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Romanticization of Apartheid: the Novels of Pamela Jooste

Pamela Jooste has published three novels over the past three years, all set in the apartheid era, all denouncing the evils of the system, all expressing sympathy with its victims and admiration for its opponents. Her first, *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter*, which won three prizes on its appearance in 1998,¹ deals with the impact of the Group Areas Act on a coloured family living in District Six. The second, *Frieda and Min*, published in 1999, traces the career of a white dissident from 1964 to 1987. The latest, *Like Water in Wild Places* (2000), is set in the final years of the struggle, ending at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. All three, in their character as popular novels by a white South African novelist, are notable for what can only be termed their comfortable presentation of apartheid, a presentation which contrives to admit brutal realities yet at the same time put such a gloss on them as to provide a positive feel-good factor for their white liberal audience.

In the postcolonial perspective the ambivalent status of “settler” literature, however committed to political resistance, has long been recognized. White South African authors under apartheid wrote, by definition, from a position of complicity as members of a privileged minority. Literary opposition to apartheid is no guarantee of acceptability as an “African” author. As Timothy Brennan argues:

¹ Commonwealth Best First Book Award for the African Region. Sanlam Literary Award Book Data. South African Booksellers Choice Award.

Nadine Gordimer or John Coetzee of South Africa ... are probably better placed in some category of the European novel of Empire because of their compromised positions of segregated privilege within colonial settler states. They are too much like the fictional "us" of the so-called mainstream, on the inside looking out.²

The writers themselves are well aware of their problematic positionality; Coetzee, commenting on Brink's notion of the "resistance writer" as an agent of opposition to censorship, queries Brink's metaphor of health and disease:

Is diagnosis carried out from inside or outside the body? ... If from inside, how does he escape contagion by the censor's paranoia (how does the diagnostic organ escape corruption by the sick body?). If from outside, how did the organ find its way outside the body?³

In this context the tone and atmosphere of white South African fiction have typically been uneasy, embodying the sense of ambivalence and complicity which Homi Bhabha has identified as typical of the postcolonial narrative situation. The ending of apartheid itself has not ended the discomfort of white writers, as the mood of J.M. Coetzee's recent novel *Disgrace* bears witness.

Jooste apparently feels no postcolonial unease. She is confident enough to write about apartheid without betraying any sense of guilt or consciousness of complicity. Her essential strategy is one of evasion: a choice of narrative perspectives which function as a means to distance, objectify and marginalize her own white community, while avoiding all engagement with the communities of the African majority. She writes about apartheid without allowing either contesting party, black or white, to assume the foreground. Typically she privileges the viewpoint of individuals and groups who can be seen as peripheral and, to a greater or lesser extent, disengaged. By this means she contrives simultaneously to admit the ugly facts of apartheid and to soften their impact in the fictional

² Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1989, 35-36.

³ J.M. Coetzee, "André Brink and the Censor," *Research in African Literatures*, 21, 3 (Fall, 1990), 72.

context. Her technique varies from book to book, but always evolves in the same direction, away from engagement.

In *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter*, Jooste appropriates the voice of the colonized subject, assuming the persona of an eleven year-old coloured girl, Lily Daniels. In telling Lily's story and in mimicking Lily's voice Jooste claims to be expressing her "tenderness and respect for those people who endured such great suffering."⁴ The tenderness is certainly there. Reviewers unanimously characterized the novel as "moving," "immensely moving" and "intensely moving" in its evocation of the life of District Six. But the tenderness—appropriately enough since the narrative voice is that of a child—is inspired by a sense of the charm and vulnerability of the subject, and the whole community comes to seem charming and vulnerable. A simple example will illustrate this diminishing tendency. Lily calls her uncle Gus-Seep, but learns late in the novel, when identity cards become obligatory, that his real name is Giuseppe.⁵ But this mistake is not just Lily's childish misapprehension; the whole community calls him Gus-Seep, and the whole community therefore appears childish. The childishness is presented as charming, and no doubt Jooste means well. She does not consciously set out to objectify or diminish her subject. Rather, the process at work is analogous to what David Spurr detects in his analysis of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Rousseau sets out to demonstrate the "life and warmth" of Oriental languages, but succeeds only in patronizing them in relation to the Eurocentric model.⁵ In the same way Lily's narrative voice, full of lively idioms (jealousy is "green eye"; storms mean God "has his fighting boots on") makes her community seem warm, vital and ultimately inferior in relation to the unspoken adult white norm. Jooste has, in Edward Said's terminology, "represented" the "other" by speaking on Lily's behalf, but her "representation"

⁴ Pamela Jooste, *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter*, Black Swan, London, 1999, 13.

⁵ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993, 103.

amounts in the end to a “deformation” of the dignity of her subject.⁶ There is tenderness here, but little respect.

In her Author’s Note to *Dance with a Poor Man’s Daughter* Jooste explains that the novel is inspired by memories of her own childhood, when she was allowed to visit the home of her coloured nanny and share in the warmth of an alternative culture and family life. She admits that “there may be some people who feel it is the height of impertinence for a white South African to write about the suffering of so-called ‘coloured’ people” (11) but offers no explanation as to why she chooses to usurp the point of view of the “other” rather than to present the material from her own perspective as a visiting white. It appears, however, that the white perspective is to be supplied by an epistolary structure offering a comparison and contrast of the two communities, white and coloured. Lily is involved in a pen-friend scheme organized by the headmaster of her primary school in a bid to promote inter-communal understanding. Lily has chosen a white girl called Carole-Amelia as her pen-friend and the first chapter, entitled “Dear Carole-Amelia,” summarizes the first stages of the two-way correspondence. At this point it appears that Jooste intends to use the two girls’ letters to demonstrate the inferiority of white social and cultural values. Lily, though poor and coloured, is presented as more fortunate than the rich white Carole-Amelia, daughter of an alcoholic mother and miserable father. Lily, in contrast, enjoys the advantage of a warm, nurturing matriarchal home. But very quickly Carole-Amelia fades from the picture; her drunken mother puts an end to the correspondence and Lily’s narrative continues without the epistolary rationale and without the parallel insight into white life-styles. Thereafter white characters make only very fleeting appearances in the text, and the individuals who do appear are speedily exonerated from any complicity in the apartheid system. Mr Asher, a retired baker who befriends Lily and invites her to listen to his opera records, is Jewish, and therefore, it is intimated, to be viewed as a victim rather than as an oppressor. Later Lily’s mother makes

⁶ Peter Childs and R.J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, Prentice Hall, London, 1987, 105.

contact with the Black Sash ladies, and they too are judged innocent, even of the charge of being “stuck up and snobs... without their sashes on, they were just like ordinary people and not that different to us really.” (302) The result of Jooste’s narrative strategy is that the reader becomes enclosed in a warm bubble of positive feeling, immersed in a culture which is presented so positively that Lily herself, when invited to make a birthday wish, realizes that she is so happy that “I can’t think of anything else to wish for.” (100) Even at a late stage in the novel, when the Group Areas Act has destroyed 90% of Lily’s community and her mother has been permanently disfigured by a white policeman, Lily can say that “if God stopped the world right there and then and asked me how I was getting along, I would be able to look Him straight in the eye and tell Him how happy I am.” (307) When the novel ends Lily is living in Southampton with her homosexual uncle, having been sent out of South Africa on a one-way exit permit. The uncle and his partner provide her with a bedroom in which everything is pink: sheets, blankets, curtains, carpet and eiderdown. There could be no better image of the rose-coloured perspective of Jooste’s vision of life in the coloured community.

A similar, but not identical, strategy is at work in *Frieda and Min*. Here Jooste implements the structure promised but not fulfilled in *Dance with a Poor Man’s Daughter*, the paralleling of the lives of two girls from different communities. Frieda and Min are both white, but Frieda belongs to the Jewish community in Johannesburg whereas Min comes from rural Natal. The narrative, again in the first person, is ostensibly divided between the two, but there is no equality of opportunity between the two narrators. Frieda’s voice predominates not only in space (she is given thirty narrative sections as against Min’s eighteen) but also in force and humour. Jooste foregrounds the liveliness and humour of the Jewish voice; Frieda is made funny and touching, and it seems to be no accident that she also represents the conservative, uncommitted element in white society. Again, the fact of being Jewish is presented as a reason, as well as an excuse, for disengagement. As Frieda says of the African

majority: "Today it's them. Tomorrow it might be us again."⁷ Min, in contrast, is withdrawn, uncommunicative and a militant opponent of apartheid. In terms of emotional impact the lively conservative overwhelms the sad dissident, and readers are encouraged to feel more sympathy with Frieda's material and social anxieties than with Min's principled political anguish. Frieda defines her major concern early in the book: "I'm fourteen years old and the major worry in my life is that no one will ever marry me. It's a real problem." (34) By the end of the book Frieda has been married and divorced; Min has spent almost eight years in detention and the readers have experienced Frieda's problems as the more "real" of the two. Even the sentence structure operates to diminish the importance of Min's political commitment, as when Frieda reports: "While I've been at Bella Goldman's Cookery School working at making perfect Béarnaise sauce Min has been joining banned organizations and being arrested and taken away by the police." (173) Béarnaise sauce and banned organizations are equated; cookery is work, whereas being arrested is made to appear frivolous.

In *Like Water in Wild Places* the basic structural unit is again a contrasted pair of characters, this time a brother and sister, children of a stern and fanatical Afrikaner father. The boy, Conrad, seeking to please his father, volunteers for the Special Forces and becomes involved in atrocities near the border with Namibia. The girl, Beeky, hating her father, joins the protest movement and is killed by a Special Branch letter bomb. Here at last it would appear that Jooste is ready to engage directly with the realities of apartheid. Once again, however, political themes are distanced and neutralized, this time by setting the action within a framework of Bushman legends and myths. Events in realtime are shadowed by these traditional tales; the suicide of the children's mother is preceded by an account of how Hare missed his chance of avoiding death; a child's terrifying experience in a storm follows the narration of the myths of Rain and Lightning. In the end the border between myth and reality becomes blurred when the spirit of the dead sister

⁷ Pamela Jooste, *Frieda and Min*, Black Swan, London, 1999, 52.

appears in the form of a spotted eagle owl, come to take leave of her brother. The poetic language used to relate mystical Bushman beliefs gradually infects the narration in realtime; the impact of the letter bomb is described as follows: "Beeky is flying free, a pilgrim in a world of wonders lit by the light of a thousand suns..."⁸ The interleaving of legend and reality has the effect of making both seem equally unreal, distant and vaguely beautiful.

Throughout the three novels the African majority remains conspicuous by its absence. This, of course, may be taken as a true reflection of the apartheid era, whose rationale was the denial of the existence of an indigeneous population. For Frieda as for Lily, the native locations are unknown territory and the only Africans with whom they come into contact are servants, whose real names are too difficult to pronounce and who "talk native" among themselves. Jooste acknowledges the important role played by these servants in white households; when Carole-Amelia's mother takes to drink it is the maid who keeps the household going. Even so, the fact that her "maid-name" is Temperance is presented as a huge joke in the context of an alcoholic household, and it is hard to avoid the suspicion that this character is included in the text simply for the sake of the joke. When obliged to deal with African characters in a more serious context Jooste is apparently ill at ease. Min, whose father was a rural doctor, has been brought up in an almost exclusively Zulu community. She speaks Zulu and is said to feel at home only in that community. But the only concrete evidence for her inter-racial integration is the fact that as a child she prefers to wear "tyre tackies," the African sandals made out of old car tyres. She is never shown in interaction with African friends. Her African mentor, the schoolteacher whom she reveres, appears in the text only as a corpse in an army base. Min, by then a doctor, is required to sign the death certificate affirming that he died of heart failure. She refuses to do so, since it is clear that he had been tortured, and her refusal precipitates her own eventual arrest and imprisonment. But the whole relationship between the black teacher and white girl

⁸ Pamela Jooste, *Like Water in Wild Places*, Doubleday, London, 2000, 232.

has to be taken on trust; we are informed of its existence, but shown nothing of it.

When *Frieda and Min* appeared it was reviewed in *The Economist* as "an uplifting book about apartheid." The uplift has in fact been achieved by a careful avoidance of direct engagement with the subject. Each of the narratives offers a perspective discreetly distanced from the conflict: that of a coloured child so happy in her own world that political horrors hardly touch her; that of a Jewish girl absorbed in her funny but touching personal problems, and finally a mystical vision of the harmony of all nature in which death itself has no permanent importance. Yet activist, militant characters do play a part in Jooste's plots, and that part is officially heroic. The first novel takes its title from Lily's mother, a skilful dancer who is warned by her family that she, as a "poor man's daughter," has no place in the Blach Sash organization. She returns to Capetown after years in Johannesburg specifically to help her family and community by organizing resistance to the Group Areas Act. She marches, protests and in the end suffers serious injury in the cause. Yet to Lily she is no heroine, and the novel privileges Lily's point of view. For Lily Gloria is the mother who abandoned her, the mother who even when she returns "doesn't know how to act as a mother at all." (140) Even as Lily leaves South Africa for ever she looks down at the dock, where her mother is walking away, and thinks "if she loves me she will look back." (331) Gloria does not look back. In *Frieda and Min* militant action is similarly devalued. Min suffers years of imprisonment and separation from her child because of her absolute belief in the evil of apartheid. Yet this does not make her heroic in the eyes of the reader, since Frieda, whose narrative voice predominates, appears to believe that Min's commitment to the cause is the unfortunate consequence of an unhappy family background: a frivolous and materialistic mother, an idealistic and unhappy father, a beloved brother who died. Min herself senses that she is an emotional cripple; in prison she reflects: "I don't think I'm a woman very good at love." (275) Taken in conjunction with the presentation of Gloria in *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter* and that of Beeky in *Like Water in Wild Places*,

the implication seems to be that political commitment is the fruit of some kind of emotional handicap, a flight from personal problems.

If Jooste's narrative perspectives preclude the possibility of heroism in the apartheid struggle, they also preclude villainy. Even the most brutal action is swiftly excused. The policeman who smashed Gloria's face did not intend to do so: "my mother says what happened was not his fault." (282) The man who made the letter bomb which kills Beeky is nicknamed the Jackal, and with the nickname Jooste evokes the Bushman legend which relates that "the black-backed jackal was the last animal created. He's a scavenger and vengeful... and all other creatures shun him and leave him to kill and consort with carrion because that's his place." (136) For Jooste, racists act as they do because "that's their place." As God created the jackal so society creates racists and murderers; they are what they are through no choice of their own. Evert Brink, the captain who arrests Min, is not in himself a cruel man; he is simply the inevitable product of "the family pew in the big white small-town church and the wrath of God on Sundays and the everyday evening prayers with three boys on their knees before their father." (300) When describing the evil influence exercised by the Old Madam, a vengeful Afrikaner ghost who haunts the household in *Like Water in Wild Places*, Jooste intervenes directly in the text: "Allow me to plead for his mother. Boer woman that she is. A Crown subject, misplaced among strangers, she said so herself... the custom of the country is not the custom of the human heart." (127) Individuals can never be blamed; the human heart is always innocent; only the "custom of the country" is at fault.

For Jooste the "custom of the human heart" is always more interesting, and more important, than the custom of the country. If the feminist movement of the 1970s revealed that the personal is the political, Jooste prefers to invert the insight, viewing the political through the lens of the personal. Beeky's father is a fanatical supporter of the apartheid regime, a senator who aspires to head the Censorship Board. Yet his implication in apartheid politics is never made central to the presentation of his character; what is emphasized is the fact that he is a wife-beater. Beeky becomes an

activist because she hates her father for what he did to her mother, not for his political affiliation. Similarly, Min's opposition to the regime begins with her opposition to her mother; she reflects when first in prison that "my mother sent me here long before they [the Special Branch] even knew I existed." (294) Even Gloria, who returns to Capetown to fight for her community, begins her career as a protestor because a former lover has been arrested and is being held without charge. Lily is sure that she would never have stood outside the prison for two days for anyone else, not even for her favourite brother. At every stage the political is made subordinate to the personal; the reader is never encouraged to focus on public issues because all issues are interpreted as fundamentally private, all part of the custom of the human heart. This has the effect of trivializing apartheid itself; personal feelings are taken seriously; apartheid is taken lightly, as exemplified in this exchange between Conrad who conforms and Beeky who resists. Conrad is joining the army; Beeky is trying to dissuade him. He tells her to stop fighting:

"You can't take on the whole world. Not when it's really just Pappa you're against."

"What I'm against is you going away," she says. "If you have to go to the Army just so we can go on using 'whites only' toilets I'd rather pee in the streets." (140)

Beeky's attitude to apartheid is and remains essentially frivolous; her political vision remains narrowly personal till her death. On the mythical level Jooste links Beeky, with her red hair and death by flame, to the Ostrich who let loose fire on the world when he lifted his wings. This may be an attempt to set her political involvement in context as a Promethean sacrifice for mankind, but nothing in the presentation of Beeky's character and motivation permits such a reading. What concerns her is the family conflict: her only cause is the battle for her brother and against her father.

The privileging the personal over the political is a consistent strategy through the three novels; ideological issues are not discussed, and the motivation of political activists is construed as always private and frequently pathetic, the effect of weakness rather

than strength. On one issue, however, Jooste appears to hold strong convictions. In all the novels a feminist agenda is addressed: women represent everything that is culturally and socially positive; men all that is destructive and negative. In her first letter to Carole-Amelia Lily reports that the men in her family are not worth much, and this is amply confirmed in the plot—in her immediate circle there are two gangsters, both of whom die by violence, and one alcoholic whom the family tend to discover in the morning dead-drunk on the floor. The men, as she tells Carole-Amelia, are the cross that the women have to bear. Apartheid itself is construed as a typically male enterprise; part of the test of manliness which God himself imposes on his people. Conrad's father tells him: "You know what God wants from us. Those who learn to conquer fear and stand up and be counted as men, He makes great." (65) When Conrad joins the Special Forces and is trained to hunt freedom fighters in the bush, this is interpreted as the fulfilment of man's destiny as a hunter. Lust for blood is natural for a hunter, whose heart "runs for ever, burning hot, towards blood." (116) While Min sees injustice in black/white relations, Frieda sees injustice in male/female relations, specifically in the fact that she is supposed to accept gladly the invitation of any boy who is willing to escort her to the school dance, whereas boys are allowed to be "picky." As everywhere in the novel, Frieda's views are expressed with force and humour, whereas Min tends to take refuge in silence, with the result that women's grievances loom larger than African grievances in the reader's mind. Injustice to women is represented as characteristic of the male apartheid-supporter. Conrad's father beats his mother and oppresses the African majority, but we are provided concrete examples only of the crime against feminism. Lily's mother is beaten by a policeman when demonstrating with the Black Sash, but the immediate cause of the violence is not the demonstration itself. An angry white husband attempts to drag away his demonstrating wife, and Gloria is injured when she tries to intervene to protect the woman. Women, it is implied, are worth fighting for. Lily and Frieda, who both feel strong reservations about involvement in the freedom struggle, have no doubts where women are concerned. As

Frieda remarks as the family prepare *shabbas*, "I'm not always sure what the men are here for but I know about women." (98)

Feminism is apparently important to Jooste, but as the novels draw towards their close the feminism is modified, and a note of romance is introduced. In *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter* Lily's Aunt Stella spends the novel languishing for a typically unsatisfactory male, one who makes no secret of his preference for her beautiful sister Gloria and who favours the Group Areas Act as a means of sending back the "natives" to the locations where they belong. But in the closing pages Aunt Stella is allowed a "happy" ending; she gets her man—his imperfections apparently forgotten—and settles down to enjoy married life on the Cape Flats. Even Lily's mother, tough, streetwise and independent as she is, turns out to be involved in "true" love with the man who, it is hinted but not confirmed, may be Lily's father. The two sit together in the moonlight, murmuring "What we have is so much more, so much finer than real life," (276) while just down the road the destruction of District Six continues. An even more incongruous note is struck when Min becomes involved in romantic interludes, because the objects of her affection are, surprisingly, agents of apartheid. The first is a married army captain whom she meets when practising medicine in rural Natal. He is presented as a good but unhappy man, conscious of the incompatibility between his sense of military honour and the shooting down of children. But he cannot promise Min that he would refuse to fire on civilians in the townships. The affair ends when the captain is given a posting elsewhere, and Min is arrested shortly afterwards. Her pregnancy comes as a surprise to Frieda, but it is worth noting that this latter never imagines even for a moment that the baby could be anything other than white. Interracial sex is unthinkable in Jooste's fictional world. Once in prison Min feels strangely drawn to Evert Brink, the man who arrests her. He is described in conventional romantic terms: tall, handsome, softly spoken, and he is clearly attracted to Min. Their attraction persists through the six years of Min's detention. This relationship might reasonably be construed as an instance of the psychological dependence formed between hostage and kidnapper, prisoner and

jailer. Alternatively, it could be intended as an acknowledgement of the ambivalence of the white dissident role which combines membership of a privileged elite with rejection of the system of privilege. Thus Min's attraction to Evert might signal her inability to separate herself fully from the caste into which she was born. But neither of these readings is supported by the text. Evert and Min are apparently made for each other: both young, white, good-looking, idealistic. Only politics stands in their way.

The inclusion of conventional romance in the apartheid setting is symptomatic of Jooste's diversionary tactics. She preserves the comfortable atmosphere of her novels by displacing attention from the political to the private, and by favouring narrative perspectives which distance political issues. By such means readers are encouraged not to take politics too seriously. The facts themselves are admitted: deaths, disappearances, torture, letter bombs. But attention is always subtly deflected from these facts towards more agreeable matters: humour and resilience in coloured and Jewish family life, eternal wisdom in Bushman legends. Clearly no white South African writer can be expected to find the articulation of political commitment as easy as Dennis Brutus suggests when he declares: "In South Africa commitment is not a problem."⁹ But Jooste, who in taking on the subject of apartheid claims to be telling "what I felt needed to be told,"¹⁰ has not only evaded but even trivialized her topic. When Trevor Huddleston addressed the white community in the 1950s he entitled his book *Naught For Your Comfort*. Jooste, in her accounts of apartheid for the post-apartheid world, adjusts her focus to provide all she can for the comfort of her white readership.

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⁹ Dennis Brutus in Per Wästberg, ed., *The Writer in Modern Africa*, Africana Publishing Corporation, New York, 1969, 33.

¹⁰ "Author's Note," *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter*, 13.

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