

Surviving a Lost War

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Abstract

Afrikaans writers have often found themselves in a marginal position. During the time of apartheid, they vehemently criticised racial discrimination, thus dissociating themselves from the centre of power. After the demise of apartheid, Afrikaans writers were marginalised in a different way, when the Afrikaans language lost its previous dominant position and truly became a minority language. They were then forced to reexamine their past and reinterpret their present. In this article, recent Afrikaans writers' radical reinvention of the ideological significance of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) is discussed. One novel about the War, Ingrid Winterbach's *Niggie* ("Cousin") is analysed in detail as an example of the search for meaning from a marginal position. The novel has a special relevance for Afrikaners in their painful adaptation to a new South Africa, but it is also linked to general themes like trauma, despair and hope.

Introduction

At the outset it is necessary to give some background information on the Afrikaans language and literature. Afrikaans developed from the interaction between Dutch colonisers and the indigenous inhabitants of Africa (the word "Afrikaans" literally means "African"). It became (with English) an official language in 1925, and since then a vibrant Afrikaans literature has developed. Although it is a minority language in South Africa—the mother tongue of about 15% of the population of 45 million (Du Plessis 2001: 15)—it enjoyed a position of power while Afrikaners¹ were dominating the political scene. In 1948 the Nationalist Party, a party which represented Afrikaner nationalism, came into power, and it

ruled until 1994. Before 1948, Afrikaans writers generally felt some loyalty towards the Afrikaners as “underdogs” who had suffered greatly under British imperialism. The situation changed with the Afrikaners being in power, and writers did not feel the same urge to support the Afrikaner “cause” any more. In due course, a number of Afrikaans literary works with sharp social criticism against the apartheid laws, promulgated by Afrikaner rulers, were published. It is impossible to discuss this critical involvement by Afrikaans authors in detail here; I will mention only a few seminal texts.

One of the first examples of the above-mentioned social involvement is *Ons die Afgod*² (1958), a novel by Jan Rabie which is caustic in its criticism of Afrikaner racism and selfishness. It is about a man who, being “coloured”³, is not allowed to buy a farm in the country of his birth; he becomes increasingly disillusioned and ultimately dies in a tragic way. *Kennis van die Aand*⁴ (1973) by André P. Brink was the first Afrikaans novel to be banned in South Africa. The hero of the story is a “coloured” actor and producer who falls in love with a white woman - contravening the so-called “Immorality Act”—and who uses theatre to protest against the racial laws of the country. After the banning of the book, Brink persisted in writing novels, simultaneously produced in Afrikaans and English, in which he vehemently criticised the apartheid system—novels that earned him an international reputation. Other Afrikaans writers followed Brink’s example to write books expressing strong political involvement. One of the most remarkable of these is *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (1978) by Elsa Joubert which is a semi-factual account of a black woman’s suffering under the country’s discriminatory pass laws. Afrikaans poets also joined the protests—the most famous being Breyten Breytenbach, who wrote bitter poems against the promulgators of apartheid, and who received a jail sentence of nine years for his involvement in the armed struggle of the African National Congress (ANC).

In 1994, with the first fully democratic elections in South Africa, a “New South Africa” emerged, and a new situation arose for the Afrikaans language and literature. Firstly, Afrikaans writers did not feel the obligation to protest against apartheid any more, since the apartheid laws had been withdrawn. New themes had to be explored. Furthermore, Afrikaans lost its previous privileged position of power and became only one of eleven official languages—English absorbed most of the functions previously shared by the two official languages. Afrikaans authors are now on the margin as far as numbers and power are concerned. Afrikaans literature, although still flowering, is in a much more vulnerable position, and Afrikaans academic publications have diminished dramatically (Galoway & Venter 2005).

It looks like a gloomy picture for Afrikaans, but it is not completely so. Although literature does need economic and political support from the centres of power, it is the margin, and not the centre, that is the space for the most intense creativity. Boundaries are “the hottest spots for semioticizing processes”

Juri Lotman remarked (1990: 136). That is, indeed, the position of Afrikaans literature at the moment—even more than before, it has become a semiotic hot spot, a zone of transformation. The movement from the centre of power to the marginal position of a minority language has been accompanied by new visions of self and the other, and by the creation of new narratives to replace the obsolete ones. South Africans entered the “New South Africa” with the ruins of the past still inside them. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur discusses the case of somebody who consults a psychoanalyst about the conflicting episodes of his life story; the task of the analyst is then to recreate the shattered story into “a story that is both more intelligible and more bearable” (Ricoeur 1991: 435). That is what is happening, on a larger scale, after the end of apartheid, and many storytellers are assuming the role of the analyst, searching for stories that are more intelligible and more bearable than those of the apartheid era. “The wound is a talking mouth”, says the narrator in a recent Afrikaans novel (Van Heerden 1996: 153). The wounds are being healed by talking, by story-telling.

It has become a commonplace in Afrikaans literary criticism that writers should act as a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, searching for truths that have been hidden, and for reconciliation between the peoples of South Africa. Authors, as storytellers, should take the lead in rewriting the past and reinventing the present for people with shattered stories. For, in the words of Richard Kearney, there is a time when a nation or a group of people has to discover that “it is at heart an ‘imagined community’ ... a narrative construction to be reinvented and reconstructed again and again.” It often has to be liberated from being “like an overgrown narcissistic infant [who] presumes that it is the centre of the world, entitled to assert itself to the detriment of others” (Kearney 2002: 81).

Rewriting the Anglo-Boer War

In the limited space available here, it is not possible to give a full picture of the rewriting of Afrikaner identity and the rethinking of Afrikaner history in recent Afrikaans literary works. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on Afrikaans writers’ rethinking and rewriting one historical event which played a major role in their collective psyche: the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902; that bitter, drawn-out war waged between the British Empire and two Boer (Afrikaner) republics in Southern Africa, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State which ultimately led to the loss of independence for the two Boer republics. During the past hundred years, the story of that war has been told and retold many a time. In the 1930s, when Afrikaners living in the cities were struggling with poverty, alienation and moral degeneration, these dire circumstances led to the transformation of the history of the war into an inspiring myth, with emphasis on the heroism of the Boer “bitter-einders”, those who fought until the end of the war.

After 1948, the year when the Nationalist Party, vehicle of Afrikaner na-

tionalism, came into power, Afrikaans literature developed in a new direction. The theme of the Anglo-Boer War lost its interest for Afrikaans writers as Afrikaners had gained supremacy in the country and therefore felt no need to grieve for the suffering of the past. In the following years, an ever-increasing rift developed between Afrikaans writers and the Afrikaner government. As mentioned above, Afrikaans writers dissociated themselves from the centre of power and adopted positions on the margins of society, from where they created narratives contrary to the master narrative of apartheid. With only a few exceptions, novels on the Anglo-Boer War, traditionally vehicles for Afrikaner nationalism, made their exit from the Afrikaans literary scene.

Since 1998, the war theme has made a dramatic reappearance. The year of the centenary commemoration of the outbreak of the war (1999) was approaching, and the commemoration stimulated a large number of publications on the war, fictional as well as historical. In some ways history seemed to be repeating itself during the past century: for the Afrikaners, loss of power (1902) was followed by regaining of power (1948) and then loss of power once more (1994). But the contrast between past and present was more striking than the similarity. Whereas during and after the Anglo-Boer War, Afrikaners received worldwide sympathy and admiration for their battle against the British army, their policy of apartheid was universally condemned and its demise was greeted with jubilation. This time the loss of power was without the consolation of having fought a “just war”. With the loss of power as well as self-respect, Afrikaans writers looked at the war with different eyes, and rejected the stereotypical patterns of the past. Some writers, for instance Karel Schoeman in the novel *Verliesfontein* (1998) and Christoffel Coetzee in *Op Soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (1998), totally debunked commonplace romantic views on the war and created a sombre image of the Afrikaner, present and past.⁵

Ingrid Winterbach: *Niggie* (“Cousin”)

In this article, the novel *Niggie* by Ingrid Winterbach (2002) will be analysed. In many ways, *Niggie* complements the above-mentioned novels by Schoeman (1998) and Coetzee (1998). More than Schoeman and Coetzee, Winterbach combines self-criticism with the possibility of retaining one’s self-respect, and links suffering with signs of hope. In the context of the themes of minority and marginality, it is important to note that the Boer soldiers in *Niggie* form a small minority group staying on the margins of the war; they are powerless and depressed, and life seems absurd. Yet in such a desperate situation, life can be experienced with the greatest intensity, and creative thinking can reach a zenith. Winterbach’s novel is alarming as well as inspirational; it has relevance for Afrikaners battling to find themselves in a New South Africa, but also for all who have been struck by trauma and have struggled with despair. The well-known Afrikaans poet,

Antjie Krog, describes Ingrid Winterbach on the blurb of the novel *Niggie*, as “by far one of the most interesting writers in Afrikaans”.⁶ Krog’s formulation is somewhat clumsy, but her view is quite correct. Over the years Winterbach has earned a reputation as a highly intelligent and original writer, and for *Niggie* she was awarded the prestigious Hertzog prize against quite stiff competition. She has written a number of novels under different names (Lettie Viljoen, Ingrid Scholtz) but in *Niggie*, her latest novel, she uses her real (maiden) name.

The Pain of Loss

The novel is set at the end of the Anglo-Boer War and deals with a group of isolated Boer soldiers hiding in a cave, waiting for orders from an absent Boer general. It has become clear to them that the war is lost, but peace has not yet been declared; so they pass their time by waiting, without much hope or direction in their lives. They are a minority within the Boer minority fighting against the British Empire, living on the margin of the battlefields. The author universalises the war situation to write about a wounded humanity and the possibilities of healing; she writes about losers as well as conquerors in situations of extreme sorrow. Winterbach focuses on these marginalized people, but through them, she expresses her view of the human condition in general: of humans as wounded and vulnerable, perplexed amid the caprices of life. The soldiers in their marginalized situation gain an insight into essential aspects of human life that easily escape the notice of those in power—those who live calm and protected lives. The characters in *Niggie* confront the absurdity of life caused by human folly and an incomprehensible fate. On the other hand, they experience, intensely, the beauty and wonder of nature, and discover some healing features under wretched circumstances.

All the Boer soldiers in the novel have been struck by painful loss. If the Boers had won the war, victory could have compensated for all the losses; but having lost the war, their situation is desperate and their lives seem meaningless: Ruieben Wessels lost a leg in the war; Japie Stilgemoed (his surname means “quiet emotions”), a character based on the Afrikaans poet Jan Celliers, having been thrown out of his ordered and calm existence⁷ discovered his shadow side (ibid: 81–2) and protected himself from the cruelties of life by vociferous reading; Kosie Rippma, a former clergyman, lost his faith when he saw the suffering of Boer women in the war; and the boy Abraham, whose brother was killed beside him in a horrible way during a battle, lost his senses. In some characters, traumatic loss leads to depression and melancholy; in others, like Gert Smal, to aggression whereas Esegiel (Ezekiel), the black man serving his Boer master faithfully during the war, lost his identity long before the war when his mind was filled with Boer history and ideology.

Loss also characterises the lives of the two main characters: Reitz, a geologist,

and Ben, a botanist and zoologist. Reitz lost his wife before the war; during the war he falls in love with a Boer woman, but when her husband returns after the war, he loses her again. Ben's whole family—apart from one daughter—die during the war; he also loses his voice due to a throat wound and when their camp is burnt down, both of them lose the scientific journals they kept during the war which have helped to keep them sane.

Signs of Hope

Yet there are signs of hope in the narrative. The novel could be read as an exploration of the possibilities of physical and mental survival of a severe trauma. I would like to mention a few of the most striking points in this regard:

(a) Ben and Reitz suggest the *importance of being interested* in the world around you. Amid the destruction of the war, they explore the wonders of nature and write down their discoveries for the benefit of others, even though their comrades show little interest in or understanding of their work. Heilna du Plooy makes the following salient point:

Contrary to the colonial attitude which is usually described as the “domination of place” by means of the ideological appropriation and exploitation of the land ... the main characters in *Niggie* have a conservational attitude. They do not want to possess the area they are documenting, they want to understand it and they admire it. (Du Plooy 2005: 5)

After they have lost their journals, they do not give up their research—this work is vital for them to find meaning in their lives. Words associated with being interested, like “geïnteresseerd” and “belangstelling” (Winterbach 2002: 91) form a leitmotif in the portrayal of Ben, who is perhaps the most heroic survivor in the novel. He is excited and filled with gratitude when his research is rewarded after the war with the discovery of a new insect species which he names “Niggie”, after his new wife. He has found fulfilment in spite of his physical and mental wounds.

(b) A cathartic *expression of pain* is essential for inner healing. This is suggested by the portrayal of the two children who live with Anna, the woman to whom Reitz grows attached. One child seems to be all right under adverse circumstances; but the other has bad nightmares—“she tries too hard not to show her feelings”⁸ (ibid: 187). Reitz is important for the development of this theme. Initially he does not show strong emotions, but as the catastrophes strike, he changes. Repeatedly he is touched or moved (see ibid: 180; 187; 216). This leads up to the scene when Ben and Reitz ride away from the farm: Reitz stops his horse, and cries as never before.⁹ Having learned to relax his “stiff upper lip” and express his feelings, he has become more human. However, it could be asked to

what extent Reitz is helped by expressing his feelings. In the end, he seems to have lost all interest in life. The expression of emotion is not a panacea for grief.

(c) Reitz and Ben, in their conversations, often resort to an associative game with words and morphemes, creating unexpected outcomes with their linguistic banter. In their enumeration of words, *language* becomes a tool of invention. As Heilna du Plooy puts it:

If these sequences of words are studied, one finds that they start off with sombre, ominous and even threatening words, but as the sequence develops, there is a loosening up, and eventually the words seem to indicate new spaces, as if there were an opening up instead of a closing down of meaning. (Du Plooy 2005: 15)

Sometimes words contaminated by a suppressed ideological content are used in a new, healing manner:

The unconscious of the language itself is examined, and the suppressed content is brought to the surface, recycled and used in a new way. Narration and interaction with narrative can thus be confrontational and unsettling, but also capable of healing. (ibid 2005: 17)

The language games of Ben and Reitz could be linked to the *literary narrator's* use of language as an instrument of invention. The literary narrative links the two signs of hope discussed under above, namely, cathartic expression and linguistic invention. By her creative use of language, the literary narrator, through fictionalised persons and situations, indirectly expresses the pain of loss and invents ways of survival.

(d) *Caring* for others, and being cared by others, play an important part in the healing process. Winterbach's novel could be seen as a response to the very negative portrayal of Boer characters by the authors Karel Schoeman and Christoffel Coetzee, mentioned above. The characters in *Niggie* do include "bad guys" like Gert Smal, the leader of the group of soldiers, but on the whole the Boer soldiers display much caring and sympathy. Willem, a deeply religious man, cares for the boy who has lost his mind in battle and undertakes to bring him back to his parents. Reitz, in spite of being wounded himself, shows great caring for his friend Ben who has been shot in the throat, and helps to save his life. The black man Esegi?l is also a healing figure. As his name suggests, he is a prophet, a mediator between the living and the dead (Winterbach 2002: 20); he builds a shelter to protect the Boers and makes food to nourish them (ibid: 119–120). The Boer women especially are portrayed as care-giving, healing persons. Tante

("Aunt"), like Willem, is a deeply religious person, who puts her faith into practice by helping and encouraging others. Anna, allowing Reitz to sleep with her, helps him to recover from his grief and guilt following the death of his wife—though sadly this consolation is taken from him on the return of Anna's husband from the battle field.

The Trickster

The ambivalence between healing and hurting which we find in the relationship of Reitz and Anna brings us to the theme of the trickster. The Jungian trickster archetype is both a deceiving and a healing figure. For Jung, the trickster is "a personification of traits of character which are sometimes worse and sometimes better than those the ego-personality possesses" and

appears ... naively and authentically in the unsuspecting modern man—whenever ... he feels himself at the mercy of annoying 'accidents' which thwart his will and his action with apparently malicious intent. (Jung 1990: 261–2)

On the other hand, the trickster also possesses healing qualities: "he is the forerunner of the saviour" (ibid: 263) appearing "in magic rites of healing" (ibid: 260). The trickster, like the Hindu goddess Shiva, combines qualities of destruction and reparation. Modern consciousness tends to shield itself from the trickster's deception and her mercy; however, she insists on being acknowledged, especially in traumatic conditions. When the characters of the novel are propelled to the margins of life, without power and without hope, they meet the trickster in her intimidating and healing aspects. They find life to be more awesome than they imagined, in more than one meaning of the word – they are filled with terror and wonder.

Niggie begins with a reference to the Jungian trickster archetype. A farmer talks about a dream that he had:

"He dreamt", says the farmer, "about the trickster woman". He had always thought that it was a man, but in the dream it was a woman. A lot of people were gathered around a village church. He did not recognise anyone. Then he saw a woman whom he knew. She had red hair, her face was powdered white and she wore a hat covered by feathers. "He cannot begin", says the farmer, "to describe how attractive that hat of feathers was. It was soft like the wings of an eagle. With a flash of greenish blue light. He and the woman gradually moved away from the people, towards a room

with a bed. When it proved to be time for lying together and he stretched his arms towards her, a completely strange man appeared in her place, and *she* was laughing outside, on the veranda. Then he knew, it was the trickster". (ibid 7–8, my translation)

A number of things should be noted about the trickster here. She appears in a dream, indicating that she is an inhabitant of the subconscious mind. Her red hair could signify fiery passion, but her powdered face is like a mask, suggesting that she hides her feelings. With her powdered face and red hair, she looks like a clown, poking fun at the dreamer; red hair can also represent demoniacal characteristics (Cirlot 1971: 135). The suggestion of unreliability and mockery are strengthened later in the dream when a man suddenly takes her place and she laughs at the dreamer. She often appears in the novel wearing a hat of feathers which Ingrid Winterbach provided an explanation for in an interview on the online literary magazine *LitNet*:

The structuring principle in this text is the interaction between feather and in-between space, the pterygiae and the apteria. The latter, the featherless areas, are linked to Barthes's statement about the essence of sensuality: "where the garment gaps". (Winterbach 2005: 1, my translation)

The layer of feathers on the trickster's hat is a cover as well as an invitation to uncover. The dream illustrates the above-mentioned interrelation of covering and uncovering, of feathered and featherless areas, of desire and disappointment. A game is played out in which the dreamer is drawn to the trickster, hoping to uncover her; but it is a fatal attraction, leading to delusion and betrayal. On the other hand, feathers are also positive symbols, linked to creativity. They are associated with birds and the air, and with transcendence (Cirlot 1971: 102–3). Later in the novel, Ben has a dream about the trickster, and once again she is presented as a *femme fatale*. She is highly desirable, but when Ben embraces her, her body turns black, like "the body of death" (Winterbach 2002: 158). Ben realises that it symbolises the temptation to succumb to the attraction of death. The fact that the trickster, in one scene, suddenly changes from male to female, and in another, from white to black, points to the trickster as a destroyer of certainties and stereotypes:

The trickster cheats his/her victims regarding race as well as sex ... Thus the attitude of the white, heterosexual man concerning sexual relationships is undermined, since he is confronted with the possibility of sexual intimacy with some-

one of a different race, or someone of the same sex. (Foster 2005: 79–80, my translation)

In *Niggie*, the trickster appears as a supernatural force determining the unpredictable, absurd run of events; but she is also incarnated in the nature of people, whose unpredictability often defies their apparently reliable nature. There are various incarnations of the trickster in *Niggie*. General Bergh, the distant general who makes such a good impression when he visits the group of soldiers, may be the one who in the end leads Reitz and Ben into a trap so that they are wounded and almost killed. Oompie (“little uncle”), the prophet, throws stones at Reitz and Ben but then welcomes them in a friendly way (Winterbach 2002: 42–3); he seems to have genuine prophetic qualities, but almost causes Reitz’s emotional ruin by bringing him into a vague contact with his deceased wife. Anna allows Reitz to have sex with her but turns her face away from him during sexual intercourse; she consoles him, but lets him go when her husband returns. Although her husband is a difficult man, she feels obliged to stick to him, and sends Reitz away in deep sorrow, devastated by the caprices and calamities of his life story.

In the character of *Niggie*, as in that of *Tante*, the nourishing and healing qualities of the trickster are emphasized. The fact that the title of the book refers to *Niggie* suggests her importance, although she only appears in the last part of the narrative; she is a strong symbol of hope amongst all the sorrow. Her name, as that of *Tante*, is not a personal name, but an indication of familiarity – she is a familiar figure to all, willing to act in the way a relative should do—a cousin to all in need. The phrase “may God help ...” is like a refrain in *Niggie*’s dialogue; there is not much evidence of supernatural help in the plot unless *Niggie* is seen to be the answer to her own prayer. She is indeed a helper to people in need, and by marrying Ben after the loss of his wife, she enables him to make a new beginning and regain happiness—in contrast to his friend Reitz, who has lost his zest for life. Foster, however, notes that *Niggie*, unconsciously, also plays a harmful role by encouraging Reitz to have the relationship with Anna which later causes him so much sorrow (Foster 2005: 80). Although the healing qualities of *Niggie* are emphasized, she has a potentially destructive side to her personality too.

At the end of the novel the trickster with her feathered hat makes another, final entrance, so that the novel is “framed” by her appearance at the beginning and the end of the story. The reader is left with the suggestion that the author, the creator of the whole narrative, is herself a trickster figure. From beginning to end, she is behind the plot with its surprises and absurdities; she tricks and fools the reader, but ultimately gives him/her the hope of healing from trauma. She leads the reader along paths of intense loss and sorrow before suggesting possibilities of survival. The reader is left with two contrasting realities of life: that of Reitz devastated by sorrow, and that of Ben, heroically making a new start. Thus

the trickster has revealed both sides of her ambivalent nature to the reader. In bringing the suppressed trickster archetype to the attention of the reader, the narrative has a healing quality in itself. A shadow figure is brought to light and dealt with. In a truly tragic fashion, the reader follows the story with awe and sympathy, to reach a catharsis.

Conclusion

In the reinterpretation of the Anglo-Boer War and the reinvention of Afrikaner identity currently taking place in Afrikaans writing, Ingrid Winterbach's novel *Niggie* takes a prominent place. More than the war novels of Christoffel Coetzee and Karel Schoeman, it delicately balances the bitterness of human failure with the value of caring relationships; the severe pain of loss with suggestions of consolation. The characters in *Niggie* are marginal characters from a minority group, without power and apparently without hope. In this situation, their mettle is tested and their creativity challenged. They lose the war, but retain their dignity. The minority voices contain a message of deep sorrow and touching hope.

Notes

- 1 "Afrikaners" are the so-called "white" Afrikaans speakers.
- 2 Translation: "We the Idol".
- 3 "Coloured" refers to people of mixed racial and ethnic origin, closely linked to the Afrikaners by language and religion, yet barred by apartheid laws from enjoying full citizenship.
- 4 Translated as: "Looking on Darkness".
- 5 These two novels are discussed in detail in Van der Merwe (2005).
- 6 Original translation: "Verreweg een van die interessantste skrywers in Afrikaans".
- 7 "geordende en rustige bestaan"(Winterbach 2002: 159).
- 8 Original translation: "sy probeer te hard om nie haar gevoelens te wys nie".
- 9 Original translation: "Hy ... huil soos hy nooit vantevore gehuil het nie" (ibid: 246).

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