

# Myth and Mythmaking in South African Literature and Life

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## *Myth and Mythmaking in South African Literature and Life*

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I wish to begin by thanking Dr. Claude Feral, GRAS, the University of Reunion and the Regional Administration for organizing and sponsoring this important conference. For much of the twentieth century, but especially since the establishment of a true democracy, South Africa has been engaged in so many dynamic events that the time to reflect on major questions of our development has not been easily available. Hence, the decision by Claude Feral and her colleagues to reflect on a seminal idea in South Africa's history must be applauded. I want to appeal to the organizers of this conference to share the deliberations we will have here with the South African community by making the published text available to South Africa's public archives and learning institutions.

One of the most persistent and dominant myths in South African literature and life has been the belief that the oppression of the settler and Apartheid forces would some day be overthrown in a cataclysmic military battle between the oppressed and the oppressors.

Alex La Guma, in his brilliant novel on resistance *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (London: Heinemann, 1972), dates this belief to the early Dutch settlers at the Cape who met with fierce resistance of the Bushmen even though their weapons of attack and defence were of a simple nature. In this manner La Guma tries to dispel the more commonly held belief that was spread by settlers

and historians who favoured their view that the indigenous people whom they met when they arrived and settled South Africa were pliant, simple and peace loving and who welcomed them to South Africa. Furthermore, the latter view continues that when for reasons entirely concocted by the indigenous people the settlers were stealing their lands and livestock and they resorted to war to seek redress, they were too “primitive” and used weapons that were simple and thus they were easily defeated.

At the beginning of La Guma’s novel of resistance, the novel’s chief protagonist, Beukes, waits for Isaac, one of the resistance workers, to arrive so as to discuss the work they have to do for an upcoming strike. Beukes wanders through the city museum and pays particular attention to the anthropological section. Here Beukes finds the inspiration that he requires to go on in his important resistance work:

There Bushmen had hunted with bows and tiny arrows behind glass; red-yellow dwarfs with peppercorn hair and beady eyes. Beukes had thought sentimentally that they were the first to fight. He had walked silently past the still ochre figures crouched over cooking pots and ostrich shell water-bottles, and there, in a rectangle of dust-speckled yellow light, he had found Isaac (FSE 14).

At the end of their meeting, Beukes watches Isaac go off,

shoes squeaking on the polished floor, his long khaki coat drooping like limp wings behind him, then he had disappeared among the still hunters holding their primitive bows in petrified readiness (FSE 17).

Since the San and Khoi, the first people to inhabit the land, were faced with an invasion of their ancestral lands, their military actions are carried out more in defence. Having lost their lands to the superior weapon power of the invaders and the settlers, the struggle now for the descendants of these indigenous peoples is to win their lands back. Such a battle Beukes perceives to be one where there will be a great conflagration where those who have oppressed the vast majority will go down in defeat.

Hence, *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* ends on a hopeful and triumphant note. Beukes, even though injured in a police raid, succeeds in his mission to arrange for transportation for Peter, Paul

and Michael to leave South Africa to receive military training so as to bring the day of reckoning for the oppressors closer to the end. Beukes is thus reassured and elated that, indeed, victory is near:

Beukes stood by the side of the street in the early morning and thought, they have gone to war in the name of a suffering people. What the enemy himself has created, these will become battle-grounds, and what we see now is only the tip of an iceberg of resentment against an ignoble regime, the tortured victims of hatred and humiliation. And those who persist in hatred and humiliation must prepare. Let them prepare hard and fast—they do not have long to wait (FSE 180-181).

As an active revolutionary who spent a great deal of time in detention and under house arrest, and as a prominent leader of the ANC's revolutionary struggle, La Guma believed firmly that the day would come when the Apartheid regime would be engulfed in flames.

Thus *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* borrows its title from the Guinean poet who predicted that colonialism and oppression "Will be shattered like the spider web,/In the fog of the seasons' end." Furthermore, the novel is dedicated to "Basil February and others killed in action [in] Zambia, 1967." These are the South Africans, like Peter, Paul and Michael at the end of the novel, who had left the country to receive the required military training to come back to lead the oppressed against the oppressors and who had now distinguished and memorialized themselves in revolutionary battle.

Later in the novel, Elias Tekwane, the leader of the revolutionary cell to which Beukes belongs, is caught by the security police and tortured mercilessly. But his belief that this brutality is the last gasp of a discredited regime is very firm. Thus he answers the police Major as follows:

You are going to torture me, maybe kill me. But that is the only way you and your people can rule us. You shoot and kill and torture because you cannot rule in any other way a people who reject you. You are reaching the end of the road and going downhill towards a great darkness, so you must take a lot of people with you, because you are selfish and greedy and afraid of the coming darkness... (FSE 6).

And at the end of Tekwane's torture and with the last gasp of breath he still believes firmly that his and others' suffering and rebellion will bring a famous victory:

There was the darkness of the sack again. Talk, talk, talk. But the ghosts waited for him on some far horizon. No words came, only the screaming of many crows circling the battlefield. Wahlula amakosi! Thou hast conquered the Kings! The far figures moved along the far horizon. He! Uya kuhlasela-pina? Yes, where wilt thou now wage war? Far, far, his ancestors gathered on the misty horizon, their spears sparkling like diamonds in the exploding sun. Somebody came out of the bright haze and touched him with a hand. His mind called out "Mother." From afar came the rushing sound of trampling feet (FSE 174).

Mongane Serote's novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1981), is another impressive example of defiance and uprising of the oppressed against their tormentors and a firm belief that soon oppression of the black majority by the white minority will be defeated in a triumphant battle. Set in Alexandra Township, one of the oldest ghettos in Johannesburg, Serote, even more so than La Guma, depicts the dreariness and hopelessness of the lives of black South Africans who live in the inner cities of South Africa. Faced with the iron fist of Apartheid, the dispirited inhabitants of this overcrowded ghetto try to maintain their dignity and their hope that this season of hopelessness will be transformed into hope.

Like La Guma, who writes about his inner city of Cape Town, District Six, Serote provides, because of his own living experience in Alexandra Township, an intimate portrait of people and lives who sing and dance, love and fight, hope and despair and give birth and die. And the streets are filled both with riotous colour and drab pain, but life, however difficult, proceeds. It is in places such as Alexandra Township and District Six that the black revolutionaries come from.

Just as the Sharpeville Massacre provides La Guma an opportunity to graphically describe the carnage of the event, Serote is inspired by the Soweto Uprising of schoolchildren who dared to defy the brutal power of the Apartheid regime. The school boycott in Soweto and its terrible aftermath has spread to many oppressed

areas of South Africa. A few miles away from Soweto is Alexandra Township with the same conditions existing for a boycott. And Serote records their uprising as follows:

The children at this school told the teacher, who came to teach Maths, that they could not learn if he had his holster on. They told him that they thought he should go to the operational area and teach the people there the Maths of Life. That there were no longer any borders to protect. That if terrorists had crossed the borders, or never actually been outside the borders, then there was no point in guarding them. When he did not listen, they told him they were walking out of Class (EBB 200-1).

When the teacher warned the children against their action and that he would report them to the “government,” he is informed that since it is not the pupils’ government, they intended to walk out of class. The teacher, “out of frustration,” pounces on the boy who had questioned him about the “government,” and this leads to protest throughout the school and the township at large. This walkout is supported by schools in Springs, Benoni, Boksburg, Brakpan, Germiston, Maraisburg, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.

The student walkout is followed by teacher demands throughout the country, thus creating a climate of a revolutionary uprising against Apartheid:

If the government doesn’t listen, we resign. So said the teachers in Cape Town. Johannesburg. Durban. Springs. And now even towns whose names had never been heard of, like Paul Roux (probably a farm school), joined. The streets of South Africa’s cities were again filled with two types of uniforms, both feared: camouflage dress and school uniforms (EBB 201).

The school boycott becomes the catalyst for protest action from “parents, domestic servants, street sweepers, bus drivers, gardeners, everyone—joined.” Then as if the myth of overthrowing the ignoble regime had come, those trained in urban warfare attack a military base (EBB 201). Another attack by the soldiers of the oppressed occurs: “Daring Terror Attack on Durban Oil Plant” (EBB 205).

Finally, the belief that the day of reckoning has come spurs the regime on to attacking neighbouring Mozambique where they know many of the trained revolutionary soldiers were to be found: “The planes arrived in Mozambique. Thunder. Fire. Smoke. Silence” (EBB 205).

Serote, who lived in exile in neighbouring Botswana at this time, gives us an excellent view of the South African myth of overcoming the oppressive regime:

All I know is that besides being a loss of safety, change is also a promise. These planes cannot bomb us forever. Nor are we going to queue for bread for the rest of our lives. I am sure about that. I saw the women and the children come with their bundles. I saw their eyes. I saw their faces. I know that this cannot go on forever. The first leg of the journey is now well and truly in progress. There is no safety anywhere—not for anyone (EBB 205).

At first, the populace is stunned and frightened by the oppressors’ planes and the bombs that they are able to drop on suspected resistance targets. But they begin to lose their fear and their spirit of discontent and resistance begins to infuse them with a defiant courage, certain that soon the oppressor will be defeated:

The pilots who fly the planes—like these mothers and their children and their bundles—stare and stare and stare, in the way that only a human can, in the only way that a human fears. At a certain point, the stares of fear and of hunger look alike. It does not matter whether one flies a plane or stands in a queue. Now and then we look at the mighty planes with their mad speed, hovering and swooping above us. But we also know that, while we fear them, they also are in great fear to fall. We know—as they roar above our heads—that since we are human and they are not, we can wait and they cannot. They cannot fly and wait. In the same way that we cannot wait and starve for a long time. We can fall, and they will fall. We see their huge shining bodies whiz past and roar afterwards, and before we know where they are they come back. But that is because they do not see us, or know us, or want to know us. The strongest will win this game. It is costly. But the strongest will win it (EBB 206).

And just as La Guma is convinced that the strongest will be the oppressed majority and he ends his novel on a positive note with children playing in the morning sun, so, too, does Serote end

his revolutionary book with a birthgiving scene where the woman is encouraged by everyone present to “Push, push, push” (EBB 206) so as to bring into life the hope of a brighter future.

The myth that the oppressor will be overthrown in a bloody battle was shared widely by both black and white South Africans. Alan Paton, in his celebrated novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (London: Penguin, 1944), on several occasions in the novel notes that the racist cruelty of the white population is so overwhelming and so unheeding and the spirit of forgiveness which is so great among the black victims that, indeed, when the time comes where whites will turn away from fear and show their humanity to the blacks, it will be too late to save the beloved country for the blacks will have turned away from loving those who had treated them with contempt:

I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it. [Msimangu] was grave and silent, and then he said sombrely, I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they [whites] are turned to loving, they will find we[blacks] are turned to hating (Cry, 38).

Even Paton, who had a Christian-Liberal view of the race situation in South Africa, realized through the political speeches of John Kumaslo that the standoff between the blacks and whites would eventually lead to a cataclysmic battle between the races.

In Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* (London: Penguin, 1981), Bam and Maureen Smales, an English-descent “liberal” couple and their three children flee from Johannesburg when the black urban and exiled fighters begin to attack and capture government and corporate buildings and destroy as many white lives as they can. But this particular moment of fear is preceded by many before. Bam Smales recalls the “strikes of 1980” which had “dragged” on and had caused a great deal of chaos in the country. He observes that

While the government continued to compose concessions to the black trade unions exquisitely worded to conceal exactly concomitant restrictions, the black workers concerned went hungry, angry, and workless anyway, and the shop-floor was often all that was left of



burned-out factories... Riots, arson, occupation of the headquarters of international corporations, bombs in public buildings—the censorship of newspapers, radio and television left rumour and word-of-mouth as the only sources of information about this chronic state of uprising all over the country (JP 6-7).

On this occasion, notes Gordimer,

The blacks were held back (they were temporarily short of ammunition and they had long since given up the heroism of meeting bullets with sticks and stones) by the citizen force strengthened by white Rhodesian immigrants, some former Selous Scouts, accustomed to this sort of fighting, and the arrival of a plane-load of white mercenaries flown in from Bangui, Zaire, Uganda—wherever it was they had been propping up current Amins, Bokassas and Mobutus (JP 8-9).

Eventually, the revolution occurs, and this is how Bam Smales sees it:

When it all happened, there were the transformations of myth or religious parable. The bank accountant had been the legendary warning hornbill of African folk-tales, its flitting cries ignored at peril. The yellow bakkie that was bought for fun turned out to be their vehicle: that which bore them away from the gunned shopping malls and the blazing, unsold houses of a depressed market, from the burst mains washing round bodies in their Saturday-morning garb of safari suits, and the heat-guided missiles that struck Boeings carrying those trying to take off from Jan Smuts Airport (JP 9).

Living perpetually in fear that they will some day be seen as “white pariah dogs in a black continent” (JP 8), Bam and his family are now faced with the revolution they had both anticipated and expected and which they were unprepared to receive. In their haste to leave the scene of the battle and to save their lives, they opt to seek the protection of their servant July who guides them to his village. But the day of reckoning has come as Bam and Maureen discover in listening to the radio:

There was fierce fighting round Jan Smuts Airport; the city centre, under martial law, had been quiet last night, but mortar fire was heard and confused reports had been received of heavy fighting in the eastern and northern suburbs. The Red Cross appealed for blood. The

gasworks had been attacked and the explosion had started a fire that spread to suburban houses; Bam's eyebrows flew up and exposed his gaze—only across the valley, the freeway, from the house they had chosen to build in a quiet suburb (JP 25).

The myth of an apocalyptic battle that will take place between blacks and whites also rivets the Afrikaner community as Marie van Niekerk writes in her novel *Triomf* (Kaapstad and Pretoria: Queillerie, 1994). In this book, the chief working class Afrikaner characters Pop, Mol, Lambert and Treppie are waiting in fear for the first Democratic Election to take place and they are concerned that if the Nationalist Party were to be defeated by the African National Congress, the whites of South Africa will be driven out of the country by the blacks. In particular, they feel that the blacks will reclaim the homes which had been taken from them forcibly and which had been given to the Afrikaner working class community. One of those black areas was Sophiatown, an inner city suburb that bubbled over with black culture and living. When, as van Niekerk notes, the blacks were removed, the haste and indignity of their departure were graphically recorded:

Die kaffers moes daai slag so vinnig hier padgee lat hulle nie eers tyd gehad het om hulle honde saam te vat nie. Baie van hulle goed het agtergebly. Hele dressers vol breekgoed. Die kon jy hoor stukkend val toe die stootskrapers ingekom het. En beddens en enemmelkomme en sinkbaddens en goed. Alles voor die voet platgestoot. Dit was nogal 'n gesig. Die kaffers het geskrou en rondgehol soos mal goed. Wat hulle kon, het hulle probeer bymekaarkry om op die lorries te laai wat vir hulle kom wegvat het. En die kaffers se honde het getjou-tjou-tjou soos hulle gemaal het om weg te kom onder die goed wat val en breek (T 1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The kaffirs on this occasion had to leave quickly without having time to take their dogs with them. Many of their belongings were left behind. Whole cupboards full of breakable goods. You could hear the broken pieces when the bulldozers arrived. And beds and enamelware and sink tubs and things. Everything was flattened by the bulldozers. It was quite a sight. The kaffirs screamed and ran around like mad people. What they could, they tried to put together to place on the trucks that had come to take them away. And the kaffirs dogs whined piteously as they tried to escape the broken things which were falling on them. "Well, if things don't work out, we have a plan!" says

The new, white inhabitants of Sophiatown change the name of the place to Triomf, to signify the triumph which they think they have achieved. But as van Niekerk points out, the place is inhabited by the working class poor of the Afrikaner community and their mundane lives with their sordid and incestuous sexual liaisons, their squalor, their family fights, their inability to express themselves properly contrast very badly against the sophistication and joy which black South Africans enjoyed in Sophiatown. So what was supposed to be a triumph has in fact become a sad joke. And as a last gasp the Afrikaners of Triomf are awaiting in defeat and resignation the results of the first democratic election which will finally bring this phase of Apartheid to an end.

Fearful that the former inhabitants will return to Sophiatown to reclaim their land, Mol, the Mother figure in the novel, recalls the undignified and hasty removal of the blacks and is convinced that the end of the whites will occur in a similar manner. So preparations are being made by this family to flee to Zimbabwe or Kenya where in their ignorance they are under the impression that segregation of the races was still in force and that they could continue to hold sway over the blacks.

“Well, as dinge nie uitwerk nie, dan het ons mos ‘n plan!” se Lambert. “Jy’t mos gese, dan vat ons vir Molletjie en ons laai die petrol in die neus en op die roof-rack en in die dicky, en dan ry ons reg Noord. Almal van ons, en Gerty en Toby. Zimbabwe toe of Kenia toe. Waar mens weer kan leef soos ‘n wit mens. Met meide en kaffers om rond te order soos jy wil! En hulle is goedkoop daar!” (T 55).

Contrary to the belief of the Afrikaner inhabitants of *Triomf*, the elections are not chaotic and the result of a first majority black government does not lead to catastrophe. The myth, however, of a cataclysmic battle between whites and blacks continues to haunt the Afrikaner psyche. Regardless of the fact that the rich spoils of Apartheid have been kept by the white community, the belief that

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Lambert. "You said, if things don't work out, then we'll take Molletjie and fill her nose with petrol and the roof-rack and in the dicky, and then we will drive to the North. All of us, and Gerty and Toby. To Zimbabwe and Kenya. Where one can once again live like a white person. With maids and kaffirs to order around as you like! And they are cheap there!" (T 55) (our translation).

some day blacks will demand true redress continues to prevail. Hence, white South Africans remain prisoners behind their walls and fences and gates and suburbs and rely very heavily on private security companies to keep them safe.

Although the myth of final battle is now less strident among blacks, the objective socio-economic conditions on the ground encourage many to still believe that only through battle with the whites will true liberation occur. Thus a writer such as James Matthews in *The Party is Over* refuses to bend to the official pronouncement that the end of apartheid has come and that the blacks are now truly in charge of their own destiny. Matthews in a recent book of poetry points to the corruption among black leaders and elites and remarks ruefully on the poverty and violence that continue to plague the disadvantaged. He sees the current change in South Africa as a betrayal of the dream of liberation for which so many blacks fought and died. Hence, he calls upon black South Africans to rise up against the present leadership and to continue the battle against white South Africans.

One can safely predict that the long held myth of a war between the oppressor white South Africans and the oppressed black South Africans will continue to colour the imagination of all South Africans until a day arrives when South Africans of all colours live in socio-economic comfort and in political harmony. When all South Africans can think of themselves not as victims and victimizers, but as inhabitants of a beautiful, rich land, then the myth of the vanquished will die out.

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