A Victory of Sorts, All *Thirteen Cents* and *Bitter*, Too

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We defeated them, the enemy and their agents. Well, *a victory of sorts*. Now we have to live with the consequences. War is like that.

Introduction

Democratic South Africa is in many ways an ordinary society with extraordinary stories emerging from its communities. The disintegration of 'formal' apartheid brought by the 1994 elections has left in its wake a nation with a constitution that is admired for its democratic ethos following years of legalised racial inequality. Prior to 1994, the question that was constantly being asked of writers was concerned with what they would write about now that apartheid as a theme had been dismantled. This was as a result of Albie Sachs's provocative article, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom",[1] which initiated a general debate on aesthetics and politics that henceforth "real criticism" should replace "solidarity criticism" and "political correctness", seen then as inimical to good artistic works. Though hardly original, the article was an indicator of the liberalizing voice within circles of members of the African National Congress and how writers allied to the liberation struggle would react became a crucial arena of debate.

In the years since it was published, writers have had a good occasion to probe the interstices of interiority, complexity and ambiguity in South African human relations. The years leading up to ten years of democracy have seen an efflorescence of literature. And yet, by and large, such literature tended not to focus on dysfunctions of families but on larger socio-political issues. The authors who break the mould and re-locate the quotidian traumas of contemporary South Africa within the families

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are Achmat Dangor and Sello Duiker. Here the problems the authors delineate emanate both from the past that refuses to go away and a present that betrays the ideals of the past. For these writers, there is no clear break with the past, and the future is murky and uncertain. The victims are seen as caught in a maelstrom of a vicious circle of degeneration neither of their making nor choosing.

A note of caution needs to be inserted at this point: the question of South Africa as slotting un-problematically within the ambit of the postcolonial sphere is necessary. Critical debates over whether the country can be described as a "postcolonial state" have been held since early in the decade of the 1990s, and even then no consensus has been arrived at. Academics such as Rosemary Jolly (1995), Leon de Kock (1993), Kelwyn Sole (1994; 1997), Annamaria Carusi (1989; 1993), David Atwell (1993), Nick Visser (1997) and others have flogged the desirability or not of what is seen as metropolitan discourses that rob the local of specificities while inventing a broad front eclecticism supported by liberal ideologues or by radical populists (cf. Sole 1994, 165-24). At any rate, one also takes cognisance of the critique by scholars such as Arif Dirlik (1994) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1996) in saying that the applicability or not of such theories needs careful plotting and not mimetic appropriations even where these are markedly ill-conceived and theorised for a particular locale.

For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I deploy Achille Mbembe's "postcolony" to unpack the South African literary representations of the family; it will be seen that the "postcolony" is not mutually exclusive from postcoloniality. It is more a matter of emphasis. Explaining the nature of the postcolony, Achille Mbembe remarks that:

> The notion of "postcolony" identifies a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence that the colonial relationship involves…The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation. (2001, 102)

Mbembe notes further that the postcolony needs to be apprehended in two ways: (i) how the state *creates* its own world of meanings—a master code that, while becoming the society's primary central code, ends up by governing, perhaps paradoxically, the logics that underlie all other meanings within that society and (ii) how state power attempts to institutionalise this world of meanings as a "socio-historical world" and to make that world real, turning it into a part of people's common sense not only by instilling it into the minds of the *cibles*, or target population, but also by integrating it into the period's consciousness (Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity" 103).[2] The present South African government's obsession with "order" and "discipline" dovetails with Mbembe's observations that echo Atieno Odhiambo's notion of democracy in the postcolony as necessarily "guided democracy" (1987). Artists observe and describe a completely different, "nonsense" society. How writers perceive South African society, while not programmatic writing to the "postcolony template", reveals remarkable congruence of perception and vision aligned to it.

The South African academy has not been lax in seeking to understand and probe the various creative outputs from writers in the country. For instance, Kelwyn Sole has written about the manner in which South African prose fiction has flourished in the ten-year period between 1994 and 2004 (2002, 24). In his assessment, the "narratives of reconciliation, multiculturalism, reconstruction, examination of memory and the redefinition of identity loom large in short stories and novels". Such prominence is the result of academic attention to the genre. Yet he notes further that it is poetry that has carried "the burden of intellectually questioning, emotionally dense and formally experimental impetus over the last ten years" (24-25). In his view, post-1990 South Africa is less tolerant of political narratives, and that poets continue to stress most insistently the roles of social responsibility and political commentary, and to demonstrate these in practice (Sole 2002, 25). While I am broadly sympathetic to these views, I would hesitate to assert that fictional narratives have been *solely* concerned with reconciliation, multiculturalism and so forth at the expense of social responsibility and political commentary. The two genres are not mutually exclusive as Es'kia Mphahlele, quoting Christopher Caudwell (1956, 208), illustrates:

> Poetry expresses the freedom which inheres in man's general timeless unity in society; it is interested in society as the sum and guardian of common instinctive tendencies; it speaks of death, love, hope, sorrow…as all men experience them. The novel is the expression of that which men seek, not in their unity in society but in their differences, of their search for freedom in the pores of society, and therefore of their repulsions from, clashes with and concrete motions against other individuals different from themselves.

The distinction here is because novels represent change and diversity, poetry changelessness and unity. Such a distinction accounts for their technical differences. In their technical differences, both genres penetrate and enrich reality (Mphahlele 8). It is this essential difference that accounts for the exploratory nature of the three novels that I discuss. Here, too, there is a refusal to downplay the political role of the writer in a post-liberation scenario (Sole 25). Two contemporary texts, *Bitter Fruit* and *Thirteen Cents,* portray a rather harsh social and political reality of the South African milieu, one of political sterility and social deprivation in which not even family bonds survive the upheavals of the past, nor the present. For reasons that need careful plotting, it would seem as though neither of these two writers place much faith in old bonds and institutions beyond the need to come to terms with the past (Dangor) and the need to survive the present (Duiker; this thematic strain is also apparent in his second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*). For both writers, the present triumphalist spirit of ten years of democratic rule cannot be fictively celebrated. As Jean Meiring attests, "*Bitter Fruit* is a story about a so-called coloured family who discover—inevitably—that the new democratic South Africa is no Eden" (Meiring 6).[3] Dangor, as a former political activist surely has baggage, while Duiker, as a former street child, has experiences that spill over to the text he writes. Both texts decry the damages done to the family and it is on this quintessential human unit that they lay claim to a damaged

society. And the question to ask is: with the apparent death of the family, what sort of possible futures does contemporary writing envisage? One cannot overlook the harsh realities of the present nor the rumblings by former political activists who are discontent with their lot. But in proclaiming the death of the family—at least fictively—these writers seem to grapple with the intangible underbelly of society that requires further research. In the ten years of democracy there is nothing to celebrate if the family unit is no longer viewed as an integral part of the social fabric.

Bitter Fruit

Bitter Fruit starts by foregrounding the past, and through this past the present becomes fraught with difficulties for the Ali family. Silas Ali, a past political operative is the 'fixer' in the Ministry of Justice in the transitional period prior to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In the present dispensation, it is his job 'to ensure that everyone remained objective, the TRC's supporters and its opponents, that they considered the law above all, and did not allow their emotions to sway them (Dangor 2001, 59). He is himself confronted by someone whose presence allows for a slow but inevitable disintegration of once close, but curiously un-loving family even as he fights his emotions for 'objectivity' against what lies as the heart of the family's dreaded secret. Silas runs into his nemesis, François du Boise, in local supermarket while out shopping for groceries. The narrator sees the meeting of the two as inevitable:

> It was inevitable. One day Silas would run into someone from the past, someone who had been in a position of power and had abused it. Someone who had affected his life, not in the vague, rather grand way in which everybody had been affected, as people said, because power corrupts even the best of men, but directly and brutally. Good men do all kinds of things they could not help doing, because they had been corrupted by all the power someone or something had given them. (2001, 7)

From this inevitable meeting, the past takes on a pungent and devastating form in the lives of the Ali family. The "inevitable" meeting is precisely as a result of victim and perpetrator sharing the same space, the same geographic territory. Du Boise, a former security policeman in the South African Special Branch, makes Silas's self-control to slip. Henceforth the repressed past comes back to haunt not only himself but his wife, Lydia, and their son, Mikey/Michael/Noor. Worse to come is the revelation of secrets that held their private grief together, and as these are revealed the cement holding the family gives way to the pressure of the 'inevitable'. In his years of married life and during the political struggle, Silas Ali had never confessed to being an activist to Lydia. This is seen as the first betrayal in the text, for Lydia hardly comprehends how he could withhold this information from her: "He had endangered their lives, hers and Mikey's because of his secretiveness, his inability to trust her, his own wife" (54).

From this initial betrayal, Silas and Lydia co-habit a space of uncertainty, resentment, repressed anger and even more secretiveness. She sees his act as one of "ancient insensitivity, and [though] not deliberate" (60) it is nevertheless cruel. They remain alienated from one another and this alienation is strengthened by Lydia's perception that Silas's friendship with Kate Jessup, a former underground counter-intelligence commander to Silas, is "a genuine bond", to an extent where "Lydia's dislike for Kate turned to detestation" (54, 55). In this world of previously strong alliances, it is the private spaces and public ones where the battles for loyalty and companionship or even comradeship are fought, with further betrayals. Dangor paints, with grim determination, a world where betrayal becomes a currency, a sort of cannibalistic in-breeding and in-fighting all interlaced with genteel manners and the curious politics of transition. Mbembe's observation of the state as creating in its own code of meanings and institutionalising such meanings is pertinent, here. What Dangor illustrates is the manner in which publicly "disciplined cadres" of the movement turn on one another while representing a "united front" for the target population.

In the narrative, coming from the supermarket, Silas informs Lydia about who he had run into, and she begins a litany of why she feels he ought to have killed him if he were man enough, a rather difficult proposition given Silas's entrapment in the politics of a job, of trying to "reconcile the irreconcilable" (30). Lydia, enraged, mocks him, saying: "If you were a real man, you would have killed him on the spot, right there in the mall, splatter his brains against a window, watch his blood running all over the floor", since "He took your wife, he fucked your wife, [and] made you listen to him doing it" (19). Disconsolate, Lydia dances barefoot on the shards of a broken beer bottle and nearly bleeds to death. Here "reconciliation" as a national creed is undermined for the horrific deeds perpetrated on the victims.

What the above process of disintegration shows is a microcosm of a society coming to terms with living in close proximity with former combatants and the impact of the political struggles on families. Families begin, in the transitional period, to re-examine what the past struggles did to their moral, communal and values' fabrics. Du Boise in this instance is a catalyst activating long-held suspicions, resentments and other secrets between husband and wife. As Lydia lies recovering in hospital, Silas himself collapses in sheer exhaustion and the stress of burying uncomfortable thoughts in "constructions" (46). As he convalesces, the repressed returns to haunt him, in this instance the very person who should be his pride and joy, Mikey. In a dream, he allows his fears to surface: "A distant fear came back to Silas, one that he rarely allowed to take shape in his mind—*Mikey is not my son, not physically*" (83, author's emphasis).

The primordial fear Silas dreads, like the rape of Lydia that they steadfastly refuse to discuss or even be counselled, haunts his dreams. It is Lydia, at the conclusion of the act of rape, who knows that she is pregnant with Du Boise's child but maintains a prudent silence over the years (108).

What may be termed 'the South African rape complex' is as old as the founding of the colony itself, and we need refer to Andre Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (1982) to refract this complexity, and miscegenation is part of the country's intricate complexities.[4] Dangor explores and brings to the fore the notion,[5] expressed by Sabine Sielke, of rape as part of the dominant master narratives that are nationally specific:

> …transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts. Fictions of rape belong with the allegorical master narratives Frederic Jameson considers "a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension about our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality" (*Political Unconscious* 34)…I want to insist that talk about rape has its history, its ideology, and its dominant narratives—narratives that, as I argue, are nationally specific, even if they rely on widely established textual predecessors (such as myths) and patterns (such as the "othering" of sexual violence). (2002, 2)

Faced with having a wife who was raped because of his activities and a son whom he rejects at the unconscious level, Silas embodies the very contradictions of a nation in denial: hemmed in by the law the new order upholds while watching the past becomes a living nightmare for himself and his family. Indeed, matters are not helped by Lydia and Mikey's physical attraction for each other—nor her instinctual knowledge that Mikey sleeps with Kate for the fun of it—and Silas's intuitive knowledge of this matter. Coming home from the office on a rather depressing day, Silas does well to stay out of the house for an hour or so while Mikey and Lydia recover from their near incestuous relationship: "Then [Mikey] senses another presence. Silas is outside, staring morosely at the house, unable to walk up to the door, slip the key into the latch, push it open" (130). Through a careful process of foregrounding, the reader has been alerted to exactly this sort of possibility, with hints and oblique references to Lydia's near-obsessive desire to smell the child-turned-teenager (57; 82; 146; 150). This is the point at which these members of the Ali family consciously avoid each other, leading furtive lives and keeping contact to the minimum:

> Somehow, out of expediency through collusion, because of the sheer need to re-establish the surface of their lives, things returned to normal. From the moment that Silas opened the door…they established a code of silence, a set of mutual understandings—Silas and Lydia, Lydia and Mikey, Mikey and Silas—striking separate compacts with each other: whatever had happened on that day would not be spoken about or even hinted at. (136)

It is with the above that we observe that while Mikey's and Lydia's desire is never acted upon, Dangor does force the reader to consider the re-figuration of the rape-incest as a possible trope in the post-apartheid novel in the relationship between Johan Viljoen, a former exiled activist and his daughter, Vinu, a friend to Mikey (185-188). In this instance, both families are in a state of disintegration, and Mikey drops out of university, joins a (fundamentalist) religious sect and seeks out his mother's rapist. Kate, who is in the intelligence community, obtains the file about

Du Boise for Michael. At this point Michael knows he is (one of) the bitter fruit(s) of the title and fatally shoots his biological father after reading of Lydia's rape in her diary (114). Dangor here violates the "cult of secrecy" (Sielke 2002, 142) about family conflicts held in check while refusing the "cult of reconciliation" that Silas requests of Lydia (19). For Lydia, going to the TRC to lament her violation would have been very painful since even her extended family is not privy to the truth about Michael's conception (117). Silas, the man who had lived for the struggle, epitomizing the stoicism of "disciplined cadre" demanded by the party hierarchy, is prepared for the whole "truth" to be publicly aired (143-145). This comes back to what Lydia sees as his "monumental insensitivity" towards his family and herself especially. Tellingly, what Lydia never realizes is that Silas was not the one who led the police to them on that fateful day, but the man who was to become her brother-in-law, Alec, and a friend to Silas, something that had been haunting Silas all these past years (193).

The text ends on a surreal rupture. At a party hosted by Silas's friend Julian Solomon to mark Silas's fiftieth birthday, Lydia takes on a lover from the dance floor and liberates herself from Silas's past. What does make it seem surreal is that he makes love to the young João Dos Santos Honwana with the knowledge that Silas (and possibly Michael) had seen them coupling (249). Michael leaves the country for India. The last we read of Lydia is as a traveller en route to Cape Town and hopefully a new life, freed of the burden of being a mother-wife-lover-rape victim. Silas, passed over for the ambassadorship to France, remains in the now truly empty house describing himself self-deprecatingly as ''n bushie [Bushman] from the townships" who contemplates flight: 'Perhaps it was time to go, leave this place, this house, this country and its contorted history?' (200). The bitterness engendered by the past conflicts survives and determines the present disarray of the Ali family. The family in Dangor's vision lacks intimacy, and their sharing the space of "home as hearth" is nullified by the past. It is a home without private lives, without a history of intimacy. In the last scenario, with Silas sitting in the progressive gloom of the living room, this is a home that cannot sustain public life because it is unable to infuse into it the values of honour, integrity, compassion, intelligence, and creativity of a private space as home.[6]

Thirteen Cents

The current South African literary scene is littered with works that make issues pertaining to sexuality explicit. This "expository" literature started with *The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr.[7] While there is nothing new in this (since sex matters had been part of the literature for some time), what does come as a surprise is the level of explicitness that writers now explore. It is well to remember the level of prudishness the past censorship boards used to display, banning outright texts that explored such topics and on the excesses of sexuality. "Mrs. Plum", a novella by Es'kia Mphahlele where sexual relations are between the Mrs. of the title and her dog, Malan is an

example of aberrant sexuality.[8] While such a concern is not the subject of this paper, the problematic of sexuality as a currency to those that do not have nuclear families is the subject of the text, *Thirteen Cents* (2000). In this text, Duiker points a very poignant and painful picture of what the absence of a family means to young lives having to fend for themselves against the backdrop of Cape Town. The opening itself foregrounds the violence that allows for children to be rendered without family simply because of the deficiencies of the parents. The protagonist, Azure, comes home one day in Mshenguville (in Soweto) and discovers the bodies of his parents, as he reflects on how the street sellers yell at him without any knowledge of his past:

> But like I said I am almost a man. I can take care of myself. "*Julle fokken mannetjies moet skool toe gaan*," the fruit-sellers yell. It's easy for them to say that. I lost my parents three years ago. Papa was bad with money and got Mama in trouble. The day they killed them I was away at school. I came back to our shack only to find them in a pool of blood. That was three years ago. That was the last time I went to school. (2; author's emphasis)

To a reader, there are so many questions that immediately arise out of this description of the parents' demise and the lack of schooling on Azure's part. Interlaced with the scene of killing of course is the idea of masculinity: "I am almost a man" thus able to "take care of myself". The arrest of childhood development to a middling adulthood here is striking. Also, the question of no more schooling in itself suggests a number of important (cultural) markers: lack of the bonds of the extended family Azure does not even wait for the funeral. So while the father is the cause of the family disintegration, the results stay with Azure. Strikingly, he is able to write off this episode without major psychological effects (or so he wants us to believe). Asked how the discovery of his parents made him feel, he is short-handed about it: "My friend Bafana can't believe that I saw my dead parents and didn't freak out. But I told him. *I cried and then it was over.* No one was going to take care of me" (2, emphasis added). Taking care of himself takes priority over mourning and seeking help. Henceforth the child-narrator must earn a living: "I sleep in Sea Point near the swimming pool because it's the safest place to be at night. In town there are many pimps and gangsters. I don't want to make my money like them. So during the day I help park cars in Cape Town. It's not easy work" (3). This extract makes for grim reading of the lives lived by street children and the callous behaviour meted out to them. The introduction of pimps and gangsters prepares the reader for the more gruesome aspects of the narrative. Azure's work is in itself a reminder of the lack of gainful employment for the city's flotsam, pointing to a larger societal problem of unemployment, which links up with criminality, prostitution and gangsterism. On a good day he makes enough to eat, on bad days he relies on Joyce, a lady who works at a restaurant who feeds him (6). "Auntie" Joyce, it transpires, also saves Azure's miniscule money as he does not understand the intricacies of modern society at his age but later contrives to rob him (11-12; 75-76). This does not come from parking cars, however, but from picking up punters who pay him. From such reading covering only the opening two chapters, we

realize that Azure is no longer a child (in the real sense) and begin to follow his daily path of survival, from needing shoes, food, shelter and a need to belong. Initially, he starts off needing cash, and so "turns tricks":

> I walk further along the beach to the moffie part of the beach. I sit on a bench and wait for a trick. I sit a long while before I hear someone whistling. Soon I'm walking back with a white man to his flat. When we get inside the lift he tells me to take off my shoes. *I know the routine.* Once inside his flat he will expect me to strip off at the door. We go in and I begin to take off my clothes at the kitchen door. (8; emphasis added)

From the extract we realize the extent of survival Azure has internalised. He is knowledgeable about what is expected of him, and all of the transaction is without fuss (except the payment). Azure has learned not to ask questions, not to ask for names, to simply recognize the type of client he has and comply. He learns to survive the "mean" streets through guile and the sexual cannibalism prevalent in the city. He pays "protection money" to a pimp, Allen, who only understands money and traps Azure in a relationship of utter dependence (16). Aside from Allen, he has to contend with rich children who come up with drugs at Sea Point requesting to spend the night with him for "a totally outdoor experience...to get the whole experience unedited" (21-22).

What Duiker does with these opening sequences is to lay bare the underbelly of a picturesque, beautiful city as a grim reminder that appearances can be deceiving, that people do live in the city. The city's hoboes, street children and prostitutes also inhabit it, sometimes forming uneasy alliances in the face of a rampant commercialisation (25-27). He paints a picture of street children at the mercy of drug pushers, dealers, and ruthless gangsters who, having emerged from South Africa's prisons, continue where they left off. The problem Azure has is that, in a moment of indiscretion induced by cannabis, he calls a local tough "n kaffir" (19). This allows Duiker to problematise Cape Town and its inhabitants; this re-inscribes the problems of ethnic orientations and the city's apartheid legacy. It is a problem not only historically determined, but physically and psychically. The hierarchies in the ganglands are controlled by "Coloureds" and are not about to come down, and Azure's real problem is that, contrary to the norm, he has blue eyes that Gerald yearns for. From here on he is afraid to be captured by Gerald or his friends, and knows that the former is an urban predator (described as "T-rex") (61).

When Azure is eventually "captured", it is not because he did not make a run for it: he actually turns himself over to Gerald because he cannot survive the city without first atoning for his indiscretion. He is beaten senseless by Sealy and Richard thugs who work for Gerald. He is then taken to hospital and then held as a prisoner who is starved, fed, then sexually molested before being accorded an audience with Gerald (Chapters Eight to Nine, 38-57). It is here, at this meeting, that Duiker deepens and re-works the reality of the text, for Gerald demands total allegiance to him from Azure (now called "Blue") as he now "owns" him as chattel. As property, "Blue" must make money in any other way for Gerald and is told: "Everybody has a job here.

So go and do whatever it is you do but just be back at five" (57). So that, apart from having lost his nest egg to Joyce's unscrupulous methods, he is compelled to work for survival in the city. No recourse from the law is possible as Gerald is in cahoots with the police (41) and "Blue" knows it. Crucially, he realizes that as he contemplates his situation, he has turned thirteen: "It's my birthday today. I'm thirteen. I feel it too, all those numbers. I can see them clearly and they all make thirteen. One. Two. Three. I must understand that number" (66).

Given his life experiences thus far, it is correct to say Azure has aged far beyond his chronological years. Thirteen, an age when innocence is discarded for the teen years, finds him already "older" (62) as one friend comments. The emphasis on growing up fast highlights the necessity of acquiring street smarts for his survival in the absence of parents, siblings and the extended family. In effect, he internalises the urban strain of "learning to live with fear" (68). Confusingly, he learns from Gerald that his dead parents were killed so that he could be "taught how to survive" on his own (71). When Joyce filches his money and in the face of unremitting cruelty from Gerald he grows truly desperate and runs off to the mountain and joins other "bergies," people who live on the mountain (112).

Duiker, unlike Dangor before him, ends the novel on an apocalyptic note where Azure/"Blue" sees the destruction of Cape Town by giant waves and explosions as he stands on top of the mountain (Chapter 22, 160-164). Although we are somehow prepared for the bizarre in the death of Gerald (134), still it works out more as an experimental ending of disillusion than what one would expect from a novel that starts out as this one does. This sort of ambiguous ending in either hallucinations and/or magical realism, while germane, makes it difficult to pursue the story of the child-narrator beyond the present text (unlike Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and *Songs of Enchantment*, for instance). Such an ending might seem contrived, defeating the beauty of the foregoing text because it negates closure to what has been written in the social-realist mode. But only on first impressions, since what has been termed by Mervyn Peake accounts for such an ending in societies that underwent traumatic experiences such as post-war England. In Peake's narratives, the "darker circus" is apparent. In her astute study of Peake, Lesley Marx, as though commenting on Duiker and Dangor's novels, observes that the artist is called upon to do a double take on reality:

> It can be seen that the continuum of possible responses from enchantment to disenchantment is an image of the artist's dilemma…the act of focusing solely on the beautiful and ignoring that which gives pain can lead to disillusionment; on the other hand, the act of confronting pain can lead to mute horror. And yet, the artist, by definition, is the one who must sustain the tension, aware of the pleasure and pain at the same time, of order and chaos, of beauty and the grotesque, of the mask and the skull it hides. (1983, 11)

While the theme of disillusion is stronger in Dangor's text, the freakish and the theme of disenchantment runs through Duiker's text. In Marx's assessment, this is

termed "a nonsense universe" which provokes an uneasy laughter that modulates into a sense of horror as the dark world of fear, ruin and chaos around us is made apparent (Marx 1). For a first novel, Duiker's text is a gripping reading of contemporary post-apartheid society. In a real sense, therefore, South Africa is different and yet not so different from other societies emerging out of as traumatic past given what the sensitive points of such societies record. Its constitutional democracy and respect for the rule of law provide the matrix for order and coherence. It is in the social practices, however, that the order is rendered chaotic, and makes nonsense of the notion that in a way this is a "special type" of society.

Conclusion

In his text, *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe (2001, 1) makes a startling claim that, in our times, "the African experience appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature'". Part of the problem that Africa belabours is precisely that it does not divert itself of such negative perceptions. The protracted and thoroughgoing manner in which Mbembe researches the postcolonial offers a variety of postcolonial theory that is distinct to the continent. South Africa is undergoing rapid changes in many political, social and economic spheres. While it does not necessarily fall within the template wrought by Mbembe, it comes close to it through state created code of meanings that are now being deployed and made into a fetish: "the signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the *commandement* produces are meant not merely as symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is forbidden to depart from or challenge" (103). Worrying convergences of such formulations abound: contestations on identity, a code of meanings sanctioned by the state, and a centralisation of power being the more obvious manifestations.

Writers, ever sensitive to seismic changes, detect these manifestations earlier than their compatriots. Hence, in South Africa, the literary outpouring by fiction writers has been to question, explore and attempt to disaggregate such changes. *Bitter Fruit* revisits the issue of family disintegration, betrayal of former comrades, the loss of intimacy. Dangor strives to show how the centralised notion of a "rainbow nation" shows fractures in how it is not possible for all to manage a single identity but that there is a need to manage several identities as the character Michael does, contracting out of South Africanness that entraps his stepfather, that genders his mother. *Thirteen Cents*, on the other hand, explores the underbelly of a South African picturesque city to show the unpalatable side to it, rendering South Africa a 'nonsense universe' for some of its peoples. It is a harrowing read that is unsparing of the disintegration of social mores and values, and renders African *ubuntu/botho* insufficient to rescue Azure/Blue from a life of penury. It highlights the vulnerability of children

in a world that seems to have gone upside down, thus its ending in a phantasmagoric destruction of the city illustrates the "dark circus" in which the lives of street children are enmeshed. These texts, in their diverse ways, return us to Caudwell's assertion that novels are the expression of that which writers seek, not in their unity in society but in their differences, of their search for freedom in the pores of society. If the two novels seek the domesticity and intimacy one associates with the family, they fail precisely because in democratic South Africa "the family" cannot be fictively celebrated in the first decade of democracy.

Endnotes

1. Of course, the Sachs article did not mean acquiescence by the academy and writers. A critique of this and Njabulo Ndebele's paper is written by Tony Morphet in *Pretexts* 1990:94-103.

2. Criticism of just this sort of commandement attitude follows the African National Congress's 'quiet diplomacy' engagement concerning the Zimbabwean question. At the time of writing, the Congress of South African Trade Union had sent a mission to Zimbabwe that was rudely rebuffed, leading to discord within the Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, COSATU and SACP. See for instance Cristelle Terreblanche's report, "War of words over Zimbabwe situation escalates," and Rhoda Khadalie's critique, "ANC can learn something from John Voster."

3. The 'Ali family' is drawn from the author's own mixed race lineage. In the interview with Meiring, he reveals, with relish, how his great-grandmother was a Dutch woman who married his paternal great-grandfather, an Indian. He was brought up in Newclare, a designated 'coloured' community in Johannesburg as a Muslim. As Meiring opines, contrary to the apartheid government's mistaken projection of the coloured community as an obvious and largely monolithic ethnic category, it was as startlingly varied as a kaleidoscope, which accounted in part for Dangor's political activism.

4. I borrowed the term "rape complex" from Sielke's definition of the "Southern rape complex," which she defines, and explains, thus:
   the "Southern rape complex" according to which the presumed sexual violation of white beauty by black beast figured the "rape" of the South during Reconstruction and legitimized retaliation through violence. At the same time, this complex inflicted a fear of rape that, like the threat of lynching, kept a subjugated group–women just in the process of fighting for suffrage–subjugated (Hall, *Revolt* 153). Cited and recontexualized one century later, this register's rhetoric frames present conflicts by past interpretations and reinforces "solutions" such as segregation. More than that: since the metonymic drift of the paradigm of rape and lynching has dominated the discourse on sexual violation at and of the borders of race, class, and ethnicity, the objects of such violations are left behind in the debris of displacement…Accordingly, it does not suffice to capitalize on rape, as Leslie Fiedler does as "an image of true archetypal resonance" ("Pop" 91) or to characterize the "symbolic" dimension of (female) rape fantasies, as does Molly Haskell, as "archetypal rather than individual" ("Rape Fantasy" 92), thereby dehistoricizing rape. Instead, I want to insist that talk about rape has its history, its ideology, and its dominant narratives–narratives that, as I argue, are nationally specific, even if they rely on widely established textual predecessors (such as myth) and patterns (such as the "othering" of sexual violence (*Reading Rape* 1-2).

5. This questioning of 'national narratives' is to my mind begun by Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2000).

6. Here I paraphrase Njabulo Ndebele's formulations from "A Home for Intimacy."

7. For instance, *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo Ndebele, T*he Quiet Violence of Dreams* by Sello Duiker and *Rights of Desire* by Andre Brink.

8. Subsequently banned under the then Publications Act no. 42 of 1974, as amended.

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