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Cecil Abrahams

► **To cite this version:**

Cecil Abrahams. South African Literature in Post-Apartheid Times: the Case of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*. *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2001, Writing in South Africa after the end of Apartheid - G.R.A.S. 4e colloque international Saint-Denis de La Réunion (7-9 décembre 2000), 21, pp.17-24. hal-02344215

HAL Id: hal-02344215

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344215>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

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South African Literature in Post-Apartheid Times: the Case of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*

During the long night of darkness and oppression of the South African apartheid era, many fictional and non-fictional accounts of life in apartheid South Africa were written. Some of these accounts were innovative and gripping and the external world, because much of this writing was banned in South Africa, learned a great deal about the heinous crime against humanity in South Africa from reading these stories. But there was also a large portion of the literature that could hardly qualify for imaginative engagements with the lives of South Africans. Hence, critics like myself often wondered what was wrong about South Africans that they were not able to capture the rich source of materials that were made available to them through the many confrontations that the majority of South Africans had to endure on a daily basis. Thus literature at times seemed to border on reportage and intriguing stories were being reduced to slogans or mere propaganda. In such writings, the purpose was singular, the plot often elementary or a cover for spouting out the writers' favourite protest language, the characters were wooden, the background predictably oppressive and the general story not very engaging.

Many of us, looking at some of the creative production at the time, consoled ourselves with the belief that once we had rid South Africa of apartheid, a renaissance of cultural activity will emerge and South African writing will flourish as never before.

Although much of my life in South Africa has been wrapped up with a very difficult administrative position, thus rendering me

less than competent as a participant both as a critic and writer on the South African literary scene, I am, however, a keen reader of the books that have appeared on the South African scene over the past few years and it is from that viewpoint that I wish to make a few remarks.

Legally, apartheid has been banished in South Africa. Recently, our Minister of Education Professor Kader Asmal announced boldly at a conference of higher education leaders that "the battle of the mountains has been won, but the struggle for victory was now in the battle of the plains." What he meant by this confident announcement was that apartheid had been defeated, but the spoils of that victory had still to be earned. Whereas I agree with our Minister that the spoils of victory have still to be earned, I disagree with him that we have as yet won entirely "the battle of the mountains." Apartheid is dead only in the sense that my rights are now protected under our very modern and progressive constitution and that I enjoy a freedom of movement and free association which I had been denied in our long night of oppression and which drove me into many years of exile.

But wherever we look in our vast and beautiful land we see dreadful, wounding scars of the past and our answer to healing or eradicating those wounding scars has not as yet been bold and responsive enough. Thus on the beautiful peninsula where several of the South African delegates at this conference come from, we are shamefully challenged by the contrast of the worst excesses of luxury-living of the First World and the desperate and debilitating poverty of the Third World. As we have just successfully held another major South African Election at the municipal level, we know that throughout the Election campaign we were graphically bombarded by our apartheid legacy and our failure to date to eradicate much of it. So while "the battle of the mountains" has been won to some extent, the compromises we had to make in the mountains, often known as "reconciliation," have also retarded the true development of our country into the confident nation it ought to be.

I suggest, therefore, that the "renaissance" of writing that many of us predicted has been stymied by the contradictions of our "victory" against apartheid. While writers of note such as

JM Coetzee, Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer and Mongane Serote have continued to produce writings of importance, the dearth of truly creative flourishings has been noticeable. One of the exceptions of this lament of mine is a book by a relatively unknown Afrikaner writer by the name of Marlene van Niekerk.

Born in Caledon in the famous Overberg region of the Cape, Marlene van Niekerk studied at the University of Stellenbosch where she obtained her Master's degree in Philosophy. Later, she obtained the doktorandus degree in Amsterdam and she returned to South Africa to teach Philosophy at the Universities of Stellenbosch, Zululand and UNISA. At present, she lectures Afrikaans and Dutch literature at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Van Niekerk's prize-winning novel *Triomf* was preceded by two collections of poetry, *Sprokkelster* (1977) and *Groenstaar* (1983), and by a collection of short stories, *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992). The novel which I am going to reflect on in the rest of my address, *Triomf*, was recently released in the English language as *Triumph*.

Apart from the fact that my own mother tongue is Afrikaans and that during my long exile I lost touch with both the language and the literature in Afrikaans, thus I have made a conscious attempt to return to the language and the stories my mother first told me in Afrikaans; I was also intrigued by this novel because it brought me back to the places of my childhood and to the motives and struggles of the poor rural Afrikaners who had been attracted to the inner cities of South Africa to provide sustenance to the development of apartheid.

In the 1950's, when the newly installed apartheid regime began in earnest to dismantle the patterns of living of the old colonial South Africa, the successive governments of those days insisted on the separation of the races on every level. In the inner cities of South Africa, and especially in Johannesburg where I was born and grew up, many urban settlements were peopled by all racial groups. In the town where I grew up, Vrededorp (town of peace), best known as "Fietas," a place similar to Cape Town's famous District Six, working classes of all racial communities lived literally cheek by jowl. Hence, I had access to the friendships

and enmities of all racial groups and I grew up in a religious and culturally diverse suburb of Johannesburg. The white community that literally shared our space were Afrikaners from the "platteland" or rural areas and who arrived in the city looking for work because they were either farm labourers or had been owners of failed farming operations. Most of these Afrikaners were economically, educationally and socially inferior to many of the black people who lived in the inner cities. Respect for them was rather low.

With the advent of apartheid, the Afrikaner ruling elite could not tolerate a view that Afrikaners were in any way inferior or equal to the black communities. Hence, the elite embarked on a racially-justified project of removing the Blacks from their places of abode and exiling them to dusty and undeveloped areas on the far outskirts of the city. Indeed, for Johannesburg, this was the beginning of the now famous Soweto.

With the removal of the Blacks from the inner cities, the apartheid government set about building a white nation on whom they could rely. In the case of the novel *Triomf*, the poor white rural community which had settled in Vrededorp were moved to what was once South Africa's best known black township Sophiatown. Like District Six in Cape Town, Sophiatown was a vibrant inner city of working and professional classes of black people that for at least two decades provided South Africa with some of the best cultural activities. All of this imaginative and exciting life were moved out to Soweto so as to make the city and its close surroundings a white homeland. The removal of Blacks was considered by the apartheid government to be a major triumph, hence the title of the novel.

Van Niekerk's first objective seems to be her curiosity to see whether indeed the working class Whites who now frequent the apartheid government's dreamplace had actually triumphed over the black people who had lived there before. When the tale begins, South Africa is in the throes of holding its first democratic elections in 1994.

The main characters in the story, the couple Pop and Mol, their son, Lambert, and Mol's brother, Treppie, are awaiting the two days in April 1994 when the Elections were to occur. The

family also possess two dogs, Gerty and Toby, who receive much attention in the novel.

What makes van Niekerk's novel a *tour de force* is the painstaking, meticulous way in which she can pick up the lives of a working class family and weave ordinariness into a brilliant piece of storytelling. Several members of the family recall their years in Vrededorp and for a reader like me who actually hails from this inner-city suburb it provides insights about white neighbours, who although they shared my living space, lived lives which remained a mystery to me during my years of growth. For this particular family the bulldozing of the homes and literally the lives of the black occupants of Sophiatown remains an irrelevant fact. What they do believe is that they have scored a triumph over them. A rather crude bunch of people, especially Treppie and Lambert, their language, landscape and conception of South Africa remain an apartheid construct. Hence, they refer to black people in derogatory language and their labelling of the lives of the black people is quite harsh.

But, as van Niekerk points out, the journey from Vrededorp to Triomf to settle in a white homeland is ironically not a triumph. Thus the novelist carefully and slowly takes the reader through the sham of the apartheid promise to the working class Afrikaners. Hence, even after such a long period of living in Triomf, this household can show very little material or spiritual gain. An ordinary brick cottage with small rooms, a touch of a garden and a driveway so narrow that every time that their old Volkswagen car reverses out of the yard it knocks out the postbox.

The place is shabby, but it mirrors many of the other houses in the neighbourhood.

Whereas once Sophiatown was a mixed neighbourhood of people sharing the joys and despair of every day life, the Triomf of the novel is a narcissistic place where the few who have been raised slightly above the others are described by Treppie as people who think much of themselves. In a graphic scene where Lambert sits on his low-ceilinged roof and peers over the prefabricated wall of his neighbours, he witnesses seemingly happy couples "braaing" meat and drinking beer. Since in his own home, because of their poorer circumstances and a mother who has lost any interest in

cooking, his regular and main diet is "wit brood met polonie sandwiches." On one occasion, Pop wins seventy-four rand through a scratch card game and thus takes the entire family out to a fast food place to celebrate. This for the family is a step upward and more in line with the triumph they were supposed to have enjoyed in moving away from Vrededorp.

But these are rare occasions. The family is trapped in their own boredom and their fear of what is to happen to them and to white South Africa should the Blacks win the Election.

The household is also one where incest takes place with impunity. Mol's husband Pop is reaching eighty years of age. He is a gentle person who prefers quietness about the house and he constantly tries to bring peace among the warring members of his family. He and his wife produced Lambert who is mentally unstable and who is an epileptic. From time to time the epilepsy becomes uncontrollable. Eventually Mol realises that if she were to masturbate her son by massaging his genitals he would become peaceful. However, after many such massages she is forced to have sex with him before he would become tranquil.

Mol also has a sexual relationship with her brother Treppie. Thus between Lambert and Treppie she is kept sexually busy on a constant basis. Neither sexual partner has any respect for her and she often has to endure serious insults. Her sexual noises during the sex acts are described in terms of the pigs. Mol tries desperately to escape the advances of these family members, but she is often unable to escape. Slowly she becomes more and more removed from her family mentally and she begins to neglect household chores. Too poor to afford help from maids, she simply allows the house to slide further into neglect and untidiness.

What van Niekerk shows in the character of Mol is the lot of many an Afrikaner woman. Her open discussion of incest indicates a phenomenon that was not spoken of and one that would have undermined the view of the superior Afrikaner tribe. Once again, in a community that was very rigid and "God-fearing" and one that supposedly abhorred all forms of evil as well as being supportive of the moral family unit, the behaviour of the family in Triomf is decidedly not a triumph.

Van Niekerk deals at length with the working class and, perhaps, the entire Afrikaner tribe's fear of the "swart gevaar" (black danger), the chief reason why apartheid was instituted in the first place. Using the crude and hateful language of racism, the major characters in the book display utter contempt towards African people. The fear of the black person's ability to succeed in all aspects of life and thus to threaten the existence of Whites such as Treppie who had been brought up believing fully in the incapacity of black people, permeates a great deal of the novel. Having been taught and acculturated to the false belief that Whites were superior to the Blacks from their cradle to the grave, the family in the novel take for granted all the stereotypes which were prevalent in apartheid South Africa. To indoctrinate people to such an extent is a triumph. Thus literally stealing someone's land as happened to the black in Sophiatown is regarded as a triumph of the enlightened and the capable. However, now as South Africa embarks on a democracy and the stolen land becomes a bone of contention, the whites in *Triomf* begin to feel vulnerable and their triumph is slowly becoming a mental and then a physical nightmare.

Treppie and Lambert, therefore, feeling less and less certain that the political elite of the apartheid regime can protect them, begin to concoct unrealistic plans of how they are going to rescue their earthly goods, pack them in their old car and drive away to Kenya to where, as they believe, "a wit man can weer 'n wit man wees" [a white man can once again be a white man] and where Blacks know their inferior place. Of course, being totally out of touch with the outside world, indeed, even out of touch with their *triomf* world, they are unaware that countries such as Kenya had long taken on black majority governments. Here again, then, "triomf" (triumph) turns into an ironical and sick joke.

When van Niekerk's book first came out, she was criticised harshly by the Afrikaans media. The writer had dared open up several cans of worms which Afrikanerdom had managed to hide successfully throughout the apartheid years. Like many of Breyten Breytenbach's pieces, van Niekerk had scratched in places which were sacred to the Afrikaners. That the working and rural Afrikaner classes were duped into accepting white superiority for the sake of having comfortable lifestyles paid for the sweat of the

majority black population, and then to discover as true democracy beckons that these tokens of comfort were not worth very much, were always going to be a shocked revelation to the "volk" (tribe). But van Niekerk was only the beginning of several more exposes which have demonstrated clearly that apartheid itself and Triomf in particular were and are not triumphs over the human spirit of the vast majority of South Africans.

Van Niekerk's novel is the real triumph. Here in the language of the working class, dealing with the mundane existences of the weakest and most prejudiced members of the Afrikaner tribe, the novelist exposes the sham of apartheid not in slogans, labels or blatant propaganda, but, rather, in a confident and triumphant manner of weaving a magical plot out of boring, mundane material and in a subtle way she puts together a story which exposes one of the major planks of the foundation of apartheid. Without having to wave the "rainbow flag" as we South Africans have become so used to doing, she slowly unfurls the flag of our past and shows it up for its failure. The momentous Election of 1994 did not drive Afrikaners away from South Africa. For many they are now better situated to make a triumphant entry into the new South Africa. It is writers of the van Niekerk kind that South Africa needs more to ensure that the vibrant and ever-changing lives which South Africans enjoy are celebrated in triumph.

*Cecil ABRAHAMS*¹



¹ Rector and Vice-Chancellor, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa.