

Representations of Violence

in Contemporary South African Fiction

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Abstract and Introduction for a presentation at 'Violence and the Contexts of Hostility,' global inter-disciplinary conference to be held in Budapest, Hungary in May 2008.

Abstract

There are certain social structures, which are inherently violent. Apartheid by definition promoted 'apart'ness, created disjunctions, affirmed social gaps and as such it fuelled power struggles, which are the breeding ground of antagonism and hostility. After more than a decade the ghosts of apartheid still loom over Southern Africa. But the degree to which they are responsible for the high crime rate with often callous violence, remains a question.

Apartheid, as one of the most recent examples of attempts for social engineering (not new to humanity e.g. Third Reich) was a system, which did not allow for one to keep dignity, in other words a system in which it was impossible to 'be good' – to put it bluntly. The reasons for this do vary according to the peoples of particular groups, colours or tongues. There were perceived senses of honour during apartheid but they were rather manifestations of struggles for power on the one hand as opposed to an asymmetric and often futile yearning for recognition by 'the others'. This created social tensions, mistrust, fear and guilt which have been triggering and perpetuating violations on various levels. The clashes or meetings of various values systems in such a diverse country like South Africa inevitably relativise one another, which further deepens and serves as justification for widening social gaps. So even if it stands to reason that there is no dignity in violence often the opposite is claimed because the perceptions of worth and dignity vary as much as the perceptions of what constitutes violence itself and justifications for it do.

In this paper I examine the various roles violence- as a result a various perceived humiliations and threats - plays in people's lives in South Africa, as well as in light of the social gaps, and rifts created by apartheid. I study the representations of the different violences in Damon Galgut's novel, *The good doctor* with the objective of showing how unjust social circumstances skew ones perceptions in making moral ethical choices.

Introduction

There are certain social structures, which are inherently violent. Apartheid in South Africa was a political system, which by definition promoted separateness, created disjunctions, affirmed and exacerbated social gaps. As such, it fuelled power struggles, which are the breeding ground of antagonism and hostility. And although official segregation is no longer enforced it left cultural, economic and social gaps, mistrust, feelings of anger, resentment and guilt, which haunt this land relentlessly as shadows.

In this paper I will talk about the mechanisms behind the social engineering; the ambiguity of political ideology, which by its dichotomous nature generates brakes in the integrity of identity, and as such induces and perpetuates violence. I will do so via Damon

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Galgut's novel *The Good Doctor* and social and political analyses of the times. Neither of these offer solutions, but they trigger thoughts about the need for understanding social and political mechanisms; the need for a deconstructive approach to realities and the importance of the acknowledgement of the various co-existing truths.

The Good Doctor, like any other novel, should not be reduced to politics. It is a story of a few people who for different reasons happen to be in one place. An interesting interpretative parallel is the psyche of the characters read along the lines of the politics and social circumstances.

The story takes place in the borderland of the South African. Medical Doctor Frank Eloff becomes -somewhat reluctantly- friends and room-mate with Laurence Waters a freshly graduated medical doctor, who arrives to the hospital to do his community service¹.

The location of the town in the novel is not specified.² And indeed it need not be, it is a former homeland and that is what defines it. Frank Eloff explains to Laurence Waters "a few years ago there was a line on a map, somewhere around where we're sitting now. On one side was the homeland where everything was a token imitation. On the other side was the white dream..." (GD 18) The places and the spaces in the novel bear testimony to a system, which divided (people, space etc...) according to its own ideas and ideals. Based on the Population Registration Act of 1950 the entire population of South Africa was classified by the western concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' into White, Coloured, Indian/Asiatic and Native (later Bantu or African). These categories determined the political, economic and social rights as well as the education opportunities.

When the two main protagonists of the novel are talking about the homeland, Laurence (the young one) claims that it is all politics, which he is not interested in, but Frank reminds him that "Everything is politics [...] The moment you put two people in a room together politics enters." (GD 18) As much as Laurence tries to ignore politics it is precisely the reason why he is where he is at the moment. Homelands were purely political constructs.

The absurdity of this deliberate construction of space exemplifies the absurdity of the system of apartheid. In the history of humanity we have witnessed many examples of social engineering on mass scale (Third Reich, communism...), the 'grand plan' of apartheid being one of the latest. Political ideology, which is a making of a handful of people if propelled in the 'right' direction can be sustained for long periods relatively successfully, regardless of the amoral and immoral nature of its social ethics. In '48 the South African National Parties 'apartheid' slogan was "a huge success" and according to political scientist Anthony Butler "its power lay in its very ambiguity" (16).

A *good quality* ambiguity is when a point, regardless of its validity, can be persuasively presented in opposing terms, while both support the initial point, making it valid in any case. If the point is based on ideas and sets of beliefs (ideological that is) and also ambiguous we are faced with a potentially powerful tool. South African political sciences scholars Willem Van Vuuren and Ian Liebenbergs explain that "ideology, as the logic of domination, has typically proclaimed a single dogmatic truth or core myth; but it has presented these basic myths in dichotomous terms so that the ideologies constituted a mythic antithesis of absolute positive and absolute negative elements, which *precluded* more complex alternative interpretations of reality." (27) [my emphasis]

Reduction to simple binarisms *excludes* the possibility of relativising and proper assessment of the situation. Historian Karl Dietrich Bracher argues that the ideology in power

¹ It is a SA government policy that medical doctors after completing their studies have to do a year of community service.

² My guess based on the scant description is that it is either the former Lebowa and the bigger town is Pietersburg or Venda or Baputhatswana with the town being Bishop and Mafeking ??

politics is “a tendency towards extreme simplification of complex realities” (1985: 5) which is at the same time divided into a dichotomy of good and evil, right and wrong, friend and foe.

The political illusions in South Africa were structured around a myth of white supremacy and inherent racial and ethnic difference, the ‘logic’ of which led to segregation and the so called ‘separate development’, which the white minority was to provide and control. Despite its simplicity the inner logic of these claims was convincing enough to sustain the system for decades. Those who were not *with* were *against*. The myth of the enemy is created alongside these poles. According to Van Vuuren and Liebenberg the psychology of the National Party mythology involved the exploitation of the two most powerful forces of human motivation, namely ‘fear’ and ‘hope’. (16)

Fear and hope are indisputably amongst the strongest emotions in our individual and social lives. A sense of belonging gives us reassurance, countering fear. It also gives us hope that we are not alone. We identify with certain characteristics of a group the ‘us’, as opposed to the other group, the ‘them’. This is part of the process of identity creation, while ‘the enemy’ is always the opposite of ‘me’ or ‘us’. From then on, we strive to comply with the characteristics of the group we associate with in order to maintain a sense of safety and belonging. This natural phenomenon is used and abused by the political ideologies.

Applied ethics and political psychology professor of the University of Cape Town Peter du Preez does not think that the choice of identity as a central theme in politics is an arbitrary choice. He claims, that “the identity of a group makes political action possible” (3) Du Preez explains that “identity is not maintained in isolation. Identities exist in systems of relations” he calls “identity frames – which maintain each other.” (du Preez 3).

We all have various social roles. The identities, some of which are arbitrary while some are inherent are on another level, so to say, they overarch the social roles and we negotiate them constantly. (I will for the purposes of this paper leave out the psychological self-perceptions and focus on the social psychological aspects.) However I do want to make clear that the interchangeable use of self and identity is misleading. The person as a system of identities is the broadest concept, which encompasses various identities that are not necessarily equal.

Du Preez explains that locutions such as ‘the role of a woman’ [or ‘the role of the African’] are usually attempts to pre-empt the implications of womanhood [or Africanness’] for a particular purpose. Du Preez says, “[T]hey are, when they are not specific, attempts to absorb categories of persons to particular roles; to make these roles of such importance that anyone of the designated category who fails to perform them can be made to feel guilty or ashamed” (6). Guilt and shame humiliate and undermine one’s sense of integrity of the self (and challenges the maintenance of dignity, which is another issue I won’t get into now). It is the meeting points of the various identities within us, which are used against us in power games. They can be used against us because they are presented to us in oppositions, in mutually exclusive binarisms. Therefore a constant deconstructive approach is needed in order to bear in mind –despite the traps – that identities and roles are neither mutually exclusive nor constant categories. This deconstructive approach is the very opposite of what politicians or eg. religious leaders want us to do. It is easier to deal with and hence engineer people when they are pulled into identity traps.

In *The Good Doctor* Frank Eloff recalls his time in the army. He describes it as follows: “History had sent me up to the Angolan border for two years.” (GD 62) From there he was sent up to a small bush camp for three months. “The camp was being used for a lot of intense activity; patrols were going out constantly, looking for enemy patrols to annihilate. For the first time I was treating people who were fighting in a real war. I saw things there I had never seen before. Wounds made by grenades and bullets and land mines; the deliberate damage that people wilfully inflict on each other ” (GD62). This is where Frank met

Commandant Moller, the officer in charge of the whole camp. Most people were afraid of him and tried to avoid him. “He had a reputation that spread far beyond his physical presence – for a blind and holy devotion for his job. His job was killing enemy soldiers, and it was for this reason only that the camp existed” (GD 63). Frank and another doctor were there to “patch up the people who did the killing, so that they could go out and do it again.” (GD 63)

One night Frank was called to come and look at a man who was being interrogated. The black man, naked, was lying on the floor, splattered with blood, barely breathing. Frank was asked to examine him and assure the soldiers that he is not faking it. The question was of course absurd. Commandant Moller asked Frank’s expert opinion on how much more questioning the man can take before he dies. Frank thinks: “[T]hese questions are insane, they are the measuring-points of an inverted world, doctors are here to heal and repair, not assist in this calculated demolition of nerves and flesh” (GD 66). But he has to comply and says that the man “wont die yet” (GD 64-66). By the following day, as the natural instincts of our mind to stay sane start working and we repress, he says to himself “*It would have made no difference. You didn’t have a choice. You only answered the questions*” (GD 66-7). Had he tried to save the man who was being beaten to death he would not have become a hero. Heroes are constructed for political reasons just as enemies are. In this case Frank would have become an enemy too. He would have been flipped onto the wrong side of the morality and he would have probably been killed also.

The situation Frank was in was an identity trap on various levels. As a doctor he had to save the life, yet he knew that it is only for some hours so that the soldiers can torture more ‘answers’ out of the man. Frank was not allowed to *save* him, he had to keep him alive for the needed purposes, as a human that man did not count. Frank could do nothing to save him.

However, life brings Frank to meet Moller ten years later (GD 99). Moller came to be stationed at this former homeland town to guard the (national) border as a commander of a group of soldiers, this time “black and white together, some of them the enemy he’d been trying to kill” (GD 99) a decade earlier. Frank is still scared of him. But by now he realises that it was “something else in him, something deeper than his face, that scared [Frank]. He was drawn in on a hard, tiny centre of himself, in the way of people who live in devotion to a single idea. In a monk this can be beautiful, but in him it was not” (GD 183). Moller is a soldier and his job is to exterminate the enemy and protect the people from the enemy, he is devoted to that idea alone. The fact that enemies change with the politics does not seem to matter to him. This blind devotion is what Frank finds puzzling. Moller is a very polite man, Frank has no doubt that “he used the same level tones with the people he’d tortured and killed. There was nothing personal in it for him” (GD 188).

The political ideology of apartheid kept the myth of the enemy as a threat alive, it nurtured fear, hatred and violence towards the enemy. Moller’s self-righteous attitude is justified by a moral high ground; he is doing his job well, he takes pride in it – for him violence is a necessity, while Frank’s position as a doctor goes head on *against* violence, his job is to save lives.

Blind devotion is potentially harmful even if it is to a seemingly ‘good’ cause. Frank detects this in Laurence and Zanele, the American woman (Laurence’s supposed girlfriend) who after having rediscovered her African origins, changes her name from Linda, wears colourful western African attire and goes on a mission first to Sudan (where he met Laurence) and now she is working in Lesotho (GD 96). Frank thinks: “She and Laurence were the same kind of person: blindly and naively believing in their own power to change things. It was simple, this belief, and the simplicity was strong and foolish” (GD 96). Their zealous approach could be compared to Moller’s blind devotion.

Many, including myself, are sceptical about these ‘do gooders’. Africa, is very inviting for those who want ‘do good’. Choose a remote, poor, rough, sunburnt place, ‘do good’ and

than go home feeling cleansed, some sins repented. Linda/Zanele argues with Frank that despite the odds “[A]nything is better than nothing” (GD 97). I agree that help is needed and should not be dismissed as useless, yet I also tend to resonate with Frank Eloff on the point that, “past a certain point, anything is exactly the same as nothing.” (GD 97).

Towards the end of the novel Frank eventually gathers courage to remind Moller of their meeting over ten years ago, but Moller does not even remember it (GD 203). What was a life-changing trauma for one meant nothing out of the ordinary for the other. Frank made what he calls “little confession, but [Moller] could not give [Frank] absolution.” (GD 204) Moller would not ease Frank's sense of guilt.

It is comforting to think of Moller as a moral monster as a deviant psychopath. But there is too many Moller's around. Indeed all of us have Mollers in us. One evening as Frank returns back to his room in the hospital he finds Laurence asleep in his bed. He thinks: “..his face seemed even younger than it was. Not young enough to be innocent, but soft and pale and vulnerable to violence. And the violence was in me: form nowhere it occurred to me how simple it would be to break a sleeping head like this. One hard, heavy blow with the right object and it would be done. Because he was the enemy. I saw it now. The enemy was not outside, at large, in the world; he was within the gates. While I had slept. Night thoughts; but nothing like this had come to me before. And it was terrible how casual, how very ordinary, the idea of murder could be. I turned away from it, and from myself, and went to bed.” (GD 161)

Blind devotion, whatever its justification or inner logic is a potential breeding ground for antagonism and violence. A deconstructive approach is needed. A relentless questioning of the various levels and aspects of reality are necessary to prevent us from blindness, like looking through a prism, which disperses, rather than focuses light.

Absolution and forgiveness will not come from the outside for Frank Eloff, he has to learn to live with the past and the present it brought along. However absurd, history cannot be dismissed. And South Africa is a country in transition where people have to learn to live alongside the former enemies, however unclear and unstable the category is.

There is no single ‘correct’ way of dealing with the past violences and humiliations. In this long period of the national party rule in South Africa apartheid permeated all layers of society but it affected everybody in a different way. Some do not deal with the legacies of the past but yearn for it to return, still nurturing racist beliefs while others are guilt ridden BUT many look the past in the eye and are filled with new energies for new beginnings.

Galgut's novel does not offer a recipe for the social problems neither does it paint a picture of a bright new future. It triggers broader questions, which are not only valid for South Africa, questions which should make us think about the potential dangers of political ideologies, about finding ways of dealing with the past and present realities, in order to learn to live in tolerance.

Thank you.

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