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Writing in South Africa after the End of Apartheid. Literary Discourse and Transition: Farida Karodia's *Other Secrets*

Does the end of a regime, that of apartheid mean the death of a literature (that of South Africa), strongly related to its history or does it indicate new literary trends and a change in mentalities. Are new literatures in South Africa in transition as depicted by Albie Sachs's book entitled: *Exchanges, South African Writing in Transition* (1991), or that of André Brink's *Reinventing a continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa* (Cambridge 1998). Better still, does this new literature emphasize on the advent of "a third culture" (Nadine Gordimer), on "the process of cultural hybridity" (Breytenbach), on "a new rising sun" (Ahmadou Kourouma), or on "turbulent skies"? (Baudelaire). Do linguistic practices and cultural interferences as well as new literary structures at the heart of these novels refer to a new world order characterised by harmony or chaos? Or is there nothing new under the South African sky? This is what this paper will try to discuss while focusing on Farida Karodia's novel entitled: *Other Secrets*.

Farida Karodia's first novel, *Daughters of Twilight* 1986, runner up in the Fawcett prize, relates the story of two sisters, who live as she did in the family store. The mother and grandmother portrayed resemble her own in their strength and positive influence in a survival struggle. Her second novel entitled *A Shattering of Silence* (Heinemann 1993) is set in Mozambique during the Portuguese colonisation. (*African Women's Writings* – Heinemann 1993). *Other Secrets* (Penguin 2000) Karodia's third and most

recent novel, is set in the harsh background of the apartheid era. Though apartheid is not referred to, in its crudest form, it pervades the novel insidiously rather than allusively. Farida Karodia has also exerted her writing skills in short stories. Among the best known, are *Coming Home* 1988 and *Against an African Sky* 1995, reedited in Canada 1997 where she lived in exile for almost twenty-six (26) years.

Other Secrets relates the saga of an Asian (or rather mixed-blood family) in South Africa under the apartheid regime but constant references are made to the forthcoming elections with its hope and despair tonality, to prominent political figures, like Biko, Mandela, Sisulu in their respective struggle against the regime. The main characters in this novel are the members of this nuclear family, namely the parents, Abdul and his wife Delia, referred to as Pa and Ma, the two daughters Yasmin and Meena, the narrator and the maternal grandmother Nana. The female characters, tough, determined and defiant in their actions, with the exception of the narrator, have the leading rôle and contrast with the "peripheral role of a principled hard-working father whose only fault is his futile optimism," (postscript), a low profile Leibnizian character.

The novel relates the struggle for survival of the members of their family trapped in the web of apartheid, their hopes and despair, their legitimate desires, be they material, sexual or spiritual, their expectations and frustrations, their intimate or antagonistic relations as members of a family on the verge of crumbling into pieces despite their willingness for solidarity, and also their relationship to others: the white communities, the Afrikaners and the Blacks. For ethnicity and "otherness" are also at the heart of this novel built on a contrast: on fantasy and grim reality, on hopes and frustrations, on pragmatism and ideals, on the search for happiness and simple joys and the sense of a merciless destiny. This book as the narrator puts it deals also with "muslim/christian dichotomy," with mixed parentage, hybridity and ethnic purity issues, for the problematics of identity are not less present, placing the protagonists often in conflictual situations, in a dilemma, and forcing them to conceal but for how long their secrets, or "other secrets" as conveyed by the title. This is mainly what this fifty-nine (59) chapter book is about. It is written in the

form of a “novella” each chapter barely exceeding ten (10) pages or even in the form of a three-act play each act entitled respectively: Daughters, Mothers and Other Secrets. The Chapters constitute the scenes, so to speak, with numerous changes in the setting or “décor” and with the introduction of new characters and the departure or elimination of former ones. This is to say that drama or better still tragedy pervades the whole novel, the narrative prevailing over the descriptive—more symbolical and metaphorical than ornamental and mimesis (discourse, confrontation and row, dialogue, brief soliloquies and aphorism) prevailing over diegésis (narration). Hence the characters are seized mostly through what they say, think or do, or through what others say or think they are.

Much of the efforts of the protagonists, are bent on finding or even catching a glimpse of the other’s secrets. It won’t be farfetched to say that the protagonists play at cats and mice, or even at hide and seek. This narrative technique, quite original in itself constitutes one of the major aspects of the plot narration. Farida Karodia skillfully and majestically handles and exploits narrative voices here and the various registers of what the French theorician, Gerard Genette, terms “focalisation” and which deserves a more indepth analysis in a future paper. Another memorable feature of this novel, but not the least, is the frequent use of what is today termed “intertextuality” *i.e.*, the presence of another or other texts in the novel itself, which enhances both plot narration and aesthetic effects and which is worth considering together with other narrative techniques such as imagery, metaphor, and symbolism.

Setting and Characters

As already mentioned this novel which takes the form of a romance autobiography is set in the harsh days of apartheid and racial segregation. Petty apartheid manifests itself in the different spheres of life, at school, in church, at the railway station, to mention but a few examples. At Soetstroom Apostolic Primary School for Coloureds—SAPS—the young Meena and her elder sister Yasmin are victims of a racist school mistress, named Miss

Durant. Yasmin defiantly accepts to be caned in the place of her little sister who on her very first day at school has dared to tear off under the eyes of her mistress the flyleaf of a library book on which were written the insulting words of a jingle "Coolie, Coolie ring the bell; Coolie, Coolie go to hell." Children are the ones to suffer the stings of racism and it is therefore not surprising that Farida Karodia who must have gone through these traumatic experiences recalls them so vividly even though she is writing after apartheid. Ready to forgive she is not that willing to forget. Examples of racist behaviour are manifold in the novel. Meena's family has to endure the stoning of their shop by the young Afrikaner villain named Cobus Steyn, while her father has to suffer the humiliating words of Cobus's father, Hermanus when he begs for reparation. Apartheid is highlighted in the family eviction from Soetstroom where it had a small trading business, as a result of the Group Areas Act which "laid down in precise terms those places where Europeans could live and those which were set aside for African or other racial groups." (*Writing from South Africa* – Cambridge 1995). The family's eviction is evoked in tragic and poignant terms in Chapter 11 by the narrator sensitive to her parents' distress:

Our eviction was like a bullet in the head. We were leaving behind not only our home but also a big chunk of our lives. (p. 95)

Emphasis is laid on the father's disarray: "Bewildered like a man whose whole world had collapsed my father stood in the veld taking in the desolation at McBain." (p. 96)

Racism culminates in the rape of Yasmin by the same Cobus Steyn who is left unpunished because of the family's lack of faith in law and order, their resignation and their "fear of a system of justice which punished the victim and rewarded the offender." (p. 39). The arrest of the family's factotum Daniel, a black simple-minded Rhodesian refugee simply because he had no papers, his imprisonment, his harsh treatment and his killing are all tragic examples of the merciless regime. During a visit to Daniel in prison, Meena and her mother Delia are appalled as they stare at him

Daniel was ushered in. He approached slowly, dragging the shackles which bound his ankles. The left side of his face was swollen; his left eye shut. His lips looked like sausages, the upper one split down the middle. He was barely recognisable. (p. 245)

Description of the setting also aims at enhancing the tension and depression that prevail. The family's initial dwelling place is Soetstroom in Eastern Cape depicted disparagingly by Yasmin as a "dull boring pimple on the face of the earth." (p. 33)

Yasmin feels trapped in Soetstroom as does Daniel who "as an alien without papers was not permitted to live in the location" and had to assume "a crab-like existence." (p. 21). After years of struggle to make life worth living in Soetstroom, the family is arbitrarily forced to move to McBain. This eviction constitutes a severe blow to their already precarious existence and the reference to the myth of Sisyphus (revisited) by the grandmother is not without significance. Loneliness, boredom and dejection henceforth become the daughters' common plight. "McBain was an area so remote and so desolate that it was like being catapulted into another world." (p. 98)

In this new wasteland deprived of basic amenities, household chores are likely to increase, such as the daily drawing of water supply, cooking on primus stove and keeping stray animals away. Conjugated to the hostility and loneliness of the place are the drastic climatic conditions which bring about their lot of stress, depression and uneasiness and Soetstroom is no exception to this.

Winters were cold in Soetstroom. . . the high altitude somehow made the summers bearable, except when the Berg Wind, a hot, suffocating current of air, gusted across the mountains on its way to the ocean. It sapped us. Stole our breath and whipped up the guilty dust, blasting the back of our legs until they felt as rough as the moulted skin of a snake. (p. 7)

Such a depressing atmosphere is conducive to different reactions on the part of the protagonists. While the female adults struggle for survival and strive to give a meaning to their life, in the younger generation stems a desire to break free. We have said earlier that women have the eminent role in this novel and this is

greatly due to forceful and combative figures like Nana and Delia. The latter's toughness and resourcefulness disarm each and everybody. She is the one to invest her time, money and energy to have "the house in Soetstroom renovated, the outside painted and the damn backyard cleared." (p. 54)

Her attitude toward adversity during eviction is beyond admiration: "Ma didn't waste much time on self-pity" (p. 97). During these crucial times in the wasteland she clearly demonstrates her fighting spirits and strong convictions. What a contrast to the passivity and immobilism of the father: "While Ma and Nana worked with a desperation born of uncertainty and fear to put a roof over our heads, Papa sat outside despondently contemplating our inhospitable environment." (p. 98)

The education and emancipation of her two daughters are also of utmost concern to her, despite bitter arguments with her husband about the subject matter: "My daughters are not going to end up as slaves in some man's kitchen" is one of her favourite retort to her husband. Despite Abdul's frailty and weaknesses, he is still beloved by his wife who has at heart the family's happiness and solidarity. "My mother insisted that he had nothing to blame himself for. He had tried to protect his family; that he had failed was not because he was weak as a man or as a father, but because he had tried to seek justice in a country where justice did not exist for non-whites." (p. 177)

The daughters on the other hand react differently and openly to this austere and claustrophobic environment. Yasmin is the first to break free despite her father's devoted care and over-protectiveness. Fed up with what she calls the "stupid School" or "this God-forsaken whole" of Soetstroom (p. 52), she succeeds thanks to her vivacity and determination in getting admission to a boarding school (The Elizabeth Grey School for Girls), where she shows her predilection not for academic subjects but for horse riding ("Equestrienne") and later for fashion modelling. The way she discards the headmistress' proposal for a nursing or teaching career, the summum for non-white girl students, is significant of her over ambitious character and the high goals she has set herself. The Boarding School is also synonymous to freedom, for it gives her the opportunity to have lessons in love which she refers to as

“French Kisses,” with her horse-riding instructor Andrew Jordaan, and to have also her “coming-out ball” of which a sharp account is given in Chapter Fourteen (14).

Attending boarding school transforms Yasmin from head to toe. Alienated from Muslim traditions and more westernized and assimilated, she strongly objects to her father’s bent on marrying her to someone by the name of Farouk, which leads to an inevitable row.

Meena on the other hand is less extrovert, less impetuous than her elder sister but this doesn’t refrain her from rebelling. She too wants to break free from the suffocating atmosphere of McBain and from the heavy covering of family constraints and traditions. She has her first and most bitter row with her father over match making and in turn boldly resists her father’s attempt to marry her to Hamid Khan, humourously referred to as “frog-face.” But on the whole, her desires as a youth remain stifled. Unlike her sister she lacks pragmatism and quick decision, contenting herself in living in a world of fantasies, seeking refuge in romance novels or “walking along the railway tracks” to escape tension. After Yasmin’s departure she feels restless, lonely and miserable.

However she has her first love experience during the visit of Jonathan, a second cousin, at McBain. “The days I spent with Jonathan were unlike anything I had read about in romance novels. None of the books did justice to those moments of bliss. I wished it was possible to freeze them. The tenderness, the passion, the desire. . . .” (p. 232)

Love has enabled Meena to come out of her “chrysalis” and overcome her inhibitions but Yasmin too has contributed to her transformation. Was she not the one who often teased her about her virginity, and made her get rid of her prejudice and self-consciousness about her body? (e.g. the dancing in the rain episode Chapter 13). After Jonathan’s departure Meena still recalls how she “had given (herself) in the veld. Raw and uncluttered amidst the lizards, ants, the sand and the prickly karoo bush.” (p. 234)

It’s also love experience that draws her back from fantasy to grim reality. Jonathan’s departure has caused havoc in her life: “I moped around the house, missing Jonathan. . . . I was getting bored with romances. They had become predictable. I knew now that

there was no such thing as a happy ending. Reality was vastly different from the diet of fiction I had been feeding on.” (p. 235)

But ethnicity and identity issues often constitute a barrier to self-realisation or an impediment in the quest of happiness. Ethnicity and the problematics of identity are illustrated in the relationships the characters bear with others or among themselves as members of a family. Farida Karodia emphasises mainly the relationships of this hybrid family to the white communities the Afrikaners and the black South Africans. As one could expect ethnic encounters in this apartheid regime can only be tense, superficial not to say hypocritical. But this vision may be partly true and it is one of the merits of the novelist to shed new lights on the ethnic relations, as far as she could have witnessed or recalled. At the very onset of the novel we come across these lines:

“Somehow in this small town, we were insulated against the wider implications of apartheid. We survived the effects of racist laws by being unobtrusive, almost invisible” (p. 3). Discrimination between the Whites and the asian traders occurs not on epidermic grounds but rather economic ones: “Our presence in town was grudgingly accepted. While there was enough business to go around, we were tolerated, but at the first sign of a weakening in the local economy the whites banded together.” (p. 4). Relationships with the neighbouring Afrikaners are quite strange, based at times on duplicity or dissimulation. Hence Meena’s family has recourse to different subterfuges in order not to fuss either the Whites or the black customers.

“The store was closed on Sundays because trading on that day was prohibited by the Lord’s Day We occasionally circumvented the law and did a back-door trade with our African customers, trusting them to conceal their purchases.” (p. 11). Dealing with debt-owing customers was not an easy task either and it was left to the wife who was “tougher” than her husband when confronting them. On the whole relationships with the Afrikaners are rather ambiguous: tense as in the case with the Steyn’s family, though the father tries to make amends for their despicable conduct; pathetic, as with the Botha’s family, representative of the poor-white Afrikaners. Mrs Botha is depicted as a mysterious, alcohol addicted woman, the Father as incestuous, both figures

symbolizing a world of depravation and degradation. It's Meena's mother and Grand-Ma who come to their daughter Elsa's rescue during her agonising delivery despite her ungratefulness and whimsical behaviour. Mrs du Plessis represents the bad and ungrateful customers and as Nana crossly remarks, once "their circumstances improved, people like Mr. du Plessis and the rest of the poor white community all trooped back to support their own kind." (p. 26)

Relations with the Blacks are more genuine despite paternalistic undertones. Gladys the maid and Daniel the handyman are considered as members of the family for long service rendered. It's to their own risk and peril however that the family shelters Daniel despite his being an alien without papers. Daniel displays great cunningness and ability hiding himself from the police till his final arrest: "He had been with the family for ages. Despite all the changes and the clamp-downs on African influx control, he was remarkably invisible" (p. 20). After his escape from prison, he begs the family for protection and shelter: "This is my home, Madam. My home is with you." (p. 246)

After his tragic death, "Ma arranged for his remains to be buried in the small cemetery near the village." (p. 251)

Family Relations

Family relations in this novel as in life too, are not too smooth, occasionally spoilt by intempestuous confrontations or shaded by long-concealed secrets left unsolved. At the heart of the daughters' dilemma lies the marriage between Abdul an Indo-Muslim to Delia a coloured. "Ma and Nana belonged to that nebulous group generally referred to as "Coloured." (p. 24)

The father strongly attached to his asian roots and muslim faith makes sure he inculcates the strong principles of Islam to his daughters, teaching them the Koran in Arabic while they are still young. His visits to Cassimhai and Aishaben, his closest relatives in the city are meant to consolidate strong ethnic and linguistic links through the use of Gujarati as the language of communication. Fasting during the Ramadan is strictly observed by father and daughters: "In summer fasting was exhausting. I was

constantly dehydrated and counted the days to the end of this gruelling period of deprivation.” (p. 64)

Eid brings the long waited rejoicings as the daughters seem more concerned about the pagan rather than the spiritual aspects of the event, when the mother confectionates taffeta skirts and crinolines to the great delight of Meena but under the grudging comments of Yasmin who “hated home-made garments.”

And finally it’s the Islamic Society which takes care of the father’s funeral and ritual ablutions: “The men from the Islamic Society prepared Papa’s body at the hospital, praying as they performed Ghusl - the cleansing.” (p. 218)

Likewise Christmas is an occasion for celebrations, bringing more cohesion and solidarity within the family, especially after the father’s death. But here again emphasis is laid on the pagan aspect. In Soetstroom primary school, Yasmin and Meena used “to sneak off to participate in Christmas concerts” where they were given to Yasmin’s dissatisfaction “minor roles in the pageants.” (p. 202)

Religious conflicts are not absent though and the narrator herself sometimes feels torn apart in her religious belief, but not so far as to turn it into tragedy: “when I was younger... I resorted to prayer, praying first to Allah and then to the Christian God, hoping that one of them would heed my prayers.” (p. 201)

On the whole the novel highly exemplifies the virtues of tolerance and acceptance of “otherness,” at least within the family microcosm.

Closely linked to religious dichotomy is the theme of hybridity which constitutes a critical issue in the novel. Meena’s dilemma is partly due to her birth and physical profile. The question of her reclassification as coloured occurs on two occasions, first to gain her admittance to school and second to secure a teaching post, but all this is done without her father knowing it. The problematics of mixed parentage also crops up when it comes to the crucial question of marriage. Meena is both conscious of and concerned by the ethnic purity issue: “Yasmin and I were not pure Indian. We were half-breeds. We had a coloured mother, which in the eyes of the Indian community was a defect. We were spoilt goods and thus of less value.” (p. 178)

Is it for this reason that Yasmin rejects her own baby later named Soraya, born out of her rape by Cobus Steyn, or as she later misleadingly suggests, from her relationship with Andrew Jordaan? This dichotomy not only in religious convictions—muslim/christian—but also between tradition and modernity, personal desires and social constraints and taboos, is often enhanced by frequent recourse to what I previously termed intertextuality. Meena's youth, we remember, has been nurtured by fantasies and romance novels and she herself ends up her career as a novelist (being the author of two fictions: *Safron Sunset* and *Sometime this summer*) like Farida Karodia, the true novelist. Intertextuality *i.e.*, reference to other texts, weaves in fact the novel and aesthetically enhances its texture. The reasons for its use (or abuse) are manifold. Suffice it to mention one or two examples. Intertextuality reflects the intimate desires, the ambitions and also the frustrations of the narrator. The end of Chapter 22, constitutes a summary of her life, of her success and failure:

I had read hundreds of romance novels, burying myself in the escape they offered me. And it passed the time. I was probably becoming a composite of all those hundreds of female characters who loved, lost, and in the end triumphed. But my life would probably not be triumphant. It was more likely to be doomed just like Michelle's in *Lost Paradise*. She had loved and lost. (p. 189)

Intertextuality is also a constant source of dramatic irony as can be seen through this passage, or the one about Jonathan's departure already quoted here.

Intertextuality is also closely linked to imagery, another asset of the novel, most of which is drawn from nature. Landscape narrative is far from being exotic but is invested with symbolic significance. The struggle for survival, a leitmotiv here, is often depicted with reference to nature and climatic conditions. Chapter Seventeen (17) contains a vivid description of this survival instinct both in human and animal species:

After the rain the veld was a festival of insect industry, life having returned to the slaked earth: butterflies, ants, termites, centipedes and slugs all scrambled for food. (p. 144)

Briefly speaking this description reminds us, among others, of the family's reactions to eviction and their struggle for survival. It reminds us also of Yasmin's recovery after having given birth to Soraya in the most appalling conditions. Nature, be it a dry harsh season, or torrential downpour as described in Chapter Thirty (30) is a constant reminiscence of the nightmarish apartheid days "For three days the merciless berg winds continued to sweep across a veld already scorched by two years of drought... On the third day we watched with mounting anxiety as the sky turned into a churning leaden cauldron rent by slashes of lightning. The first huge drops of rain pelted down, pocking the dry earth with craters." (p. 252; 254)

Nature serves as a metaphor of oppression and inhumanity. After the episode of the deluge, one comes across apocalyptic descriptions such as this: "Two thorn trees, plucked up by the storm were lying up-ended on the far bank, their roots grinning at the sky. A bloated goat carcass was wedged between the pylons of the small bridge where blue bottles had converged to feast on the carrion." (p. 255)

Gérard FANCHIN¹



APPENDIX

Farida Karodia

I was born in South Africa and left here in the mid-sixties to teach in Zambia. While there, my passport was revoked and I went into exile in Canada. I have spent the good part of twenty-six years living there. I returned to South Africa in 1994 to vote in our first democratic elections.

¹ University of Mauritius, Réduit, Ile Maurice.

PUBLISHING HISTORY

- 1976-1983: Wrote two one-hour and several half-hour radio dramas for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. produced by Fred Diehl in Calgary.
- 1986: Publication of first novel *Daughters of the Twilight*, Women's Press (London, U. K.).
- 1989: Publication of collection of short stories, *Coming Home and other stories*. Heinemann International (London, U. K.). Participated in the Writer's Festival at Harbour Front in Toronto, Canada.
- 1990-1991: Travelled extensively. Spent six months researching a project in India.
- 1991: Returned to India to write and produce a half-hour drama for TV entitled *Midnight Embers* which subsequently won awards in the category, "Best Drama For Television" in Frankfurt and in New Jersey and also received special mention at the Bauff Film Festival.
- 1992: Publication of a novel, *A Shattering of Silence*, Heinemann International (London, U. K.).
- 1993: Participated in the International Writer's Festival at Harbour Front in Toronto, Canada.
- 1994: Returned to South Africa to vote in the April elections and to research a collection of short stories.
- 1995: Publication of a collection of short stories, *Against an African Sky*, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town.
- 1997: *Against an African Sky*, Canadian edition, published by Tsar Publishing, Toronto.
- 1998: *Friends*, a new short story, appeared in an anthology, *Her Mother's Ashes 2*, published by Tsar Publishing, Toronto, Canada.
- 1999: *Seeds of Discontent*, included in an anthology *The torn Veil*, published by Queillerie, Cape Town.
The Red Velvet Dress, a new short story was included in an anthology, *Opening Spaces*, edited by Yvonne Vera and published by Heinemann U. K.
 Completed the new short story *Chance Encounters*, a new short story soon to be published in a new anthology.
- 2000: *Other Secrets*, a new novel published by Penguin Books (S. A.).
 An early draft of a new novel, working title, *A Long Journey Home*, a story set in Canada. I am also working on a novella and putting together a collection of short stories.