History, Memory and Reconciliation: Njabulo Ndebele's *Cry of Winnie Mandela* and Pumla Gobodo-Mazikela's *A Human Being Died that Night.*

Susan Suleiman interprets postmodernism as

> that moment of extreme (perhaps tragic, perhaps playful) self-consciousness when the present – our present - takes to reflecting on its relation to the past and to the future primarily as a problem of repetition. How does one create a future that will acknowledge and incorporate the past - a past that includes, in our very own century, some of the darkest moments in history - without repeating it? (xv)

The germaneness of her comments is striking, particularly the way her analysis of postmodernism can be applied to the post-1994 South African situation. Suleiman's formulation may take us further down "the long road to freedom" – though, despite the context of that remark by Mandela, the understanding and the healing of the wounds of apartheid will never be accomplished. Communal and individual suffering of such a magnitude can never be fully overcome but we can perhaps, in Suleiman's terms, self-consciously reflect on those times in order to prevent a repetition of them.

This paper will focus on two recent texts which examine the trauma of apartheid in a personal, as well as a political way: Njabulo Ndebele's *Cry of Winnie Mandela* and Pumla Gobodo-Mazikela's *A Human Being Died that Night.* Both these texts constitute complex attempts to understand the nature of suffering and the role of the South African government of the time in creating both the conditions and the means which made what happened possible. Both are written in the form of narratives or stories which reflect immediate responses to the suffering of apartheid – and suggest how the possibilities of alleviating such suffering lie precisely in the textualisation -

(con)textualisation - of it by those who experienced it. The fact that these two texts are framed in story form is significant since, as Kelly says, “Unlike history, story keeps counting, continually bypassing the summative moment in which [traditional] history arrests and delineates time” (142). From this point of view story can be seen as a form which continually disrupts certainty and stasis – the kind of disruption which the two texts discussed in this paper seek to promote.

Ndebele’s text contains the fictional accounts of four women, all of them looking back on their early years of marriage and the separation which occurred for different reasons in each case, but always because of the lack of constancy of the man who left her for apparently important practical reasons, such as political exile in order to participate in the struggle, or being given a scholarship to train overseas as a doctor – though one of the husbands depicted seems to have priapism as his only reason for abandoning his wife in favour of numerous other women.

Each woman interrogates her own history by telling her story while addressing and questioning Winnie Mandela in her role as another abandoned wife. The accounts are by no means uncritical of Winnie Mandela, but a sense is conveyed of how dauntingly difficulty her personal life was. Each woman tries to make sense of her memories and come to terms with her pain of abandonment, but the feelings are so intense that none of them can find closure. However, the text does implicitly illustrate the positive function of memory discussed by Papoulias:

> Indeed, for some cultural historians, memory is a process of self-making: it names ‘the ways in which people shape and transform’ not only their past but crucially ‘each other through collectively authored stories’. (117)

The women’s stories are strongly intertextual and provide a powerful transformational dynamic, though in this text the pain of the past is not relieved until the end – and even then the crucial problem of how power differentials between the genders might be adjusted in order to prevent such injustices is not really addressed .Ndebele’s novel shows the emotional (and financial) deprivation of four women who are, finally, able to speak about and make patterns – always incomplete – of their experiences. These experiences are personal, yet the forces that created them are, indubitably, the laws and customs which, in many cases, still limit the power and mobility of black women in particular.

Ndebele uses Greek myth to provides a universal frame for events in South Africa, giving us some distance from the South African chronotope by invoking the story of Penelope, Odysseus’s wife, as the woman who stayed faithful to her husband, despite many difficulties and a long separation from him. Ndebele’s text shows the price that black nuclear families paid for the fight against apartheid, but it also shows the strength and courage which black women displayed in the face of loss as well as the social demands for absolute propriety: these women were required by their communities to remain faithful to their errant (and erring) husbands as Penelope was to hers. The figure of Winnie Mandela unifies the text, in that all four of the other women write putative letters to her, which both praise and question her

stance, gaining strength for who she was while sympathising with what she had to endure In the long absence of her husband. Hero – and saint -- though Nelson Mandela may be, his role in what Winnie became is also implicitly questioned, though the text does quote from the letter he wrote her from prison in which he shows a deep awareness of the burden imposed on her:

> Your love and support, the raw warmth of your body, the charming children you have given the family…the hope of enjoying that love again, is what life and happiness mean to me. I have somebody I love who is worthy to be loved and trusted, one whose own love and patient support have given me so much strength and hope….Yet there have been moments when…I have wondered whether any kind of commitment can ever be sufficient excuse for abandoning a young and inexperienced woman in a pitiless desert, literally throwing her into the hands of highwaymen…. (108-9)

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One of the tensions in this novel is between societal norms and the flesh-and-blood feelings which are evoked by situations of abandonment and loss of relationship. How is it possible to reconcile the enforcement of traditional values regarding the behaviour of women with the deep suffering felt by so many women as their basic needs for support, love and companionship are removed? This is the nub of the problem: the women are expected by their communities to conform to the Penelope paradigm, but this is clearly an idealised one – the archetype of the abandoned woman who remains faithful to her absent (and often errant) husband is a narrative imposed by patriarchal societies, for the benefit of men only. And, in this text, Penelope herself – in a radical departure from the original myth - leaves her husband after he returns: she relates how when Odysseus returns, he leaves her after their first night together “to perform cleansing rituals to forestall possible civil strife following

his brutal slaying of my shameless suitors." (119 – 20). But, she says, "it has never been told that when he returned, I was gone. I went on my own cleansing pilgrimage. Odysseus should not have left me like that on that special morning while I was still learning to savour his return. He should have shown more sensitivity." (120).

The text ends on an optimistic note, with the five women travelling through South Africa in a minibus together, celebrating their self-awareness and strength and asserting their right to equality by exercising the social, emotional and geographical mobility traditionally denied women. On their way, they give a lift to a white hitch-hiker, who turns out to be Penelope. By implication this, together with the camaraderie experienced by the women exchanging stories, has a healing effect on all of them. As Ndebele says in one of his essays about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "What seems to have happened is that the passage of time which brought forth our freedom has given legitimacy and authority to previously silenced voices" ("Memory" 20).

The notions of history, memory, healing and reconciliation are crucial to this text. Suleiman speaks of "some of the darkest moments in history" having taken place in our very own century, referring no doubt to events in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, as well as the Pot Pot massacres, *inter alia*, though apartheid can, in its own way, also be seen as one of the darkest moments in history. As Suleiman implies, the difficulty with such painful events is not simply that they should be remembered, but that we – the

human race – need to try not to create a future in which we do not repeat them.

In order to make constructive use of memory we need to challenge the fixed binaries and legitimating narratives which ruled our past: our underlying sense of history needs to become a composite one, constructed from many different accounts of the same times and events. “The deconstructive position does not reject historical reality but questions our access to it, our apprehension of it and, therefore, its meaning.” (Munslow 102). The postmodern view of history is one which promotes individual, and often local and personal, accounts of the past – and which gives such accounts validity on their own terms. As Said says,

> Memory is a powerful collective instrument for preserving identity. And it’s something that can be carried not only through official narratives and books, but also thorough informal memory. It is one of the main bulwarks against historical erasure. It is a means of resistance. (182-3)

In *A Human Being Died that Night* Pumla Gobodo-Madikazela, a professor of psychology, describes her personal experience of a series of interviews which she had with Eugene de Kock, former head of Vlakplaas, while he was in prison. She wrestles with her own revulsion towards him, yet at one point she is so moved by his suffering that she touches his hand which has a cold feel to it, she says – his “trigger hand”, as he subsequently describes it. She avoids easy judgements of good and evil, saying that “South Africans face the challenge of how to embrace the past without being swallowed by the tide of vengeful thinking.” (103)

She ponders on issues of forgiveness and reconciliation, and challenges South African society as a whole to provide the impetus and the structures which will bring healing and transformation:

> The question is no longer *whether* victims can forgive 'evildoers' but whether we – our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media, and academic institutions – are creating the conditions that encourage alternatives to revenge. (118)

In other words, the way for South Africa to overcome the limitations of history imposed on it by authoritarian structures and master narratives which were persecutory to most of its citizens is to work towards new paradigms – those of reconciliation and transformation, personal and societal. Gobodo-Madikizela also promotes a profound attitude to memory:

> If memory is kept alive in order to cultivate old hatred and resentments, it is likely to culminate in vengeance, and in a repetition of violence. But if memory is kept alive in order to transcend hateful emotions, then remembering can be healing. (103)

Both the texts discussed offer fresh ways of engaging with now familiar realities, inviting us to review those perceptions which prevent us from relating to others with understanding and awareness. As Moore et al have it, we need to "brush history against the grain":

> Brushing history against the grain may encourage novel articulations, fomenting alternative political possibilities. Forming new affinities across embattled lines of difference may be one means of challenging oppressive forms of racism and naturalism. (47)

Both Ndebele and Godobo-Madikizela challenge ingrained ways of thinking in their attempt to establish alternative political possibilities. Ndebele frames the person and actions of Winnie Mandela in a way which blurs the common

oversimplified judgements either for or against her. Godobo-Madikizela's account interrogates popular views about the inhumanity of de Kock's actions by acknowledging his suffering, and refusing to allow his actions – or her reactions to him - to dehumanise her. Both texts deconstruct popular views about the history of these two people, and offer instead an open-ended process of reconsideration about how our society might deal humanely with those who have offended it. History becomes a fusion of collective memories that change in the telling and retelling, redefining the way a society sees its past and colouring its actions in the present. It is time, says Ankersmit, for us to "think about the past, rather than investigate it." (152)

LaCapra insists that "documents are texts that supplement or rework 'reality', and not mere sources that divulge facts about 'reality'." (11) Arguably, then, the two texts dealt with in this paper may change the way readers perceive and react to the South African situation by involving them in debate about issues previously perceived as cut and dried, changing views about the past, but also encouraging the creation of unpredictable futures. Reconciliation, however desirable, should be seen as only one of several possible positive outcomes, and history should not be made to serve the narrow interests of only currently desirable communal values. As Dipiero says in a different context, both works "rupture unilinear constructions of historical knowledge in order to dispute specific sites of subjectivity" (111). Our willingness to courageously accept and exploit such ruptures – to negotiate "those transactions between inner and outer worlds, the times of history and of

memory, from which history might learn" (Radstone and Hodgkin 132) - will profoundly influence the kind of future we create for ourselves in this country.

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