

Orality and the South African Short Story: Es'kia Mphahlele's 'Mrs Plum'

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In her study of the works of Es'kia Mphahlele, Ursula Barnett quotes a letter to her from the author in which he remarks that 'Mrs Plum' was 'the best thing I ever pulled off'. It is certainly Mphahlele's most widely discussed and anthologised story, and justifiably so: it is an acute and subtle interrogation of white liberalism in South Africa by a black narrator whose steady growth in knowledge and understanding allows her to prise apart the liberal ideology of her employer and to expose the hypocrisy and injustice that it contains.

'Mrs Plum' is narrated by Karabo, a black woman in her early twenties, and the chief focus of the narrative is what Karabo experiences in her three-year stint as a domestic worker for Mrs Plum. Mrs Plum lives in Greenside (which signifies 'wealthy Johannesburg northern suburbs') and, in the words of Karabo, 'love[s] dogs and Africans and said that everyone must follow the law even if it hurt' (Mphahlele 1967: 164). These are the story's opening lines, and already we are made aware of Mphahlele's satirical intent (note the order of 'dogs and Africans ...').

Karabo hails from Phokeng near Rustenburg and has come to the big city to find work. Part one of the story provides an overview of the life of black domestic workers, their worries and delights, and their relationships with their madams. Part two takes a closer look at Mrs Plum. Mrs Plum is a classic northern suburbs liberal: she insists on calling Karabo by her African name; she also encourages her to read and generally to improve herself. But her concern for Karabo inevitably becomes a form of bullying manipulation:

she knows what is best for her servant, and will insist that she follow the prescribed course of improvement.

Karabo's relationship with Kate (Mrs Plum's daughter, who is the same age as Karabo) is a little more open and equal, until they become rivals for the affections of the same man (but this only comes a little later). A few pages into the story, the following revealing exchange occurs between the two young women:

.... Kate tells me plenty of things about Madam. She says to me she says, My mother goes to meetings many times. I ask her I say, What for? She says to me she says, For your people. I ask her I say, My people are in Phokeng far away. They have got mouths, I say. Why does she want to say something for them? Does she know what my mother and what my father want to say? They can speak when they want to (168).

A little further on, Kate describes to Karabo how the women of the Black Sash protest outside government buildings:

Kate also told me she said, My mother and other women who think like her put on black belts over their shoulders when they are sad and they want to show the white government they do not like the things being done by whites to blacks. My mother and the others go and stand where the people in government are going to enter or go out of a building.

I ask her I say, Does the government and the white people listen and stop their sins? She says, No. But my mother is in another group of white people.

I ask, Do the people of the government give the women tea and cakes? Kate says, Karabo! How stupid; oh!

I say to her I say, Among my people if someone comes and stands in front of my house I tell him to come in and I give him food. You white people are wonderful. But they keep standing there and the government people do not give them anything (16f).

So, very early on, then, Karabo shows her mettle: she debunks the classic liberal folly of believing that merely protesting to an inhuman and intransigent government will produce results; and she also implicitly criticises a society that believes itself to be superior to black culture, but that does not observe even the simplest of courtesies—that does not, in other words, treat people with respect. It is her very naïveté that proves most devastating: her frank rebuttals to Kate’s and Mrs Plum’s attempts to educate her are both funny and highly effective. At one point Mrs Plum objects to her addressing the gardener, Dick, as ‘boy’:

Now listen here, she says, You Africans must learn to speak properly about each other. And she says White people won’t talk kindly about you if you look down upon each other (171);

to which Karabo promptly replies: ‘Madam, I learned the words from the white people I worked for’ (171).

Part three deals with Karabo’s participation in the activities at the Black Crow Club, where she learns sewing and knitting—and politics . . . courtesy of the real-life Lilian Ngoyi. At this point in Karabo’s gradual progress towards awareness she observes: ‘I was learning. I was growing up’ (175). This forms a refrain in the story, and points to the story’s status as a *bildungsroman* (a work charting the growth and development of its main character).

Part four is by far the longest part of the story and presents the various crises that begin occurring. Dick has the onerous task of seeing to Mrs Plum’s two dogs (Monty and Malan), and is resentful at having to treat the animals as if they were human beings. Later, when a scare breaks out in the neighbourhood about servants poisoning the dogs of their employers, he is summarily dismissed by Mrs Plum. Karabo herself has a series of disillusioning experiences. She and Kate both fall in love with a black doctor who is one of Mrs Plum’s guests; this comes to nothing, but the experience leaves Karabo deeply resentful at Kate’s presumption in dating and wishing to marry a man in order, she says, to ‘help him’ (186). Karabo’s inward response is to think, ‘these white women, why do not they love their own men and leave us to love ours!’ (184).

Karabo becomes more and more disenchanted. Seeing Dick cleaning the dirt out of Mrs Plum's bath one day, she thinks: '*Sies!* Why cannot people wash the dirt of their own bodies out of the bath?' (194). And when, in that infamous moment in the story, she peeps through the keyhole and sees Mrs Plum engaged in what appears to be a bestial action with one of her dogs, her disenchantment is complete. Shortly after this, Mrs Plum refuses to give her leave to be with her family upon the death of her uncle, and Karabo decides to leave her service for good. However, a week after Karabo has come back to her parents' home, Mrs Plum herself arrives in Phokeng to attempt to persuade her to return. Karabo manages to exact a pay-rise from her and better leave arrangements, and the story ends in the following way:

The next day she found me packed and ready to return with her. She was very much pleased and looked kinder than I had ever known her. And me, I felt sure of myself, more than I had ever done.

Mrs. Plum says to me, You will not find Monty and Malan.

Oh?

Yes, they were stolen the day after you left. The police have not found them yet. I think they are dead myself.

I thought of Dick ... Could he? And she ... did this woman come to ask me to return because she had lost two animals she loved?

Mrs. Plum says to me she says, You know, I like your people, Karabo, the Africans.

And Dick and Me? I wondered (208).

So, in one sense, the story ends where it began—certainly as far as Mrs Plum is concerned: she loves dogs and Africans—in that order, and according to her lights. However, for Karabo, the experience has given rise to immense personal growth. In three years she has grown from a state of ignorance about white people and their ways, to one in which their worst aspects have been revealed. She will return to this world, but on her own terms, and older and wiser.

'Mrs Plum' has been commented on fairly extensively—most notably by Norman Hodge and Damian Ruth. At the opening of 'Mrs Plum', Hodge comments,

Karabo is cast as a seemingly naïve narrator, unconscious of what she is saying or thinking. Yet the reader soon realizes Mphahlele's mastery of narrative voice: he is able to show a character coming into contact with an unfamiliar environment, gradually learning about it, and at the same time, he uses Karabo's reactions as a means of illustrating some of the absurdities in South African white social protest (Hodge 1981: 34).

Here the distinction that can be drawn in this sort of story between the 'narrating I' and the 'experiencing I' is useful: the 'narrating I' is the narrative agency in the story, the 'voice' we hear relating the events of the story; the 'experiencing I' is the persona whose experiences over some three years make up the substance of the story. In 'Mrs Plum' we witness the gradual convergence of the two towards the story's end, as the initially naïve and inexperienced protagonist moves ever closer to the position occupied by the older and wiser narrator.

In his article, Ruth explores the story in relation to three others that, he argues, 'prefigure' it ('We'll Have Dinner at Eight', 'The Living and the Dead', and 'The Master of Doornvlei'). Ruth argues that Hodge 'makes too great a claim for Karabo: we do not at the end of the story have a character with 'a total awareness of self' (Ruth 1986: 65). Nonetheless, he agrees that the story has the qualities of a *bildungsroman* and points to its emphasis on the enlarged understanding of its protagonist:

it is specifically a story of how a black South African maid develops to a point where she sees through a white liberal madam and comes to a particular understanding of her socio-economic position in the society she enters (65).

At the end of the story, he concludes, 'Karabo opts for manipulating the oppressive structural expression of the relationship' with Mrs Plum: 'Karabo certainly has grown up and learnt; Mrs Plum obviously hasn't' (88).

I would endorse Ruth's analysis: Mphahlele is too canny to present the unsophisticated Karabo as having the insight necessary to dissect the world of white liberalism in clinical intellectual terms. Mphahlele knows that such a perspective would strain the credulity of the reader. What we

have, instead, is a situation expressed succinctly by Hodge in the first of his remarks quoted above (it is worth repeating):

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Both Hodge and Ruth have provided thorough and convincing readings of the story, and I do not want to go over the ground they so competently cover. However, there is one aspect of the story that has not received a great deal of attention, and it is this aspect that, I believe, makes the story so successful—Mphahlele's skilful use of *narrative voice*. He uses a first-person narrative point of view and filters the events of the story through the consciousness of his central character, so that we see these events through her eyes. The fact that Karabo is not a sophisticated, self-aware narrator makes her narrative all the more compelling. The purpose of the story is to probe at, and reveal, the contradictions of white liberalism in South Africa under apartheid, and Karabo does this extremely effectively. It is her very naïveté that makes her debunking of white liberalism so trenchant—and funny, to boot.

Let us look a little closer at Mphahlele's use of narrative voice. In the passages from the story I quoted earlier we can see examples of Mphahlele's adroit use of rhetorical devices that serve to *locate* the narrative voice ('I say to her I say ...'; 'Kate also told me she said ...'; 'I ask her I say ...'). This verbal tic, which is a skilful way of reminding us that we are listening to the voice of a narrator, is supplemented by an abundance of other idiomatic expressions: 'That day I was as angry as a red-hot iron when it meets water' (164); 'I do not know what runs crooked in the heads of other people' (168); 'our food ... is [s]o nice that it does not stop in the mouth or the throat to greet anyone before it passes smoothly down' (171); 'We walked in with slow footsteps that seemed to be sniffing at the floor' (187).

Karabo is a 'spy in the house of white South African liberalism,' and we are made privy to her discoveries via Mphahlele's use of narrative voice. Karabo becomes our eyes and ears, and her very forthrightness and

simplicity make her a believable witness. A third-person narrative point of view, with its customary detachment and distance, would not have served the purpose nearly as effectively. To be sure, the story itself is strong and memorable. But it is the way it is *told*—its use of idiomatically rich first-person narration—that makes it so entertaining, and, of course, *effective* as a piece of satirical fiction.

I wish to end by locating Mphahlele's masterpiece in a larger context. I have for some time been absorbed by the question of the relationship between oral and written forms in the South African short story. My fascination with the work of Herman Charles Bosman, in particular, led me far back into the early nineteenth century in pursuit of early models for his 'oral-style stories,' which is the term I believe most aptly characterises a narrative technique in which the cadences and styles of oral speech are simulated in written stories. I have traced the roots of this style of story to the 1840s, when Cape periodicals began to publish stories cast in the form of oral narratives¹. And then there is a century-long tradition of oral-style stories that follows. From writers like Drayson, writing in the 1860s, through Scully, FitzPatrick and Glanville in the late nineteenth century, and Gibbon and Pauline Smith in the first few decades of the twentieth century, Bosman inherited a rich local tradition of oral narrative, which he blended with the influence of the American humorous tradition (Twain, Leacock, and Harte, among others)².

However, after Bosman this style of story goes into sharp decline and surfaces only sporadically, and in substantially altered form, mainly in the work of black writers in the modern era. The post-war South African short story by whites—led by writers like Gordimer, Lessing, Jacobson, Cope and Paton—is predominantly social-realist in nature, typically focuses on the inner consciousness of a single protagonist, and is highly compressed in

¹ Two examples are an anonymous story entitled 'My Uncle's Tale', which appeared in *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Magazine* in 1848, and a story by one H. van Plaaks (*pseud.* C.A. Fairbridge), called 'Dirk van Splinter, a Legend of the Devil's Peak', which appeared in the same magazine in the same year.

² For an analysis of this tradition of story in South African literature, see Pereira (1986) and MacKenzie (1993; 1995; 1999).

form. It conforms, in other words, to the requirements of the modern short story. The broad development of the (overwhelmingly white) South African short story from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century to the stage it has reached in the present day, then, can be characterised as a steady and irreversible progression from fireside tale (or what I have called the oral-style story) to modern short story.

When one turns to the short story by black South African writers, however, this progression from fireside tale to modern short story (which brings with it the decline of stories written in an oral style) is to some extent reversed: from an initial reliance on Western modernist literary models in emergent black South African fiction in the late 1920s, many black writers sought increasingly to throw off Western influence and adopt African (largely oral) cultural modes. So while short stories by white writers evince a marked decline in oral influence in the post-war period, in the same period black South African writers were just beginning to rediscover their cultural roots. Prior to this, the tendency to mix cultural traditions was already evident in black short fiction (in R.R.R. Dhlomo, for instance), but this tendency gained impetus later, and is to be found chiefly in the writing of the 1970s and 1980s: short stories by A. C. Jordan, Bessie Head, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Mbulelo Mzamane, Mthobi Mutloatse, Joel Matlou and Njabulo Ndebele all bear the traces of such cultural 'hybridity.'

However, the convention of the frame narrative and the use of an intradiegetic storyteller figure in the South African short story occur very seldom after Bosman. Instead, what we find in the work of those writers attempting to adopt an 'oral style' in the modern era is the assumption by the author of the role and function of the oral storyteller. Instead of employing the convention of the internal narrator and frame narrative, the writer him- or herself takes on this narrative voice. 'The Writer as Storyteller?' is the title of Michael Vaughan's paper (1988) on Ndebele, and it aptly captures the nature of this phenomenon. In different ways various black writers (Head, Matshoba and Ndebele in particular) attempt to cast their stories in an oral style and they do this by assuming the mantle of the traditional oral storyteller.

In very few cases, however, is an oral style adopted as the *mode* in which their stories are narrated. Their stories, in other words, do not employ a storyteller figure and the cadences of oral speech—and thus the link with

the earlier oral-style tradition is tenuous. Interestingly, Mphahlele himself remarks on the paucity of oral-style stories in black South African writing: “Mrs Plum” is an attempt to record African speech rhythms and African speech idiom in English. To my knowledge there aren’t many ... black writers who try to do this ...’ (Mphahlele 1987: 31). More frequently (and most conspicuously in the case of Ndebele), oral cultural modes and values are merely *thematized*: they form a significant part of the subject-matter of the stories without fundamentally affecting the manner in which the stories are told.

Mphahlele’s ‘Mrs Plum’ is one of the few exceptions to this rule. In this story, as we have seen, Mphahlele uses a first-person narrator and the cadences of oral speech. This narrative device brings the reader very close to the narrator and her experiences. Indeed, it allows the reader to inhabit Karabo’s very consciousness, as it were—and it is this technique that makes the story so effective.

To my knowledge, Mphahlele did not repeat this technique in later stories—and, still more surprising, few writers after him made use of the rich legacy of the oral traditions of Africa in the narrative style of their stories. We can only wonder what other stories Karabo might have told us.

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