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► **To cite this version:**

Richard Samin. Awareness and Fragmentation in Recent South African Short Fiction. *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.65-76. hal-02344226

HAL Id: hal-02344226

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344226v1>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

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Awareness and Fragmentation in Recent South African Short Fiction

In the last years of apartheid and since its demise, a new literary awareness has emerged in short-story writing by both black and white authors. The transition to democracy was a period of uncertainty and ambiguity and has yielded innovative and interesting forms of writing in which the themes and narrative conventions of the previous period have been questioned and remodelled. The aim of this paper is to show that the artistic fluctuations and transgressions in short-story writing are not so much the expression of a desire to register as faithfully as possible political and societal realignments and adaptations as the deliberate intention to shape new forms of writing in order to come to grips with new situations and new meanings. In order to encapsulate the ethos of the period, writers have questioned the principles and implications of realistic discourse, experimented with different narrative and rhetorical devices and generated a fragmented awareness of the world. In order to illustrate my point I shall refer to short stories by Peter Horn, Bheki Maseko, Joël Matlou, Etienne van Heerden and Ivan Vladislavic.

I- Realism and history

My basic assumption is that the literary discourse of today's short fiction does not so much intend to render a faithful account of social and historical data—although it still fulfils that function to a large extent—as to shape an awareness of how we perceive them, encapsulating in its web of narrative and rhetorical figures and patterns the changes of a particular period. In short it provides a formula to conceptualise the present.

The concept I am starting from is that of realism. We have to accept the idea that despite its apparent a-historicity it is historically determined and there are moments in history when it needs to be re-examined.

Classical realism, that is the one which purports to offer a transparent and falsely objective vision of the world, was often loaded with a sense of value. In the case of South Africa under apartheid, realistic fiction was undoubtedly used as an ideological weapon in so far as it served to expose the evils of the regime and express a moral indictment. Realism created a frame of reference which did not generally allow room for ambiguity or ambivalence but, on the contrary, served to uphold clear-cut oppositions and reinforce certainties. Philippe Hamon, a specialist on the question, says that "realism is a pedagogical device to convey readable and coherent information about the world and aims at eradicating ambiguity." (quoted in Dubois 2000: 37)

In South Africa the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) have unveiled the untold horrors of the past and raised all sorts of questions about things which had hitherto been taken for granted such as the clear-cut oppositions between legality and illegality, persecutors and victims. Besides, the shift from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the Growth and Redistribution Programme, the procrastination in delivering promises, the extent of corruption and criminal violence have sent contradictory signals in spite of the advantages accruing from political liberation and the prospects of a better future. Militant realism was no longer felt as being adequate to engage meaningfully with the contradictions of the present times.

This has initiated a shift from the strictures of the realistic paradigm to writing practices involving experiments with rhetorical and narrative procedures so as to induce new readings and cast a new light on hitherto unexplored areas of reality.

In order to convey the complexity and ambiguity of the present and dispel the illusive sense of certainty and rationality which classical realism induced, contemporary writers have introduced devices which undermine the conventional rhetoric of realism through a range of transgressions affecting the narrator, the choice of genres and the coherence of the narrative.

II- The unreliable narrator

Many short stories today show a clear preference for first person narrators as though to suggest that the problems of the community must first be relayed by the individual in order to be properly understood. However, in many cases these narrators are inadequate or unreliable when not downright nutty: they range from children, mentally perturbed persons, tramps, criminals or petty gangsters, more generally characters who are socially or psychologically marginal.

A case in point is the narrator in Peter Horn's story "We Must Be Mad." He is a former persecutor who has tortured many ANC militants and is now haunted by their screams to the extent that he can't get a wink of sleep at night. He directly addresses the reader in a kind of elegiac complaint whose logic is totally subverted: he accuses his former victims of being inhuman for persecuting him with their painful screams when it would have been so much easier to speak. There follows a grim and detached report of the treatment he meted out on them. The man is a cross between Joseph Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* as he stands on the brink of death staring into the unknown and of the officer in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* for the cynicism and detachment with which he considers his former activity. The fact that this story was published at a time when former persecutors like Dirk Coetzee or Eugene de Kock were making their confessions before the Amnesty Committee leads the reader to question the redemptive value of this type of confession.

Joël Matlou's narrator in a quasi-autobiographical collection of loosely connected stories *Life at Home* (1991) tries to recapture his childhood impressions. The consciousness he has of his early childhood is based on scarce and partial reminiscences which convey the state of puzzlement with which he gradually discovers his environment and the life of black farm workers on a white man's farm in the Transvaal. The story of his life thus boils down to a mere accumulation of briefly described personal experiences which conveys a sense of immediacy. But since the reader is not allowed to see beyond mere factual evidence he is also struck by a sense of confinement and strangeness when confronted with

characters or phenomena which cannot rationally be accounted for, such as the mad man who ate grass:

He used to chew his pillow until 3.30 a.m. The grass-eater who escaped mysteriously from a tribal cell in Winterveldt is still mad. I tell you, he used to chew his pillow until 3.30 a.m. A man believed to be Mr David Letshwene, about 36, was found at Soutpan in the Moretele district on Sunday morning, near a tap, drinking water from the dirty furrows. When people saw him they became scared. After drinking some water he crawled on his hands and knees to nearby shrubs, where he started eating grass... He spoke clean English. He was wearing Florsheim shoes, black socks, grey trousers and jackets, a Scotch tie, white shirt and brown hat. (78-79)

The unobtrusive attitude of the narrator who remains a neutral observer without offering the slightest explanation introduces a feeling of estrangement and transforms a marginal character's antics in a rather drab environment into a kind of epiphany with the intimation that the visible world is encompassed by an invisible and mysterious reality.

Another dominant feature of contemporary short story writing is the use of a garrulous first person narrator, one who holds the reader by his lapel and entrusts him with the burden of his worries. The directness, proximity and conversational tone of the narrator's discourse aim at bringing round the reader to his opinion to eventually turn him into his accomplice.

This forcefully imposed complicity sometimes arouses an uneasiness if not a feeling of revulsion with the reader when the narrator's moral stance is fundamentally flawed. Such is the case with Peter Horn's "Finding the Truth" (1999): the first person narrator is a state pathologist who is obsessed with truth and convinced that ANC suspects never tell the truth even under torture and that truth must be located somewhere in the brain. After dissecting thousands of victims' brains and examining them he is finally convinced that the region he has been looking for is "very near the pituitary, in which Descartes believed he had found the interface between the soul and the mechanics of life" (Horn 1999: 48). In order to further substantiate his theory he carries out experiments with people who are unquestionably innocent to check

whether they have something to hide in their truth cells. So he starts killing children: "My first victim was a six-year-old boy whom I found wandering about in the bushes near the beach one Sunday afternoon. He was dead before he understood what had happened to him. I just twisted his neck." (49) After examining their brains he is satisfied that they do not carry "the insignia of the devil." (49) However he begins to entertain doubts as to the brain of the leader of the country. The story ends as he intends to check whether this brain carries a hidden truth, because, he adds, "otherwise I will go mad." (50)

With this type of narrator the story tilts into the allegory and brings into play a network of understatements and allusions proceeding from the immediate historical background and also from a rich body of literary texts and genres.

III- Generic transgression

Hence the second type of transgression we find in most stories: generic transgressions. These stories are no longer confined within a single reading mode. The paradigm which had been handed down through generations of writers was that of realism. But the juxtaposition of realistic elements with others borrowed from non-realistic genres like the tale, the romance or the allegory seriously undermines the principle of verisimilitude and disorients the reader.

Bheki Maseko's story "Mamlambo," (1991) clearly illustrates this point. The implicit narrator, in a kind of prologue, unquestioningly endorses the belief that in order to increase your prosperity in life you must first get hold of a magical snake called "mamlambo" through a traditional doctor. It requires certain necessities and even sacrifices to maintain it. Failure to comply with them results in disaster including the death of the owner. To possess the snake can therefore be dangerous and getting rid of it is a difficult process which involves further rituals. After this brief introduction the story of love-forlorn Sophie Zikode begins when, in order to keep her latest boy-friend, she decides to consult a traditional doctor. She follows the appropriate procedure and the magic operates: after a night with her lover Sophie discovers

“mamlambo” coiled under the pillow. She takes fright and immediately wants to get rid of it. The only solution is to transfer it to someone else. She finally succeeds in leaving the snake, hidden in a suitcase, to an unknown woman who happens to be the mother of one of the lovers who had just recently jilted her.

The ironical twist of the story serves to bring to the fore the contradictions on which it is based. On the one hand we are dealing with a story which on the face of it seems firmly entrenched in an oral tradition. It possesses the directness, clarity and swiftness of delivery which one would expect of an oral tale. Moreover, the belief in cultural traditions is strongly asserted. Yet the final effect of the story proceeds more distinctly from the irony of the structure, that is from its rhetoric, than from its magic import. Or, more precisely, the characters' belief in the extraordinary power of the snake and its magical intrusion into the narrative do not matter so much for their intrinsic cultural impact as for the part they play in the construction of irony. The ostensible ethnological thrust of the action is eventually reworked into the narrative so as to bring it round to a neat and satisfying closure.

This results in a kind of indeterminacy as to the real function of magic in the text: is it really meant to operate as a narrative agent or is it simply part of its rhetorical apparatus aimed at problematising our perception of the real?

Etienne van Heerden's story “Mad Dog” (1992) is another case in point. The main character, Jakadas Pool is also the focaliser. He is a black sharecropper who has been beaten and dismissed by the white farmer for contesting his refusal to increase his rations. He has been trekking for nine days across the Karoo with his belongings and family on top a donkey-drawn cart. Almost all the way from the moment they left the farm they have been followed by a rabid dog and Jakadas has become convinced that the dog is the reincarnation of one of his uncles who has come to punish him for the goat milk he stole from him when he was a kid. As they trundle along Jakadas remembers old stories telling how people who had been bitten by rabid meerkats were transformed into mad dogs and “would trail anyone who had done him wrong” (van Heerden 3). For the rest of the journey, until the family finally comes upon an old abandoned farm house where

they can rest, eat and protect themselves, Jakadas's mind is obsessed by the presence of the mad dog as he comes dangerously close to the cart and labours under an overwhelming sense of guilt and the fear of death. The following morning as he gets up and looks out of the window he notes that the dog is gone and when he ventures outside he can see the hoof prints of the donkeys and their own footprints left in the ground the night before but there are no visible dog tracks. This inconclusive story leaves the reader doubtful about the reliability of the narrator's testimony—was the dog really mad? was it a figment of his imagination?—But, on the other hand, the realism of the narrative—the vividness and precision with which the Karoo is depicted—lends credibility to the veracity of Jakadas's ordeal. The story thus suspends the possibility of a definite interpretation and while it sails on the tradition of realism the irrational elements woven into the narrative simultaneously preclude the certainties and the sense of closure which realism usually entails.

Generic transgression of the type mentioned above generate an aesthetics of ambivalence which doesn't entirely negate reality but fosters the impression that the patterns of realistic discourse no longer operate to account for the world in a coherent way. Hence a feeling of dislocation.

IV- Fragmented narratives

One of Ivan Vladislavic's stories in his collection *Missing Persons* (1989) opens with the following epigraph by Lionel Abrahams: "Fragments neither close nor open meaning; they may mean anything except wholeness, except certainty." The story is aptly entitled "A Science of Fragments." (1989: 84)

It is a kind of elegy in prose made up of loosely connected sections which recall dislocated moments of the narrator's past which he shared with a woman who has recently died. In the opening section, the narrator confesses that the urge to translate this dramatic event into language is irresistible. The fragmented mode of writing which is used to evoke episodes of their past life reflects the urge to capture the immediacy of the narrator's emotional response. The text operates as though the images were

seized at the very moment they emerge into consciousness through the process of verbalisation—as though, to use Antjie Krog's formula, the narrator wanted "to seize the surge of language by its soft, bare skull" (1999: 27)—with the result that their almost hallucinatory quality and the dislocation of their temporal sequence convey the very meaning of the text: the fragmentation of memory and perception.

The impact of the images and scenes which are represented is such that their unfamiliarity, their potential mystery hamper the possibility of acceding to an obvious and immediate understanding. The reader is entrusted with the responsibility of re-establishing the underlying order and coherence of the narrative. This form of writing which disorientates the reader serves as a kind of "litmus" test to show the limits of realistic writing.

In fact Vladislavic's strategy is even more subtle: his aim is not so much to proffer a critique of realism as to undermine its pretension to offer a faithful and coherent image of reality when reality is by definition elusive and all the more so when it is as devious and absurd as in South Africa under apartheid. In his stories, Vladislavic deliberately magnifies the absurdities and contradictions of life under apartheid to such grotesque and improbable proportions that their representation tilts into sheer fantasy as in his story "We came to the Monument." It is a political tale reminiscent of the apocalyptic allegories of Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and John M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* with the difference that the code of realistic illusion is openly subverted.

There has been a war, the Afrikaners have been defeated and the city in the north (that is Pretoria) has just recently been abandoned by the victors. A group of Afrikaners in a parody of the 1938 celebrations of the Great Trek return to the monument (the Voortrekker Monument) and use it as a shelter. The story intertwines the voices of two narrators one is a statue which, after leaving his pedestal in the city centre had managed to find a place for itself among the figures in one of the friezes of the Monument. This statue, which had fallen in love with a young girl before the war and had been saddened by her absence during the war is now thrilled to see she is among the people who have settled down in

the Monument. The young girl notes that her friend, the statue, stands among the figures in the frieze and infers that "he is not unhappy in the stone world in which he belongs. He turns his back on us. He cannot hear us." (79) Which is not true since the statue in its monologue asserts that "I hear her dimly, talking in her sleep." (80) The art of Vladislavic here consists in exploring the historical theme of Afrikaner political hegemony and racial segregation by deliberately turning his back on the realistic treatment of it and choosing instead to explore, in narrative form, the implications of an idea or a metaphor. The rationale of the story proceeds from the literal exploitation of the idea that apartheid has sought to reify a mode of life and social relations as one would seek to immortalise a historic moment in the rigidity of the stone or preserve the past in a museum. The improbability of this strange tale of destruction, silences and misunderstanding serves as an ironic metaphor of the no less absurd human conundrum which the implementation of apartheid has actually brought about.

The transgression of the conventions imposed by realism offers opens up an arena of freedom where illusions, deceits and the totalising tendency of realistic fiction can be exposed. The very process of writing becomes a central theme as Chris van Wyk's story "Relatives" shows (Rode and Gerwel 1995: 115-120). In it the first person narrator, who wants to write a story, actually tries to apply the principles of a writer's manual in order to describe the people and the environment which constitute the framing narrative.

Besides this self-conscious tendency there is often, in contemporary short-story writing in South Africa, an element of jubilation proceeding from its capacity to innovate, parody and transgress which, in the final analysis, also serves a critical or satirical intention. Through the deliberate undermining of norms writers feel free to explore new artistic means and under the guise of fantasy sometimes verging on opacity they express dissenting opinions as to their perception of history. Peter Horn, for instance, flirts with socially sensible issues when in his tale-like story "My Voice is Under Control Now" he exposes the traditional domination of African males through the voice of a female narrator whom the tradition forces to remain mute but whose rebellious mood allows her tongue to wag freely with the result that the

traditional authorities condemn her to have her mouth shut with a padlock. As she grows older she does not reform and is branded as a mad woman. She eventually marries a man who wagers with his friends that he'll succeed in silencing her. He loses his wager and becomes dangerously aggressive with her. She then decides to poison him and nobody finds out because she decides to remain speechless so as not to betray herself while showing that she has finally decided to abide by the tradition. In another story "Not born of a father or mother" he also uses irony to expose the useless and ruthless killings of young militants in the townships. Concerning violence, Bheki Maseko in "The Knight of the Long Knives" casts a crude light on criminal goings-on in Kwazulu-Natal. The theme is taken up in the collective story "The Story About the Man who Could Fly" made up of several sections by different narrators about a man who managed to escape the vigilantes who were pursuing him in the Kwa-Natal countryside. Unlike Maseko's story, it is told as an oral tale combining directness of address and a variety of voices. At the end of the story the man who escaped miraculously from his pursuers by growing wings inadvertently flew into telephone wires. When the police arrive the vigilantes run away and as the man is finally brought back to the ground he receives a severe thrashing. The story ends with this bland, non-committal remark: "The weather changed suddenly, and it became cloudy but with some rainbows." (Oliphant 1991: 97)

The subtle ironic allusion to the "rainbow nation" provides a clue to the role fantasy, comedy or the grotesque play in these short stories: they are meant to express a sense of derision, as would laughter in the face of despair or hopelessness. The confusion of parody and reality operates as a critique of the latter. The thrust of this narrative strategy lies in the fact that by ostensibly dealing with the real through unrealistic categories, contemporary short-story writing intimates that the absurdities, confusion and indecencies of the world do not warrant a more consistent treatment. Unlike realistic writing, this type of writing does not aim at reflecting the world and rationalising its contradictions, it does not seek to merge with it in an impossible embrace. By taking its distance from conventional forms of representation, it is simply content to operate as a metaphor of reality.

Conclusion

The subversion of the narrative codes of realism in contemporary South African short-story writing offers the possibility for new modes of writing, new tropes to encode the present reality. At the same time, the connection with history is not completely severed: the idea is not to do away entirely with the determinations of history so as to indulge in the pleasure of mere formalism but to pay more attention to the way history is represented. By creating a tension between the world and the word, writers fulfil a twofold function: firstly they make the reader aware of the fact that they are not simply historians but story-tellers, secondly by distancing themselves from the strictures of mimesis they give themselves more leeway to introduce the fantastic, the symbolic and the allegorical so as to create the discourse which they deem best suited to account for the present times. What is characteristic of today's writers is that they have found it necessary to transgress the rule of verisimilitude by resorting to marginality, hybridity and heterogeneity so as to convey their vision of an incoherent and fragmented world. The refusal of traditional realism corresponds to the resilience of human decency when confronted with madness, horror and wanton death. The irony which is frequently found in short-story writing today serves as a sting to deflate pretensions, illusions and complacency. By breaking free from a conventional narrative mode contemporary South African writers seek to jolt their readers into a more critical awareness of the present period.

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