

White Masculinity and the African Other: *Die werf bobbejaan* by Alexander Strachan

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Introduction

The vast discourse on the Self and the Other is no doubt one of the central fields of enquiry in intercultural studies. Despite its more utilitarian focus on face-to-face interactions between people of diverse cultures (Jandt 2001:38), the field of intercultural communication has also incorporated insights from the more philosophical discourse on the Self and the Other. And, of course, research on intercultural interaction goes beyond race and ethnicity. Increasingly, researchers are becoming aware of the need to investigate the role of gender in intercultural studies (Jandt 2000; Kaschula & Anthonissen 1995; Scollon & Scollon 1995).

Scholars who take an interest in the involvement of gender in intercultural communication cannot escape a thorough reflection on the relation between the gendered Self and the gendered Other. Indeed, there is a growing interest in the entanglement of gender stereotypes in the construction of new cultural formations. Claire Alexander (2000:124) argues that the recent emergence of the 'Asian gang' in the United Kingdom draws upon 'dominant discourses (both popular and academic) of black masculinity, constructed through images of deviance and violence, to legitimate this reinvention'.

In an article in the *Mail and Guardian*, Tania Branigan (2001:27) gives expression to the new awareness of the use of gender stereotypes, normally employed to belittle men in their masculine identity, to emasculate—and at the same time to 'other'—entire cultures or civilisations. In the wake of Osama bin Laden and Al Quaida's attacks on New York and Washington, Branigan points out that popular racist mythology in the west, on the one hand, has created stereotypes of Arab and Asian men as weak, effeminate and unmanly. On the other hand, black men are deemed to be aggressively and uncontrollably male. Race is entwined with sexual identity in the west's inability 'to comprehend that other people can be differently, not less, male' (Branigan 2001:27).

In this article I will restrict myself to Afrikaans literature and examine the representations by white male authors of Afrikaner men in their engagement with African culture since the transitional period to democratic rule in South Africa. Alexander Strachan's novel, *Die werfbobbejaan* (1994), will be discussed as an expression of white men's often tortuous attempts to re-place their masculinity in a time which inaugurated the ascendance of a black ruling class.

The opinion of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:173) that the dialectic of Self and Other is the matrix of post-colonial literatures also holds true for Afrikaans literature. Africa continues to haunt white writers and it is noticeable that these writers are more and more frequently drawn to those parts of Africa (and South Africa) where the white man has not completely overrun nature and traditional society. There is a fascination with San culture, with Namibia, with Zululand and, not least of all, with the hunting fields and nature reserves where the illusion of a pristine world can be recovered (Visagie 2000).

The role of politics in the intensified interest of white male writers in Africa, its peoples and its wildlife is of particular importance and I will try to elucidate some of the political implications of this new engagement with Africa. Trying to cope with the fact that they have lost political power in South Africa after decades of white rule, Afrikaner men have to rethink and reinvent a male identity that is not intimately connected to power and domination. A rediscovery of nature and a reengagement with the peoples of Africa seem to offer a way out of the impasse. I will return to this issue but would first like to focus briefly on the representations of the African Other in the history of Afrikaans literature.

Afrikaans Colonial Literature: The African 'Barbarian' and the 'Jolly Hottentot'

Representations of the African Other have never been absent from Afrikaans literary works. In the first decades of the twentieth century, two images of the African Other predominated in Afrikaans literature. Jakes Gerwel (1988:21f) identifies the image of the 'Jolly Hottentot' ('Jollie Hotnot') as a frequent stereotype to describe so-called Cape coloured men. According to this stereotype Cape coloured men were unreliable workers with a predilection for jokes and mirth. Very often they would be portrayed as a banal echo of the activities of the white Self. The fiction of Melt Brink, G.R. von Wielligh and D.F. Malherbe demonstrates how the 'Otherness' of the Self is inscribed in the body and colonial identity of the coloured man (see Bhabha 1986:xv-xvi; Roos 1998:42f).

In portrayals of black people in Afrikaans fiction from 1930 to 1960, the image of the 'Jolly Hottentot' was extended to black African men. White rule was

easier to justify if the rhetoric of fiction could be manipulated so as to represent the colonial Other as an irresponsible joker, unfit for political office. Historical novels dealing with the rise of the Afrikaner nation employed the stereotypical image of the black man as a barbarian. In the work of Mikro, G.H. Franz and P.J. Schoeman, this stereotype was replaced by more nuanced representations of black people (van Rensburg 1971:31f). By the 1930s, Afrikaans novelists such as Jochem van Bruggen had also started to explore the effects of urbanisation on Africans (see Botha 1999:649-651). However, up to the literary renewal brought about by the Sestiger movement, blacks would continue to be portrayed as workers showing respect for the white ruler and a readiness to serve him in humble submission (Van Rensburg 1971:34).

It was only from the 1960s that black and so-called coloured writers and poets started to write Afrikaans fiction with a voice of their own, without emulating the literary discourse of white writers. In the recent work of Matthews Phosa, A.H.M. Scholtz, E.K.M. Dido and S.P. Benjamin, the issue of a black or coloured identity becomes a focal point. Dido's (2000) *'n Stringetjie blou krale (A String of Blue Beads)* is a critical reflection on the racial taboos that have contributed to the formation of identity among the so-called coloureds in the Western Cape. In Dido's novel, Nancy Karelse faces the rejection of her own family and community when she embarks upon a voyage to rediscover her Xhosa ancestry. The contemporary works of black and coloured writers are very often attempts to consolidate a sense of selfhood that may eventually reach a point beyond the racialised post-colonial dialectic between Self and Other.

***Die werfbobbejaan* by Alexander Strachan**

In my account of the manifestations of white masculinity in relation to the African Other in contemporary Afrikaans fiction, I would first like to concentrate on Alexander Strachan's novel, *Die werfbobbejaan* (which can be translated as *The Yard Baboon* or *The Home Baboon*), which was published in 1993. It is the story of a woman, Khera, who spends a year in a hotel in Zululand in order to write the biography of a mysterious man, referred to as 'the game catcher', who is later revealed as her former husband. On the hotel property an aggressive baboon is kept on a chain as some sort of pet.

When the baboon escapes, a hunter is called in to track it down and to kill it. This hunter turns out to be the game catcher, Khera's former husband, to whom she is still attracted. The game catcher follows the spoor of the baboon and in a first confrontation it bites him in the shoulder blade. After some days of tracking, he eventually finds the baboon entangled in the bushes. He lifts his rifle to shoot it but a

visionary experience and nausea prevent him from killing the animal. Cold and wounded, he returns to the hotel, where he makes passionate love to Khera, who is instructed to dig her fingers into his wound. Then he leaves Khera for an unknown destination in the 'north' and dies a solitary death in a sod house, having been weakened by his wound and finally torn apart by his own dogs. The description of his death overlaps with the narration of the death of the baboon that is also attacked by dogs. The death of the game catcher is mourned by a community of African people who bury him in an elaborate ceremony. After the burial, his body is exhumed from its grave by the sorcerer of death, uMthakathi, who resurrects him as uMkhovu, a zombie and sinister consort of uMthakathi.

Strachan has been described as an Afrikaans Hemingway due to his preference for a tormented and enigmatic male protagonist who is simultaneously a writer, hunter, soldier, womaniser and sensitive artist (De Lange 1990:4; Van Coller 1999:621). In *Die werfbobbejaan*, which can be read as the third part of Strachan's trilogy comprising as well *A World Without Borders* ('n Wêreld sonder grense) and *The Jackal Hunter* (*Die jakkalsjagter*), the same protagonist emerges as a dominating presence in the novel even though Khera is the main focaliser in the narrative. The game catcher makes an occasional appearance in the novel but it is only in the description of the hunt that the narrator awards him a central position in the telling of events. However, in the writings of Khera, the explicit references to the enactment of a 'male myth' (1994:76) leave little doubt that the novel is ultimately concerned with male identity.

The dominance of the male character in *Die werfbobbejaan* is most apparent in the extension of his identity, with the effect of assimilating a number of other characters into the realm of the male enigma. The young singer who visits the hotel, the newly circumcised young worker and the baboon are all associated with the game catcher. Towards the end of the novel, Khera asks herself in what form the game catcher will return in future. She considers the young worker and the singer as two possible re-embodiments (1994:161). Significantly, both the worker and the singer are in some way involved in the initiation rites of masculinity. The circumcised worker, bearing the fresh signs of his recent admission to manhood by his community, is challenged by the rest of the workers to prove his masculinity one more time by confronting the baboon which had snatched away the blanket that covered his body. Khera is tempted to initiate the young singer sexually. She consciously links the singer and the worker to a 'male myth' which is reminiscent of Jung's theory on the archetypal constitution of a collective unconscious (Jung 1969 and Kloppe 1996). According to Khera, the male myth reaffirms itself time after time: 'It becomes impossible to escape from it—an ancient pattern too deeply entrenched in the subconscious of the community' (1994:76).

The baboon is also represented as a male animal. Furthermore, it shares the game catcher's desire for Khera. This becomes apparent when it gets hold of her panties and gets an erection (1994:103), whereupon the narrator dwells on the baboon's desire to mate with her (1994:106). The identification between the baboon and the game catcher is not only striking in the simultaneous narration of identical deaths. During the hunt it is stated that hunter and prey 'exchange their roles in their thoughts: the one imagines himself in the place of the other, trying to determine what his opponent would do, which route he would follow and what places he would rather avoid' (1994:134). This statement is affirmed when the baboon puts itself in the shoes of his pursuer by leading him astray to the lair of a poisonous snake. In his turn, the hunter settles down to rest on the same spot where the baboon had been resting earlier during the hunt.

The male subject as an omnipresent being is manifested in the moments when Khera senses a supernatural presence. During a fishing trip, she has an eerie feeling that the game catcher is spying on her from the thicket (1994:31,34). When she works on her writing she sometimes senses his presence, 'as if he wants to emerge from the words, to take possession of the room' (1994:14). At other times Khera is haunted by the impression that he is manipulating her in her writing, as if 'the course of the plot had been determined in advance, [her] role only instrumental, the writing up of a story that had already been written' (1994:18). Van Collier (1999:627) regards the game catcher as a Zeus-like figure who can hide his true identity by adopting many different guises, thus confusing his wife Hera (read: Khera).

In my view, the imposition of the game catcher as an all-encompassing and appropriating presence is a concerted attempt to stress the power of male subjectivity, as an always recurring mythical presence inscribed in the collective unconscious, and to colonise the Other (young men, black men, women, even animals). In the light of the psychoanalytic insight that the formation of identity is an 'ever problematic process of access to an image of totality' (Bhabha 1986:xvii), one sees in *Die werfbobbejaan* an extreme example of the totalising force of the male subject. In fact, the novel corroborates Luce Irigaray's contention that subjectivity as such is a male creation that strives towards the attainment of its totalising objectives by consistently denying women access to subjectivity. According to Irigaray (1996:61-63; Butler 1993:9), both the subject and the Other are essentially masculine and form the foundations of a closed phallocentric discourse that attains its totalising objectives by the exclusion of the feminine.

Any totalising impulse in the male subject could be seen as an attempt to construct an illusion of wholeness so as to conjure away the lack of being that underlies the subject. According to Lacan, the subconscious cannot be seen in

isolation from language with its multiplicity and dispersing effects that deny the subject any claim to wholeness. Lack is therefore the fundamental condition of the subject (cited in Silverman 1992:4). As a result of the confrontation with language and signification, the subject experiences an unavoidable castration, its entry into a regime of lack or symbolic castration. Subsequently, the subject musters the ego and fantasy to cover up the lack or void. Human identity, which comes into being through fantasy and imagination, finally compensates for the lack that underlies the subject. However, there are times when the illusion of wholeness collapses, confronting the adult individual with the fundamental void or lack that informs his or her subjectivity (Silverman 1992:35). Usually, this leads to an existential crisis. A similar experience seems to befall the game catcher when he takes aim to shoot the baboon.

The recovery of a basic and more physical masculinity during the hunt is one of the most common topoi in hunting literature (Schwenger 1984:102), but the game catcher is in fact confronted with a visionary experience on the hunting field that undermines his male identity. As he takes aim with his rifle, the baboon opens its mouth, whereupon the game catcher is flooded with visionary images from his childhood past, images about sexuality as well as more enigmatic images about nature and death (Visagie 1996/1997:139). He is apparently confronted with the images that have played a role in the construction of his subjectivity. However, it becomes clear that all the images are tainted by a certain cloudiness and a consistent deathly quality that overwhelm him with dizziness, nausea and finally a fit of vomiting (1994:145).

The images that form the basis of the game catcher's male identity are revealed as severely tainted by destruction and impurity. In my opinion, the game catcher is brought to the edge by the images precisely as pointers to his own death and destruction. The values and memories from his past that formed the basis for the construction of his male identity have been exposed as insufficient to cover up the resurgent lack that underlies his subjectivity. This visionary experience is apparently one of the reasons for his failure to complete the hunting ritual with the killing of the prey.

The game catcher's failure on the hunting grounds does not prevent him from returning to the hotel to demand sexual fulfilment from Khera, the woman who is 'the prize' (1994:76) that awaits the victor in the ritual of masculine supremacy. However, at the moment of sexual penetration the male subject is once again overwhelmed by the images that emerged from the mouth of the baboon (1994:152). None of the motions that traditionally reinforce male identity seem to provide satisfaction as the protagonist is repeatedly beleaguered by the lack at the base of his subjectivity.

Even on his deathbed, the game catcher is still driven to follow the motions that are dictated by the male myth. He awaits his solitary death in a sod house (1994:166) just like the jackal hunter, the symbolic father of the game catcher in *Die jakkalsjagter*, which is the second part of Strachan's trilogy. At this stage of the novel, the narrator refers to the male protagonist simply as 'the man' and no longer as 'the game catcher'. This suggests that he is not primarily a character bound to a specific context. The game catcher is merely one manifestation among many of the male myth lodged in the collective 'subconscious of society' (1994:76) which must be re-enacted continuously.

In one of the many forward-looking passages in the writings of the game catcher that Khera studies in her biographical research, it is suggested that no fewer than nine oxen (1994:157) are slaughtered by the African community that takes care of his funeral. Within this community he is described as '[t]he wanderer with hunting rifles and books, the one that carried a restlessness with him, one who has captured the imagination of the young men, caused them to start talking of leaving' (1994:157). The circumcised worker is another young man who, after his contact with the game catcher, considers abandoning the 'superstitions of Zululand' (1994:161) to find a new life as a student in Johannesburg.

A system of cultural reciprocity, with the masculine as a focal point, seems to develop towards the end of the novel. The young black men yearn for a life that will take them away from traditional society, whereas the white wanderer receives an African funeral and becomes part of a sinister exhumation ritual involving uMthakathi, the evil witch of death in traditional Zulu culture, and her or his familiar, uMkhovu (Berglund 1974:266,279). The hierarchy that privileged the white male Self in relation to the African Other in colonial literature seems to get blurred. Strachan seems to aim at an erasure of this hierarchical relation in order to establish a transcultural myth of masculinity. Masculinity emerges as a phenomenon which has an unchanging integrity and definition despite its various cultural manifestations. Strachan represents these cultural forms of masculinity as, at most, fleeting projections on the surface of a phenomenon that fundamentally does not accommodate difference and that possesses a consolidated transhistorical and transcultural shape and purpose.

Although witches in traditional Zulu culture are mostly women, Strachan chooses a male figure, referred to as a sorcerer, to embody *ubuthakathi*. (According to Berglund (1976:266) *ubuthakathi* 'refers to an incarnate power geared towards harm and destruction which manifests itself through humans'.) This may be interpreted as part of the imposition of a gendered economy in the novel that is devoted to the masculine. Zululand itself is described as a predominantly male environment where hunting, drinking, fishing and rugby seem to be the main

interests of the community (1994:63). It is also an environment where even the white farmers experience Zulu folklore as a reality (1994:17,55): the myths of *imbulo*, the big lizard or Cape monitor that is always looking for milk to drink and that can only be killed with boiling water (1994:91) and, of course, the beliefs about uMthakathi, the evil witch who rides a baboon facing backwards with his finger lodged in the anus of the animal (1994:19,122).

The game catcher's association with the baboon leads to sinister tales among the hotel staff during his pursuit of the baboon. They describe him as uMthakathi (1994:107,113) or as uMkhovu (1994:146), uMthakathi's familiar. Early in the novel it is also suggested that he spies on Khera from the bushes like impaka, the wild cat (1994:34-36), another familiar of uMthakathi (Berglund 1976:279). But the passages describing his dying provide the most explicit links between him and the evil forces of death (1994:19f,158f).

The scenes in which the game catcher is reborn as the zombie, uMkhovu, 'the one who is known as iMfakambili—he who will have two lives, who will appear again, who will die a second death' (1994:159)—are of particular significance. On the one hand, the reappearance of the male character (as anticipated by Khera in 1994:161) may seem like a further extension of the omnipresence and permanence of the man as bearer of the male myth. In this interpretation, the masculine emerges as a supreme presence, a logical consequence of the systematic projection of the masculine onto the Other, whether black or white, male or female, human or animal. According to this view, masculinity is represented as a totalising force in the novel without a hint of irony or critical intent from the author.

This said, one should not forget that *Die werfbobbejaan* was published at a time when postmodernism was the dominant literary trend in Afrikaans writing. It is a novel that gives great prominence to textuality and it displays an intense and self-conscious preoccupation with subjectivity. *Die jakkalsjagter*, Strachan's first novel, published in 1990, is regarded as one of the most significant postmodernist texts in Afrikaans (Du Plooy 1993; Lombard 1991; Smuts 1993). The claim of the postmodernist theorist, Linda Hutcheon (1988:20), about the 'paradox of postmodernism', seems to be a suitable approach to the passages relating the reappearance of the male character after his death. According to Hutcheon (1988:3, 20), postmodernist writers install a fictional illusion and then proceed to subvert the very illusion that they had so carefully constructed. The object is ultimately to problematise rather than to take a definitive stand on any specific issue.

In my opinion, Strachan generates the illusion of a totalising male subjectivity which systematically projects itself onto the Other, whereupon he cleverly undermines this 'unshakeable' male myth by raising the male character from the dead in the form of a zombie, the abject and evil familiar of a witch. In

addition he systematically reveals the lack that underlies the subjectivity of the male protagonist. When the already fragmented and destabilised male subject reappears as a manifestation of the deathly and evil pair, uMkovu and uMthakathi, one struggles to see this as an enhancement of the male myth in any positive way. Masculine supremacy as elaborated in the first part of the novel is exposed as fundamentally suspect and undesirable upon its resuscitation in such a perverted form (see also Van Coller 1999:628). The association between the male subject and the undesirable figures, uMkhovu and uMthakathi, leaves one with the impression that *Die werfbobbejaan* aims towards a critique of masculinity. Notably, no proposals are made for the construction of an alternative male identity that will separate itself from the discourse of totality that seems to have death and destruction as its logical consequence. Strachan's association of the protagonist, the embodiment of the male myth, with deathly and destructive figures seems to suggest that he has a very pessimistic view of contemporary masculinity, a view which excludes any prospect of redeeming masculinity from its dark impasse.

It is interesting that Strachan returns to the more ancient Zulu myths that have lost some of their relevance in contemporary African culture, particularly urban culture. The engagement with these older myths may be indicative of a conservative nostalgia for the 'original' truths of Africa, apparently untainted by Western influences. The hybridity which characterises contemporary cultural forms in Africa may be too volatile for a clear cut, unfettered interrogation of the African Other by white writers. This may explain Strachan's preference for the myths of precolonial Africa. The result of this engagement with ancient myths is the representation of African culture as exotic and as radically Other. To a certain extent, Strachan reduces the exoticism in his positing of the transcultural male myth which blends together white and black masculinity. However, the totalising nature of this strategy brings about the othering of the feminine.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to return to the question of why Afrikaans male writers such as Alexander Strachan, Piet van Rooyen, Johann Botha, Chris Barnard and Christiaan Bakkes show such intense interest in Africa and the African Other in their more recent work. *Die werfbobbejaan* bears the signs of the time when it was written, namely the transitional period just before the first democratic elections in South Africa with its '[s]ocial and political turbulence, a transition to a new dispensation' (1994:138). The death knell for white male supremacy in South Africa was becoming a reality. A new definition of Afrikaner masculinity had to take shape to compensate for the severing of the bond between white masculinity and political

power. Many older Afrikaans writers reacted to this challenge by returning to history in their work, but a significant number of male novelists embarked upon a new exploration of Africa and its peoples in what seems to be an attempt to find a new sense of place in the changing circumstances.

These explorations are hesitant and are more often than not accompanied by many of the stereotypes that characterised representations of the African Other throughout the history of Afrikaans literature. It is noticeable, however, that the male writers reflect self-consciously on their condition as white men in Africa. The politics of being a white man in South Africa very often takes a central position in their reflections. The anxieties of a new and uncertain future as an increasingly disempowered minority receive great scrutiny in their attempts to find a home within African society.

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