Mandela's Ego:
A 'Cock' and 'Bull' Story

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Introduction

Mandela's Ego (2006), Nkosi says, developed from a fantastical idea[1], which is, of course, why it is a novel, in a certain sense of the word anyway. It can be seen against what Lewis Nkosi has said about writing by black South Africans in English, namely, that

> … its [writing by black South Africans in English] formal insufficiencies, its disappointing breadline asceticism and prim disapproval of irony, and its well-known predilection for what Lukacs called 'petty realism, the trivially detailed painting of local colour' … can be seen to be a result, in part, of a claustrophobia related to … internal colonialism from which, it is hoped, a post-apartheid condition will set it free (1998: 77).

[1] 'I had wonderful students at Brandeis University, in Boston, in my writing class …. I wanted to encourage them to write. As an act of solidarity, I told them I would also write something for them which [we] would read together but I had no idea what. Then I thought very quickly; I thought of a young boy who grows up worshipping Mandela. His manhood comes to an abrupt end before it has begun the day Mandela is arrested and sent to Robben Island' ('In Their Words—Book Award Nominees' p. 1. www. entertainment.iafrica. com).

Whereas this line of inquiry into black South African writing in English has become all too familiar, albeit its credentials remain contested, what is a more urgent question today is whether the hope of the freedom to experiment (with irony and fantastical tales, for instance) post-apartheid has been realised in the recent literature by black South African writers, including Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego* as a case in point. Alternatively, one may ask of this line of inquiry whether it is appropriate—indeed, desirable—to see history as marching in linear fashion from presumed claustrophobic necessity to the open air of formalism, so to speak. Further still, whether what can be called claustrophobic necessity is not a legitimate area of fictional interest and philosophical inquiry, beyond the generalities of literary taste or subjective formalism. For, even as this critique of black South African literature acquired renewed energy in the nineteen eighties and early 'nineties, with the publication of Njabulo Ndebele and Albie Sachs's essays, a sobering counter-critique of the ascendance of culturalism could be discerned in the work of, among others, Michael Vaughan, Tony Morphet, Shane Moran and Kelwyn Sole (see Vaughan 1991: 186- 204; Morphet 1992: 129-141; Moran 1995: 177-195; Sole 1997: 116-151). Vaughan, for instance, could not find in Ndebele's stories examples of the kind of literature that his critical essays presupposed and called for but, rather, a tradition of storytelling more at home in a Western realist novel, with its attendant problems. For his part, Morphet saw Ndebele's critical essays as drawing on 'the traditions of Romanticism and Nationalism' (131). In 'The New Hellenism', Moran cautioned against the 'valorisation of popular culture', which 'presupposes a unity that can be, and has been, racialised' (1995: 182-183). He did this by considering some of the historical uses of the idea of culture and the pre-eminence—and sometimes hegemony—of the German sense of culture, that is, '*Bildung*', which 'conveys self-formation, development, and cultivation ...' (183). Sole argued that,

> It is noticeable that the sense of 'newness' it [post-coloniality] both helped form and responded to often demonstrates a superficial understanding at best of what the local versions (in literary criticism) of the 'master narratives' it has sought to supplant were. It has also tended to stereotype the literary expression produced during the struggle period as literature obsessed with politics and oblivious of

> the quotidian experiences of its characters or its readers[2]—a belief which usually relies on the authority of a handful of critics such as Ndebele, Sachs and Nkosi (119).

Culturalist arguments and practices, then, have had to confront the challenges of materialist critique, with their emphasis on the imperatives of power that suffuse cultural representation, and these challenges have become more pronounced with the steady, albeit fitful, emergence of 'post-apartheid' writing. This is even more so because much of what is today called post-apartheid literature is marked by a strong sense of cultural self-representation and historical recuperation, a phenomenon not altogether surprising, given South Africa's history of overdetermination of identity from without, as it were, of *ethnos*. However, as I shall argue in the case of *Mandela's Ego*, the phenomenon of cultural self-representation is one that is potentially conservative.

There are, of course, variations to the theme of cultural and historical self-representation; Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000), for instance, or, for that matter, her *Playing in the Light* (2006), approaches the issue of self-representation in terms that differ from Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego*. For instance, whereas in *David's Story* a formal issue such as the investigation of the self in history is a thematic concern, in Nkosi's novel expressions such as 'Courting Zulu men believe in touch', 'For Zulu girls this was routine stuff' (144), or 'What better way for a young Zulu boy, striving to make a name for himself as a man …' (50), while an argument can be made of their potentially ironic—even comic—import, nevertheless remain largely dehistoricised. And, as I shall contend in my discussion of Nkosi's novel, it makes very little difference, if at all, that the kinds of identities that the two authors (Wicomb and Nkosi) portray are marked by

[2] Indeed, J.M. Coetzee's reading of Alex La Guma's *A Walk In The Night*, in 'Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex La Guma' (Attwell 1992), shows that, strictly speaking, a closed or monologic text is impossible. That is, that it often depends on the experience that readers bring to a text that appears to disclose nothing of its world beyond the author's banal omnipresence to realise that a text's meaning may, in fact, also reside in the act of reading.

differences in complexity[3]. Nor does it seem terribly convincing to say that *Mandela's Ego* is a hoax, as it were, a cock and bull story, for the mere fact that cocks and bulls in the novel acquire more than just comic significance.

Doubtless, irony abounds in the narrative of *Mandela's Ego*, so that the generalisations about Zulu boys, girls and men may very well be intended to provoke. Yet the world that the novel portrays (Mondi village) seems to me already sealed inside a semiotic chain that undermines the possibility of a non-identitarian argument or, at the very least, an argument that acknowledges, however tacitly, that issues of identity imbricate with those of power. Irony in narrative fiction, it must be said, is a function of a narrative contract between narrator and narrattee and works by means of strategic disclosure of the underlying 'truth' that the use of irony seeks to render absurd. Unless, of course, it is proffered in bad faith, in which case it falls by its own unlearnt lessons. In the novel, besides Dumisa's exaggerated and, thus, ironic egoism, which is fairly easy to lampoon, other characters act out their predictable roles that the narrator assigns with cheerful self-indulgence. MaMkhize, Dumisa's mother, and her daughters sing '*Waklazulwa ngenxa yami*! *He was wounded for our sins*!' (26) *ad nauseam*, and do not seem to have any meaningful lives outside the home; Father Ross holds forth with his Medieval ideology, disguised as poetry, in Africa; the Zulu girls are either difficult (Nobuhle) or loose (Nozizwe), with both sides rolled into a simple sexual binarism, much to the male protagonist's delight; the villagers are a happy, cheerful lot and the Afrikaners are murderous but not very bright. In short, when it comes to these characters, the novel's irony reverts to the older, tedious commonplaces and stereotypes.

What is of interest for me, then, is the value of the culturalist (read fantastical) site that the narrative of *Mandela's Ego* appears to inhabit against the background of, firstly, the evident internal hierarchies of gender and wealth and, secondly, the seductive pull of African nationalism which gives the novel its title, and which, like all nationalisms, appears to be deeply organised in the lore of masculine authority and prestige.

[3] That is, that Wicomb's novel is aimed at an academic audience, while Nkosi's is aimed at a relatively youthful readership.

Ego Sum

Set in the nineteen sixties, *Mandela's Ego* follows the sexual (mis)fortunes of 'Dumisa, the Bull of Mondi, a Zulu *isoka* [Casanova] of great renown, a heroic lover of countless women, known across the length and breadth of the land for his exploits in the name of the Black Pimpernel, the great Mandela' (7). On the horizon of this text of male sexual egoism, or, rather, embedded in it, is the text of (South African) politics, even though the narrative is quite glib about the meaning of this text to the day-to-day lives of the Mondi villagers. Here Nkosi returns to his old theme, namely, the uneasy and tragic commerce between black male sexuality, politics and psychoanalysis, well established by *Mating Birds* (1986) and developed in *The Black Psychiatrist* (1994). However, whereas in these earlier works the tragedy plays itself out in the encounters of black male protagonists, Ndi Sibiya and Dr Kerry respectively, with white women, Veronica and Mary respectively, in *Mandela's Ego* Nkosi changes tack and tackles the tricky issue of the coming-into-being of Zulu male subjectivity and how this is sustained by a projection of self-love/narcissism onto a significant ideal. The ego ideal in the formation of Dumisa's sexual identity is the combination of the formative fantasy of a super masculine Mandela, which he works into his (and, by extension, 'Zulu') masculine sexual repertoire, and the sexualised image of African nationalism, which he appropriates for his Mandela Football Club. Fastened upon this is an idea of Zulu boyhood and sexual socialisation that is sustained by a local version of 'Zooluology', to borrow a coinage by Peter Davis (1996:124)[4].

However, the novel eschews an elaborate Freudian narrative and, instead, installs one that must be seen to have its foundations in Zulu male attitudes towards manhood and sex. For instance, the narrator spends a great deal of time in the early sections of the narrative working out the differences between Zulu and European notions of sexuality and desire via the lessons

[4] Whereas Davis uses this term to mount a critique of racist colonial attitudes towards the Zulus as an unchanging mass of noble savages, in a similar way that Edward Said uses the term 'Orientalism', I argue that it can be appropriated for a description of a practice of cultural representation in which a group is described in static/essentialist terms, even if the intention is not to insult or to undermine.

that Father Ross gives in his Culture Studies classes about

> European courtship patterns in the Middle Ages, about love-making between knights and ladies in those great, unrepeatable times, when love was above all a game of chess—full of passion yet innocent of vice, full of devotion yet unsullied by the corruption of the flesh! (33).

To which he opposes 'The people of Africa [who] have too much sex on their minds to experience the meaning of true love' (33). Even the case of Dumisa's sexual impotence after Mandela is captured by the Apartheid State police, described in some detail in the opening two paragraphs of Chapter Fourteen, and which looks every bit the type of case that Freud discusses in his case studies, turns out to be without an abstract Freudian psychological foundation[5]. Rather, it is cured by its cause, as it were, by the release of Mandela, rather than by the psychosexual promptings of Madame Rosi. In this regard, then, one can suppose that together with the failure of Madame Rosi's method, the resistance of Ross's pupils to the 'obvious hypocrisy' (34) of European knights, who 'take women for a ride' by simply engaging in pointless 'palaver' (34), means that the narrative leans towards social analysis, rather than the idea of the essential 'tragicness of psychical life' (Voloshinov, qtd. in Morris 39) favoured by the Neitzschean strain of Freudianism. Which, of course, is not to say that the narrative is consistent with a social analysis that it appears to endorse. This murkiness in the narrative's conceptualisation of the relation of the subject to the social, it seems to me, is one of the areas of the novel that require analytical attention and mirrors the point I made earlier about the relative absence of sustained political life in Mondi village at the very moment that the village appears to be in the eye of the nineteen-sixties political rumble.

Nevertheless, let me ponder further the merits of my point above, namely, that the narrative tends toward a social, rather than an abstract psychological analysis, even as it seems to invest Dumisa's tragic failure to 'rise to the [coital] occasion' (7) with an abstract psychological diagnosis.

In a critique of Freudianism, in *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*

[5] Freud's discussion of the libidinal investment of the ego, for instance.

(1927), Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov, after pondering the weakness of the basis of the Freudian psychological thesis in 'subjective individualism', posits an alternative one based on the '*social and historical localization* [that makes a human being] *a real human being* and determines the content of his life and cultural creativity' (in Morris 38). This is because,

> [Tthe abstract biological person … does not exist at all.… What is needed, as it were, is a second birth, a *social* birth. A human being is not born as an abstract biological organism but as a landowner or a peasant, as a bourgeois or a proletariat … (ibid. 38).

In the above sense, then, no person can be possessed of a singular consciousness born of a singular ego ideal. About Voloshinov's line of critical inquiry, Pam Morris notes that, 'since any Marxist study must be founded upon an objective methodology, the inherent subjectivism of [the Freudian] introspective trend makes it totally unacceptable for dialectical materialism' (ibid. 38). If, as Voloshinov says, what runs through 'Freud's [subjectivist] doctrine' is 'the *strife*, the *chaos*, the *adversity* of our psychical life', and that this is a radical departure from earlier, more optimistic 'old [pre-Freudian] psychology', its [the doctrine's] weakness nevertheless lies in its conception of the human subject as existing outside history.

Strife and adversity in *Mandela's Ego* centre on Dumisa's psychosexual 'ill[ness]' (162). 'Following Mandela's capture', the narrator informs us,

> Dumisa was seriously ill, unable to eat, unable to sleep. He suffered nightmares, he complained of splitting headaches, his eyes yellowed, began slowly to dim. For hours on end he was mute, unable to utter more than a dozen words at a time. Then his hearing became impaired, he hallucinated. Sometimes he dreamed of Mandela, his hero, tall, bearded, eyes luminous with desire for freedom (162).

This leads to his failure to consummate his conquest of Nobuhle, '[a]fter so many days, weeks and months of trying to bring his quarry [Nobuhle] to heel …' (7). Readers are made to understand that Dumisa has brought this psychosexual strife on himself: out of the choices available to him to become

a (proper Zulu) man, he opts for a fantastical one that he culls from his uncle Simon's anecdotes about Mandela's boyhood, evidently embellished, and from 'photographs of the great man' (19). In this sense, his is the story of a politically naïve village boy in the tense political environment of the South Africa of the early nineteen sixties, whose frame of reference is quite limited, a point that a man at the rally at which Mandela is scheduled to speak brings home to him. After demanding to speak to 'the Big Man' (117), the man, 'Assuming a severely tutorial tone', tells Dumisa that,

> Mandela may be a big man in stature, but he is not the Big Man of the Movement. Luthuli is President-General. We believe in collective leadership. No one is a 'Big Man' in our Movement. We try to discourage any manifestations of the Cult of Personality (117).

Needless to say, 'Dumisa did not know what the man was talking about …. He listened [to Mandela's speech] without enthusiasm' (118).

Textual-sexual Politics in *Mandela's Ego*

Against the backdrop of the above, one can make a few pointed inferences about the type of novel that *Mandela's Ego* is, in particular the imbrication of the story of a Zulu Casanova in a remote village of Zululand with African nationalism, which Dumisa constitutes into a formidable, albeit repertory, sexual metaphor and routine via the agency of Mandela. I want to proceed by making a few observations regarding the textual-sexual overlay in the narrative of *Mandela's Ego* and how this may be said to relate to the idea of social and political consciousness that the novel grafts onto the singular consciousness of its male protagonist.

The fantastical world that Dumisa makes up from stories told to him by his uncle Simon, 'his older cousin Sipho, and indeed a whole army of herdboys in the countryside taking care of younger boys' (23), including Sipho's masturbation; the sexually charged poetry lessons that Father Ross gives in his Culture Studies classes; and the elaborate display of sexuality in the *ukuthomba* (coming-of-age) ceremony, all imbue the narrative with the elements of tragic-comedy that it sets against the realism of political ferment and repression. Dumisa's world is both tragic and comical precisely because

in it he can only admit these stories or, if not these stories, those that would dovetail with his stock of regularly performed masculine routines.

The social world that the narrative portrays, however, is one of socio-cultural transition from vernacular consciousness to something of no 'true origin or proper provenance' (64). Dumisa's shorts, for instance, which he wears under an *ibheshu* (skin apron) at his coming-of-age ceremony, speak of the 'extravagance of his blended repertoire' (64), but also poignantly of a community that is loosely anchored in 'authentic' (64) tradition. The structure of the Mondi village community that the narrative constitutes rests on a set of fairly simple co-ordinates: the missionaries, who have converted a small band of villagers, including Dumisa's mother, regard the villagers as simpletons and the non-converts, among whom Dumisa's father, retain an older (aristocratic) male order. In-between are those, like Dumisa's uncle and Nozizwe, who are of worldly consequence and the non-descript who drink sorghum beer at Dumisa's (place), but who nonetheless give the narrative its authoritative, insider voice.

The political world remains largely marginal to the day-to-day lives of the Mondi villagers, conspicuous mainly by the sight of 'a man … in the vicinity of Mondi Missionary School, in deep conversation with pupils … dressed like a soldier in khaki uniform, and … a dark beret with a pin bearing the letters and colours of the Freedom Movement stuck in it' (74). Aside from the journey that Dumisa and the members of his Mandela Football Club undertake to a political rally in Pietermaritzburg, and the news of political upheaval brought to the village by the local newspaper *iQiniso* (The Truth), there is no sustained political activity in Mondi.

So how are the two texts of sexual, quixotic fantasy and of political realism and social change brought to bear on a text of ordinary social and cultural life of Mondi? To address this question, I return to some of the broad statements that I proposed earlier, in particular my view that the novel sidesteps crucial issues of material culture by grafting its narrative and its world onto a largely synthetic culturalist pattern. While a cautionary tale about Mandelamania is not inherently weak, no such presumption can be made about what flourishes inside the framework of such a tale. It is, thus, to the story of the Mondi village community, which holds the novel's 'Prologue' (Dumisa's sexual impotence) and 'Epilogue' (the restoration of Dumisa's sexual powers) in place that I now turn, the better to probe into the

spurs that Nkosi brings to the post-apartheid novel form, against the 'disappointing breadline asceticism and prim disapproval of irony' (77) of the claustrophobic apartheid novel. For even as the novel turns to the past to situate Dumisa's Mandela-size ego, it treats of the past 'as the prehistory of the present'; it (the historical novel) is, as it were, 'a coded reflection on the present' (2005:6), to borrow Terry Eagleton's efficient formulations.

'Zooluology': Masculinity, Femininity and Narrative Authority in *Mandela's Ego*

'The Zulus', the priest used to say, 'are most like us as we were many centuries ago when the great tribes of Europe were still young and vigorous and full of sap, before too much civilisation had razed their spirit, when pastoral life still bore witness to that ideal of pure love, expressed in absolute freedom and innocence' (9). This is Father Ross at his condescending best, a point that the narrative makes a point to buttress, most notably in its description of the American tourists that Dumisa takes around Mondi as a tourist guide with the Durban Tourist Company, who want to see 'how a real Zulu maiden prepares a meal' (133) and suchlike so-called Zulu cultural quintessence. Of course, Dumisa uses the opportunities that both Father Ross's lessons and the tourists' gullibility present to assert his own views about sex and to see Nobuhle (as the so-called real Zulu maiden), respectively. In any event, this is the trajectory that the narrative takes, relying on point and counterpoint, showing up Father Ross's austere colonial ideology and the American tourists' 'fast food' type as different only in form. But what does the narrative present as the alternative to these stereotypes of 'the Zulus'?

The first issue that I want to consider is the link that the narrative establishes between sexual and political impotence, using Dumisa as the mirror for such a link. Of course, it is not the first time that this kind of link has been made by an African writer; Sembene Ousmane used it in *Xala* (1974) to launch a scathing satire on the political impotence of the neo-colonial male elite in Senegal, by showing how the men of political influence take many wives both to flaunt their wealth and to compensate for their lack of real political (read economic) power. In *Xala*, the story of El Hadj Abdoukader Beye, a wealthy businessman in a newly independent

Senegal who takes a young wife to show off his success, is used as a parable to reveal this phenomenon. On the first night with his young wife, El Hadj fails to consummate his marriage because he is stricken by a *xala*—a curse—which renders him impotent. The notes on the back cover of the video production of the story describe El Hadj's attempts to solve his problem as 'allow[ing] … Sembene Ousmane to draw a vivid, satirical image of life in post-independence Senegal, underlining the gap between rich and poor and the inextricable mix of modernity and tradition'.

Mandela's Ego, like *Xala*, also deals with the issue of male sexual egoism. Again, like Ousmane's novella, Nkosi's novel bases its theme of sexual egoism on the ascendance of a cult of personality. However, unlike *Xala*, *Mandela's Ego* does not undertake a materialist analysis of this phenomenon, even though, potentially, it calls for such analysis. Instead, the narrative adopts a subjectivist approach, with pretensions toward a social and political analysis, by portraying Dumisa's impotence as ultimately the result of his delusions of grandeur. The consequences of this subjectivist approach are that, firstly, the social scene, which forms the backdrop of Dumisa's sexual activities, is portrayed in stereotypical ways and, secondly, the potentially rich narrative of masculinity and nationalism is sacrificed for the simplistic one of the tragic consequences of hero-worshipping or Mandela mania.

Let me tackle the problem of the lack of a viable social analysis in the novel, by considering the way in which the narrative rightly portrays the sexual socialisation of young boys in the village as responsible for Dumisa's attitude towards the village girls, but retreats from an analysis of the social constructions of masculinity and femininity. Indeed, much of the narrative appears quite comfortable with stereotypes of men, boys and girls that derive from social presuppositions and, in fact, holds them up as essentialisms, rather than submit them to social critique. The procession of general statements about Zulu men and women in the narrative, examples of some of which I referred to earlier, have acquired notoriety today as urban legends[6]

[6] Recall Jacob Zuma's defence when asked by the Judge at his rape trial why he did not back away from what he construed as a sexual invitation by his accuser, that in his culture, which would be Zulu culture, a man does not leave a woman in a state of arousal.

but are the stock-in-trade of *Mandela's Ego*'s Zulu cultural 'archive'. The failure to acknowledge the agency of Nobuhle, onto whose tantalisingly within reach and subsequently available body the text projects Dumisa's impotence, results in a restorative, rather than deconstructive, text of masculine pre-eminence: Dumisa regains his potency by going through a ritual of sexual 'release' and Nobuhle, whose role in the narrative is to raise the stakes in an otherwise male tragicomedy, is quietly narrated out. So is the 'brown woman [in a] *doek*' (181), whose only act is to offer Dumisa sex, which cures his impotence. It would be correct to say that she is put there to prop up a story that has no real use for her beyond the sexual service that she provides, which is also a service that the narrative requires to reach its conclusion.

Still on the issue of the novel's failure to provide a viable social analysis of the milieu, there is also clear evidence that, despite the social changes that Mondi village has undergone since the arrival of the missionaries, an aristocratic male order has remained. Mziwakhe Gumede, Dumisa's father, owns a sizable herd of cattle and remains aloof from and contemptuous of his wife MaMkhize's Christian fervour. However, there is no attempt in the narrative to draw links between his position in the village and in the text and the 'new men' of political power and influence who are gradually making inroads into the village. And, this is despite his evident discomfort with the son's political interests and growing disregard for him. Given his son's Mandela-size ego, there is good ground for the narrative to explore the lineaments of power, masculinity and authority in the discourses of tradition and nationalism. After all, Anne McClintock wrote in an issue of the journal *Transition*, which also featured an essay by Nkosi, that,

> While the language of the ANC was the inclusive language of national unity, the Congress was in fact male, exclusive, and hierarchical, ranked by an upper house of chiefs (which protected traditional patriarchal authority through descent), a lower house of elected representatives (all male), and an executive (all male). … Women could join as 'auxiliary members' but were denied formal representation, as well as the power to vote (114).

This is an issue that was urgent then as it is today. And since *Mandela's Ego* situates its own story in the period that McClintock describes above, it seems quite odd that Nkosi's narrator would revert to a language that is replete with gender and sexual stereotypes.

Conclusion

The type of theme that *Mandela's Ego* tackles is not new in African writing and has been treated with various levels of depth in world literatures dating back to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Against this background, and considering Nkosi's credentials as a renowned writer and critic, one would have expected a nuanced understanding of the concepts on which *Mandela's Ego* is founded, including the fantastical form, masculinity, femininity and nationalism. However, the novel missed the opportunity to tell an engaging *and* entertaining story when it seemed easier to do so than to fall into the same trap of 'petty realism' that Nkosi would rather was consigned to the claustrophobic colonial cauldron.

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