Springing the Cage: The Role of *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* in Constituting the Field of Postcolonial Ecofeminism

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Review Article
Engaging the Shades of Robben Island
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Abstract
Critical connections between postcolonial studies, gender studies and ecological studies are beginning to be articulated, and it is significant that these liberating intersections are most developed in a poem about the iconic South African prison Robben Island. In the context of the escalating crises of neo-imperial globalization, the global financial collapse, global warming, and assorted domestic, institutional, national and transnational chauvinisms that have engendered all too many incoherences and silences, this essay draws on the eponymous poem in Deela Khan's collection, other indicative African literary texts and research from various fields to begin the work of constituting the field of postcolonial ecofeminism.

Key Concepts: postcolonialism, feminism, ecology, postcolonial ecofeminism, African literature, South African poetry.

An increasingly complex world requires the development of more integrated responses to experience and to the construction of knowledge. Postcolonial studies, ecological studies and gender studies are progressive approaches that deploy a variety of conjunctural constructs to make better sense of the difficult terrains that each traverses. It is not surprising to discover that it is in the genre of poetry that the connections between such conjunctures are beginning to be articulated. Innovative representation is a particular strength of poetry, which has long facilitated the introduction of new themes and ways of constituting experience, as well as more creative and critical articulations of the challenges of subjectivity and representation while affirming agency and audience from African and majority world locations even in the medium of English.

The Cape Town poet Deela Khan was involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and began writing resistance poetry in the mid-1970s. She published the collection *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* in 2002. It comprises the eponymous poem and twelve shorter poems. Situated just off Cape Town the prison island has, since the 1990s, symbolised the end of colonial and settler colonial (apartheid) oppression in South Africa. Writing these poems during a residency on the island in 1997, the poet resists the ready-made option of adopting the iconic image in her work. Instead, she draws on a long tradition of liberation poetry and exercises her artistic and intellectual resources to engage with the centuries of political and environmental injustice on Robben Island. In doing so she attempts to articulate not just one but a range of subaltern subjectivities.

Beyond challenging the racial and androcentric biases of colonialism and settler colonialism the poet articulates the close connections between ecological imperialism, settler/colonialism and the attendant racism and sexism. The rationale for such an approach may be found in the work of a range of environmental and social justice writers. Pointing out that 'alienation from nature is the source of unjust social relations' (Snyder 1995, in Cock 2007:9), Jacklyn Cock argues that ignorance and hostility towards nature 'sets us up for objectifying and exploiting fellow humans' (9). Of course other factors such as national and cultural chauvinism, along with unrestrained avarice, also help explain the phenomenon of imperialism, and the poet takes account of these factors as well.

Ecofeminism is a movement of convergences based on the recog-

nition of the connections between environmental justice and feminism[1]: 'it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorise injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment' (Sturgeon 1997:23). Ecofeminists address questions of how people are treated in the context of how nature is treated, and these concerns inform ecofeminist critiques of patriarchal science. Ecofeminism recognises that human beings are an integral part of nature, even as many people have been unaware of the profound impact of the quality of air, water, land, and plant and animal life on the condition of their lives, and as more people have grown more alienated from their social and natural environments[2]. Ecofeminism recognises the interconnectedness of environmental and gender injustices as well as the urgent need to integrate individual, institutional and national responses to these challenges (Campbell 2008:vii).

Ecofeminism and postcolonialism engage in basic struggles over land, and both movements are critical of the destruction caused by colonial and neo-colonial forces. Like postcolonialism, ecofeminism challenges supremacist claims of belonging to a higher order of being while reducing the status of other human beings, life forms and natural elements to that of objects, so as to rationalise subjugation and abuse. Both movements reject what Donovan (1996:161) identifies as supremacist ontologies of domination which use binary epistemological modes and practices. This clarifies the reasons that ecofeminist and postcolonial movements reject the imposition of Eurocentric universals and master narratives. Instead, both movements subscribe to 'the concept of the diversification of agency' which 'calls for the inclusion of as many speaking subjects as possible' (Murphy 1997:55).

Ecofeminism recognises the significance of awareness, sensitivity

[1] Links between ecological and feminist movements have grown over the years, even as African feminist groupings have become more visible (e.g., the Tanzanian Gender Networking Project, the African Feminist Forum, and the African Gender Institute).

[2] With global warming, awareness of the interconnectedness of global systems is growing, although perhaps far too sluggishly to effectively challenge the problems of neo-imperial globalisation.

and systems approaches for overturning the operations of unfettered power. This is related to the concern postcolonialism shows for the recovery of oppressed subjectivities and voices, along with the hard won recognition of the importance of building unity (to produce a critical mass), which necessitates recognition of the significance of diversity, whether along gender, class, race, ethnic or national lines. In these ways both movements deconstruct monological colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal discourses that have privileged tiny elites on the grounds of gender, race, nation or ideology, while infecting all other constructions of value. Both share the objective of social transformation and engage in wide-ranging initiatives to challenge 'all relations of domination … to transform the structure of power itself' (Murphy 1997:49). Among the better known postcolonial ecofeminists are the environmental activists Wangari Maathai, who founded the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya and won Nobel Prize for Peace in 2004, and Vandana Shiva.

Postcolonial ecofeminism involves an integration of many of the goals and concerns of both the movements, as exemplified by Deela Khan's pioneering collection of poems that engage with the significance of an island on the literal and metaphorical edge of empire and settler colonialism. Postcolonial ecofeminism challenges the conceptual and structural constituents of patriarchal colonialism and neo-colonialism. As is apparent in many of the poems, postcolonial ecofeminist art links the long history of anti-colonial struggles (including the anti-apartheid resistance) with the development of gender struggles against the patriarchal regimes that have controlled many institutions, the domestic, public, corporate, national and global levels[3].

Although the minority governments that controlled South Africa did pay some attention to nature conservation, this was not done holistically but as part of the assertion of exclusivist notions of identity, to justify the dismissal of indigenous people as a problem rather than recognise the first nations as legitimate citizens, and to try to gain respectability in some

[3] The current global financial meltdown exemplifies the problem of unfettered growth (driven by bravado, reckless machismo and unsustainable practices) in poorly regulated financial systems, to the detriment of people and life forms across the world and for generations to come.

western circles (Cock 2007:33). There were a few progressive environmental groups in the 1980s but these poems are among the first South African anti-colonial ecofeminist works of literature in English.

Some literary texts that anticipated developments in postcolonial ecofeminist literature in South Africa include the proto-feminist fantasy 'The Floating Room' by Asilita Philisiwe Khumalo (1998). This is an early engagement, recorded in 1972, but likely to have been in existence much earlier. The story subtly challenges the limits of domestic patriarchy by pitting it against an alignment of animals with magical powers, natural elements and a studiedly docile heroine. Bessie Head also made early contributions to postcolonial ecofeminism, both in her commentaries and in her prose representations of rural village life in Botswana, as stories in *The Collector of Treasures* (1992) demonstrate.

Other South African literary texts that show strong elements of postcolonial ecofeminist assertiveness include Kaatje Nieuwveldt's (2003) testimony before a commission in 1858, where she articulates a black woman's sense of agency over her rights to her land while accusing a colonial magistrate of malpractices. Lauretta Ngcobo published the novel *And They Didn't Die* (1990) which represents rural women's struggles to survive and challenge the oppressiveness of apartheid in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Zakes Mda's novel *The Heart of Redness* (2000) shows a rural teenage heroine to have a more authoritative grasp of local environmental issues than far more educated characters who have unsustainable and even neo-colonial conceptions of development. There are also some interesting references in Ingrid de Kok's *Seasonal Fires: New and Selected Poems* (2006). One of the most sustained and sophisticated instances of this emerging genre is to be found in the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera's interweaving of anticolonial and ecofeminist poetics in her experimental novel *Nehanda* (1993), which is a writing strategy that Deela Khan also deploys in her poem 'Quarry Narratives' (55), in the second section of her collection.

It is seven years since *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* was published by Realities (which was established by fellow Cape Town poet and veteran anti-apartheid activist James Matthews), time enough for a reading of this visionary and challenging collection to be undertaken. The following analysis focuses on the title poem 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island' (2002:17-31).

Working as an artist and healer, Khan draws on various resources to address violations and detoxify the natural and social landscape. She uses her art to invoke a number of long suppressed or destroyed voices: these are the shades referred to in the titles of the collection and the first poem. In this engagement she takes on what Chinua Achebe (1975) observed to be the responsibility of the postcolonial artist, to render history in the absence of records or unsullied ones. She also uses her medium to attend to the many acts of destructiveness that occurred on the island, against freedom fighters, animals, plants and the land. This approach is clearly predicated on the healing of her own oppressions as a black woman and a black minority woman under apartheid, in that she speaks out of her own hard-won subject positions. In the following lines from the Poet's Note, she explains that she developed her position of articulation by tackling those elements that have been most silenced (Lorde 1993) in herself:

> For me, *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* has proved to be a crucial journey; a passage in which I, a black woman poet, to whom Robben Island was always an unspeakable place, was able to confront the island shrouded in its mystique and multilayered history (2002:13).

Khan uses her Poet's Note to affirm her intention to historicise and poeticise stories of the island from a long neglected and suppressed subject position (13). As a newly liberated South African living the daily contradictions of Cape Town, a city at once so beautiful and so segregated, she seems to have felt impelled to construct the thirteen poems, including the long six-part title poem, to contribute to what Lorde (1993:43) described as 'the transformation of silence into language and action'. Khan chooses to reach psychologically and politically beyond the existing blueprints for national reconciliation, as led in different arenas by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu (in the Truth Commission)[4], to engage with critical questions of environmental and social justice under different political regimes. She does this by going beyond the hyped up images of Robben Island and Cape

[4] Nevertheless, Tutu and the older Mandela both exemplify an interesting combination of masculine and feminine energies.

Town to offer a citizen and an artist's understanding of the key co-ordinates that inform her being and serve as resources. Adrienne Rich once articulated this challenge in words that resonate with key themes in Khan's work: 'I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history, within which … I am created and [am] trying to create' (1987:212).

In the Poet's Note Khan suggests that although the historical challenges of settler colonialism, racism and sexism were nominally lifted by the ending of apartheid, opportunistic readings of reconciliation and resolution cannot bypass the hard work of undoing centuries of structural, coercive, cultural and psychological oppression. She draws on Milan Kundera's assertion that the 'struggle of [people] against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' (13) and her poems in the collection underscore her rejection of the residual option of selective amnesia. Instead every poem acts to counter the old apartheid silences, the window-dressing of commercial interests, and the subtle cultural sanctions that have dealt with the 'unspeakable' history by excluding whatever is inconvenient. Recognising that such responses only defer and exacerbate the problem the poet opts, in a characteristically anti-colonial ecofeminist move (much like Yvonne Vera in *Nehanda*), for a more sustainable course, resolutely giving voice to the historical figures, events, land and other natural elements that have long been suppressed in colonial, apartheid and even supposedly postcolonial South Africa[5].

Overcoming the bifurcations of intellectual discourse Khan links the history of Robben Island as a prison to the ecological degradation that occurred over four centuries. This is done not only for political redress, as justified as that is. Instead the poet draws on the resistance art against apartheid to offer a significant development upon it. She does this because she sees the challenge of environmental justice as being central to the restorative process in South Africa. The rationale for this may perhaps be explained by Patrick Murphy's axiom, 'Nature becomes crucial as a means for self-understanding' (1991:158), although the collection and the poet's

[5] Frantz Fanon's (1963:148-205) characterization of post-independent states in 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' seems to describe many of the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa even though it was written many decades earlier.

involvement in the struggle suggest a broader reference. In 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island' Khan suggests that what is required for the psychic healing of self and society is the fine tuning of postcolonial, ecological and feminist (i.e., empowered and engaged) modes of thinking. While most of the poems deal with the colonial and settler colonial eras, it is clear that this project needed the post-apartheid context to be initiated.

The challenge of liberating people, land and voices, which is central to the work of many women and black poets in South Africa (Narismulu 2007), is tackled directly in the opening lines of 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island':

Robben Eylandt
Isla de Cornelia
Penguin Island

I have said all the slave names your rapists called you.

The poem opens with a dramatic enactment of dialogical voicing, as the speaker succinctly asserts the long overdue need for naming, direct speech and direct forms of address and dialogue, while tackling environmental and human rights abuses that have characterised the island and those metonymically represented entities, South Africa, the African continent, and the world, for as the Poet's Note asserts, the poems seek to present 'Robben Island as a microcosm of global issues' (13).

Summit of Ancient Mountain,
Eden of seal, penguin, sandpiper, cormorant,
oystercatcher, gull, tortoise, Arctic tern and sacred ibis,

What is your real name?

Do you own one?

Or have the unspeakable mutilations you've suffered made you unnameable?
Maybe you will intuit a name into the ether;
a name that would help you heal,
help us heal.

The first stanza resembles an island (as do most of the stanzas with their centered lines of type in a sea of white), and celebrates birds and animals, which locates the poet in an orthogonal system from the forces of oppression. Further, it is interesting that poetry is the literary genre which most closely parallels song (including birdsong). Added to this, there has long been speculation that the development of speech in humans has avian links, at least at the behavioural level (e.g., see Goldstein, King and West 2003).

Many postcolonial African women poets have used their art to reject stereotypes of African women as submissive and silenced[6], and Khan does this as well. That the speaker is unencumbered by the history of colonial and patriarchal silencing is apparent in the strong descriptions, questions and cauterising critiques throughout the poem, as praises and interrogative voices are elided but not conflated. The words 'Summit of Ancient Mountain, / Eden of seal' are suggestive of the invocatory naming practices of a praise poet (*imbongi*), an office traditionally reserved for men, although women resistance poets like Sankie Nkondo and Gcina Mhlophe have at times assumed such a mantle to address overlapping struggles against apartheid and patriarchy (Narismulu 2003). The voice of the *imbongi* also represents a break with the individual and more easily marginalised poetic voices (in modern western traditions) in favour of the combined roles of healer, social conscience and critic, as developed by poets like Wally Serote[7] (e.g., 1972,

[6] Refer, for example, to the work of Sankie Nkondo (1990), Gcina Mhlophe (2002), Nise Malange (1986), the Thula Baba Collective (Lockett 1990), Freedom Nyamubaya (1986), Kristina Rungano (1984), Leila Djabali and Maria Manuela Margarido (both in Chipasula and Chipasula 1995).

[7] It may be argued that the Romantic poets were also deeply interested in the spiritual and healing qualities of nature, open to the influence of some popular art forms, attentive to the creative capacities of artists, and alert to the dangers of technology, with a few of them showing interest in either human rights or animal life. However, they were also very focused on the individual, on human feelings, intuition and imagination over reason, and on the exotic. They tended to see themselves as isolated geniuses, so they privileged the position of the artist and often valorised individual freedom over social concerns.

1978). The final lines 'help you heal, / help us heal' emphasise the speaker's attentiveness to the challenge of global healing, and clarify the opening lines which, from this vantage point, take on the appearance of an exorcism (line four) followed by praises that seek to re-establish the integrity of degraded entities[8].

Feminist retrieval is evident in the way the poet populates her poems about a place inhabited by very few women in 340 years with what are often understood as feminine energies of articulation (i.e., both expressivity and linkages), healing, and spirituality. The (usually female) *sangomas* that are referred to several times in the poems symbolise the poet's attempts to divine suppressed histories and to heal deep and ancient wounds. Indeed the poet's postcolonial ecofeminist approach draws her to take on a role closer to the poets of the African oral tradition, that is, taking on the roles of historian, healer, teacher and social conscience. This enables the reclamation and reconstitution of suppressed experiences and histories through art, so beginning the healing of violated relationships with nature.

The third question, 'Or have the unspeakable mutilations you've suffered made you unnameable?' reverberates against the opening assertion ('I have said'). It works reflexively to expose the defence of ruling interests and logics as an anachronistic divine right in the still dominant discourses and even some incipient discourses (as in support for the use of public funds to prop up bankrupt corporations from ABSA Bank to General Motors, or to make specious arms acquisitions). It is against such regimes of studied silence or unaccountability that the poet produces a critique of one of the most eulogised cities in the world:

> The scars inflicted by your intruders
> lie embossed like saltpetred welts on your hide.
> Necklacing your coastline are rotting military Installations,
> shell stores, water-logged underground bunkers; a menace for

[8] Less dismissive of technology than the Romantics, though very critical of colonial and neo-colonial destruction of the earth, Khan tends to focus on the significance and interconnectedness of all life forms, and champions the rights of oppressed groups as much as individuals, while she is attentive to the past for she sees it as being intimately connected to the present.

wild creatures, shooting ranges, zero beacons, rusting guns pointing
heavenwards like a curse ….

All this waste;
unnecessary eye-sores masterminded
by Brit and Boer for the protection of
Cape Town that was never under
siege…

The poem throws up strings of challenges in 'intruders', 'slave', 'rapists', 'mutilations', 'scars', and 'welts' in the midst of the references to healing. It rejects the detritus of the old colonial military installations as well as the apartheid prison structures. There is criticism of colonial ruling class masculinity in the lists of 'unnecessary eye sores' that attest less to civilisation than to the spurious 'waste' of local resources to protect overweening characters in jingoistic boys' own projects of global domination[9]. This is the how a postcolonial ecofeminist analysis renders history from the subject position of a black South African minority woman:

> The poems have engaged her [the island's] shadows with the sincere hope that as many of the shades, images and shadows encrusted in her past be recognized by our Time as one of its own concerns, be constantly re-membered and cautiously steered away from the precipice of forgetfulness and disappearance (Khan 13).

In retrieving ecological discourse from its settler colonial history of blaming oppressed indigenous people, the poet attempts to ensure that the reader is 'steered away from the precipice of forgetfulness and disappearance' (Poet's Note 13). The use of the archaic forms suggests that time has been frozen by settler/colonialism. What is being challenged is the imprint of the early maps on which the colonial enterprises were launched, for instead of *finding* precipices and dragons what the colonialists actually

[9] In yet another articulation of the power of rogue patriarchy, neo-imperial coup plotter Mark Thatcher, son of the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, recently escaped justice.

did was to *create* and sustain 'forgetfulness and disappearance', as exemplified in constructs such as the prison island.

Alluding to the anti-colonial resistance movements that challenged various colonially inspired 'precipices', the poet launches an important new challenge to a shadow that continues to obscure the history and lived reality of this society. She describes her poetic project as a 'crucial journey' (13), and the scale of development required applies not only to herself but also to her readers, who have still to come to terms with the complexities of our histories and subject positions. That the poet has the courage to confront these dragons shows the value of engaged artists to the healing, discursive development and leadership of this young democracy.

The following lines suggest how the island and its fauna and flora were as oppressed as the generations of South Africans who engaged in legitimate struggles for freedom. The ecological critique is expressed in lines of mourning that record the impact of a relatively short span of human devastation of land that was formed many millions of years ago[10]:

At the dawning of this century
with every rock of your shores heavy with human scent,
your waters contaminated with rotting carcasses
of ships and whales and the blood of bird, human and seal,

your penguins had gone,
your seals had gone,
your whales had gone

You had become a desolate wasteland
a waterless prison-hell
for best forgotten *lepers*, *lunatics*, social deviants
or any perceived threat or opposition to the Crown (18).

The lines 'your penguins had gone / your seals had gone / your

[10] In a striking twist of fate, various sites in southern Africa have been acknowledged as cradles of humanity (joining other well known sites on the east of the continent).

whales had gone' reverberate desolately against the lush lines in the opening stanza which celebrate seven varieties of birds:

> Eden of seal, penguin, sandpiper,
> cormorant,
> oystercatcher, gull, tortoise, Arctic tern and
> sacred ibis.

The speaker's use of the vocative case when addressing the island underscores the width and depth of the poet's perspective. These verses offer a powerful model for navigating the old exclusive binaries that were entrenched in dominant South African discourses and which treated social justice and environmental justice as competing oppressions. Clearly the poet does more than accept the recoding the island as a valued place, she recognises it as a living entity with a particular history and rights:

> What were you like prior to the predation of your wild,
> long before the first longboats invaded your shores?
> Ocean teeming with whales all around you—
> Coastline alive with penguins, ibises,
> cormorants, pelicans, gulls, tortoises, seals ...
> You were wild, you were free (18).

Notwithstanding Spivak (1988) and Trinh's (1989) work, environmental justice is based on rights that extend beyond those who are able to speak and even beyond those who are still not heard, such as the many natural entities that have been disregarded for centuries (except when pushed to extremes, as with animals forced to deal with encroaching humans or, on a far greater scale, the warming of the earth). The poet does this conscientiously, deploying the genre (in the last six lines below) not just to assign responsibility but to educate readers as well. The conceptual sweep of these stanzas suggests that the critique does not stop at challenging the exclusive constructions of subjectivity[11] that characterised previous regimes but also encompasses those that have persisted through the 1980s and into

[11] The hegemonic subjectivity of the previous regime is still heard across the country in the opposition of entrenched groups to democratizing processes.

the 2000s in the culture of executive presidents, denialism and clandestine arms deals:

> … It was no explorative urge expended for the good-of-all;
> it was a resource-hunting, bounty-snatching lustfulness
> … To conquerors, life, land and ecology were never sacred things.

> The moment they saw you,
> they had discovered you.
> You were their prize—
> They had the right to take you,
> name you, loot, plunder and destroy you -
> Your protracted rape across the timeline
> began with the breaking of your birds, your beasts
> and the rockshelf that undergirds
> all that grows on you …
> Whole colonies of trusting penguins.
> called 'feathered fish', by the English,
> were herded into longboats to be butchered,
> their eggs harvested by the boatload
> not allowing them the grace of time to recover
> to regenerate their kind (18-19).

Besides exposing the gender, cultural, religious and national chauvinisms behind colonial plunder, these lines effectively challenge readers about our own neo-colonial subject positions, and record the alienated relations that people still have with their fellow creatures and the natural environment. The word 'rape' is used again to highlight the link between violations of nature and pathological constructions of masculinity. That women have also been party to the development of these crises, if only in a failure to challenge them, is implicit.

The repetition of the non-specific pronoun 'they' flags the recognition of another anomaly. No postcolonial feminist can afford to join in the pretence that about half of the sovereign colonial/apartheid subjects were female and, despite patriarchal socialization and repression, enjoyed the

vote (by secret ballot) for most of the twentieth century. But, despite the work of progressive organisations and activists like Ruth First and Jenny Curtis (Schoon), most women were not noticeably more progressive than ruling class men. Engaging with such contradictions are a necessary part of an engagement with the dominant, for denialism achieves little against such material manifestations of power. Despite such sobering subtexts, the final lines of the section confidently assume the subject position of healer and teacher:

> With blue-print of mistrust-for-humans imprinted within their genes,
> your seals are still gone,
> your whales are still gone -
> Your penguins have returned
> but scuttle away at the threatening
> sounds of approaching footfalls—
> Our generation needs to earn their respect,
> needs to regain their trust once again (19).

Again, in stanzas such as these, instead of just rejoicing in the shutdown of the globally excoriated prison, or being content to lionise the freed political prisoners, or anticipating the declaration of the island as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (as happened in 1999), the poem focuses on the problems that need attention. The speaker carefully maps the deep links between environmental and social justice, exploring the long parallel history of injustices to people and nature, and weighing up the responsibilities of the present. The Foreword to the poems, written by Ahmed Kathrada (a long term political prisoner) bears out the poem's inclusive focus on the rights and well being of all the inhabitants of the island:

> The diversity and freedom of the bird, marine and animal life on Robben Island have also long been a source of great joy to us and have provided meaningful contrast to the prison conditions that pertained in the past. Khan's work captures the sense of creative diversity, of a home for many creatures, birds of different species, buck and other life forms (11).

Although Kathrada does not say as much, his words show that the long period of incarceration did not blunt the sensitivity of political and human rights activists to the rights of all creatures. Instead it may have had the unintended consequence of expanding consciousness (springing the cage), so triumphing both politically and spiritually over the apartheid state's quintessentially selfish and repressive agenda. The expansive consciousness that the poem articulates is balanced with an acute concern for the challenges of the present, as a line in Poet's Note states: 'Robben Island [is] a microcosm of global issues' (13). This explains the poet's attentiveness to offering a carefully contextualised and historically informed engagement with this part of the South African and African landscape. Of course by suggesting close parallels between Robben Island and mainland South Africa, the poem also counters hype about the exceptionalism of Cape Town (especially as such discourses reproduce the divisions entrenched by apartheid).

The short second section of the poem, which deals with the early centuries of colonial presence, reiterates the established formula like a refrain from an oral poem. However, the vituperative echoes in the lines below slip out of any poetic mode to render the prosaic reality of the long years of oppression:

Robben Island
island prison
purgatorial dumping-ground
hell-hole
cosmic joke

these are but a few of the monstrous shapes you had been made to take:
a perverse perpetuation of settler punishment
you had to carry across 400 yoked years (20).

Not only were the land and its fauna and flora destroyed but numerous captives were judged deviant and interred by the colonialists as they entrenched their settlements in the Cape:

Flung into an existence of hard labour
swart slawen en bandieten hammered and dislodged
muscle-busting slabs of Malmesbury shale in *Jan se Gat*, the first
of your multiple hack-wounds gouged out in the name of civilization,
with the flog-sting of a cat o' nine-tails clawing their mutilated backs.

Shuffling amidst the ear-blasting cacophony of shattering rock,
with taste, smell, sight obliterated by ceaseless storms of dust
and skin slit and arrowed by raining fragments of rock, they plodded
precariously on wetting their dust-cracked tongues with salt water.

Breaking rock they broke their backs,
lost their ears, eyes, souls to build
Van Riebeeck's castle, the slave-lodge, the prisons,
the mainland bridges they would never cross,
the churches, schoolhouses & halls (20)

Such descriptions of the abuses that were part of the early colonial projects contradict what is presented to schoolchildren and tourists as heritage buildings in the 'Mother City'. Encoded in poetry, a genre attuned to emotions and the subtlety of the senses, the destructive culture that accompanied the invasion is communicated very powerfully. But the poet is not content just with tackling the colonial violations. By constituting Robben Island as having 'breasts of solid rock' (20), she challenges the old idea that woman is to man as nature is to culture (Norwood 1996:324), and exposes another patriarchal maxim.

The third section of the poem begins by focusing on the island as a prison in the eighteenth century, although the narrative resists dwelling on the most dismal aspects of the period by focusing on the irrepressible earth and incorrigible prisoners:

The 18th century chronicled you as a fully-fledged
convict station Robben Island. Yet, somehow, your
atmosphere of relentless hardship and abuse did not bar
love from blooming and bursting all seals of silence;
rock from sprouting flowers.

The spirits of your people were far from crushed
and seers still walked your waters (21)

The narrative then moves back in time to offer an alternative account of the lives of the Khoi leader Autshumato (who was described in the colonial-apartheid texts as Harry the Hottentot, or Harry the *Strandloper*) and his niece Krotoa:

Divested of names and birthright
Autshumato and Krotoa were ferried
oor die see, oor die see, in die eiland stemertjie
every time they incurred the wrath of their insatiable masters (22).

Autshumato eventually secured his freedom by escaping from the island and 'he was not re-captured / but his land had already slipped into Dutch hands' (22). The poem contradicts the colonial claim that the Khoi were wanderers (*strandlopers*) and therefore had no rights to the land. It is interesting that the poem challenges the colonial view of history just about every time it refers to Autshumato. Given that no restitution for descendants is envisaged this late in the new dispensation, it seems that the poet is exercising the anticolonial option of thinking beyond the secured box of colonial entitlements and neo-colonial deals.

Krotoa's fate was more complicated, as the narrative recounts. She was renamed Eva by the van Riebeecks, who took her into their household:

Robbed of her Khoikhoi identity at eight
Krotoa, *pygmalioned* into a Dutch girl,
was baptised and re-named Eva.
Subtly programmed to manipulate and betray
her people and to serve the Dutch East India Company
Krotoa became the most spirited traitor-diplomat of her time.

…The Company buried baptised Krotoa
away from her kindred spirit-soil…
in a remote corner of the
Castle-fortress where she had served,

had loved & married, was widowed,
lost her children, lost her people,
her head, heart & carved-up soul (23)

Like the land, black women and men were used, abused ('carved-up') and summarily discarded. Krotoa's story is presented as a cautionary tale to postcolonial subjects, much like Zakes Mda's satirical representation of members of an Eastern Cape community who imagine that the building of a casino will alleviate poverty and joblessness (2000). Using criticism and irony these lines mourn and rage against the fate of the abject Krotoa and the countless, nameless others who have been conscripted into serving various empires against their own interests.

The fourth section of the poem critiques the colonial encroachment on land through the experiences of various Eastern Cape leaders who were imprisoned for refusing to serve as imperial instruments:

a line of prominent Xhosa chiefs abducted
from the colonist-coveted valleys of the Eastern Frontier
… driven off ancestral-lands
like the wildlife before them; legitimate leaders torn away …

... Displaced from acres-upon-acres of lush,
arable terrain they were re-settled on the craggy,
petrified stretch of moonscape adjacent
to [the] sand-beach at Murray's Bay (24).

One of these chiefs was the prophet-warrior Makana, who was imprisoned by the British colonialists in the nineteenth century. Makana escaped on a boat with thirty fellow prisoners, and the narrative constitutes their bid for freedom as a heroic journey. What in other contexts would arouse feminist concerns about an overemphasis on masculinist expressive energies are treated as necessary in the struggle against the larger evil of colonialism[12], and the following stanzas participate energetically in the

[12] Such are the contradictions that African and other southern feminisms are obliged to integrate into their already complicated agendas.

drama of the escape, while only hinting at the tragic outcome in each of their final lines:

> … The flesh-eating cormorants
> hovering overhead echoed Makana's cries as he hollered
> words of encouragement to the billow-battling warriors
> swimming toward their freedom, towards the deceptively
> close shore or the uncharted ocean floor (24).

> … Makana rode the slapping, slamming, crashing
> dragonbacks of water as cresting and falling
> they ferried him to the sacred cavern of
> talking bones and judging stones
> unknowable leagues beneath the ocean bed (25).

The stanza that follows offers an interesting representation of anti-colonial heroism. The speaker still does not refer directly to the drownings, but telescopes the tragedies of incarceration by quickly moving on to other tragic figures (Siyolo, Fadana and Maqoma), while drawing the reading audience into the oral performance:

> If you listen to the voices in the water
> they whisper the saddest requiems …
> The pictures of history are treated with acid:
> Scratch them listener, they burn! (25)

The last two lines, which allude metaphorically to old photographic processes, represent a displaced climax as the poet elects to focus on her audience with the reminder that the history of struggle is not without pain, even for subsequent generations. This is another instance of a characteristically feminist articulation of an anti-colonial incident. The actions of the speaker serve to draw readers closer in a move that sacrifices a structural feature (the tragic ending) to redirect energy into strengthening the emotional engagement with the audience. This is not just a sentimental move that unwittingly caricatures women's supposed preference for emotional

connections over historical facts (which have in any case been communicated quite poetically in the previous stanzas). Rather it represents a strategic choice to connect with the always living audience, who may be catalysed into action to redress and not just accept all the facts of history. Such a reading is supported by a subsequent stanza that depicts the unequal struggles that characterize the history of colonised people:

> History perpetuates the same old worn-out story:
> Superior weaponry and settler-induced
> starvation swindled indigenous people
> out of their territory—
> Spear, shield, club & assegai,
> no match for gun, cannonball & firestick (25)

Certain that the reader knows that Maqoma was the renowned Eastern Cape leader who developed a form of guerrilla warfare used by subsequent generations of freedom fighters, the narrative deals with his vain hope that the Governor of the Cape, George Grey, would free them as well as their land, which had been seized by the British (26). When Maqoma was eventually released after twelve years he continued with the struggle for liberation:

> Armed with an undying love for the land
> and a death-defying desperation
> to reclaim his people's dignity,
> Maqoma and his tribe reoccupied the land
> that had always been theirs.
> A truly heroic gesture that angered the British
> who had him re-exiled to you devoid of a trial;
> his people's land now indisputably Crown-land,
> they owed him no second hearing (26).

In these passages the poet shows that her subject position is as much informed by the history of anti-colonial struggles as it is by the more recent struggles for gender equality. This seems to be the case with a range of women who were involved in the resistance movements, for whom the early

anti-colonial struggles cannot be separated from the newer forms that evolved, such as gender and ecological struggles. Indeed, attentiveness to the early struggles over land are part of an integrated vision of freedom, as is apparent from the African feminists who have an inclusive approach, even as they focus on securing women's interests (e.g. Lauretta Ngcobo and Yvonne Vera), and as they focus on securing gender and environmental justice simultaneously (e.g., Wangari Maathai). The poem then moves on to examine one of the most controversial episodes in South African history:

> Were the apocalyptic images in Nongqawuse's visions
> engineered by gluttonous settlers who hankered
> after Xhosa ancestral land?
> Was the Cattle-Killing [a]
> Holocaust or [a] death-wish
> come to pass? (26)

The narrative touches on the dominant reading that what happened in 1856-7 may have been a mass suicide, and it engages with the suspicions about colonialist manipulation. Notwithstanding the persuasive arguments of Jeff Guy, Helen Bradford (1996) and Meg Samuelson (2007) about gaps in the scholarship and unaddressed questions of gender, there is the intriguing possibility that the widespread destruction of crops and cattle may have been part of an early and desperate anti-colonial resistance project. Such are the yields of an integrated approach to the challenges of this conjuncture.

The beginning of the rehabilitation of Robben Island during the 1990s (as a result of the long association with the imprisoned leaders of the resistance) freed the poet to focus on its long history as a site of multiple oppressions, not least of which was its use as a dumping ground by medical professionals who took care of 'the contamination- / paranoia of the fast-expanding colony':

> Dr Birtwhistle and the management of Somerset Hospital
> decided that exile to the ultimate
> periphery was the only antidote for people
> saddled with incurable diseases, rotting
> bodies and fragmenting souls

> … you had to be the colossal junkyard;
> a container for all the colony's outcasts (27)

That the medical personnel violated their patients, their own humanity and their professional ethics seems to be offered (particularly through the sarcasm of words like 'antidote' and 'fragmenting souls') as a cautionary tale for modern professionals, and particularly those in the civil service who seem to believe they are not subject to public scrutiny. The metaphors 'junkyard' and 'container', piled dissonantly one upon the other, pithily render the range of abuses perpetrated by the state and its professional dispatchers. Besides this the poet also offers a critique of patriarchal imperial science:

> [The] universalizing texts of science and medicine [and literary studies] have elided the anomalous, the marginal, the local, the particular, erasing them, absenting them, dominating them…. Some [feminist/poststructuralist] theorists have called for a revalidation of narrative, telling the history of a particular individual, as a means of restoring the absent referent, the thou, to the texts (Hunter, 1991, in Donovan 1996:163).
>
> … [This is because] Western symbolic discourses, then, often operate in this way as dominative practices. Their signifying texts take over and reshape the literal, the material, expunging in the process the living being, the thou, the subject, casting it in the passive form as a signified, while retaining agency for the dominative signifier. Such a mentality has enabled destructive Western dominative practices toward nature (Donovan 1996:164, my square bracket insertions).

This helps clarify the reasons the poet felt driven to construct a complex, wide-ranging and integrated poem about the island in Table Bay. Ecofeminists try to halt the degradation of the Earth by raising awareness and constituting it not as an object but as the primary subject upon which all other life forms are dependent. This postcolonial ecofeminist uses the modern equivalent of the vocative case 'thou' (i.e., 'you') to restore all those entities that had been objectified (earth, human beings and other life forms)

to full discursive subjectivity and sovereignty. Asserting the subjectivity of the earth and other life forms is an apposite way for this poet-activist to announce, extend and underwrite her own liberation from oppression.

The poet's interest in both the spiritual and the material forms of ecofeminism is also apparent in the fifth part of the poem which deals with the era before the formal end of apartheid. The idea that 'bones persist' and 'bones are indestructible' (29) is worked into a metaphor celebrating literary art that preserves shared history (much like the core-cliches of oral stories):

The stories are bones
that would always
re-member
your oppressed past,
our oppressed past (30).

Khan's commitment is clearly not just to speaking about the subject of resistance but to letting the subject speak through the medium. This is in keeping with her restorative mission, as outlined in her Acknowledgements (2002:9).

The sixth and final section opens with the recognition that, despite centuries of exclusionary logics, no human being faces the future alone. The end of the opening stanza and the beginning of the second (and final) stanza capture the speaker's resolve that despite ongoing challenges there will be a better outcome through greater unity between people and all of the rest of nature:

Sure-footed we walk towards the delta
still flooded with blood …

We squirm as unabated its bloody tributaries
still course across our warring planet and
History still writes itself in blood -
Together we look into the heavens and welcome
the breaking storm as it thunders its promise to
unclog every river and wash all the spilt

blood of the centuries away,
Robben Island.

Another resistance poet with a very early and sustained interest in the postcolonial challenge of healing is Wally Serote, as is evident in early poems such as 'My Brothers in the Streets' (1972) and in a range of poems in his collection *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978). The speakers in these poems show close correspondences to the speaker in 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island', in that there is deep faith in grassroots resources, a willingness to engage frankly and constructively with the horrific effects of oppression, and a capacity for the transcendent creative thinking necessary to progress beyond the pervasive madness of empire.

Central to the production of such innovative ways of seeing are new forms of articulation, spoken out of a more integrated understanding of the world. This reinforces the ethic of respect for diversity (if Darwin's theory is not persuasive). It also underscores the importance of attending to the most neglected and oppressed demographics. The agency shown by the poet, not least through the construction of a confident and assertive speaker[13], offers a reminder that most black women emblematise a range of groups that are most vulnerable to the forms that capitalism has taken under colonialism and neo-colonialism. That the poet is interested in working with earth, gender and anti-colonial challenges while resisting ghettoisation is instructive. That she is not content just to articulate her own interests is refreshing in a world still struggling with racial, gender, cultural, class and national chauvinisms.

It is sobering that in literary studies there seem to be scarcely any parallel developments as yet. The 2009 comparative literature study 'Consuming Subjects: Theorizing New Models of Agency for Literary Criticism in African Studies', by Wendy Laura Belcher, looks promising but records no parallel, advance, or conceptually integrated response to the challenging conjunctures experienced by the majority of the world's people. However,

[13] Women's voices are often ignored, and the problems are usually compounded in the case of black women. In her work on black women's voices Carole Boyce Davies (1995) delineates not just the impact of the oppressions but the importance of women's agency in overcoming the challenges.

there are references in Sociological literature (notably the review essay by Ann Denis, 2008) that show that integrated responses to social challenges are new (dating from 2005) and are the contribution of feminist sociologists. But these are analytical approaches and not creative approaches as well.

In 1999, two years after 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island' was written (but not yet published) the economist Amartya Sen made the observation that, 'Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women' (1999:203). Clearly, in inaugurating a postcolonial ecofeminist subject position Khan pre-empts and in fact supersedes this call, from the 'developing world' itself. The poet's resourceful response to one place that has been desecrated offers a powerful model of how the multiple facets of imperial and neo-imperial globalization may be apprehended and engaged more comprehensively. Each new global health, environmental, financial and political crisis jolts us into deeper recognition that we live in a very small neighbourhood, and that the solutions require more than technological fixes; they require shifts in how we see ourselves and our world, and shifts in our value systems. While the social sciences have long recognised how difficult it is for human beings to make cognitive shifts, such a challenge is in fact a particular strength of the arts, for artists tend to be the harbingers of new ways of making sense of who we are and what we need to do to take better care of our world and the generations to come.

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