

Katja Bendels

White Africans?
Negotiating Identity
in White South African Writing

Reflections

Literatures in English
outside Britain and the USA

Albert-Reiner Glaap (Ed.)

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Katja Bendels

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I Introduction

For most of our lives we usually do not explicitly concern ourselves very much with the issue of identity and establish our self-concepts according to the roles we play within our environment and the ideas and structures we associate ourselves with. Thus, I might define myself as a woman, wife, daughter and scholar of post-colonial literature. In situations of crisis, however, at turning points of our lives or routines, the question of identity and self-understanding arises with particular urgency. These situations then often call for self-appraisal and a redefinition of our self-concepts. With the demise of apartheid in the early 1990s, South Africa found itself at such a turning point in history, which has necessitated a re-negotiation of the identities and self-concepts of all its citizens. It is, of course, common knowledge that neither the apartheid government nor the white colonial rulers of previous times wished to encourage a common South African identity. Now that these impediments have successfully been removed, the question arises of how to forge a national South African identity after centuries of legalised discrimination and segregation of races? Most tellingly, Albie Sachs' famous paper "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom", written for an ANC in-house seminar in 1989, begins with the words: "We all know where South Africa is, but we do not yet know what it is."¹ Since South Africans associate themselves with numerous different cultures, ethnicities, languages, creeds and ways of life, the creation of national unity can, as Albie Sachs claims, only be achieved "while fully recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country".² This means that all groups need to negotiate for themselves and in interaction with other groups their respective identities as Zulu, Themba, Indian, Afrikaner etc. South Africans.

In his speeches and writings Sachs argues that culture, and specifically the arts, can play a pivotal role to help the South Africans rediscover themselves, and he provocatively proposed to his comrades to refrain from regarding culture merely as an instrument of struggle:³

We South Africans fight against real consciousness, we know what we struggle against. It is there for all the world to see. But we don't know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be a South African? The artists, more than anyone, can help us discover

1 Albie Sachs (1990a). "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom." *Spring is Rebellious. Arguments about Cultural Freedom*. Edited by Ingrid de Kok. Cape Town: Buchu Books, 19.

2 Ibid., 24.

3 Cf. *ibid.*, 19.

ourselves. Culture in the broad sense is our vision of ourselves and of our world. This is a huge task facing our writers and dancers and musicians and painters and film-makers. It is something that goes well beyond mobilising people for this or that activity, important though mobilisation may be.⁴

Literature, as one means of cultural expression, can thus serve as a pivotal device in the debate about a common South African identity. Since all works of literature have necessarily been written within the context of a given culture, they are inevitably rooted in its cultural mentality and dominant ideology as the result of certain power relations within the environment of the subject. The reading and analysis of these works, to quote Ansgar Nünning and Birgit Neumann, consequently "allows insight into culturally sanctioned systems of ideas, beliefs, presuppositions and convictions which constitute collective mentalities and identities". It is thus exactly in literary fiction and its adherence to traditional plot-lines, myths and metaphors that "conventionalized presuppositions, biases, values, and epistemological habits find their most succinct expression".⁵ In South Africa, however, literature has over many decades been employed for political and ideological purposes, most prominently of course the struggle against apartheid. This utilisation of the arts necessarily limited its imaginative and stylistic freedom. Thus, in order to further the current debate and support the South Africans' search for who they are, the country's literature must necessarily be delivered from the 'ghetto' of apartheid imagination. Writers must reclaim their stories and develop a counter-imagination which, in its execution and deliverance, could surpass the very system it was fighting against and in which their writing has been trapped.⁶ South African writing has within the last fifteen years taken first tentative steps towards the liberation of its imagination. André Brink, among others, has repeatedly called for a *re-imagining of the real*.⁷ He claims that after the long period of 'realist' and fact-oriented struggle literature,

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- 4 Albie Sachs (1990b). "Afterword: The Taste of an Avocado Pear." *Spring is Rebellious. Arguments about Cultural Freedom*. Edited by Ingrid de Kok. Cape Town: Buchu Books, 146.
 - 5 Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (2008). "Ways of Self-Making in (Fictional) Narrative: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Narrative Identity." *Narrative and Identity. Theoretical Approaches and Critical Analyses*. Edited by Birgit Neumann, Ansgar Nünning and Bo Pettersson. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 5.
 - 6 Cf. Ashraf Jamal (2005). *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 3.
 - 7 Cf. André Brink (1996c). "Reimagining the Real." *Reinventing a Continent*. London: Secker & Warburg, 144-163.