Verena Jain-Warden

Pain and Pleasure:

The Representation of Bodies and Emotions in Contemporary South African Novels

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Current research in both literary studies and the social sciences increasingly parallels developments in the natural sciences and focuses on the entangled[1] nature of cultural processes and human relationships.[2] Such an approach to understanding culture is valuable primarily due to two insights: first, that conventional logic does not go all the way in understanding human behaviour and second, that it is impossible to examine one aspect of a culture without taking into account the influence of multiple other aspects. It is the increasing focus on human entanglement that helps to explain the current trend of research on emotions. Traditionally connected with irrationality and extra-discursive knowledge, emotions seem to provide the perfect angle of approach to the contradictions of the contemporary world. By analysing the role of emotions, we seem to come closer to understanding the multiple ways in which we are "undone by each other," as Judith Butler (2006: 24) famously states. At the same time, studies of emotion and affect often naïvely assume that emotions are "independent of and, in an important sense, prior to 'ideology'" (Leys 2012: 9). This would imply an unfiltered access to the body and a clearly distinguishable gap between "the subject's affective processes and the subject's cognition or knowledge of the objects that cause them" (ibid.). An analysis of the literary representation of emotions can overcome this gap by taking into account the meanings ascribed to emotions in a culture and the ways in which emotions interact with our understanding of the world.

In the context of South Africa, specifically, focusing on emotions helps to break up rigid discourses and to approach cultural products from a fresh angle. Sarah Nuttall states: "So often the story of post-apartheid has been told within the register of difference – frequently for good reason, but often, too, ignoring the intricate overlaps that mark the present and, at times, and in important ways, the past as well" (2009: 1). Approaching South African history and literature through the lens of difference is useful for understanding many of the ways in which apartheid injustices worked and in which South African society is divided even now. However, looking beyond difference, at the ways in which literature

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1 "Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored and uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or a set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle" (Nuttall 2009: 1).

2 In the context of postcolonial literatures, see for instance Nuttall (2009); McCormack (2014); Davis (2013).

constructs South Africans as being shaped by an intricate network of emotions, is more adequate for analysing post-apartheid complexities. In the current study, the focus is narrowed down to literary representations of two emotions, both of which play an exceptional role in contemporary South African culture: pain and pleasure. While representations of pain often serve to create a coherent history of South Africa, contemporary literature contrasts and complements these representations with an emphasis on pleasure – at times to create an opposition between past and present, but in other instances to expose continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. By looking at eleven novels, published between 1990 and 2010, this study illustrates the diverse meanings which are ascribed to pain and pleasure in post-apartheid South Africa.

While apartheid officially ended in 1994, the novels discussed here include some that have been published in the so-called transition period from 1990 to 1994. The choice of 1990 as a starting point is due to the fact that the imaginative reshaping of South African self-conceptions began as soon as a formal end to apartheid was in sight. The coming into power of the new government in 1994 is seen as another central mark in South African history. At its outset, the 'new'[3] South African state was constructed as everything the old one was not: free, tolerant, multicultural, non-heterosexist, and equal in terms of ethnicity and gender. All of these characteristics found their expression in the metaphor of the rainbow nation, a term coined by Nobel prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu and taken up by Nelson Mandela, the first democratic president after apartheid. In his inaugural address, Mandela says:

> We trust that you [the international allies] will continue to stand by us as we tackle the challenges of building peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy. [...] We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination. [...] We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world (1994).

In this speech, the rainbow nation refers to the peaceful coexistence of people of different skin colours, but also to other identity categories, for instance gender. Mandela's address stresses the discontinuities with the past by alluding to its injustices – poverty, racism, and violence. Simultaneously, he makes clear that the metaphor of the rainbow nation is not only directed towards the South African people, but also serves as a way to create a positive image of South Africa for the rest of the world.

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[3] The word 'new' is put in inverted commas in this context because the desired change of all realms of life has not been achieved to date.

In the course of the years following the establishment of a new government, the early post-apartheid[4] optimism of both population and politicians made way to a growing disillusionment. South Africans still grapple with the injustices and traumas of the past, which increasingly turn out to be harder to overcome than was assumed by the first generation of post-apartheid spokespersons. In fact, in her analysis of the ongoing violence in contemporary South Africa, Rosemary Jolly states:

> It is a sad irony that [...] while South Africa's remarkable post-apartheid constitution guarantees rights to its citizens that are radical in its scope, life on the ground of the 'Rainbow Nation' is, for the majority of citizens, (still) characterized by high rates of poverty, morbidity and violence (2010: 1).

While the racist state policies of apartheid have been abolished, their consequences continue to influence the present. The legacies of apartheid include a continuation of unequal economic situations, with "the majority of black people remain[ing] in poor living conditions" (Gunkel 2010: 17). The constitutional prohibition of discrimination based on "race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth" (Government of South Africa 1996) proves to have little effect as long as social change does not keep up with changed legislations (see Pucherová 2011: 110). Poverty and a lack of opportunities in terms of education and employment as well as the militarist attitudes of the past, promoted both by the apartheid government and the anti-apartheid movement, have led to high rates of crime and violence in the present.

Current discourses both address the problems contemporary South Africa is facing and focus on what has changed for the better since the end of apartheid. Literature, as a cultural product that shapes other discourses as much as it is shaped by them, has played a pivotal role in creating ideas about what defines contemporary South Africa. Far from being "autonomous kinds of discourse," as critics such as Lucy Valerie Graham (2012: 6) believe, history and literature intersect and influence each other in various ways. While one should avoid the pitfall

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[4] The period after 1994 is referred to as post-apartheid in this study, despite the fact that the term has been contested because it "tends to [...] imply a contrast between the past and the present as absolute with 1994 as the year that marks the radical break" (Gunkel 2010: 17). Undoubtedly, the transition from one set of beliefs to another cannot be pinned down to a single moment and is far from complete to date. Nevertheless, the shift from one system of power to another that sets out – albeit with limited success – to contrast the former in almost all respects is a key point in time. Besides, the term implies a state of continued involvement with the past, a struggle to overcome and go beyond apartheid.

of reading literary texts as mere expressions of historical events, as Graham rightly cautions (see ibid.), literature is a result of diverse cultural practices and in turn has "a profound impact on people's attitudes and behaviour" (Grünkemeier 2013: 5), thereby influencing and interpreting historical events. Literature dynamically interacts with the culture in which it is produced. At the same time, works of fiction should not be judged according to their faithfulness to historical details. When analysing fiction, the question is not so much whether the represented events and characters match other, non-fictional discourses point by point, but which functions these representations serve. In other words, fictional texts are read in terms of the representational strategies they employ. This study is restricted to the analysis of novels, in which story, narrative transmission, and formal and stylistic characteristics all take part in constructing conceptions of the world we live in.

Post-apartheid South African novels not only assign meaning to the changing present, but they also reinterpret the apartheid past, focusing on previously neglected aspects and developing new perspectives. Damon Galgut, one of the authors discussed in this study, observes that apartheid literature usually assumed a clear stance with regard to the state: "You were either with the system or against the system" (Galgut and Miller 2006: 141). After the end of apartheid, such clear moral positions are no longer in place, and contemporary novels "engage with [the] contradictions and tensions" (Kossew 2004: 97) emerging from a country caught between the will to move forward and the legacies of the past. Those post-apartheid texts that do not represent the present but look at the apartheid past usually go beyond simplistic for-and-against dichotomies as well. Since there is no longer any need to fight the apartheid government and to prove one's own moral stance, contemporary South African literature about apartheid times often deals with issues such as guilt, complicity, and the effects of apartheid on individual and collective mindsets.

The representation of emotions plays a key role in contemporary South African novels. Many novels, both written during apartheid and afterwards, construct the history of South Africa as shaped by pain.[5] The violence of colonialism and the subsequent cruelties of apartheid have often led to an understanding of South Africa as a country in which painful experiences constitute subjectivity and human relationships. This tendency continues up until the present day. Elleke Boehmer comments on the role of pain in post-apartheid South African literature:

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[5] Pain, in this study, is defined as a feeling of hurt inflicted on living beings. Pain can have direct physical causes, but it can also be caused indirectly. See section 1.5 for a detailed conceptualisation of the term.

> South African literature since 1994 has, in terms of its thematic, symbolic, and stylistic preoccupations, seemingly staggered, punch-drunk, from one crisis and cry of pain to the next. In this the literature has seemingly followed the repetition compulsions that have beset the country, where the pain and violence that apartheid perpetrated were followed with almost unseemly haste by the national crises of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the crime wave, the problem of Zimbabwe, and the 2008 outbreaks of xenophobic attacks, not necessarily in that order (2012: 29).

Boehmer stresses the continuities of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa in terms of the preoccupation with pain as a central concern of its literature. While there is a shift in the causes of pain – from the violence of the apartheid state to failures of the new government as well as the HIV/AIDS epidemic – its significance as a defining feature of South African history and literature remains the same. Remarkably, Boehmer's choice of words attaches an almost mythical quality to the role of pain in contemporary South African literature and culture: the cyclic reoccurrence of painful experiences is likened to repetition compulsion, a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

According to Boehmer, literary texts accept pain as an intrinsic feature of the South African nation and endow it with the power to shape a coherent national history. However, the tendency to construct pain as a central feature of the South African past and present is complemented, challenged, and overlaid with an increasing focus on pleasure[6] as another emotion that defines contemporary South Africa. In popular discourses, particularly those that foreground the vision of the rainbow nation, the pain of the past is often contrasted with the pleasurable aspects of the present, most importantly the choice of sexual partners as well as sexual pleasure as a right of both men and women (see Hunter 2010: 137). While pleasure as a central concern of South African literature is a post-apartheid phenomenon, not least because of the strict censorship laws during apartheid, this current tendency includes literary texts dealing with the apartheid past. Thus, contemporary South African literature addresses the question to what degree, and in what ways, pleasure figured in apartheid South Africa. From the distance of the post-apartheid present, the role of pleasure both as an instrument of state power, in the sense of the regulation of sexuality, and as a feature of resistance during apartheid is explored by several authors.

As this brief overview shows, pain and pleasure are two emotions which are centrally employed in South African literature. Often regarded as an insepar-

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6 Pleasure, in this study, is defined as a feeling of enjoyment or bliss. The term is used in a way that imbues it with sexual connotations, though it is not necessarily directly triggered by sex. See section 1.5 for a detailed conceptualisation of the term.

able pair in the history of ideas, they have frequently been constructed as oppositional emotions.[7] In South Africa, this dichotomy serves to establish a contrast between the apartheid past and the post-apartheid present as well as to explore the tensions and contradictions of both systems. In addition to such conceptions of pain and pleasure, literary texts also investigate the overlaps and intersections between these emotions. Contemporary South African literature at times challenges their binary opposition and instead focuses on the ways in which pain can be an intrinsic part of pleasure, and pleasure may be derived from the infliction, representation, or witnessing of pain.

Invariably, novels about pain and pleasure share a concern with the human body. This is due, above all, to the embodied nature of both pain and pleasure. Both emotions deal with questions of agency: they represent actions performed by bodies, on bodies, and between bodies. They are central to forming an understanding of subjectivity and human relationships and they help constitute human beings in the context of their surroundings. Inflicting pain on or giving pleasure to someone always establishes a system of power: it implies a reaching out, an intrusion, an intimate bonding, or a violation. It is due to these capacities that representations of pain and pleasure can be analysed so fruitfully. Not only do "the most highly elaborated symbolic structures and discursive systems [...] ultimately derive from bodily sensation" (Brooks 1993: 7), but pain and pleasure, in particular, expose power structures and the intricate ways in which human bodies interact with each other. They reveal "the entanglement of flesh and national histories" that Donna McCormack (2014: 2) focuses on in her book on trauma in queer postcolonial narratives. Furthermore, Peter Brooks points to the fact that

> narratives in which a body becomes a central preoccupation can be especially revelatory of the effort to bring the body into the linguistic realm because they repeatedly tell the story of a body's entrance into meaning. That is, they dramatize ways in which the body becomes a key signifying factor in a text: how, we might say, it embodies meaning (1993: 8).

Thus, South African narratives dealing with pain and pleasure attach social meanings to these two emotions, as well as exploring and shaping human relationships and power structures in contemporary South Africa.

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7 From early Greek philosophy to the focus on sadomasochism and algolagnia in the late 19th century, pain and pleasure have usually been read in connection with each other in Western philosophy: either as contrasting elements or as mutually constituent ones. Such early configurations of pain and pleasure have a marginal and indirect relevance for contemporary South African literature at best, which is why they are not considered in this study. Those philosophical positions and texts that are useful for a reading of pain and pleasure in contemporary South African literature will be discussed in chapter one.