

# Learning Myself Anew

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## Introduction

We are living in a period of momentous happenings in South Africa. One of the most difficult and challenging areas in our communal life is related to changing an educational system that has been entrenched on the basis of inequality and prejudice. In this paper I begin by reflecting in an impressionistic way on the legacy of reading literature under apartheid in my own educational journey. To situate the discussion in a South African context, I have woven particular personal experiences with institutional and historical realities, reading my way into theory from the bedrock of my experience and vice versa. In the second half of the paper I shall extrapolate from such experience some of the challenges that we face in the sphere of cultural and educational politics for the present and coming years.

## Telling our Stories

Madeleine Grumet (1978) has drawn attention to the use of the autobiographical method in education, particularly teaching practice, to explore ways of transforming objective situations through subjective, personal reflection. Naomi Norquay (1993:241ff), drawing on Frigga Haug and others, speaks eloquently of 'memory-work' as a political necessity in our transformative agenda. She shows the value of interrogating personal experience and personal history in the process of envisioning the future.

Telling our stories, using the 'self as subject', shows the intersection between the individual and the larger forces of our history. In telling our stories we attempt to understand both intellectually and emotionally. We each have a story to tell, in its uniqueness and commonality, but also in its constructedness. In remembering in the present, we begin to realise that parts of our past are waiting to be reclaimed, 're-visioned' and told as we view the past through the lens of the present, weaving an inter-textual narrative.

We need to be able to engage in 'rememory', to use Toni Morrison's (1987) phrase. Rememory provides the opportunity to recall the horror as well as the joy (of intimations) of creative life that was suppressed and lost almost irrevocably. Writing in the United States, Ronald Takaki (1993:14) states: 'In the telling and retelling of their stories, they create communities of memory'. Memory is indeed the weapon not just to reconstruct the past, but to interpret it (Roy Pascal 1960:19).

Telling our stories is particularly necessary at this historical juncture in South Africa, a time when we engage in the building of a nation. This does not mean that we shall be able to set the past in clear and unambiguous terms. We are constantly creating and recreating the past, arranging and re-arranging it, drawing on individual and collective experience. V.S. Naipaul (1995:9) has noted the inscriptions we bear of an expansive shared memory:

But we go back and back, for-ever, we go back all of us to the very beginning, in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings ... We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves ...

Inscribed in our memory is also the anecdotal, ordinary and everyday, as we signpost our lives in the context of our history and reinterpret that very history.

## Looking Back

I was in high school in the late 1950's and early 1960's, inheriting a legacy of reading under apartheid without realising it. It was the time of separate education, of growing up in an all-Indian school, walking on winding footpaths past rows of Indian homes, past the gates of the school for 'Coloureds', vaguely aware that beyond those gates was a whole world quite separate from mine. (Yet my neighbours were 'Coloureds', who shared 'vetkoeks', family gossip and a common Christian faith with my mother and father, my brother and myself.) The school for White children was at the other end of town; we never met them, even for debates or peace rallies. African children went to school in the distant 'location' but they could have been on another planet. In my 'NED' (i.e. Natal Education Department) white-controlled provincial system of education (before the Tricameral Parliament in 1983, when Indian Education came under a separate Indian chamber) classroom of those years, I was safely sanitised from the realities of sharing life with my fellow South African citizens who lived in the same 'home' town. It is a sad indictment on apartheid schooling that I was not

afforded the opportunity to encounter and interact with students of other race groups throughout my entire formal education from primary through secondary to tertiary level. My teachers at school were all Indians and mainly males. Generations of South African students have endured this cultural impoverishment and the processes to redress this situation has only recently begun.

In 1953 the Bantu Education Act was passed and in 1954 we saw a transfer of the control of black education from the provincial administration to the central government Department of Native Affairs. The Department of Bantu Education was created in 1958. H.F. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs had set the South African agenda uncompromisingly in his now clichéd statement:

When I have control over native education, I will reform it so that natives will be taught from childhood that equality with Europeans is not for them

Occasionally there were glimpses of the wider world of resistant, alternative thinking. Some of our more daring teachers had invited Chief Albert Lutuli, who lived in Grootville, Natal, to speak to us at one of our annual speech days. Chief Lutuli, the first Nobel Peace Prize winner from South Africa, epitomised the unwavering struggle of the ANC in those days. He was later to be placed under house arrest and the ANC itself was banned in 1960 culminating in the Rivonia Trial of 1964. Lutuli's autobiography, *Let My People Go* (1962), was a cry of anguish against apartheid. But for years that voice was suppressed. Hopes were raised in 1960 when Harold Macmillan made his famous 'winds of change' speech in the House of Parliament in Cape Town. But those winds of change did not blow over our school. Newsworthy items we were exposed to focused on the space race between the United States and Russia. Our classroom talk centred on these phenomenal examples of the progress of 'mankind'. But we hardly heard of what was happening in the other end of town or the rest of the country.

The South African government was growing aware that winds of change blowing over the rest of Africa would mean that it could not expect further support from Britain. We were poised to leave the Commonwealth. I remember the day that the vice-principal came to our class and offered us souvenir-medals to commemorate the inauguration of South Africa as a republic. Nobody stood to receive them. Our allegiance to 'The Crown' and 'The Queen' was unshakeable and there was general unease when Verwoerd grimly walked out of the Commonwealth. The irony, of course, was that Indians, like the rest of the black population, were omitted from the referendum to decide whether South Africa should become a republic or not. My relatives were loyal royalists, vying with one another about how much

they knew about royal family life, enjoying the royal pomp and pageantry vicariously and developing naturally a 'nostalgia for empire', to use Edward Said's (1994) phrase. Yet, under the British Crown, the history of indentured labourers was hardly a happy one.

As I look back now, I realise that there was a curious collusion between apartheid and colonialism and that this came to bear especially in the literature that we studied at school. Literature was immediately synonymous with Literature with a capital L. Raymond Williams' critique was to come years later, ironically only after my formal university education, when I began reading for myself (see Williams 1977). Literature was confined to English Literature or that which was written a 'long time ago'. Oral and popular literatures as well as local and contemporary writing of black South African peoples were not even considered as being marginal or secondary. It simply did not exist.

With its stress on 'standards' and aesthetics, the Great Tradition was accepted unproblematically as canon. Developing in the 1930s in Britain, the chief figures of the great tradition were F.R. Leavis and the Scrutiny School. As Matthew Arnold had tried to do in the late nineteenth century, they wished to bolster a declining society and its hegemony by promoting a liberal education. They hoped that this canon would provide the 'civilising', cultural and moral values that religion was failing to offer. John Higgins draws our attention to the precarious position that English literature occupied historically and the strategies that were devised to prop it up. He argues that

a part of the project of English literature was to invent a sense of Englishness at just the moment that England entered its long period of imperial decline (Higgins 1994)

In recent years I have learned that English literary study actually developed in the colonial context of India and have begun to appreciate how the study of English and the growth of the Empire were inextricably bound together.

Now, when I look back on those classes in my old school, in another time and place, I see the extent to which I was 'institutionalised'—into 'the institutional system of English Literature as an academic subject' (Bergonzi 1990:5). Peculiar totalising discourses were inflecting my thinking silently, implacably. I think of the many silences and denials of those learning days, those 'articulated silences' to use Henry Giroux's (1992) phrase. There was, of course, no television in those days, due to the Calvinist need to protect the people from moral decay. So the 'hyperreality' came not from a media culture, but from the insidious hidden curriculum of dominant discourse—telling me who I was and shaping my identity. This was the time of entrenchment of apartheid, and the growing power of the Nationalist

Government. In another part of the world, Frantz Fanon (1961) was writing about the 'wretched of the earth' and his writings were going to contribute decisively to resistance of apartheid in the decades to come.

I realise now that those were the days of *Drum* and Can Themba. I recall seeing *Drum Magazine* lying about the house, together with *The Farmers' Weekly* and *Outspan*. I don't know where my father obtained old copies. It would be years later that I would grow to appreciate that the *Drum* writers were trying to

record and create the voices, images and values of a black urban culture which, in the aftermath of war-time industrial expansion, was struggling to assert its permanence and identity. At the same time, the newly-elected National Party government was setting out to smash any permanent African presence in the so-called white cities and to embark on the apartheid dream of Bantu retribalisation (Chapman 1989).

I now realise why *Drum* never appeared in our official reading in our classrooms. It was not even mentioned in passing.

Can it be true that black women were writing since the turn of the century? Yet they never made their way into my classrooms in this town on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Even Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), though presented to me as an exemplary model of 'indigenous' writing, was not depicted for its singular South African perspective, nor for its place in feminist thinking at a time when the world was moving into the second wave of feminist thinking and writing.

I was living out my romance with English literature, moving in and out of grand old English country houses and splendid estates, learning about the way all real people lived while formulating a distinct impression of how all good poetry and good novels should be written. My consciousness and sensitivity—my 'elemental' self—was being produced and 'saturated' by another culture of ideas, a 'politics of signification', telling me who I was and who I should become. The books of the Great Tradition, naturalising constructed values, held unquestioned status. This became my centre from which I viewed the world. And all I cultivated was the grand desire to be like the Catherine Earnshaws waiting to be eternally united to the Heathcliffs of the world, somewhere beyond the provincial boundary of my dismal and ordinary neighbourhood. Perhaps I dreamed too of coveting the 'bluest eye', like Toni Morrison's Pecola. I was made for divine discontent and 'immortal longings', far beyond the sordid reality of life in this corner of the world.

In this context, I have something to expiate—a pettiness. Why did I believe that true literature was meant to take me away from the reality of my life and place me on some transcendent plane of existence? Why did I experience it as a legitimate aspiration above my lowly class, giving me visions of a better life, a better world?

I read of no stories of local labourers, of life on the sugar plantations on the hills and valleys of Kearsney, the village of my growing-up days. There was no way of reflecting then on the feudal-type existence my parents accepted as privilege—barrack-lined accomodation with weekly rations as remuneration. This day to day living, woven with stories of families and feuds, of living and loving and struggle and small joys was relegated to the margins of real life. The crude personal and private was only to be lived and endured. This daily history was slighted by a politics of selection working invisibly on behalf of my colonised self.

There were stories of Pandita Ramabhai, of Sarojini Naidu, of Gandhi and Nehru. Told around large homely coal fires, they assumed the breadth of legend and irreality, portraying life experiences in broad brush-strokes. In colonised India, fragments of the pre-colonial past had already been merged with colonial patterns of life and culture. The process of dispossession which began in India continued for the Indian workers who were brought to work in a strange land with its own myths and legends. They did not resist it, nor did they create counter myths. These were left for the real 'frontiersmen'—those of the European races.

What thoughts filled the early Indian migrant workers in their physical and emotional encounter and confrontation with the colonial masters and the new land? What metaphors were deployed to depict their severing of links with ancestral traditions on the one hand and their migration and translation across the Indian Ocean on the other? What 'counter-memories', as Paul Gilroy (1987) and others ask, came into being but are now lost to the wind? Why are these questions relevant only to the white settler's dilemma and not to the black races of the world? One of the sad indictments of our apartheid schooling, sufficiently well-organised to promote formal, functional education, was its insidious stranglehold on the creative imagination. The stifling and even absence of a literary tradition among Indians prevented us from reflecting on our psychic displacement. We were subjected to colonial discourse and simultaneously prevented from criticising empire 'textuality' (see Boehmer 1995:13). We were also kept apart from the wider world community of history, literature and intellectual thinking. Our post-1960 isolation from the rest of the Commonwealth did not enhance a sense of shared historical conditions globally.

Moreover, Indian experiences were not woven into the fabric of the emerging literary expression of other race groups in South Africa for the better part of the century. The tendency to imagine oneself to be part of discrete and homogenous cultures was both cause and effect of our separated living.

From the 1960s onwards, there has been a growing number of writers of Indian origin, both male and female and both 'at home' and in exile, who

are writing with a distinctively South African voice. Examples of these writers are Ahmed Essop, Ismail Choonara, Achmat Dangor, Essop Patel, Farouk Asvat, Ronnie Govender, Guru Pillay, Kessie Govender, Kriben Pillay, Deena Padayachee, Shabbir Banoobhai, Jayapraga Reddy, Shobna Poona, Farida Karodia and Agnes Sam. Many have resisted narrow ethnic categories of the apartheid state and have claimed a wider, black identity to 'harmonise/ our blackness all over Azania' (Patel 1980). While this writing, mainly of a younger generation, has not directly engaged in a critique of indenture and assimilation, of the discursive violence of colonialism and racism as found in other parts of the Indian diaspora such as Trinidad, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Australia, the context from which their writings spring is unmistakably related to this history.

There is also Arabic, Urdu, Tamil and Hindi poetry that needs to be integrated into South African literary writings. Surendra Bhana and Joy Brain (1990) observe that pamphlet literature written by Indians in South Africa is a considerable but still hidden and not adequately explored resource. Their own research also shows the value of oral records, passed from generation to generation, for the uncovering of lost experiences, thoughts, memories, expectations and criticisms. Much work, also remains to be done on extant little-known published or archival material to uncover discourses and literature common to Indians in South Africa's past. Much has yet to be added to the three poems by BD Lalla, published in Van Wyk et al. (1988), to ensure the popularising of these literary expressions.

Foucault (1972) has drawn attention to the process whereby exploitation and domination is imbibed, whereby people subjugate themselves—in a process of 'subjection'. In the past, we were not only manipulated politically and economically but also excluded by being exoticised. And we participated in the commodification of ourselves and our 'culture'. These processes assured that we collude in our own cultural oppression. In this context, Edward Said (1978) notes that, "the modern Orient ... [still] participates in its own Orientalising". It was this tendency that also prompted Ndebele (1971:3) to protest against the general oppression of all colonised peoples, when he wrote:

do not crowd my mind  
with studied images of my past,  
let me feel it first:  
do not display my carved rituals  
at the British Museum,  
for little do they say,  
let me feel them first.

At present, there is a particular yearning to discover these 'subjugated know-

Change has been taking a long time to reach our educational systems. Our schools and universities were isolated from the mainstream of global change for a long time and have only recently become places of real curriculum and structural change. The discourse of decolonisation was already beginning in the 1960s in Kenya for instance. In South Africa, however, we were still officially entrenching 'grand apartheid' at the time. It took years before I heard about the Black Power movement, of the concept of Negritude and the Harlem Renaissance on the ascendant at the very time I was at school. This critical engagement in the multiform and complex discourse of decolonisation and resistance to apartheid undergirded the events of Soweto 1976.

Soweto 1976 was precisely a revolt against apartheid and cultural imperialism in our educational system. It reintroduced the practices of struggle into the South African arena like no other event since the banning of the African National Congress in the early 1960s. The media's depiction of these events as 'senseless violence against the hallowed halls of learning' and the official instruments of apartheid society and the government's stifling of the real effects of this turning point in southern African history and education did not succeed in stemming the tide. In real terms, the legacy of that struggle is only being claimed now as we try to implement those dreams of a liberatory pedagogy. Soweto 1976 signifies that time in our education history when we started to sever and extricate ourselves from the shackles of all that is related to our oppressive lives. Sepamla (1977:6f) captures this vividly in his poem, *At the Dawn of Another Day*:

take away  
your teachings  
take away  
your promises

take away  
    your hope  
take away  
    your language  
give  
    me  
    this  
    day  
    myself  
i shall learn myself anew  
i shall read myself from the trees  
i shall glean myself from all others  
i shall wean myself of you.

Soweto 1976 claimed for all of us the right to foreground our particular, historical experiences. It was the culmination of our need to name and describe our oppression. This naming of our experiences was crucial in the awakening of the consciousness of the oppressed.

Students were protesting against the artificial boundaries that had been ideologically set up and which would in time, collapse—boundaries between context and education, teacher and student, student and political reality, curriculum and need. Our ‘street culture and street knowledge’, our singular and corporate experiences of apartheid divisions and practices felt in our minds and in our bodies, were rendered inert in the formal abstract knowledge of classroom instruction (see Peter McLaren 1993). This is also why the advent of ‘Peoples’ Education’ was inevitable in our history. The growing resistance of students to the state’s attempts to inculcate, preserve and further an alienating education, initially only had one source on which to draw: personal experience. ‘A tyranny of place’, an inescapable and necessary ‘politics of location’, was prompting us into new spaces of liberation. All this as we moved into the eye of the storm, with the state of emergency beginning in the mid-1980s, and the inevitable apocalyptic literature of this decade.

After Soweto 1976 and Steve Biko’s death, our education history was set on an irreversible course of reconstruction.

## Challenges for the Present and the Future

My ‘lifelong education’ is taking a new turn nowadays. It is really a re-education, sensitive to new impulses of thought, new critical voices and old silences. Apart from asking questions about what constitutes the literary canon, I am going back to those old familiar texts and reading them for their omissions, evasions and erasures. In this process, I am claiming a reflexivity

that had hitherto been suppressed. I am seeing them in all the trappings of their 'locatedness'. Edward Said (1994), together with writers such as Homi Bhabha (1990), points out that a fundamental aspect of 'culture and imperialism' is that nations themselves are narrations, that those who had power, had the power to block out other narratives from forming and emerging, of screening the way representations of the colonised took place. In order to rectify this distortion, the advent of *Staffrider* serves as the point of orientation impressing on us that this hegemony also serves as the stimulus which prompts us to produce (and publish) our own books and writing.

In recent years I have been growing attentive to South African voices demanding the right to define, imagine and theorise our own understanding of human skin, black and white history and to develop a sensitivity to voices from the Third World speaking in the interstices of gender and race. I am discovering the

need to find new symbols, to revisit the familiar which has suddenly become strange, to rediscover the ordinary, to reinvent the real' (Ndebele (1971).

There will always be that longing to know what you have been deprived of, to strip yourself of those false identities that have been trafficked for you and to search for your 'real' identity beneath the colonial layers. The recent craze for 'roots' is perfectly understandable. The 'West' had given us, in Lewis Nkosi's (1965) words, a 'heap of broken images' of ourselves and we have assumed the mission to recreate ourselves from the disparate elements of our cultures as well as from the debris of our shattered pre-colonial past. Of course, we will realise that there is no authentic identity somewhere waiting to be found. We have to be circumspect when we prop ourselves up by our apparent 'authenticity'. Stuart Hall and Peter McLaren (1993:286) urge the 'construction of identity grounded in memory, narrative, and history but not contained by them'.

We should be circumspect too of the influence of well-meaning critics or 'cultural brokers'. Richard Rive's (1977:61) earlier evaluation of those involved in the literary scramble for Africa is certainly apt especially today:

This time the explorer came armed with a fistful of ph'ds in black literature, passed through Africa's doors, and taught the blacks to understand Soyinka and Achebe, and discuss negritude, if not meaningfully then at least soulfully. The professional Africanist created the professional African. The former must have beamed when he saw his protégé don his beads, fuz his hair, beat his cowhide drum, and tell whites what they in any case already knew.

Indeed a new battle has to be waged. While we have grown critical of how

Literature was defined for us in the past, there is a need now for further vigilance. Literature reflected the criteria by which we determined whether something qualified as 'literature' or not, the standards by which we distinguished 'good' writing from bad and the means and aspirations of a particular class (Bammer 1991:240). Now, literature must include the literary expressions and experiences of all. While we academics were once opposed to the commercialised and mass-marketed popular culture consumed by common people, the politically-correct view now may prompt us to become self-appointed purveyors and custodians of a new Culture with a capital C or even of popular culture. We have started to speak of township culture, music and art. In this activity, we might find that we still legitimate and validate our positions at educational institutions by using strategies similar to those harnessed by colonialist and apartheid regimes. Deciding that the old distinctions are now spurious and proclaiming to the world our enlightenment from imperialism, elitism and bigotry we might find ourselves still being implicated in the same from a different vantage point<sup>1</sup>. Roger Deacon and Ben Parker (1994) state:

The struggle against all forms of domination, both Western and indigenous and including those that sing the song of emancipation, requires not the identification of a higher truth or a future paradise but simply "the persistent critique of what one must inhabit" [Spivak].

## To Counteract the Legacy of Apartheid

To counteract the legacy of apartheid which manifested itself at state, institutional, cultural and individual levels of South African society and to reconstruct a new society, schools and universities, we must consider radical change of the curricula. This requires a major paradigm shift, a politically-engaged perspective instead of a neutral one. Such a perspective has to rigorously critique the 'epistemology of apartheid' and adequately address questions related to the production of knowledge and the assumptions of truth and objectivity. An informed and dynamic strategy for organisational change at school level in particular is essential and analyses and action-proposals on curriculum issues inescapable.

Given this background, curriculum change cannot be short-term, technicist, ameliorative, additive and piece-meal. We have to pursue developing a critique of exclusivistic, privileged, monopolistic 'regimes of

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these views are articulated by Bammer (1991:246) in relation to feminist concerns and I have extended them here to include thinking about literature and teaching

truth'. The practices of cultural violation, epistemic violence and imperialism that colonised the social imagination and perpetuated processes of othering 'others'—in this case, those who were not Western, not middle class but black or female—must be radically excised from education and pedagogy.

Because of our experiences of the past, we need an analysis of the deliberate exclusion of the experience of living in Africa. Such 'treacheries of erasure' were designed to keep people passive, silent, and dispossessed, both intellectually and materially. These analyses may also open the space for accounts of the liberation of the stifled 'political unconscious' breaking through the layers of suppression. Since curriculum change cannot be isolated from wider institutional transformation research and university education will have to play the leading role here.

Our schools and universities could not always be locations of oppression. They have been transforming themselves radically into sites of struggle and of resistance and have become sites of hope and possibility. I believe that literature study, in all its critical diversity, can be pivotal in continuing this developing critical tradition in the 'new' South Africa.

Furthermore, we have still to engage in a proper study of the implications of 'Africanising' our schools and universities. Amongst other changes, it should include the changing of the composition of students, academics and administrators, the changing of the syllabus and curriculum, the establishing of criteria to determine relevant research programmes and the criteria for the judgement of excellence in our particular contexts of need and challenge. This will also have to include the development of ideologically-engaged academic support programmes and a major review of all prevailing assumptions that black students are inferior, that it is the students who must change and that perceived 'loss' can be made up by bridging programmes.

We will need to develop mechanisms for the on-going development and transformation of the curriculum by both teachers and students, to constantly problematise even our critical pedagogy and to resituate our emancipatory work in the light of emerging and changing experiences and interpretations. This will also involve a study of the feasibility for disciplinary deterritorialisation and dynamic interaction in the light of existing expediencies of disciplinary divisions, intractability and impermeability.

## **Conclusion**

I began this paper by noting the importance of 'telling our stories'. I have presented these reflections at a particular moment in my own history. I

expect to go back to the past again and again, to engage in new interrogations and new reconstructions and to be attentive to the contradictions, gaps and silences in my story and in my telling of it. Part of reconstructing ourselves as a post-apartheid society is to constantly dismantle and rebuild as we try to understand the part that social structures have played in shaping our identities as well as our own complicity in them. Telling our stories entails risk and pain, but in the reclaiming and re-naming is new freedom.

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