# *A Duty of Memory*

## Book Review

*A Duty of Memory*
by W.P.B. Botha
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W.P.B. Botha's book, *A Duty of Memory*, set in South Africa after the Second World War, does not only provide an insight into the Afrikaner's fears, hatred, loyalties and passions; but is also an exposé into the nature of his family life. On the surface, the text has all the ingredients typifying South Africa, such as the issues of race, master-servant relationships, Afrikaner patriotism, the perpetuation of Afrikaner blood and culture and the deep-rooted fear and suspicion of black insurgence. However, a closer scrutiny of the text reveals violence and destruction, not just between the black and white races, but also, within the confines of the Afrikaner family. This text of secrecy, deception and betrayal illustrates the illusionary nature of the family and individuals.

The protagonist, Andries Hartzenberg, a swarthy, athletic rugby player goes on a sporting tour of England where he meets Caroline Hines, a young English woman. Caroline, an only child, is subject to extended periods of loneliness by her parents, whose interests lie in their respective professions, as well as the war. So, at the beginning of the war, she is sent to live with her uncle and his family on their farm at the foot of Sperrin mountain in northern Ireland. Deeply unhappy and resentful, she returns to

London where she finds employment in a bacon factory, where she makes a brief acquaintance with Andries. She confides in him her sense of abandonment by her parents, her alienation in an England ravaged by war and her determination to succeed on her own. For Andries, a foreigner and non-European, the war had little impact and interest. In an effort to comfort her, he casually suggests that she forgets her past and starts somewhere afresh, perhaps in Africa. This invitation sows for Caroline the seeds of new beginnings not just for her but also for Andries and his people. Shortly after Andries's return to South Africa, a pregnant Caroline arrives in the eastern Transvaal, seeks out Andries and becomes his wife.

It is this union that shocks the Hartzenberg family into reality and shatters their perception of a perfect family living out the Afrikaner idealism. They alienate themselves from the newly wedded couple and wallow in misery. For the close-knit Afrikaner *volk* (nation) who are exceptionally proud of their Springbok sporting heroes, this unpardonable marriage of a full-blooded Afrikaner son to an English-speaking woman spells dejection and disloyalty as it eternally mars Andries's career and their opportunity to celebrate honour and rejoice in their nationalism. This feeling of despair arising from the piercing of the armour of patriotism is expressed in the following reaction:

> *Ag*, said everybody, it's just politics. By politics meaning Ma. Meaning that by marrying an Englishwoman Pa had thrown away his chance of ever representing his country, because as far as the selectors were concerned Pa was a traitor to the volk (6).

As a result of his betrayal, Andries is ostracized by his siblings who 'blamed him for their parents' sudden ill health, for the blackening of the family name' (43). By marrying a woman from an opposing upbringing, Andries had committed, not only a filial, but, a national crime. Taken even further, for Andries's family, this marriage was a cardinal sin against God. The typical hypocrisy of an Afrikaner family that upholds a religion which for them does *not* advocate the brotherhood of man, becomes apparent in the ensuing lament:

> The shame, the betrayal of everything they and their parents—God-fearing Christians—had ever stood for. They reproached him for dishonouring the church. Making a mockery of the ceremony of holy matrimony (43).

To the Afrikaner community of eastern Transvaal, English-speaking people were regarded as outsiders and neither their culture nor their language was welcomed and any liaison with them meant keeping Satan as a bedfellow and this heralded damnation. The only redeeming force was the power of their Christian prayer in the Afrikaans vernacular.

The text constantly alludes to the Afrikaner's sense of superiority, arising out of his own self-perception as belonging to the chosen race. However, the time dawns for the Afrikaner to change, to yield—to shed off his cloak of elevation and face the reality, a stark reality that exposes him as a whimpering, withering coward. This is aptly described by Eeben:

> ... we are a cold-blooded people. Frozen with fear. Because we know, deep down we know God has fooled us ... still we must pay the price. For pretending we didn't understand. Pretending we didn't see it when we did (45).

The text shatters the stereotypical notion of the Afrikaner family life as being peaceful, loving, moral and content. Andries's family is plagued by the social evils of violence accompanied by physical, emotional, sexual and alcohol abuse. Considering that the Afrikaner is often exemplified by his love for his fatherland, which is farmed with the blood and sweat of its Afrikaner sons, the text showcases Leeufontein, the farm inherited by Andries, being subject to neglect and disinterest, becoming an economic waste.

The story, recounted extensively through the eyes and mind of Eeben, vacillates between past and present. The narration is disjointed and the reader is often exposed to Eeben's flow of consciousness or is allowed to preview the lives of Jo and Beth in terms of their own revelations. Where Eeben adopts the role of protagonist or first-person narrator, he adopts a conversational, colloquial mode, relying greatly on the Afrikaans vocabulary to convey meaning. In the text, the personal letters of Caroline and

Mafimane become important tools, which, not only link the story, but also offer insights into their character and their lives. The reader interacts with fragmented pieces of related events, which are expected to fit into a coherent whole. This narrative technique of weaving the past with the present is relevant as the past shapes and influences the events of the present.

The text highlights a life where hostility, destruction and isolation are the norm. The absence of real Christian values and morality leads to emotional sterility and self- destruction. The characters are incapable of developing strong, loving bonds; especially in an atmosphere that stifled, depersonalised and desensitised them.

Botha's text encases the inability to shake off one's past. This is not just for the Hartzenberg family but also for the Afrikaner who jealously and protectively guards his identity, heroes and monuments, only to have the dream of Afrikaner nationalism and a Boerestaat crumbling upon him. For the Afrikaners who believed that unity is strength, this was just a pipedream for the land eroded beneath their feet. But what does remain, is the presence of the past with its threatening and haunting memories, scars, secrets, ghosts and fears. No matter how one tries to disguise and rearrange the truth, it always returns to nag. But from the ashes of this past, hope, rejuvenation, growth and transformation can emerge as long as the individual confronts truth.

> There is a duty ... to bring all those hidden crimes out in the open, so those who have suffered can begin the healing process, which will bring us all back together as one nation (199).