

Bushmen perhaps also plays a role. Eventually, however, all these fictive works are marked by a psychological venture into the domain of intercultural relationships in South Africa and the history of such relationships. In the past, literary texts exploring the relationship between Afrikaans and Bushmen societies (such as the works of Von Wielligh, the Hobson brothers, PJ Schoeman, JJ van der Post and Jan Rabie's early novels) were seen as peripheral literature, not belonging to the main stream of the Afrikaans canon. Yet, the exploration of this relationship in the three texts under discussion here as well as the fact of their simultaneous publication in 1994 are beginning to make it clear that such works are of central importance for a better understanding of the country, its people and the way in which they deal with each other.

Recent Southern African Books from the Heinemann African Writers Series

The Reluctant Playwright

by WPB Botha

Oxford: Heinemann, 1993, 233 pp.

ISBN 0435905899.

A Shattering of Silence

by Farida Karodia

Oxford: Heinemann, 1993, 216 pp.

ISBN 0435905937.

Cape Town Coolie

by Réshard Gool

Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, 183 pp.

ISBN 0435905686.

Jesus is Indian and Other Stories

by Agnes Sam

Oxford: Heinemann, 1989/1994, 134 pp.

ISBN 0435909215.

Tales of Tenderness and Power

by Bessie Head and edited by Gillian Stead Eilersen

Oxford: Heinemann, 1989/1990, 144 pp.

ISBN 0435905791.

The House of Hunger. Short Stories.

Dambudzo Marechera

Oxford: Heinemann, 1978/1993, 154 pp.

ISBN 043590986X

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WPB Botha was originally we are told of the 'Afrikaner working class', left South Africa in 1975, and now teaches in London. *The Reluctant Playwright* is his first novel, and deals with Seamus Doyle, a world-weary Catholic

Irishman who returns to the rural Transkei where he had spent his youth (his parents were Irish nationalists who fled their homeland) to teach Xhosas during the years of Broederbondage.

Suspected of being a dangerous liberal by the Security police and a collaborator by militant Africans, he is in reality a jaded cynic trying to come to terms with the memory of his 'sell-out' dead father who abandoned radical Irish nationalism for a 'place in the sun' in racist South Africa. When he learns that his father was actually working for the ANC, his enthusiasm for life is 're-kindled' and he is inevitably drawn into the escalating underground battle between the ANC and the State as an authentic 'Liberal hero'.

The novel moves to a melodramatic climax, and to the end Doyle struggles with political commitment and his relationship with his father. An anti-apartheid novel wary of its white hero—but if we are expecting something fresh and de-familiarising and intelligent to be written about South Africa then we will be disappointed.

A Shattering of Silence is the second novel by the former South African Farida Karodia (her first was *Daughters of the Twilight*—1986), who now lives in Canada.

Faith, the young daughter of liberal Canadian Protestant missionaries working in colonial rural Mozambique, witnesses the horrifying murder of the entire mission including her parents by Portuguese soldiers. The now mute Faith, unable to remember the trauma, 'just one more child crippled and orphaned by acts of barbarous violence', spends the rest of her childhood in a variety of orphanages before becoming a teacher of sign language in a clinic to children maimed physically and psychologically by the war.

This is not a typical anti-colonial war novel to the extent that it focuses instead on the women—caring and strong—who were 'veterans of another kind of war, the war of survival fought on the battleground of their homes and in their townships'; and the children: 'apart from starvation, abandonment and their dispossession, these young victims, defenseless and vulnerable, were also sacrificed at the altar of war'.

Faith is increasingly drawn into the escalating anti-colonial struggle, in particular by attempting to expose the kidnapping of Mozambican children by the Portuguese, who sell them into Middle Eastern slavery. With the dreaded authorities closing in, she embarks on a harrowing escape from the country to tell the world about the abuse of children, during which she also has to deal with her personal amnesia and muteness. For all its desire to represent women in more politically acceptable ways, and to foreground the innocent victims of war, the narrative is too predictable and does not really rise above being an adventure story.

Yet another novel by a former South African, *Cape Town Coolie* is actually a re-working of an earlier novel by Reshard Gool, who died in Canada in 1989. Set in Cape Town in 1947 (the date is not arbitrary), the novel is narrated by a white Afrikaner academic of anarchist leanings and focuses on Henry Naidoo, an Indian liberal lawyer who gets caught up in the corrupt machinations of the capitalist Shaikh-Moosa, the 'poisonous spider'

who is plotting financially to exploit the inevitable coming victory of Afrikaner nationalism. His devious plots include raising the rents of the citizens of District Six, and Naidoo forms a Tenant's Association to combat him. Along the way, he gets entangled in the obscure conspiracies of Cape Town's fringe Trotskyite groupings, and falls in love with the flighty daughter of 'one of the most distinguished Coloured families'.

Yet again an unlikely figure is drawn reluctantly into political involvement, and yet again, despite some interesting observations about the complicated lives of professional Coloured and Indian people in the Cape Town 1940s, the novel never really rises to becoming a profound political novel and instead remains a rather dull portrait of uninteresting characters.

Agnes Sam is yet another South African exile, having left South Africa in 1973 and now resident in Britain. *Jesus is Indian and Other Short Stories* is her first published book. The fifteen stories deal mostly with the South African Indian community (the religious schisms, tensions over arranged marriages, their historical victimization) and being Indian in Britain (the racism, the generational divisions), and throughout Christian and feminist discourses can be gently traced. The stories are however rather inconsequential and are perhaps mainly aimed at teenagers.

Tales of Tenderness and Power is a magnificent collection of short pieces of writing by Bessie Head, one of southern Africa's greatest writers. And another South African exile! This is Bessie Head's third collection of short writings to be published (the others are *The Collector of Treasures* and *A Woman Alone*), and they range from early writings in the 1960s in South Africa to later material set in her adopted home of Botswana. As the editor Gillian Stead Eilersen puts it, the writings 'cannot all be classified as short stories in the usual sense of that designation: some are short descriptive observations, some are fictional or semi-fictional, some historical stories'.

Many of Head's persistent concerns are to be found here: the tension between modern independent individualism and traditional African conformity (see 'The Lovers', where this tension is figured as between arranged marriages and romantic love); her respect for the gentle dignity of the African peasantry; her assaults on the corruptions of (political and sexual) power (see her portrait of the post-colonial politician in 'Sorrow food': 'As I told you, I'm an honest guy. I believe in day-light robbery'); the constant sense of overwhelming forces lurking just below the placid surface of existence. Read her moving, beautifully crafted portrait of Robert Sobukwe, 'The Coming of the Christ-Child', and of course her manifesto, 'Dreamer and Storyteller':

Possibly too, Southern Africa might one day become the home of the storyteller and dreamer, who did not hurt others but only introduced new dreams that filled the heart with wonder.

Bessie Head had an uncanny ability to write stories which, instead of dictating the way they are read, provoke the reader into an active imaginative participation in the creation of the fictional experience. In a remarkable way

her hostility to authoritarian power-games seeps into the very construction of her narratives.

Dambudzo Marechera, whose inevitably premature death in 1987 was a tragic loss to modern fiction, is the consummate 'post-colonial' Zimbabwean writer, and *The House of Hunger*, a collection of nine short stories, including the lengthy title story, is one of the most important texts to emerge from Southern Africa in recent decades. It should be on every school and university syllabus, because these powerful stories challenge just about every complacently hegemonic view of what 'African literature' is. Trapped in the frozen time of late colonialism—in the 'foul breath of our history' of Ian Smith's Rhodesia—the protagonists—mostly young black intellectuals—suffer from an inward-turning 'soul-hunger', a self-reflexive *Angst* at one with twentieth-century Modernism. These are stories about identity—many hover painfully on the threshold of adulthood—but instead of fictionally resolving the overwhelming tensions and contradictions of being a western-educated African in an oppressive colonial context through the discourse of, say, African nationalism, Marechera boldly lays them bare. The conflicts of Africa/Europe, tradition/modernity, and colonialism/post-colonialism become the very site of a powerfully imaginative avant-garde writing which, instead of taking sides, tracks down the complex impossibilities of his historical fate. In this profoundly unsettled colonial world, where the self is lived as 'split', there can be no pretense of seizing at some authentic African identity. Subjectivity, like fiction, is seen as a flagrant fabrication, something stitched together—and not too successfully—from the fragments of multiple interpellations. And Marechera parades the stitches.

Marechera knows all too well the fatal seductions of Europe, the limitations of traditional African communities, the disastrous performances of post-colonial nations, the ironies of being an independent intellectual on a continent reluctant to abandon the certainties that awesome political struggles cannot do without. After encountering his liberatingly disruptive stories, there can be no simple return to the comforts of the anti-colonial discourses that have articulated our own conjuncture in South Africa. And for that we must be grateful. In a meta-critical move, I will leave with a passage from the story, 'A House of Hunger':

Stephen was mean, a bully; a typical African bully in an ordinary African school Stephen was an avid reader of the Heinemann African Writers Series. He firmly believed that there was something peculiarly African in anything written by an African and said that therefore European tools of criticism should not be used in the analysis of 'African literature'. He had also gleaned a few nuggets of thought from E. Mphahlele's *The African Image*.