

Violence, Crime and Fear in Contemporary South African Fiction:
David Medalie's *The Shadow Follows* and J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract:

Violence is part of everyday life in South Africa. As the country is striving to reconcile with its past it also faces many challenges of the present. One of the most urgent problems is the high crime-rate. News of violent crime are so frequent in South Africa that one becomes inured to them. Reactions to brutality and fear are various but they all have one thing in common, they distort reality or even overtake it, they become a reality.

In this article I am studying various forms of violence as they are represented and/or explored in contemporary South African fiction, particularly in the writings of David Medalie and J.M.Coetzee. Through the works of these writers different perspectives on violence are examined, which leads to a better understanding of these complicated issues and raises further questions for consideration.

Violence has been part of African societies and during the many years of colonial history it has often been used as a political tool. South Africa is a country with a past where violence was justified by the struggle for liberation. The fight against domination started with a non-violent, passive resistance and turned into hostilities, which left the country with much to reconcile with. It is a past, which "follows as a shadow" - as the title of a contemporary novel suggests- and effects contemporary life.

Nevertheless, whereas the motives and goals of violence were clear before - fight against apartheid, for liberation, equality - now they are ambiguous. Debates about violence, crime and fear help answer the questions: To what degree is today's crime situation in South Africa a result of the apartheid? What is the nature of crime in South Africa? And most importantly: How long will the shadow follow?

Key words: South-Africa, crime, literature, violence, fear, security, rape, masculinity, apartheid, transition

I am not an optimist because I am not sure that everything ends well, nor am I a pessimist because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is not a feeling of certainty that everything ends well. Hope is just a feeling that life and work have meaning. It is not an estimate of the state of the world. It is something that you either have or you don't, regardless of the state of the world that surrounds you. It is a dimension of human existence.ⁱ

South Africa, is very often equated with crime. And yes, there is a lot of crime, but thirteen years ago there was apartheid. Crime can be, and is, blamed on many things: the past, politics, management, the whites the blacks... we will never run out of something or someone to blame but that will not bring us closer to understanding. Sociologist late Roger Gould, in his book *Collision of Wills* saw "violence as a window onto the broader phenomenon of human conflict, not as a lurid expression of deviant personalities."ⁱⁱ That is how I study violence here because South African crime is not a result of some deviant personalities but something much deeper.

Politics, history and literature cannot be separated in South Africa. Apartheid changed everything in and about literature; it was not a healthy ground for creative writing. South African writer André Brink claims that the political situation "produced a sense of priorities, which made it very difficult for writers to write about certain very ordinary human situations without inviting accusations of fiddling while Rome burns."ⁱⁱⁱ There was a simplified polarization, simple 'binarities', you were either for or against apartheid. Being political was a yardstick for art. As it takes time for the country to deal with the legacies of apartheid, so it does for literature, which is itself subjected to transformation.

Reactions to brutality and fear are various but they all have one thing in common, they distort reality or even overtake it, they become a reality. Violence and its residue contaminate the mind and create mistrust. These distorted realities are part of existence in South Africa and as such are reflected in literature.

The title of David Medalie's novel, *The Shadow Follows*^{iv} can be interpreted in various ways. It can be read as an analogy for legacies of apartheid, which follow as a shadow. Or it can refer to the rejected, disliked part of our selves, which we would prefer to be rid off. Nonetheless if the shadow is something we cannot do away with, so is 'disgrace'. David Lurie, the main protagonist in J.M. Coetzee's novel^v considers disgrace a "state".

These novels are about many various shadows and many disgraces but for the purposes of this paper I will be focusing on the distorted reality of

South Africa as a result of crime, violence and fear. My reasons for studying social phenomena via literature are similar to those of Lionnet Françoise comparative literature scholar who claims that

literature allows us to enter into the subjective processes of writers and their characters and thus to understand better the unique perspectives of subjects who are agents of transformation and hybridisation in their own narratives – as opposed to being the objects of knowledge, as in the discourse of social science.^{vi}

We often hear the expression senseless crime. If there is sensible and senseless crime than, due to its brutality and proportions, crime in South Africa seems utterly senseless. Gould explains that, “some acts of violence are understandable, perhaps even just, whereas others are condemned as out of bounds, devoid of sense.”^{vii} The fight against apartheid can be justified. Although it is complicated enough to justify what seems to be an oxymoron, violence *for* freedom, now there is violence *and* freedom. The bleak reading of the situation in South Africa today is a ‘state of lawlessness, confusion, and disorder’ corresponding to the definition of anarchy. The word *anarchy*, appears in both novels. In Medalie’s *The Shadow Follows* Jock Slater urges his son to remember that, “the greatest irresponsibility we can ever indulge in – as individuals and as a society – is anarchy. Especially when things are less than perfect, when a society is still trying to find its feet, that is when anarchy is the greatest threat.”^{viii} Jock Slater is not saying that South Africa is in a state of anarchy but he sees it is a potential threat. His opinion represents one of the many prevailing in SA.

In Coetzee’s *Disgrace* a minor character, Dawn, who hopes to emigrate to New Zealand, describes the present situation as anarchy.^{ix} Hers is also an illustration of one of the attitudes in the country. She claims that the previous generation “had it is easier” regardless of “the rights and wrongs of the situation, at least you knew where you were. ... Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It’s anarchy.”^x Dawn uses the term in a derogatory sense to describe what she sees as lawlessness.

Although there is no anarchy in South Africa it is a country in transition, which is a difficult and lengthy process. Apart from having to come to terms with the past it has to deal with the many challenges of the present. The high-crime rate is just one of them. Although the situation is bad, according to the statistics of the South African Police Service crime is not increasing.^{xi} Gertrud Fester member of the South African Commission for Gender Equality refers to the transition as *uneven*, because the “constitutional and legislative terrain is far ahead of cultural, religious and educational institutions.”^{xii} Deanna, one of the main characters in *The*

Shadow Follows observes similarly that, “it would take a long time for South Africa to become a normal society, the most progressive constitution in the world notwithstanding.”^{xiii}

The role of violence is also in transition. Robert Morrell, professor of education explains that, “violence in the liberation struggle was noble and necessary. In the new South Africa, it is criminal and destructive.”^{xiv} Changing the role of violence is not a legislative matter but one, which involves changes on various levels in society. Once balance is regained there will be a more steady decrease in crime. The “judgmental and irrepressible” Aunt Maisie,^{xv} in *The Shadow Follows*, a character resembling Oscar Wilde’s Lady Bracknell,^{xvi} offers shrewd commentary throughout the novel. Aunt Maisie is convinced that much had already changed. “For a start the beggars are’nt all black anymore,” she says. “There are white beggars everywhere you look. Lots of them. And many black people are driving smart cars. Black people driving BMWs and white people begging at robots. If that’s not the sign of a normal society, then I’d like to know what is!”^{xvii}

But crime is so common that one becomes accustomed to it. Only when it becomes personal does our view really change. In *The Shadow Follows*, Deanna is sitting in the hospital, her mother-in-law having been raped and murdered and father-in-law stabbed, she reflects.

One reads of incidents such as this almost every day [...]. Violence in their society was unremarkable. It was only when you knew the victims that it shocked you. Otherwise it simply passed over you; it looked you over and went elsewhere. And you overlooked it in turn.^{xviii}

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie tries to calm himself after his daughter is gang raped and he is almost burned to death. He reasons:

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at the moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head.^{xix}

His daughter’s friend, Bill Shaw, refers to the crime as a state of “war”. “A shocking business,” he says. “Atrocious. It’s bad enough when you read about it in the paper, but when it happens to someone you know’– ‘that really brings it home to you. It’s like being in a war all over again.”^{xx}

Once it becomes personal, violence changes our lives completely. After the first “superficial” signs of the shock David Lurie “has a sense that

inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused – perhaps even his heart.”^{xxi} Lurie offers a theory for crime:

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them.^{xxii}

If one starts to see violence as human evil than one can go mad. The “comforts” of the theory are a defence mechanism the mind develops to stay sane. Becoming inured to violence probably works similarly.

Elaine Slater in *The Shadow Follows* is raped and strangled in front of her husband, who is then stabbed, but he stays alive. All this happened in a newly established high-security village for elderly, where their son Richard persuaded them to move^{xxiii} precisely because “they promised security, security and more security.”^{xxiv} Based on her research, criminologist Elizabeth Stanko affirms that those “who can afford them, will ease their fears by buying more locks and similar gadgets or by moving to a ‘safer’ neighbourhood.”^{xxv} In South Africa this is not different. The criteria for choosing a house to live in are security, burglar bars, wires, fences, security guards etc. to create a sense of security.

In *Disgrace* Lucy Lurie lives in a rural part of South Africa, alone on a smallholding in the Eastern Cape. For security she has a gun, and dogs. “Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence. Anyhow if there were to be a break-in, I [Lucy] don’t see that two people would be better than one.”^{xxvi} Little did she know that it becomes true. Lucy is gang raped while her father David is locked in the bathroom, splashed with spirits and lit.^{xxvii} Her father believes that Lucy should leave but she does not want to.^{xxviii} In the end her security is ensured by Petrus, the black man, who used to work for Lucy but now has his own land next to hers. Petrus offers to marry Lucy^{xxix} because “here” as he says, “it is dangerous, too dangerous. A woman must be marry.”^{xxx} The offer is an “alliance, a deal.” Lucy explains to her father: “I [Lucy] contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise [...] I am without protection, I am fair game.”^{xxxi} According to Stanko, “women find that they must constantly negotiate their safety with men - those with whom they live, work and

socialise, as well as those they have never met.^{xxxii} Lucy explains to her father: “Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. [...] To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage?”^{xxxiii}

South Africa is a highly patriarchal society^{xxxiv} and Lucy’s ‘marriage deal’ feeds the sexist view of how women should belong to a man. Attorney Rhonda Copelon - in connection with revenge rape - reflects that raping the enemies woman as the devaluation of a man’s property is “the fundamental objectification of women. Women are the target of abuse at the same time as their subjectivity is completely denied.”^{xxxv} Lucy is a nobody without a man. Also, by this time Lucy is not negotiating for herself alone, she is pregnant - from the rape - she needs to ensure the safety and the belonging of the child also. She bargains, “...I accept his protection.[...] If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be it.[...] But than the child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family.”^{xxxvi}

The crucial question is asked in *The Shadow Follows* by Richard. “Why can’t they just take? Take what they want and go? Why must they kill and rape? What kind of people are these?”^{xxxvii} No motives for the brutality are offered as explanation in the texts. There probably is no straightforward answer anywhere. In *The Shadow Follows* Deanna recommends a book to her father titled *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*, he resentfully replies “Yes, why? [...] there has to be a reason. Action and Reaction. Cause and effect.” But his daughter dismisses his worries by reminding him, that “people have been trying to answer these questions for thousands of years.”^{xxxviii} One theory from those ‘thousand years’ is of course human evil. David Lurie is a literature professor and in his Romantics class he teaches a Byron’s poem. He reads to his students about Lucifer, the fallen angel who does not care whether what he does is good or bad “he just does it. He doesn’t act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him.[...] ‘His madness was not of the head but heart.’”^{xxxix} An important issue but for now, instead of getting into and getting lost in the ‘human evil’ I will look at a more pragmatic affair.

In order to understand violence in South Africa, particularly rape, it is helpful to gender it. Sociologist Michael Kimmel brings to attention that “seldom do the news reports note that virtually all the violence in the world today is committed by men.”^{xl} In South Africa the role of men has changed significantly during the past decades. Morrell explains that “masculinities are fluid and [...]are socially and historically constructed in a process which involves contestation between rival understandings of what being a man should involve.”^{xli} Apartheid was all-pervasive but it had

a specific gender impact on black men: it emasculated them. They were called ‘boys’, treated as subordinates, denied respect. Where black men resisted class and race oppression,

they were also, simultaneously, defending their masculinity. This often involved efforts to re-establish or perpetuate power over women.^{xlii}

As Kimmel says “[m]ale violence is a way to prove successful masculinity.”^{xliii} Psychotherapist, Beck Aaron explains that, “rape is the supreme expression of masculine power, dominance, and ownership.”^{xliiv}

The reaffirmation of masculinity by violence and rape could manifest itself in “struggle masculinity” as development studies researcher, Thokozani Xaba refers to it. It is a kind of masculinity, which “endowed a young man with social respect and status”^{xliv}. But the characteristics the ‘struggle masculinity’ possessed are inappropriate for the new South Africa.^{xlvi} The end of apartheid though does not mean that the sense of masculinity is automatically regained.

In people with deviant behaviour, Beck says, that the “common psychological problem lies in the offender’s perception - or misperception - of himself and other people.”^{xlvii} Unfortunately apartheid provided a good ground for misconceptions to flourish and directly or indirectly skewed peoples self- perception, the perception of gender roles. According to Centre for Study of Violence and Reconciliation researcher David Bruce there is “a deep-lying insecurity about personal worth amongst South Africans. This insecurity is in part the legacy of apartheid racism, which systematically, undermined people's dignity and self respect.”^{xlviii} As Morrell says, “women have suffered the consequence of anger and feelings of impotence.”^{xlix}

The consequences of the crimes are devastating. Lucy says, “I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life.”¹ Richard Slater, in *The Shadow Follows* feels that he will forever be haunted by the murderers and rapists of his parents. “The prospect of having them forever in his head, contaminating everything else that resided there, of being unable for the rest of his days to think an unsullied thought, filled him with a despair that terrified him.”ⁱⁱ

There is too much unresolved residue from the past in SA, this makes transitions difficult, which fuels crime and perpetuates cycles of violence. In his Jerusalem acceptance speech J.M.Coetzee said, “The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life.”^{lii} This stunted inner life, skewed self-perception is the shadow which follows. Apartheid created circumstances, in which it was impossible for people to keep a healthy self-perception, to keep their dignity. But the end of apartheid does not mean that dignity reappears consequentially. It is a process, a long process but I believe that South Africa is on the right track.

Notes

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- ⁱ V Havel, 'The Anatomy of Hate', Oslo Conference, 1990.
- ⁱⁱ R V Gould, *Collisions of Wills*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, p. 6.
- ⁱⁱⁱ A Brink, 'Interrogating Silence: New Possibilities Faced by South African Literature' in D Attridge & R Jolly (eds.), *Writing South Africa: Literature, apartheid and Democracy 1970-1995*, CUP, London, 1998, pp. 14-29, p. 15.
- ^{iv} D Medalie, *The Shadow Follows*, Picador, Johannesburg, 2006.
- ^v J M Coetzee, *Disgrace*, Vintage, London, 1999.
- ^{vi} F Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations*. Cornell University Press, New York, 1995, p. 8.
- ^{vii} Gould, p. 1.
- ^{viii} Medalie, p. 34-5.
- ^{ix} Coetzee, p. 9.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ^{xi} South African Police Service, Crime Statistics, retrieved 10 April 2007, <<http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2006/categories.htm>>
- ^{xii} G Fester, 'Is Gender Violence linked to Political Transition', Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Monograph 2. part 1., retrieved 25 March 2007, <<http://www.ijr.org.za/publications/archive/monographs>>
- ^{xiii} Medalie, p. 43.
- ^{xiv} R Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2001, p. 21.
- ^{xv} Medalie, p. 9.
- ^{xvi} *ibid.*, p. 4.
- ^{xvii} *ibid.*, p. 43.
- ^{xviii} *ibid.*, p. 207.
- ^{xix} Coetzee, p. 98.
- ^{xx} Coetzee, p. 102.
- ^{xxi} *ibid.*, p. 107.
- ^{xxii} *ibid.*, p. 98.
- ^{xxiii} Medalie, pp. 32, 33, 38.
- ^{xxiv} *ibid.*, p. 206.
- ^{xxv} E Stanko, *Everyday Violence*, Harper Collins, London, 1990, p. 16.
- ^{xxvi} Coetzee, p. 60.
- ^{xxvii} *ibid.*, pp. 93-6.
- ^{xxviii} *ibid.*, pp. 155, 159, 204.
- ^{xxix} *ibid.*, p. 139.
- ^{xxx} *ibid.*, p. 202.

^{xxx} ^{xi} *ibid*, p. 203.

^{xxx} ^{xii} “For the most part women find that they must constantly negotiate their safety with men – those with whom they live, work and socialise, as well as those they have never met. Because women are likely to be physically smaller than men, as well as emotionally and economically dependent on them, they must bargain safety from a disadvantaged position. As men are likely to be women’s intimate companions and their colleagues and bosses at work, the very people women turn to for protection are the ones who pose the greatest danger.

Women’s heightened level of anxiety is born of an accurate reading of their relationship to safety. It is not a misguided hysteria or paranoia. Women’s life experiences – as children, adolescents and adults – are set in a context of ever present sexual danger. Worry about personal safety is one way women articulate what it means to be female and live, day-in and day-out, in communities where women are targets of sexual violence.” Stanko, pp. 85-86.

^{xxx} ^{xiii} Coetzee, p. 204.

^{xxx} ^{xiv} Fester

^{xxx} ^v R Copelon, ‘Surfacing Gender: Reconceptualizing Crimes against Women in Time of War’ in C Besteman (ed.), *Violence Reader*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2002, pp. 193-210, p. 203.

^{xxx} ^{vi} Coetzee, p. 204.

^{xxx} ^{vii} Medalie, p. 207.

^{xxx} ^{viii} Medalie, p. 108.

^{xxx} ^{ix} Coetzee, p. 33.

^{xl} M S Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, OUP, Oxford, 2000, p. 203.

^{xli} Morrell, *Changing*, p. 7.

^{xlii} R Morrell, ‘Men, Movements and Gender Transformation in South Africa’ in L Ouzgane & R Morrell (eds.), *African Masculinities*, Palgrave, New York, 2005, p. 283.

^{xliii} Kimmel, p. 244.

^{xliv} A Beck, *The Prisoners of Hate*, Harper Collins, New York, 1999, p. 139.

^{xlv} T Xaba, ‘Masculinity and its Malcontents: The Confrontation between ‘Struggle Masculinity’ and ‘Post-struggle Masculinity (1990-1997)’ in Morrell, *Changing*, pp. 105-126, p. 110.

^{xlvi} *ibid*, p. 112.

^{xlvii} “Despite differences between individual offenders and variations in their typical violent behaviour, certain common psychological factors can be identified across various forms of antisocial behaviour, such as delinquency, child abuse, spouse battering, criminal assault, rape.” Beck, pp. 125-126.

^{xlviii} D Bruce, 'Values in SA – all that glisters: In search of self-respect', *Business Day*, 1 September 2006.

^{xlix} Morrell, *African*, p. 284.

ⁱ Coetzee, p. 161.

ⁱⁱ Medalie, p. 212.

ⁱⁱⁱ J M Coetzee, 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech' in D Attwell (ed.), *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1992, p. 98.