is no wonder that the whites feel, quite literally, under threat. The endemic violence casts a dark pall over their lives. Houses get burgled, innocents attacked, injured and sometimes killed, women raped, cars hijacked. The fear of an attack is palpable. Moreover, the violence is gratuitous, wanton and vicious. The whites are forced to barricade themselves in their houses and even there they are not safe. No one can be trusted anymore. The danger of something nasty happening is ever-present; it leads to a permanent state of alertness and fear. The short stories 'Vals alarms' (False alarms) by Corlia Fourie and 'Sjuut' (Shush) by Erika Murray-Theron (both in Ferreira 2001) deal with this subject. As a result the divide between the different races has become wider than ever.

In recent texts the current crime wave in South Africa is a recurring theme, for example in Rachelle Greeff's *Merke van die nag* (Marks of the night) (2001), and in a large number of short stories from *Kruis en dwars* (Vertical and horizontal) a recently published collection of short stories about post-apartheid South African society, to which 37 Afrikaans writers made a contribution.

Whereas in the apartheid years the blacks were portrayed as the victims of white racism and institutionalised violence now the tables have been completely turned. The whites are no longer depicted as diehard racists but as well-meaning idealists such as the married couple in 'Rooi kombersie' (Little red blanket) by Rachelle Greeff or as caring people, who are concerned about their black employees. Moreover the victims of black aggression are often innocent children or defenceless women such as the medical doctor in 'Wit' (White) by Amerie van Straaten (in Ferreira 2001) who moreover works in a hospital, which serves the black community.

In their desperation, which is fuelled by the fact that the police are seen to be powerless to reign in the violence, the whites are sometimes driven to take the law into their own hands. They become the incarnations of Frank and Jesse James. In the short story 'Manus was 'n sagte man' (Manus was a kind man) Manus, a farmer, shoots the black murderer of his son. If he had done this in the apartheid days he would have been branded an incorrigible racist. Now Manus's revenge is presented as a just act of retribution for the senseless killing of his son. In 'Nag van twee vroue' (Night of two women) by P.J. Bosman a similar incident is described (both in Ferreira 2001).

The endemic violence forces the whites to re-examine their relationship with their country. Some decide to leave, others re-affirm their unswerving commitment to

South Africa. This is the case in the short stories 'Respyt' (Respite) by M.C. Botha and 'Ek en die nuwe Suid-Afrika' (Me and the new South Africa) by Cecile Cilliers (both in Ferreira 2001) and in the novel *Donkermaan* (The rights of desire) (2000) by André Brink. Through his platonic love for Tessa, his youthful lodger, Ruben, an unworldly librarian, becomes more attuned to the outside world, which is also represented by the ghost, Antje van Bengale, and his black household help, Margrieta. After an attack on Ruben and Tessa while they are out on a walk, the former realizes that he has ignored the cries for help of his fellow citizens for all too long.

*Donkermaan* brings a message of faith and of hope, in sharp contrast to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Thus, paradoxically, the violence acts as a catalyst for change by creating an awareness that only through everyone's positive involvement in society a turn for the better may be realised. The white community cannot escape its duty to the country

By shocking people into action the violence can have a beneficial effect. In addition, the suffering and grief the violence causes, can also bring the different races together. This is for example the case in 'Nag van twee vroue' in which a white and a black woman find consolation by sharing their grief and this despite the fact that the son of the black woman killed the white woman's child and was later killed in the hot pursuit operation. In 'Maar daar is' (But there is) a short story by Riana Scheepers, an elderly white couple are attacked in their home. In shock the woman shuts herself off from the outside world. However, after a visit by her old black charwoman, her depression starts lifting: "Daar is nie troos in hierdie land nie, weet die vrou, maar daar is." (There is no consolation in this country, the woman knows, but there is) (1999: 68). In both short stories the bond of a common humanity transcends the divisions of race.

### **3 Unswerving commitment**

The picture presented of South African society in contemporary Afrikaans prose is not a pretty one. The Afrikaans writer does not put a nice gloss over reality. The problems South Africa is faced with leave little or no room for naïve expressions of optimism. South Africa has not changed overnight into a multiracial and multicultural paradise. On the contrary, the initial waves of enthusiasm have been replaced by a tide of disillusionment. The bright colours of the rainbow nation have lost some of their lustre. Nevertheless a number of Afrikaans literary works keep the hope of a more tranquil and prosperous future alive by stressing that all South Africans are united by

a shared destiny and a common humanity. Afrikaans literature brings an accurate seismographic registration of the shockwaves affecting South African society. The Afrikaans writer's involvement with his country remains as strong as ever. This commitment guarantees, not always perfect, but often gripping and sometimes provocative literary works.

\* All translations are mine.

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