

Space and Identity in Jayapraga Reddy's Unpublished Autobiography, *The Unbending Reed* and her *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*

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... we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, child-hood injuries, news-paper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death (Rushdie 1991:12).

Introduction

In this article I consider Jayapraga Reddy's unpublished autobiography, entitled *The Unbending Reed*, and her short stories collected in the publication *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. I read the two texts contrapuntally, drawing attention to the complex connections between the double narratives of disablement and enablement at work in these two disparate examples of her writings, the one autobiographical and the other fictional. I explore issues of identity, self-representation and representation in the light of Reddy's autobiographical and imaginative writings, drawing attention to differences in spatial configurations in the two writings.

Background of Reddy's Career as a Writer

Reddy was born in 1947, and until her death in August 1996, lived in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. She began writing from the time she was twelve years old, when she published her first story, 'The Lost Tube of Toothpaste'. When she was in Std. 4, she

wrote a short story, which she sent to the local magazine, *The 1860 Settler*, where it was published with acknowledgement. Her first play, 'The Balloon Seller', was also written at this time.

Reddy was fortunate to enjoy a prominent career as a writer and the story of her publication success is unique among Indian women writers in South Africa. A chronological survey of her achievements shows a slow but steady incorporation of her work into the mainstream of South African writing. In 1975 the BBC broadcast her short stories, 'The Love Beads' and 'The Stricken Land'. 'Nandi's Secret Friend', a short story for children, was also accepted by the BBC. In the 1980's these short stories that were accepted by the BBC were published by *Staffrider*, and new ones were included, such as the 'The Slumbering Spirit', 'Market Days', and 'A Gift for Rajendra'. The last story was also broadcast by the BBC. In 1984 her play, 'The Web of Persuasion', was produced by the SABC. In the same year *The Reader's Digest* published 'The Slumbering Spirit', under the title 'The Awakening Spirit'. The story was translated by Reader's Digest for its international editions in several languages, including Hindi for its readership on the Indian sub-continent. In 1987, Skotaville published her short story collection, *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. In 1988, the retrospective edition of *Staffrider*, *Ten Years of Staffrider*, included her short story, 'The Spirit of Two Worlds'. Reddy also presented a further script to the SABC in 1989, entitled 'Release to the Wind'. In 1991 Annemarié van Niekerk's anthology of South African women's short stories, *Raising the Blinds*, included her short story 'Friends', which had appeared in the collection *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. Her short story, 'Web of Persuasion', was adapted for radio and television by Franz Marx. It was hailed as a huge success but Reddy bemoaned the fact that the script was changed considerably.

All these publications were by well-known publishers, and were aimed at a wide reading public. It is noteworthy that the short stories that were selected were those that provided a wide range of South African contexts, dealing with race relations ('The Slumbering Spirit'), experiences in an Indian extended Family set-up ('The Spirit of Two Worlds'), and domestic tension related to race, class and gender ('Two Friends'). Reddy notes, in her introduction to her collection of short stores that writing is determined inevitably by living in a particular place. 'One derives one's creative spirit from this land of a myriad contrasts. There is no "typical" South African way of life' (Reddy 1987:Foreword). It would seem that her work was included in various anthologies for its very contribution to the 'myriad contrasts' that comprise South African life. While the short stories are not directly autobiographical they do draw from some of the experiences that Reddy would have been familiar with and which she records in her autobiography. Some of these are experiences of uprooting through the Group Areas Act ('On the Fringe of Dreamtime') and of being confined to a wheel-chair ('A Gift for Rajendra').

Reddy's autobiography, *The Unbending Reed* was submitted for publication to Skotaville. More recently, it was sent to two overseas publishers, but she had yet to hear from them when she died in 1996. A publisher had actually requested that she write the autobiography, presumably anticipating a great deal of interest in her story on the strength of her creative work. A short extract was published in the COSAW collection of writings, *Like A House On Fire—Contemporary Women's Writing, Art and Photography* (Horn, Mabie et al:1994), in which the autobiography was described as 'forthcoming', but to date the autobiography has not been published. The autobiography, a simple, linear account of her life, with a great amount of detail of her illness, may not have been considered as interesting as her short stories. What seems to have been ignored is that the very act of writing, rather than the content itself, was the real achievement. Gloria Anzaldua has called attention to such 'organic writing'—'It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue' (Whitlock 2000:0).

Reddy's Development as a Writer

Unlike Goonam's autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*, in her autobiography Reddy presents a narrow, almost self-absorbed, personal narrative. She recounts her early childhood, and events of her life as she grew older, to a few years ago. Her physical disease of muscular dystrophy is centrally placed in all the life stories that she narrates. In some ways the autobiography might be seen as a one-dimensional text, where her disability and concern for her physical condition is a central pre-occupation. A parallel and inter-related strand is that of her development as a writer, of the difficulties and successes she experienced in getting herself into print. It is her desire to overcome the restrictions imposed on her by her infirmity, her physical bondage, that influences her intention to become a writer.

Although Reddy has asserted in the Foreword to her short stories that she is not readily disposed to speaking of herself, in the autobiography she does give important personal details of her life, details that would have otherwise remained unknown. In the Foreword she speaks of her inclination as a writer to be 'a very private person' (1). She observes that 'solitude teaches one the beauty of silences, those long silences that deepen and stretch into eternity' (1). There are huge tracts of her emotional and psychological life of which she remains silent, but she does focus on the physical details of her diseased condition, with almost obsessive concern. The ambivalence of telling her story and being reticent about it is best captured in the anecdote of photo-taking she recounts early in the autobiography. Her grandfather was againt capturing 'an image of oneself' (2).

Her story begins with Kesa, her elder brother, and herself growing up quickly and briskly. What is immediately clear is that he was born with a neuro-

muscular disease. Kesa looks perfect in a photograph that she is looking at, and then the family confront the truth that he has muscular dystrophy. His death is poignantly described and the real import of the impending separation, the severity and finality of death, is brought home to her when his pet cat walks away, never to return again:

Then Prill walked in. Through the front door he came, tail erect and marched with a purpose towards the Coffin. He put his front paws on the coffin and peered in. The mourners were sufficiently roused out of themselves to stop weeping, and watched as her turned and walked out the way he came in. We never saw him again. If anything that day, succeeded in bringing home to me the finality of death and the rending pain of loss, it was that (15).

Reddy and her younger brother, Mags, are also smitten with the disease, and spend their entire lives valiantly coping with it. The controlling element of Reddy's identity is that of her own physical disability, which determines how she is accepted and what life experiences she will enjoy. If there is a 'preoccupation with self', as there usually is in black woman's autobiography (Watts 1989:108), in *The Unbending Reed* it is particularly so because of Reddy's need to live with muscular dystrophy as a black person and as a woman in South Africa. She is conscious that she is positioned peripherally because of her physical disability. She constantly observes, with amusement, concern and sadness the attitudes of those around her towards her disease: 'Over the years I have become used to being treated as some kind of curiosity specimen' (17). She writes of the prejudices towards her, and of her being treated as if she were totally ignorant (16). This attitude, she constantly reiterates, is only due to the lack of awareness and education among others on how to respond to her condition.

Reddy refuses 'the victim image', and in this she is supported by her grandparents and parents, with her parents being strong adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses church. The door-to-door evangelising approach of this church would have appealed to Reddy in her confined condition. There is strong family support for Reddy, as she is loved and affirmed by her immediate as well as extended family. There is deep admiration and love for her parents, her aunts and uncles who think differently, who provide her with the emotional and psychological nurturing to develop a positive sense of self. In this respect her story is similar to Noni Jabavu who, in *The Ochre People*, also speaks of the moral support of family in the face of wider social problems (see Watts 1987:115). A sense of family also plays an important role for Mayat, Sam and Goonam, with different members of the family being decisive influences in the authors' lives. Most of the writers speak of their mothers particularly as being important influences. Reddy constantly refers to her

mother as a 'pillar'; her image of her mother as a strong woman is captured poignantly in the epigraph, 'A woman is like the reed, though she bends with the wind, she does not break', from which the title of her autobiography, *The Unbending Reed*, is drawn. She notes in the 'Dedication' that the autobiography was 'To the memory of my Mother, Esperie (Bommie) whose dedication, discipline, farsightedness, courage and endurance made life a lesson in grit'. Reddy's mother might not have played an important public, or activist role, but she was a decisive influence in her family life. Reddy also claims a nurturing role for herself, and this is seen particularly in her relationship with Mags, as she assists him in coping with his own muscular dystrophy.

To encourage her in striving to be independent her parents and grandparents also believed strongly in the liberating power of education (23), and of education for girls in spite of much prejudice against this. Reddy's parents saw 'education' as a means of her attaining independence. Her mother's moralising tone has a familiar ring about it: 'If you have wealth, you can lose it. Fine things can be stolen. But nobody can take your education from you' (47). It is the need to improve, to develop, to cope with her handicap, that makes it imperative for her to gain an education.

Reddy experiences great difficulties in securing education owing to her physically disabled state, and this is exacerbated by her being black and female. Her disability made going to school difficult, and there are graphic accounts in her autobiography of her seeking admission at a school. It is the time of the 'platoon school system', deployed to cater for the lack of adequate schooling facilities for black children. The principal refuses her admission, showing the extent to which prejudices against handicapped individuals went unquestioned. The efforts of an African nurse from 'Cripple Care' pays off as she insists that the principal admit the new pupil. Reddy describes the attitudes of people towards her, and the unsuitability of the school for children like her—there are 'stairs everywhere', and the toilets are far away. Further, there are forty in a class; and the teacher had been teaching from the age of fifteen, with no suitable teaching qualifications. In spite of all the 'inconveniences' she endures, she manages to be at the top of her class, and enjoys many friendships while at school. She continues with her studying through correspondence courses when completing her education at the normal schools proves difficult. She uses this educational background to develop self-sustaining careers, such as part-time teaching and free-lance journalism.

More importantly, 'education', whatever form it took, is seen as a pre-requisite to writing books, and this is for Reddy a way of asserting an identity that is undermined by the prejudices of those around her and a way of claiming her freedom (Van Niekerk 1994:70). This is generally true of black women writers in South Africa; the lack of education presents them with significant hurdles, as Daymond points out. 'For black women who chose to write stories (as against telling them) and

to write in English, questions of education and opportunity are what would have first controlled their activity' (Daymond 1996:193). In Reddy's case, education is deemed necessary for writing, which in turn is necessary to overcome the debilitating effects of muscular dystrophy.

Reddy displays the strong urge to read whatever she could lay her hands on, and this is an important part of her preparation in becoming a writer. She later uses this knowledge to run a small nursery school from her home, and to free-lance for a local newspaper. In reading voraciously she responds to the available colonial education of the time. Shirley Chew, in her book *The Unbecoming Daughters of Empire* (1993), shows the ubiquitous nature of colonial education in different contexts. Ironically, such education is usually a Eurocentric one, and this is true for Reddy as well. Unlike Zoe Wicomb, in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), and Tsitsi Dangaremba in *Nervous Conditions* (1991), Reddy does not develop a trenchant critique of the language and culture of the coloniser. Indian women writers, such as Mayat and Goonam, try to find a balance between an English, colonial education and an Indian traditional one, where the family languages, cultural values and, in Mayat's case, religion, are assiduously learnt and assimilated. Sam, in 'Jesus is Indian', describes the need to assert non-western cultural values and reinterpret the kind of Christianity that is transmitted to Her. However, Reddy embraces and assimilates her colonial education with alacrity and in an uncomplicated way, and this English cultural affiliation shapes her identity almost entirely. She does not show a reflexive awareness of her development as a writer, or of self-as-writer.

It is Reddy's colonial education that instils in her a special desire to visit England. She does make a trip to England with members of her family and ten others, as part of a special sponsored tour for handicapped persons. Her trip makes her all too aware of the discrepancies between Britain and South Africa, especially for disabled persons. Although the arrangements for the tour are poor, Reddy speaks of a dream come true as she goes to all the familiar sights that she had known from her reading of English Literature—Oxford, Stratford-on-Avon, The Lake District, Abbotsford (the home of Sir Walter Scott). She even manages to make a trip to the BBC for an interview. Phyllis Ntantala records in her autobiography, *A Life's Mosaic* (1992), that when she was in England she visited familiar sites from her reading of English literature. In living in the world of mainstream English literature Reddy, like Ntantala, is presumably enjoying escape not only from 'South African social realities' (Nuttall 1996:6) and her own physical handicap, but is expanding her imaginative world, as 'books and reading (are) adopted by the narrating self as signs of an "intellectual" identity' (Nuttall 1996:9).

Writing the Body

Reddy's muscular dystrophy directly influences the assertion of her identity through writing, the search for wholeness and the need to claim a 'self'. In most South African black women's writings—Bessie Head, Zoe Wicomb, Gcina Mhlophe—the body, gendered and racialised—plays a significant part in the formation of subjectivity. Apart from race and gender, ethnicity, location and politics may also be linked to the way writers assert and negotiate their identity. The 'double jeopardy' that feminists have usually talked about is extended, in Reddy's writing, to a *multiple* one, making her work a unique and classic study in the 'politics of otherness' among autobiographical writings by black women in South Africa.

Writing, in her condition, she points out, was a 'profession that was highly suited to me' (10). It gives her the satisfaction of 'putting down your thoughts on paper and seeing a whole new world taking shape. A world you created' (10). Not able to participate more actively in that world, she is able to observe it, comment on it, and develop a fictional and imaginary and imaginative world out of it. In an interview with Annemarié Van Niekerk, Reddy states: 'I especially enjoy creating a whole world of my own which outreaches any possible confinements' (1994:74). 'Writing the body' is indeed a way of transcending the body's 'infirmity'. Sidonie Smith's cogent critique of autobiographical writing from the point of view of the politics of the body has particular relevance to questions of identity in Reddy's autobiography. Smith notes that '... those positioned peripherally to the dominant group, those claiming and/or assigned marginalised identities, find themselves partitioned in their bodies ...' (Smith 1993:10). Reddy's body is 'taken back and honoured on the way to speech and writing' (Smith 1993:177). Smith prompts exploration of the specific body that is claimed in the autobiographical text; of the implications for subjectivity of the body's positioning (Whitlock 2000:28).

Kathleen Komar states that many women writers 'exploit an interior space that is not biological but psychological, a space that is eventually re-exteriorized in the form of the literary text itself' (Komar 1994:97). The limitations that women generally experience makes them use the literary text as a public space. This is certainly true of Reddy, whose confinement through her disability, made her determined to overcome her condition through writing. While she does not engage in intense reflection of interior experiences, her sexuality, she does use her writing to reflect on the affairs of the world and create an important literary space for herself. In Reddy's attempt to 'write the body' then we see two main facets. One is a narrative of bodily disability, exacerbated by the fact that she is black and a women; the other is a narrative of enablement. Her increasing disablement as a person, the unfortunate bodily inconvenience she experienced, is juxtaposed by her increasing enablement as a writer. Writing affords her imaginative compensation and affirmation at the same time that she is enduring increasing physical deterioration.

There is a contrast between the confined world that she has to inhabit as a person and the imaginative world that she is able to portray in her fictional writing. The physically straitened space which she inhabits is quite different from the unconstrained spaces of her imagination. Although her disability put in her path many impediments, she fashions an alternative self through her writing. In extending her sense of self, she is able to realise her social self in a measure that is quite remarkable—because of and in spite of her illness. Reddy transcends the limitations of her physical body to inhabit diverse racial, gendered, social, religious, and cultural bodies.

The physical locations which her short stories depict include hospitals ('A Dream at Sunset'), temples, the market ('Market Days'), townships and rural areas. While she does paint a wide canvas, she still generally depicts circumscribed domestic spaces. The geographical sites are very similar to the domestic and township spaces that one is familiar with in Durban and its environs.

At times Reddy uses experiences that surrounded her illness as grist for her fictional writing. Some of her short stories depict confinement, similar to her own. In the short story, 'Celebration', an old woman is confined to her room. In 'A Gift for Rajendra' we encounter a boy who is disabled, with the realisation that he will never walk again (8). An itinerant barber, who is now redundant because of modernised services, is appreciated as he finds a mother wanting to give her son Rajendra, confined to a wheelchair, the gift of regular haircuts; the barber's itinerancy is then seen as a blessing. The character of the barber is based on a real life person Reddy knew in Clare Estate. Other short stories are set in hospitals; it is evident from her autobiography that, owing to her condition, she is taken to hospitals on several occasions. Conversely, she develops the silences in her autobiography into fictional accounts in her short stories. For example, private, emotional longings or experiences of love, marriage and childbirth, which are not alluded to in the autobiography, are written about in her short fiction.

Her personal condition enables her to become an acute observer of events and persons around her. As she writes in her autobiography, 'Memories, impressions and thoughts all form part of the process. Then there is the observer in you, the observer that sees too much, whose perceptions are sharper than normal, whose heightened awareness enables him to sense things beyond the obvious' (10). And given her frailty she writes short sustainable pieces. The autobiography follows the style of her short story writing in that it comprises vignettes of various incidents in her life.

Spatial Restrictions and Apartheid Society

While the dominant trope that determines her narrative self-construction in the autobiography is that of her disability it is located in the context of racial divisions of the apartheid state. The story of Reddy's disability is played out in the context of apartheid's separate spaces. Alongside her physical constriction owing to her disability, Reddy is also restricted to the spatial worlds dictated to by apartheid. Through segregation apartheid is directly responsible for the construction of racial identities, and in Reddy's case it is exacerbated by her handicapped state.

The space that is depicted in Reddy's writings is a racially hierarchised one, and highlights the 'spatial politics of difference' (Blunt & Rose 1994:19) in South Africa, with the personal and the public being interwoven. It is to be seen in the context of the socio-political economy of apartheid and the Group Areas Act. Durban is the site of the original Group Areas legislation, designed specifically to keep the movement of Indians in urban areas in check, and separate Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Indians from one another. Reddy recalls that previously integrated living that was destroyed: her aunt, Mutha, had a farm in New Germany, now an African township (Clermont); and an African women with a large family—who owned a cow and supplied milk to the neighbourhood in Clare Estate but had to sell her home and move out of the area.

The attempt to separate racial groups on the basis of cultural differences influences identity construction. Robert Thorton's observation in this respect shows the calculated severity of apartheid. He states that South Africa is:

known for its apparent totalising system of social engineering in which the vision of 'apartness', apartheid was implemented through massive and violent spatial dislocation of much of its population in terms of a rationalised bureaucratic master-plan of a total differentiation of spheres of life based on race and (what was the name for its architects) culture (In Werbner 1996:142).

The places that one could call 'home' and that shaped one's identity were not mere accidents or the result of personal choice and means. Of its broader implications, Viswesaran notes: '(For) if it is geography that symbolizes the field, and anthropology's problematic epistemological site, then ... it is demography that radically symbolises "home", and, I would argue, anthropology's reterritorialized epistemological site: who lives in what neighbourhood and why; who went to what school and why' (Viswesaran 1994:106).

The autobiography shows Reddy and her family confined to separate areas set aside for Indians. We have numerous examples of separate schools, separate

libraries, and other facilities. Ela Gandhi also recounts a similar story in an interview with Diana Russell (1989:135):

Ever since I could remember, I was aware of living in the apartheid system. I travelled to school by train, and I always had to use the non-white compartments. Often I would see that the white compartments were empty, while ours were full, sometimes necessitating my standing all the way from Phoenix to Durban, which is about a forty-five minute journey. The amusement parks were only open to whites, the beaches were separate, and so on. These things made me bitter and aware that the whole system is inhuman. And the Africans suffered more than the Indians.

The tendency to 'collapse space' in this way began in the early indentured years, where Indians of different languages and castes, were forced to live together. In the 'new leavening process' that inevitably evolved, a pan-Indian culture began to emerge, alongside internal differences (Haraksingh 1990:8). With this kind of living during the apartheid era, what occurs is a consolidation of this constructed communal life, where 'community' was developed and reified on essentialist notions of race and ethnicity.

Is Reddy, then, constructing an 'ethnic autobiography', and is this the result of the 'social ethos of (the) pluralism' of apartheid (Viswesaran, 1994:8)? Linda Warley (1993) points out that 'spatial location is crucial to post-colonial autobiographical self-representation', that we tend to ignore the geographic and ethnocentric bias of Euro-American autobiography. She argues that 'forgetting of the locatedness of the subject speaks of an imperialist assumption of centrality that has never been possible for the post-colonial writer' (1993). Warley stresses 'that the particular geographic and micro-spatial location of the autobiographical 'I' must be read as an important element of textual identity, for *all autobiographical subjects are located subjects* (even European ones)' (1993, e.i.o.). This is clearly evident in Reddy's writings, especially her autobiographical writing, where she is constrained to write largely about the confined apartheid areas in which she was forced to live.

Reddy does not strive to be overtly political, but her work is situated against the larger questions of race and apartheid. In conversations about her writings, she states quite simply that she writes, and does not reflect on her identity as a writer in any self-conscious way in terms of gender, race or class, or political affiliation. She does point out, though, that 'if you are reflecting life in this country and the effect change and restrictive legislation has had on its people, then your work inevitably becomes political' (Van Niekerk 1994:71). Encountering some of the evils of apartheid personally, she writes, 'Not for the first time, I seethed at the idiotic laws that strangled life in this country' (108). At the time of her growing up—the 1950s—

there is severe entrenchment of 'separate development'. *Black Consciousness* was to become more firmly established by the 1970s, when a younger generation of Indians would identify with a larger black identity (Reddy's cousin, Saths Cooper, became a stalwart in the Black Consciousness movement and an ardent anti-apartheid activist, and was imprisoned on Robben Island).

Alongside her personal story of her physical trauma, Reddy recounts this wider story of dislocation and displacement. She herself is poised on the 'fringe of dreamtime' as she recalls in the autobiography a lost world that she enjoyed with her extended family, and of the existential anguish of uprooting. This narrative strand is positioned alongside her principle concern for her distraught physical state. In this the autobiography may be seen as documenting both a personal as well as a collective history. In the autobiography there is a strong sense of communal memory, intertwined with personal memory. With constant control of individuals by apartheid policies, many communal memories were scripted as personal memories. Memory is especially potent in Reddy, who writes, 'so many things stand out sharply in my mind, as sharply as peaks against a winter sky' (11).

Reddy's story shows the family's continual movement from one place to another. She writes of the constant uprooting and relocation due to the Group Areas legislation that they were subjected to. Reddy's family moved to different places in Durban and its surrounding areas. Reddy's story begins with her growing up in the 1960s in Briardene, a semi-rural area then outside Durban. Her father was born in Briardene, and worked for Bakers Limited as a 'van boy', delivering bread by horse cart. This place, where she spent the first four years of her life, has a strong hold on her imagination. She remembers that Briardene 'was a place full of rugged hills and valleys with deep mysterious shadows', with an irreal quality about it: 'Today Briardene is no longer an Indian area but it still retains that haunted quality reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights*' (11). In drawing from her imagination, Reddy occasionally claims wider world of the cosmic and infinite through her writings. Her love of storms, the wilderness, and hills becomes readily evident, and shows a desire to reach beyond the ephemeral, mundane, and local.

From Briardene the family then moves to the city, to Hampson Grove, to live with her 'granny'. Reddy writes of life here—the hustle and bustle of life in this part of the urban area—Hampson Grove, Warwick Avenue, Ajax Lane, Wills Road, where many Indians lived in the 1950s. She notes that the 'area in which we lived no longer exists as I remember it. A freeway runs right through it, flattening the quaint, interesting roads. Long before that however, people were forced out of the area through the group Areas Act' (18). These are the same places that Phyllis Naidoo recalls in her writings, as she consciously tries to transgress the apartheid boundaries. Naidoo gives a different feel to these places through her experiences of shebeen life there and its vibrant multi-racial character.

Because of the uprooting, a sense of loss, and the memory of that loss, become inevitable motifs in Reddy's writing. Initially there was the uprooting of Indians from their ancestral homes. These hints of 'the motherland', and of a 'lamenting for their motherland' (Rooke 1953/1990:10), are particularly evident among the first generation of Indians who set foot in South Africa. While Reddy's father was born in South Africa it is the grandfather who came from 'farming stock ... in India' (22). This sense of loss was then exacerbated by colonialism and apartheid, or at times, by personal tragedy. Her grandmother, Mungamma Reddy, for instance, has to move from their farm at Roosfontein, which is situated beyond the city, in the suburban spaces of Westville. She gives up her farm in Roosfontein and moves to the city on the death of her husband. She is an emotionally strong woman who earns her keep by selling her wares at a stall in the Indian market, but the experience of leaving her old family home is heart-rending:

Mungamma returned to Roosfontein, the day the old wood and iron house was pulled down. An old tree grew on the road, a silent witness to events. She stood under its familiar comfort and wept. For a home is more than brick and mortar, its laughter and memories, pain and joy, warmth and sharing, living and being born, growing and developing. It's togetherness. It's a place to return to when everywhere else has palled, an eternal truth so poignantly made in the parable of the Prodigal Son (23).

Memory is often linked to a sense of place, particularly those places from which her family are removed. There is a longing for the lost countryside. Flora and fauna are an intrinsic part of Reddy's story. There is regret that this quality of existence has to make way for inevitable, creeping change. 'The beautiful wilderness was carved up and sold...Everyone lauded the changing environment, labelling it progress and improvement' (29). The wilderness and the bushes gradually recede. 'We no longer see that many birds and butterflies. Fireflies used to be so common but I no longer see them. Spiders, frogs and snakes have all become rare' (29). It was the time when an iguana would come to bask on a neighbour's front lawn (29). What emerges through the descriptions in the autobiography is a strong sense of violation of the idyllic countryside. This violation of nature is also the result of the denudation caused by apartheid policies.

The experiences of dislocation due to apartheid policies and practices are not peculiar to Reddy, but is a common thread that runs through many examples of South African literature by Black writers. Ronnie Govender in the Epilogue to his collection of short stories set in Cato Manor, *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories*, writes of the loss that so many Indians experienced when they had to move from Cato Manor to Chatsworth:

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CATO MANOR

silence now and bush
no more Discovery Road
no more Trimborne Road
no more hopscotch
no more ripe mangoes from Thumba's yard
Cato Manor, you have done your penance
amid crumpled eviction notices
(Govender 1996:159).

This death of 'Cato Manor', as recorded in literature, is similar to that of Sophiatown described by Bloke Modisane and Can Themba, or of District Six by writers such as Alex La Guma and Richard Rive (Ehmeir 1995:27f). These separate places become symbolic of the spatial location of apartheid society, and is a theme that is also taken up in Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight*, and in Goonam's autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*. Recently, the memoir of Pushpam Murugan, *The Lotus Blossoms on the Eastern Vlei*, documents the history of families living in Magazine Barracks in Durban, before the removals between 1964 and 1966. While Ronnie Govender depicts the effects that 'Cato Manor' had on men, Reddy and Karodia show the loss that both men and women experienced through such 'relocations'. Similarly, in her autobiography *Call me Woman*, Ellen Kuzwayo tells of the world that was lost by her family when they were forced to move in 1974 from their freehold farm which they had owned from the 1880's. And Pippa Green speaks of the 'bulldozers and jackhammers of apartheid' that destroyed Ozzie Docrat's home in Pageview around 1978, a story that is recorded by David Goldblatt in *South Africa the Structure of Things Then* (Green 1998).

A Range of Subject Positions

In her short stories Reddy attempts to transgress this ethnically and racially constricted world that she depicts in her autobiography. She writes of different race groups interacting with one another, crossing race and class barriers ('Snatch the Wind and run'), creating, where possible, integrated worlds. Persons from different race groups may interact with one another in the same household, mainly through a master-servant relationship (as in 'Celebration', 'The Stolen Hours', 'Friends'). There are those who make a conscious effort to interact with others from racially different neighbourhoods ('Snatch the Wind and Run' and 'The Slumbering Spirit'). Some go beyond the racially defined relationships that Reddy generally depicts in her autobiography and transcend the Manichean world dictated to by apartheid ('The Slumbering Spirit'), and others find it difficult to do so ('On the Fringe of

Dreamtime'). While she does not paint a wide regional landscape, as do Sam and Karodia, she moves from crowded city sites ('Market Days'), to peri-urban and suburban settings ('The Spirit of Two Worlds'), to rural ones in Natal ('A Gift for Rajendra' and 'A Dream at Sunset').

Under-girding all her short stories is the unmistakable reality of apartheid life in South Africa, and all that comes with it—racial tension and conflict, bigotry, dislocation, materialistic aspirations, a yearning and desire to be accepted in an alienating world. Highlighting the 'ordinary' rather than 'spectacle', Reddy writes of quotidian reality rather than of the macro-political world. She shows the effects of racism and racial prejudices at an individual, domestic and personal level. There are both fissures in racially-defined relationships as well as valiant attempts to bridge such schisms. We see a tension between acceptance of conventional racialised thinking—of the place of white dominance as part of the order of things—and of incipient resistance to it. Like Sam and Karodia, there are instances of prejudice and discrimination among oppressed groups themselves, or empathy with other oppressed race groups.

At the same time as she writes of other race groups, her personal experiences makes her sensitive to the experiences of Indians, especially in relation to dislocation and loss, and she does write about these in her short stories, producing a collection that provides a cultural kaleidoscope of South African life. In her poignant short story, 'On the Fringe of Dreamtime', Reddy shows how the strong bonds between humans and the natural environment are severed. She tells of the story of an Indian man (it is significant that he is nameless) who returns to his old homestead, now turned into a 'Group Area' for whites:

He ran his hand along the arm of the branch which was still as strong as ever. Here his father had hung a makeshift swing, by tying two ends of a rope to the branches and placing a sack over it for a seat To him it had been more than an ordinary tree. He had come to love it in all its moods and it became a symbol of safety, a source of strength like a sturdy reliable friend (6).

The tree stands as a link to a lost life, as it conjures up memories of the past:

The mistiness of memory cleared and he became aware that everything else about the place was strange and unfamiliar. Only the tree remained, a silent witness to time and its pain. There, on the fringe of dreamtime, he could hear echoes of past laughter and knew once more the searing pain of heartbreak (62).

The evocative descriptive shows the extent to which it was possible to dream unhindered of a time when there was a tacit connectedness with all things. It also heightens the dereliction and alienation of the present:

Down at the stream, he imagined he heard his mother slapping the washing on the stones and singing the folk songs of her youth The crabs would crawl out of the water He and his brother would sit on the rocks and watch them, fascinated They were at one with all of creation ... (65).

The short story also shows that the Group Areas legislation was to directly influence the creation of identities, where 'ethnicity was constructed within a politics of nostalgia that sentimentalised the loss' (Wicomb 95).

Most important, the short stories show a range of subject positions and identifications, in Reddy's attempt to constitute a new ethical whole, as she recreates and restores a sense of community destroyed by apartheid. Drawing from the peculiar socio-political aspects of living in South Africa as a rich narrative resource, she presents life situations confronting persons of all population groups.

In 'The Slumbering Spirit' is about a young Coloured boy named Terry who grows in confidence and self-awareness through the love and attention from a surrogate mother. It is set in the period before the group Areas Act divided the different race groups, and there was a neighbourhood of Coloureds, Indians and Whites and Chinese living together. Terry's family are sceptical of his friendship with a White woman, but Terry appreciates that the woman has time for a young person such as he, lost in a large family of ten:

Miss Anderson had given him something, something more precious than anything material. Years later, he was to recognise it for what it really was. But standing there in the cool night air, with a lift of the heart, he remembered a gentle old woman on a sun-warmed stoop. She had given him time and friendship, and something else which his fourteen-year-old mind was too young to analyse. It was awakening, an awakening of the slumbering spirit to mutual sharing and communication and sympathetic understanding and that was something he would carry with him for a lifetime (120).

The picture of a loving woman, as depicted in 'The Slumbering spirit' (19), is similar to the kind of neighbours Reddy herself had when her family lived in Hampson Court. In her autobiography Reddy notes that 'the woman of the house, a plump motherly women, loved children, even though she had four of her own' (19). As pointed out earlier, Reddy is also loved and affirmed by the women in her family—

her grandmother, aunts and her mother. She understands well the transfiguring effect that such love can have on an individual.

Reddy takes a critical view of those who show race and class prejudice. She portrays complex inter-race relationships, as in the short story, 'Two Friends'. In this short story, the 'madam', Sadhana, who is married for eleven years, is trapped in a boring marriage. She indulges in watching films on television to pass the time away. Her domestic employee, Bessie, brings her little daughter, Phumza, to work, and Asha, Sadhana's daughter, and Phumza become 'two friends'. Asha, who seems angry at being neglected by her mother, tramples her doll, while Phumza looks on with horror, especially since she nurtures a secret desire to own a golden-haired doll of her own. Phumza nurses the doll, putting it on her back 'in the manner of generations of African mothers' (110). She is bonding with the 'child' in a way that Sadhana does not seem capable of in relation to her daughter. When Asha sees this she demands her doll back, and Bessie, all too aware of the limits of a 'friendship' tempered by class and race differences, tells her daughter to return the doll. Sadhana, in the meantime, watches the scene with amused detachment, and is unable to see that she is caught in a conflict in which she is both estranged and estranging. She is oblivious to the inter-implicative bond between master/madam and servant, self and other, and the way this is played out between her and Bessie and their children. Bessie's silence and acquiescence shows her in the role of non-person or subaltern, and Reddy is suggesting a racial and class polarity that prevents a sisterhood across these oppressions.

The short story, 'The Stolen Hours', also depicts the experiences of a domestic employee, who dreams of wearing a much-coveted dress owned by her employer. The employee wears the dress when the family are away on holiday, and spends a few glorious hours imagining herself in another world. Domestic employees, mainly African women, with no institutional other to oppress, are a permanent underclass, and Reddy is conscious of their plight. In her autobiography, she speaks a great deal about her relationship with her domestic employees (102), as she is dependent on them. She also describes her own reservations and prejudices, although in her short stories, she transcends them. (It is worth noting that Rosemary, mentioned in the autobiography, still works in the Reddy home at Clare Estate, and is the housekeeper for the brother Mags.)

Reddy does not confine her short stories to experience peculiar to Indians (as is generally true of her autobiography), but is also able to write imaginatively and emphatically of relationships among Africans themselves. In her short story, 'The Love Beads', the typical love triangle is given a new twist. Jacob, a rickshaw driver, is involved in an accident, and taken to hospital, where he meets Mandy, a nurse. In a world of hardship and impoverishment, and separated from his wife by apartheid laws, he feels a strong attraction to the nurse—'her sweetness reminded him of the

sweetness of swiftly flowing streams. Her warmth was like the warmth of the sun in winter, gentle and welcome' (Reddy 1987:22). He luxuriates in the attention he receives at the hospital, and imagines fleetingly that he is falling in love with Mandy. He soon comes to realise that the nurse is going to get married, and that he has to live his own life, and value what he has. He begins to appreciate his wife's faithfulness and gentleness towards him, fingering the love beads, of red, yellow and black, given to him by her: 'He fingered the beads absently. Then he realised what an important link the beads were between his life in the city and his life in the Transkei. It was a link that was umbilical' (Reddy 1987:23).

Gendered Spaces and Identity: Living in the Yard

In Reddy's writings, identity is spatially defined not only in terms of race, but also of gender. In Reddy's autobiography there are descriptions of racially separate spaces, but in many instances these are also gendered spaces, with their own 'female subculture'. When the family moved to Clare Estate, Reddy describes a striking picture of communal life, of 'living in the yard', a common space between homes that is usually used for social interaction. 'The yard' is at once a private and public space—private, as it is peripheral to dominant white places, and public, as it provides interaction for those who are marginalised. It is also a gendered space, where women gather together to converse or pursue domestic tasks traditionally assigned to them. Reddy describes the daily, ordinary routine and rituals of Indian women who are juxtaposed in such communal spaces.

In the autobiography there are vivid scenes of women working at daily, ordinary, gendered chores—winnowing rice, cooking on open fires, cleaning vegetables or preparing sheep heads for consumption (Reddy bemoans the fact that a scene of the sheep-singeing was left out of her script [*Web of Persuasion*] when it was sent for publication. It is likely that this was seen as too 'culturally idiosyncratic' for western readers. It is also referred to in the short story, 'Market Days'). Life revolves around food, and with this, the sharing of taboos, such as those pertaining to the eating of pork and beef. We read of an itinerant seamstress, with her treadle sewing machine, who periodically becomes the focus of attention. Modern luxuries are sparse, with all the neighbours using the only fridge in the yard. In the need to survive, women play a central role, and act, as usual, as stabilisers of communal living. During their time together they share gossip, but also details of their own personal lives, of abuse or disappointment.

In relation to the yard-space, Brinda Mehta ponders on a 'reconfiguring of the politics of the household' in her interesting analysis of the Indo-Caribbean home. Mehta argues that 'serving as community space, the yard also provides the necessary space to establish a centre for political and social advising for women, resembling a

village panchayat or council...Female power is thus located in the dual capacity to negotiate one's way through the inner machinations of the home as well as through life's forces, represented by the yard and its capacity to function as a microcosm of a more global, external exchange' (Mehta 1997:10).

These liminal, communal spaces, then, help women create, shape, modify and claim identity. Are these recuperative spaces as Kathleen Komar suggests, enclosed female spaces, reminiscent of the womb? Are they seen as places of confinement in which women are contained and separated from male social space (Komar 1994:91)? In Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight*, the kitchen becomes the space where the women meet and strategise about dealing with the world. While recuperative in terms of gender and class, it also provides community in the face of a dehumanising public life in terms of race. Dorothy Driver notes that the 'search for a self-constituting community is important because of the damage done to Black South Africans in an apartheid culture' (Driver 1990:232). This is particularly so for Black women, given their marginalisation at several levels.

Yet, in the closed communal context we see an eclipsing of any introspective, psychological probing of living in a segregated society. Goonam is only able to claim a critical, interpretive voice against such alienation from the wider South African community when she has moved out of the false security of a confined racially-constructed communal space. And Phyllis Naidoo appropriates an apartheid goal as the liberatory space for the creation and celebration of racial solidarity and a sense of community with persons of different racial groups.

It is this implicit critique of racialised and gendered spaces that makes Reddy in her short stories, in contrast to her autobiography, depict a wider and more intricate canvas of social relations in the context of racial and gender divisions. The women in Reddy's autobiography are resilient and assertive, supporting their men in decisions that have to be made. In her short stories a more complex picture of women in domestic spaces emerges; they are found in varying and diverse social relationships, some stifling and others liberating. The women may be seen as struggling between individualistic inclinations to be free and independent, and traditional, conservative influences that pin them down. There is a negotiation and appropriation of private, gendered spaces, or an attempt to transcend their confines to recreate female identity.

The dire effects of the changing times on family and communal relationships are alluded to constantly. In 'The Spirit of Two Worlds', seething conflict between an older, conservative mother-in-law and a younger, modern, daughter-in-law develops. Reddy draws on the narrow conformity and claustrophobic atmosphere of the extended family, or kutum, the gendered roles that are usually assumed in these domestic contexts, and the pressures, both internal and external, that come to bear upon it. The story takes us into the world of South Africa's cramped council-house

and tenement living. Sharda, the daughter-in-law, longs to be independent, to live on her own, and to go out to work. She wishes to claim an alternative space, both literally and metaphorically.

Family life is centred in the domineering matriarchal figure of the mother-in-law, who expects compliance. The mother-in-law works hard to keep the family together, running a market stall in the city, and resisting any threat to a carefully constructed and 'stable' sense of family. Her own work outside the home is based on sheer survival; she cannot understand why her daughter-in-law should choose to work to escape 'boredom'. A state of boredom, the mother-in-law reflects, is surely a modern disease: 'Her mind went back over the years searching for something which remotely resembled this malady, but there was nothing. There had been hardships, countless sacrifices which had been made willingly, much pain and heart-break and some rare and memorable moments of joy and happiness, but never boredom' (11). After the son and daughter-in-law leave to make an independent home, and their first child arrives, the mother relents, thereby preserving the ritual bonds of the extended family.

In her TV drama, 'The Web of Persuasion', Reddy explores this question of women's independence in the face of traditional constraints. The play, deftly juxtaposing the old world and a new emerging one, begins with several conversations among guests at the scene of an Indian wedding. There is a stark contrast between the conversations of the adults and those of their children. The women talk of the way children behave 'these days'; they recall how weddings were conducted previously, and of the times when there was more land for the joint family system. They are conscious of differences in linguistic preferences, wealth and even complexion—'best to marry your own kind' (4).

Mrs Singh wishes for an arranged marriage for her daughter Indira, while Indira prefers, instead, to go to university to study law. The mother asserts, 'I know what is best for you and my plans are made' (7). Indira sees the way her sister-in-law is trapped in an unhappy marriage. 'I want to enjoy my life before I'm tied down to a husband and children'. When the two families meet and the ritual of serving the tea is endured, Indira begins to realise that Anil, the 'arranged' suitor, feels just as uncomfortable as she does about the whole affair. The two resist their family's overtures, and find that they could be friends by fighting a tradition that is mindlessly perpetuated. 'My mother is doing what her mother did, and her mother. Daughters must be married off. I wish I were a man' (18).

Indira wishes to assert her independence. 'I'm not a parcel to be wrapped up and handed over as a gift, Ma. I have a mind. I have feelings and I have a right to choose If you wanted to sell me for the best offer you should have kept me in purdah' (25). The mother is the voice of tradition, sectarianism and patriarchy: 'Rights, rights. You talk about rights. You are a child. You are a girl, and you are a

Hindu' (25). Indira tries to run away, but is resigned in the end to her marriage, when she is presented with two options only, accepting the partner that has been chosen for her, or being abandoned to a life of loneliness, thereby bringing 'disgrace' to the family. The play ends with the prospect of the two, Indira and her husband, beginning to understand each other, and accommodating each other's ambitions.

In the short story 'A Time to Yield', however, a woman's resistance is not accommodated but transformed into acquiescence. We witness a domestic scene before a wedding day, mainly among the chief women players of the occasion—a bride, her mother, sister, and grandmother. Zainab, the young bride, is experiencing doubt, anger, reluctance, bitterness, and dread, at the prospect of being forced into a marriage against her wishes. The rest of the women around her play ambiguous roles, forcing her to be submissive, to endure, and accept her lot, in the hope that she will be happy, that love will grow during the marriage. And inverted sisterhood is evident, as pressure is exerted on the bride to adapt, to acquiesce. For women caught between tradition and modernity, and seen as the pillars in social relations, conformity and compliance is the expedient route. Here Reddy writes of the restlessness, the conflict and anxiety that women experience over traditional roles, but does not depict outright revolt. However, in the short story, 'Celebration', Shamala the female protagonist, embroiled in a suffocating marriage, realises that she can give the story of her life a different ending if she wills it. Beginning a new life by transforming the gender identity imposed on her is her 'celebration'.

Conclusion: Infirmary, Identity, Writing, Voice and Power

Reddy's autobiography is about a self concerned primarily with its own physical handicap and disease. In her autobiography she constantly returns to the problem of her helplessness. Yet hers is also a powerful story of the overcoming of the body's infirmity and helplessness, of claiming power, through carving out an identity as a writer. The power and influence that she claims is not social (her passing away in 1996 went almost unnoticed), economic or political, but moral. Visweswaran argues that identities are constructed by power:

Autobiographies are, of course, fictions of the self, but in my view, this emphasis on pluralism leads to a notion of 'trying on identities', which obscures the fact that identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically constituted (Visweswaran 1994:8).

Reddy's life shows a struggle against any such deterministic, 'historically constituted' identities that might have been conferred on her, especially in view of her physical

condition. While very different from other women writers in respect of her physical disability, there is still an interesting resemblance between Reddy and the other South African women autobiographers that have emerged of late; these writers validate their experiences through writing and gaining narrative control and discursive power, writing of the very experiences that were marginalised by apartheid history. The political role of autobiography for South African women writers that Jane Watts (1987:115) spells is, I believe, a view that has direct bearing on Reddy's writings:

Autobiography is the South African writers' answer to ... interference with their consciousness—they use it to try to reverse the conditioning process in order to free themselves, through reassessment of their entire growth and development, of their mental subjugation, to remake their consciousness ... Writing becomes a request for reassurance that they in fact have an identity, that they have rescued the fragments and shards of a personality from the systematic official attempt to eradicate it.

South African Black women writers have used the genre of autobiography to recreate identity. We see this explicit political purpose through 'life-writing' in Black women's autobiographies such as those of Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* (1991), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989), and Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Women* (1985). Jane Watts sees the autobiography as a 'self-making process' for the South African Black writer. She points out that it is 'a means by which they can find the balance between themselves and the outside world and investigate that tension between the subjective and objective that orders our whole life' (Watts 1987:114). We notice in Reddy's case that it is through her identity as a writer, an identity that is part of and an extension of her 'life-writing', that she is able to transcend the constrictions of disabled/racialised/gendered spaces, the circumscribed spaces that she as a Black woman with a physical disability is forced to endure.

What is evident, then, in Reddy's writing, both autobiographical and imaginative, is an implicit womanist, rather than a feminist, interpretation of her experiences and the world. Laura Donaldson (1992:21) points out that womanism 'affirms the interweaving of oppressions and incorporates sexual, racial, cultural, national, and economic considerations into any politics of reading'. This calls for a constant re-reading and interrogation of the 'politics of location'. Moving beyond the narrow individualism that is typical of Western autobiography, and showing, in Donna Haraway's (see Pfeil 1994:211) words, 'a different normative genealogy for women's liberation' than mainstream feminism, the 'paradigm of the self' (Friedman 1988:46) that Reddy creates and recreates in *The Unbending Reed* emphasises a relational feminine self. Such 'cultural autobiography' (Friedman 1988:43) is

inevitable for Black women such as Reddy who developed a sense of self that is inseparable from her sense of community—as she defined it, and was defined and constructed. In engaging in a powerful and persuasive 'politics of articulation' both in her life and in her writing, and 'in representing elements of the 'self', which are considered 'other' by dominant systems of representation [we see] that an act of reclamation, empowerment and self-definition occurs' (Parmar 1990:116).

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