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MEMORIES OF SOCIAL TRANSITION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Many writers are producing autobiographical, semi-fictional and fictional writing about growing up in southern African countries under colonialism and apartheid. Since they deal with childhood and youth, the public and literary specialists do not see them as falling clearly into separate categories as adult or young adult books. Two black women feminist writers have recently published novels in South Africa that draw closely on their own childhood experiences: Unity Dow (*Juggling Truths*, 2004) and Kagiso Lesego Molope (*The Mending Season*, 2005). From her perspective as a judge and human rights activist Dow examines the ethics of traditional cultural practices, especially those concerning women and children, in a modernising country, Botswana, at the time it was granted independence in the 1960s. Molope recounts the experiences of a girl who attended a multi-racial school when apartheid was coming to an end in South Africa in 1990, a time when people of different races faced the imperative of finding reconciliation if a peaceful new nation was to be born.

Key words: social transition, autobiographical novel, feminist authors, childhood memories.

During the years of apartheid in South Africa and British colonial rule in the neighbouring countries, black writers produced little autobiographical writing about their childhoods under these regimes. Beginning in the 1970s, white writers (whose readers were almost entirely white) wrote young-adult fiction that showed white teenagers coming to understand the evils of apartheid, while those books for younger children that were about black people portrayed the harshness of the conditions under which they lived. Even after they acquired independence what little children's literature from neighbouring colonies reached wider circulation consisted of the retelling of African folktales almost all by white writers. Many similar books of folktales were published in South Africa. Publishing so many books in this genre showed respect for African culture but at the same time gave a picture of African people as living an ancient, tribal life untouched by modernity [9, p. 97].

To compensate for the lack of youth books about the childhood of black people under apartheid, two key memoirs that were written for adults by famous black authors, *Down Second Avenue* by Ezekiel (later Es'kia) Mphahlele (1959) [15] and *Tell Freedom* by Peter Abrahams (1954) [1], were reissued in versions for young readers, but more recent adult fiction and non-fiction of this kind remained on shelves for adults.

Since the government unbanned opposition organisations and released Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990, a good many white writers for adults have written autobiography, semi-fiction and fiction that explores white childhoods under apartheid, while a few other white writers have written about their childhoods in colonial Kenya, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. Gradually, black writers are adding books about the black experience in those times. Among this profusion of recent books are some that have been written specifically for young readers and some that public reception has endorsed as "young adult" (YA). In this paper I refer to some young adult novels that have won literary awards.

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The first notable one by a black writer appeared in 1991. It was *92 Queen's Road* [3], a semi-autobiographical novel for children about growing up in the 1950s written in the third person. The author was Dianne Case, a member of the so-called "coloured" community of Cape Town. Clearly, the mood in South Africa at the end of apartheid was receptive to a book like this. It won the Percy FitzPatrick Prize and the Young Africa Award, and the South African Children's Book Forum placed it on its Honours List for 1991.

In 2006 I served on the panels of judges for two literary awards that were presented by the English Academy of Southern Africa for books published in 2004-2005: the Percy FitzPatrick Prize, which is the most prestigious prize for YA books in English in South Africa, and the Olive Schreiner Award, which goes to the best debut adult novel or volume of short stories in English published in South Africa. The awards are named after famous South African writers. Among the novels submitted were several novels about childhood that are more-or-less autobiographical, written by white and black authors. In this article I discuss two of them: *Juggling Truths* by Unity Dow (2004) [6] and *The Mending Season* by Kagiso Lesego Molope (2005) [13]. They are written in English by African women for whom English is not their mother tongue. Both are written in the first person and read very much as first-hand accounts.

When deciding whether to submit books for the YA or adult prizes, the publishers showed that they were confused in categorising them. The confusion apparently arises from thinking that a novel about childhood must be intended for child readers. A previous winner of the FitzPatrick Prize, *Skyline* by Patricia Pinnock (2000) [17], a novel that describes white girls growing up in Cape Town after the fall of apartheid, had originally been the subject of similar uncertainty: after accepting the manuscript the publisher had doubts whether to proceed with it and how to market it. It has since become a popular, award-winning YA novel in South Africa and several European countries.

Both of the books that I have chosen for discussion are subject to the same confusion about their intended readership. The South African publisher of *Juggling Truths* by Unity Dow submitted it as a YA novel for the FitzPatrick prize, but reviews and the article on Dow by Annie Gagiano [8] make no suggestion that it is a YA book. Her previous two novels were for adults. Kagiso Molope has written two novels about black girls which have been considered both adult and YA novels. The publisher submitted the first, *Dancing in the Dust* (2002) [12], as an adult work for the Schreiner award only, but the South African section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY SA) nominated it as its only English entry for the international IBBY Honours List, and it is used for prescribed reading in schools. Molope's second novel, *The Mending Season* [13], was submitted by the publisher for both the Schreiner and FitzPatrick awards. IBBY SA has signified its judgement that it is a YA novel by placing a review on its website. Both Molope's books have been top sellers to the public at large. Thus, Dow is a writer for adults whom her publishers consider suitable for young readers, while Molope is regarded by professionals as a writer for young adults, but the public at large have acclaimed her as an exciting new South African author for all readers.

The titles of the two books encapsulate their themes: *Juggling Truths* is about a time of transition for a rural community when traditional values and practices interface with modernity; *The Mending Season* also concerns a time of transition, and describes the early stages of reconciliation between black and white people following the breakdown of apartheid.

Unity Dow's home country is Botswana, an independent African state adjacent to South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, which was formerly Bechuanaland, a British Protectorate. The country has produced a number of authors, both black and white, some of whom have

achieved international currency, the most notable being expatriates: the black South African exile, Bessie Head, and Alexander McCall Smith. Dow is her country's first female High Court judge, and she has acquired a reputation as a human rights activist with particular concern for the rights of women and children. Her four novels examine traditional social practices and their place in a modern society, and her credentials for doing so are unchallengeable: drawing on a wealth of intimate detail from her own childhood in a rural community, she subjects social practices to analysis according to the modern international standards.

The issues she tackles are highly topical in the southern African region. In *Far and Beyon'* (2001) [4] she exposes the abuse of women. South Africa has one of the highest incidences of rape in the world and a horrifying rate of rape of infants and young girls. Botswana and South Africa are among the countries with the highest rates of HIV and AIDS infection in the world (50 per cent of the Botswana population are infected with HIV), which many ascribe to the inability of women, in a society of extreme imbalance in gender power relations, to refuse sex or insist on protected sex. In *Juggling Truths* the pubescent girl is told to brush her budding breasts with a broom to retard their development and thus delay her attraction to men. In 2006 there was an uproar when it was revealed that it is common practice in East Africa to iron girls' breasts for the same reason. Likewise, in Kagiso Molope's first novel, *Dancing in the Dust* (2002), parents in a modern city keep their daughters practically prisoners outside school hours in order to keep them away from men, and the young narrator says she does not know what love is, she only knows of men wanting sex. In *The Heavens may Fall* (2007) [7] Dow returns to the abuse of women and children, with an emphasis on how the legal system fails them.

The Screaming of the Innocent (2003) [5], Dow's second novel, is about a "*muti* murder", in which a girl is murdered so that her body parts can be used in witchcraft. Again, this is a topical matter. In 2006 neighbouring Zimbabwe repealed a colonial law outlawing witchcraft, and every year an unknown number of people, mainly children, are mutilated and murdered in South Africa for their body parts. In addition people are murdered, often by mob justice, on the allegation that they are practising witchcraft.

Juggling Truths is a subtle exploration of the place of traditional practices and values in a modern society. It is set in the 1960s, which is presumably when Unity Dow was growing up, and covers the period when Botswana was granted independence. The "truths" that the little girl protagonist has to juggle are the binaries of traditional beliefs and Christianity (and the varieties of Christianity taught and practised by different denominations); home life, school life, different facts and history that they teach; the ways of the country and the city; personal ethics compared with the norms of the community.

Tension created between traditional morality and the norms of modern westernised society features in South African newspapers every day. Many people view as "customary" anything from the protection of public figures guilty of corruption or incompetence to the recent public vilification of the woman who accused the former Deputy President, Jacob Zuma, of rape. He, in turn, defended as traditional his right to have unprotected sex with a younger family friend who was, moreover, HIV-positive. *Juggling Truths*, coming from a High Court judge who is an insider, makes an important contribution to the debate on the subject and should be of assistance to the young reader facing conflicting moral standards.

The girl narrator, Nei, negotiates tolerable ways of handling gender relations, such as agreeing to show her brother traditional respect when he is with his friends in order to save him embarrassment, while making it clear that in private they are equals. Her grandmother and father tell her stories about their family to assure her that love between man and woman is between equals, it is beautiful and not to be feared, and that marriages based on love are

preferable to arranged marriages, although the latter can be made to work. Matters of faith and belief are subjected to rational analysis. Her grandmother wisely points out the value of certain lessons to be taken from the Bible, instead of dismissing it all as alien nonsense. Her mother and sister do good by practising herbal healing, showing the value of traditional knowledge, but her mother rejects "bone casters" – witchdoctors – and deconstructs superstitions by testing them with common sense. When Nei daringly breaks little taboos she finds it is no big deal – she eats goats' testicles although they are reserved for boys and turn out to be tasteless. She might observe customs that are unimportant, but she also rejects inhuman taboos. The cleverest girl in her class is blinded in one eye by the teacher's whip. As Tswana society makes a disfigured girl an outcast, her parents gratefully accept an offer of marriage from a middle-aged widower. The narrator leaves the reader in no doubt about her views on this. Nei befriends an albino boy whom tradition has made an outcast and cannot understand why people should think he is different. He is one of the several people whom the villagers shun but Nei instinctively accepts or is taught to accept him by her mother.

White writers also undertake Dow's themes but they take a risk in doing so. Jenny Robson, a white resident of Botswana, also shows how unreasonable ostracising an albino boy is in her YA novel about a Botswana village, *Because Pula Means Rain* (2000) [18]. The novel won the 2000 Sanlam Gold Medal for Youth Literature and was highly recommended for the FitzPatrick Prize. The 2004 winner of the Percy FitzPatrick Prize was *The Eighth Man* by a white author Michael Williams (2002) [19]. This novel depicts modern life in Cape Town and discusses such issues as a *muti* murder of a little boy and the abduction of a sophisticated urban teenage boy so that he can be circumcised in a rural initiation rite (which kills or maims dozens of boys every year). Post-colonial critics often demand that indigenous writers find their own voice in literature. Robson and Williams have not been criticised on these grounds, though other prominent white writers for children – Lesley Beake and Marguerite Poland – have acknowledged being at the receiving end of this criticism. Part of the attraction that Dow and Molope have for the black and white intelligentsia is that they are long-awaited indigenous voices.

Time and again in *Juggling Truths*, common sense resists unreasonable custom. Above all, Nei and her family are determined that she should be educated and she ends up studying in England and returning as an architect. In coming to this conclusion, the narrator has not dwelt on unreasonable practices but celebrated wholesome ones – the strengths of traditional family and village life. Annie Gagiano has stated that "This third novel of women's and human (or democratic) rights is not to be dismissed as 'anti-African' or as a betrayal of her local traditional culture" [8, p. 45]. Margaret Lenta affirms, "Dow, almost twenty years later, is reminding the national community of the importance of rural people in the process of development which is still continuing" [10, p. 45].

Kagiso Lesego Molope grew up in Pretoria and is a graduate of the University of Cape Town. She has worked as a Human Rights Project Officer in Canada. She says of herself, "I write the stories I would have liked to read when I was younger – coming-of-age stories about being young, African and female. I'm an African feminist writer" [14]. *The Mending Season* has two main themes: the lives of three women and the girl narrator who all defy traditional views on the place of women and the experience of a girl attending a multi-racial school as apartheid comes to an end.

In a black working class suburb of Pretoria three sisters refuse to marry and maintain a household that proudly defies the ostracism of the community. One of them has a daughter, Tshidiso, who inherits these traits. Their feminism resists their neighbours' conservatism, ignorance, superstition and belief in witchcraft. At the start of the book Molope

acknowledges the support of a number of women suggesting that, though the precise circumstances of her own life were different to those of the protagonist, her upbringing was equally feminist.

Just as the sisters' female solidarity kept their family unit intact, it helped them survive apartheid: "The seventies had been brutal, killing people's children and their souls. At that time, the Masemola sisters had clung to the thread of anecdotes as well as the memory of their mother because their lives depended on it" [13, p. 17]. The year of the story is 1990, when the white government has released Nelson Mandela, lifted the ban on black political movements and launched the negotiations that will culminate in the election of a democratic government four years later. By now many private schools and a few state schools have become non-racial, so the sisters decide to invest their pooled savings in sending the girl to a previously whites-only convent school in the city for an education superior to the one available locally, and which will give her access to university.

Their pride as women merges now with their pride as Africans. When Tshidiso asks if she should use the European name on her birth certificate when she goes to her new school, her aunt "told me not to be silly. 'No one in our family has ever used an English name, you know that'" [13, p. 28]. Her enrolment in a multi-racial school is an explicit metaphor for the change coming in the country: "People were talking about change like it was the coming of the Messiah. 'Well then, …Tshidiso will be part of that change'" [13, p. 66]. A prominent black woman writer Sindiwe Magona has identified this as the key point of the novel: "Molope weaves the dreams and aspirations of a young girl with the hopes of a nation about to give birth to itself" [13, cover].

The narrator gives an insider's account of her painful introduction to the multi-racial school which is accompanied by all the usual problems of a child in those circumstances: her lack of sophistication, wrong accent, poverty and unconventional family. At the same time, the girls and the teachers are caught up in subtle and complex racial circumstances that are unprecedented in the country. The climax of the year and the novel is when a white girl insults Tshidiso on the netball court by calling her a racist name, and another black girl, who overhears it, hits the offender. The consequences drag on until they are rather ineffectually patched up by the school but Tshidiso manages to maintain her integrity by telling the truth. This is "the mending season", and reconciliation is not going to be a tidy operation at the personal or national level. The novel skips four years and ends with her a respected school prefect while the country awaits with trepidation the elections that will introduce the new South Africa.

As fiction is concerned, the two novels are rather plodding. They contain many little asides, incidents and descriptions that are apparently brought in by the authors to convey information about the societies they describe. These would be more appropriate in an avowed autobiography, whereas as novels the books could do with more selection and shaping. At the height of apartheid the black South African writer Lewis Nkosi condemned the novels of black writers at that time as "journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature" – literature that "relies mainly on the 'inside information'" of black lives that black writers have access to [16, p. 132]. He said that non-fictional memoirs such as Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* "are far superior to anything these writers have attempted in creative fiction" [16, p. 132]. Other prominent intellectuals of the struggle have endorsed this view. Annie Gagiano, discussing Dow's novels, quotes the famous African writer Chinua Achebe as warning, "All art is propaganda, but not all propaganda is art" [2, p. 158, quoted in 8, p. 37]. Since 1994 there has been a backlash in South Africa against retelling in fiction the history of apartheid. Current critical opinion is that if writers are going to revisit those years they must have something new to say. Gagiano believes that

Dow does rise above propaganda to achieve “art”, and critics admire Molope, but I am of the opinion that they both to some extent fall under Nkosi’s and Achebe’s strictures. People overlook the novels’ weaknesses because of the intrinsic interest in their subject matter.

Margaret Lenta, analysing *Juggling Truths* and a novel by Tsitsi Dangaremba called *Nervous Conditions*, asks, “Am I suggesting that the novels are fictional histories of the immediately postcolonial periods…? And if this is the case, then why do I not propose that we read historical texts, which may have a “truth” status to which novels do not aspire? … Each [novelist] sees her novel as a necessary departure from the orthodoxy of received history” [10, pp. 44, 45]. To be fair, the two writers’ “insider” status makes their books fascinating reading. What is fresh is that they focus on the experiences of young girls. Dow turns her exceptional legal mind and position in society to a new analysis of the traditional society from which modern Botswana has grown while the reader has to infer her opinions from the story and the perceptions of a little girl. Molope portrays and at the same time analyses the experiences of a girl that were a microcosm of the birth of the new nation. Both leave the meta-narrative to historians.

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СПОГАДИ ПРО ПЕРІОД СОЦІАЛЬНИХ ЗМІН У ПІВДЕННІЙ АФРИЦІ

Елвін Дженкінс

Багато хто з сучасних авторів пише автобіографічні, напівхудожні та художні твори про дорослішання у країнах Південної Африки часів колоніалізму та апартеїду. Оскільки в них описані дитинство та юність, літературознавці та інші спеціалісти не можуть однозначно віднести їх до категорії дитячої літератури або до літератури для

молодих читачів. Недавно було опубліковано романи двох феміністичних письменниць афро-американського походження, які базуються на їхніх дитячих спогадах – "Жонглюючи правдою" Юніті Дау (2004) та "Час змін" Каджізо Лезего Молоуп (2005). Дау розглядає правомірність культурних традицій у країні, що розвивається – Ботсвані (за часів, коли вона стала незалежною державою – 1960-х), з погляду судді та захисника прав людини (особливу увагу приділяє письменниця жінкам і дітям). Молоуп описує переживання дівчинки, яка відвідує спільну школу для білих і чорних у період закінчення апартеїду (1990), в період, коли люди різної расової належності вчились знаходити спільну мову для того, щоб могла народитись нова мирна нація.

Ключові слова: феміністичні автори, соціальні зміни, апартеїд, дитячі спогади, автобіографічний роман.