

THE VOICE OF WHITE WOMEN BEFORE THE APARTHEID LEGACY IN ANDRÉ BRINK'S IMAGININGS OF SAND

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ABSTRACT

In Imaginings of Sand, Brink interrogates the voice of women in history by recounting, in the persons of Ouma Kristian and Kristien Muller, the personal histories of their white female ancestors. By using multiple narrators and resorting to magic realism, André Brink subverts the "factual" content of history and draws attention to the suppressed voices of women in the South African history. In this novel, André Brink shows us how historical and capital stories are safeguarded along centuries by women.

Key words: *Voice – sound - history – story – female – storytelling - memory*

INTRODUCTION

André Brink Philippus is a South African writer. He is one of South Africa's most distinguished writers. He writes in Afrikaans and English and was until his retirement and his death in February 2015 a Professor of English Literature at the University of Cape Town. He wrote too many novels and essays in which he has explored various themes, among which the voice of South African's white women before the apartheid legacy. Repeatedly his novels and particularly this one focuses upon the process by which history is made and recorded through words and sounds of those who make history and paradoxically, of those who are excluded from it. Given his stress on the vital importance of language in this novel, as if to underline the importance of speech and therefore sound that are part of the human language.

The word « *Voice* » here denotes the verbal expression of an outlook or a viewpoint: that refers to both verbal and non verbal communication. To *voice* is to make one's feelings, beliefs, or ideas known to others, through the mouth

of a character as it is done in this novel by Brink. Speech, that is to say sound devices are resources used by writers to convey and reinforce the meaning or experience of poetry or novel through the skillful use of sound. After all, writers are trying to use a concentrated blend of sound and imagery to create an emotional response. The words and their order should evoke images, and the words themselves have sounds, which can reinforce or otherwise clarify those images. All in all, the writer is trying to get us, the readers, to sense a particular thing, and the use of sound devices are some of the writer's tools.

Since the end of apartheid, the past has become a focal point in contemporary South African discourse, in public debates, newspapers, articles and various forms of literature. Now the focus is essentially placed on the many stories that have remained untold, the life stories and experiences of the oppressed and marginalized white women that the apartheid regime has omitted from the historical documentations. The post-apartheid literature portrays this voice by retracing or restituting the real history of white women by voicing like André Brink a serious dialogue with the hidden stories of the past. Brink's *Imaginations of Sand* has set out these hidden voices to recreate this silenced and forgotten history told by white women and ignored by the powerful male Afrikaner.

This study will be conducted according to a magical realism perspective as stipulated by Bruce Holland Rogers that undertakes to question and reinvent the modes of expression of white women during the apartheid regime. In fact, according to Bruce Holland Rogers, « *magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from ours. It's not a thought experiment. It's not speculation. Magical realism endeavors to show us the world through other eyes* ».¹

Instead, magical realism tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective. That is to say, the story of white women always caught in translation, and never allowed to be truly expressing themselves, because the colonial and apartheid power destructs their voice and words pushed to the social margins their non-male ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world.

1 - Bruce Holland Rogers is the author of *Word Work: Surviving and Thriving as a Writer*, published in the spring of 2002 by Invisible Cities Press. Some of his short-short stories can be read at <http://www.shortshortshort.com>.

I intend in this article to show in a first time the reasons that lead Brink to voice such a story through the mouth of his female white characters and secondly depict the political ideology that sustains such a way of dealing.

I. GUILT AND REPENTANCE

The novel begins with the return of Kristien Muller to Ouma Kristian, her dying grandmother's bedside. This novel deals with many of the important issues which South Africans must now face in the post-apartheid era, among which the voice of white women in the South African history, their real place and their rights. In effect, this novel retained as corpus gathers elements which largely show the voice of white women in the passing of generational stories in a constructive manner by anticipating a positive scenario for the future of South Africa.

In *Imaginings of Sand*, Brink recalls the voice of women in restituting the South African history by recounting, in the persons of Ouma Kristian and Kristien Muller, the personal histories of their female ancestors. By using multiple narrators and resorting to magic realism, André Brink subverts the "factual" content of history and draws attention to the suppressed voices of women in the South African history.

In this novel, through the mouth of Ouma Kristian and Muller Kristien, who are white female characters, André Brink shows us how historical and capital stories are safeguarded along centuries through women's words of mouth.

There may, however, be more to Brink's feminist treatment of history than mere evasion and play. Brink has constantly explored in his novels, his attention for women and their condition. His writings, most of the time point out the quest for women freedom in a patriarchal society. The character of Ouma Kristian and Muller Kristien in *Imaginings of Sand* are strong and independent, but they are primarily conceived by the author as the voice of the voiceless by claiming a responsibility which has been stolen from white women since a long time.

Like this, Kristien acts as a facilitator and scribes for her grandmother's memories so that their histories, the true and real ones as white women, be known by future generations she incarnates here. Brink expresses like this his guilt and repentance to show that men are not the only depositaries of the History of their country, and proclaiming at the same moment the idea stipulating

that the voice of women is not to always remain in the shadows of men's voice by allowing them to experience, contrary to their counterparts (women), whatever they want. So that stories told by women have to face the indifference of men. Kristien Muller clearly states this indifference when she says: «*you see when we try to do it on our own, we can shout our heads off but no one pays attention. Not because we don't speak, but because no one will listen*»²

This indifference towards words coming from the mouth of women, added to many years of apartheid and exile makes that in South Africa, most of the time the real story has been obliterated. In fact, the exile can be considered as a small death as it separates the one who is victim from his beloved, his culture and his background: «*You have forgotten most of what you knew, you were away too long. I will give you back your memory...because the woman who has no story to tell is without a tongue...*»³

Women who are supposed to be the guardians of our traditional values and depositaries of our collective memories are obliged to reconstitute their part of the stories of their collective history: «*There always must be one, she used to explained, to hand them on, to prevent them getting lost along the way*» And Ouma Kristina is clear when she says «*I do not ask you to believe me but to listen. It is not the real story that matters but the one that shows the freedom to imagine.....that's what it is all about*»⁴. Here, Ouma Kristian attempts to determine how her little girl can counteract the stereotypical perceptions of white women's voice which generally functions within the limited confinement of a family, church and home. They attempt like this to determine their individual and social responsibility in the past of South Africa.

Brink confronts history and re-views it without ideological blinkers in the same way as Kristien Muller, the narrator in *Imaginings the Sand*, acknowledges her role in history when she says: «*I know the extent of my responsibility, and what it means to be exposed to past and future alike, conscious of origins and possible endings*»⁵. Brink attempts through Kristien to understand and define the particular role played by white women in the South African

2 - André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand*, London, Secker & Warburg, p. 102, 1996

3 - André Brink, *Ibidem*, p. 58

4 - André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand*, London, Secker & Warburg, p. 98, 1996

5 - André Brink, *Ibidem*, p. 123

history and to posit a plausible scenario for the future. The stories stored in the memory of individuals and peoples and handed down from generation to generation, stay there forever as templates for how we see and act in the world. It constitutes a solid background of what we are and what we will be in our real life. It is what justifies Ouma Kristian's determination to unveil things to her granddaughter before dying.

Therefore, Paul Ricoeur is right, when he writes in *Narrative Identity* that:

*« I believe we have an intuitive pre-understanding of this fusion. After all, do not human lives become more readable when they are interpreted in function of the stories people tell about themselves? »*⁶

As such, Peter Horn & Anette Horn argue that: *« our identity can be seen as an intertext »*⁷, as identity can be seen as the sum or the melting of many other things. But this intertext can contain false, negative and destructive stories, that is to say stories which make us less capable of living in the real and true world by destroying the different relationships between the different members of the society. It is what Ouma Kristian wants to avoid. Here, her role is to teach and voice to Muller Kristien the true history so as to avoid patriarchal norms and conventions that do not favor an harmonious society: *« It is why by telling and retelling, and by the assent which storyteller and listener give to the story, that proves its value: this is where you will find out about what lasts and what the wind will blow away »*⁸

The question here is not what was true and what was false, who was right and who was wrong, but to be inspired by these stories so as: *« we can learn to live like a family »*.⁹ In this way storytelling becomes an initiation into humanity and why not into womanhood, the bridge between young teenagers and the fact of being full and mature women or men, but also the initiation into the complex world of today's South Africa in quest of its real identity, whereas everywhere,

6 - Paul Ricoeur, "*Narrative Identity*" in *Time and Narrative I*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, p. 75, 1984

7 - Anette and Peter Horn, *African Journals Online*, Vol42 (1) *Female Genealogies* in Andre Brink's *Imaginings the Sand*, Johannesburg, South Africa, p.106, 2005

8 - André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand*, London, Secker & Warburg, p. 20, 1996

9 - André Brink, *Ibidem*, p 201

identities are based on stories that are changeable, even multiple, not one and like this, it is permanently problematic even in old democratic countries.

In *Imaginations the Sand*, it is Muller Kristien's grandmother Ouma Kristian who tries to initiate her little daughter by transmitting her the memory of their lineage. It is now important for the whole society to rely on the words of women if we want to master the real history of our nations and countries, and the place and roles of each of its components.

Her grandmother is a wonderful woman, full of enchantment, mischief, energy and most importantly solid and credible stories. She is the keeper of stories about the family's history and origins, in particular the parallel histories and stories of the women in their family throughout generations. This is part of the reason for Kristien's return, to receive the gift of stories and memory from her grandmother before the old woman dies. A way of perpetuating the voice and the importance of women's memory in any society.

André Brink's Ouma Kristian tells not only her own story, but also that of the family ancestors, and always via a matriarchal lineage. It's the women that make the history, and that history reflects the story of an entire people, but it's a history that mirrors that of the Afrikaner people. This perpetuation can be seen in the collection and the preservation of Ouma Kristian's sanitary towels along years. Here, Brink tries to be a female narrator with the bizarre idea of a woman who keeps her sanitary towels in bags and in an entire room after use.

... Mais chaque boule de papier contient quelque chose, un tampon, un bouchon, très ancien, très sec et taché avec ce qui au premier abord ressemble à de la peinture noire mais qui n'est, je le jure, que du sang noirci. Car ce ne sont que des serviettes hygiéniques, utilisées, rassemblées et rangées...un témoin silencieux de l'affirmation de sa féminité. Dieu seul le sait ...des sacs, des sacs, des sacs entiers, des années et des années de sang, de déplacement avec le cycle du temps, un tous les vingt-huit jours à peu près, treize fois par an, pendant combien d'année? C'est...rien. C'est une vie¹⁰.

10- André Brink, *Les imaginations du sable*, roman traduit de l'anglais par Jean Guilloineau, Paris, Stock, 1997, p. 371

It comes down to a woman looking back over her own life, from herself to her grandmother and her mother and back again and why not for all women anyway ! A looking back synonymous of a remembering. Which remembering is itself a form of ascription, that is an act directed to oneself, to one's neighborhood and to others.

Brink's acute awareness of history and its interaction with the South African context cannot be neglected in the interpretation of his work, as he is very conscious of his role of denunciator in a South Africa which needs more committed and dissident writers to expose the ugliness of the system. However, in a much broader sense, Brink contributes with his writings to the rebuilding of a multi voiced story of his country. Like this, he relies on authentic historical and political events to constitute the social fabric of his novel, exposing in the same vein the scope of a creative literary invention.

II. HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

History has traditionally been the story of the victors, those who had power to make a mark on the world and to leave records behind. Here, the powerless are women and also the voiceless. In the South African historical record, these women are mute or quasi inexistent.

In attempting to give voice to the silences or the voiceless of the South African history, Brink offers a possibility to these white women to show really what their History was. As such, any possibility of reconstructing women history is welcome. History requires a process of reorientation and the transgression of geographical, social, ideological and mental boundaries for the building of a positive future for all. It is in this kind of re-vision of history that André Brink installs his female white characters. André Brink writes on the realist tradition with historical and political issues as history is part of the social text and context.

This novel constitutes an attempt to illustrate the necessity for reviewing or re-voicing the past and exposing the roots and reasons for discrimination and gender differentiation through the mouth of white South African women.

In my view point, the value of this post-apartheid novel is laid down in its capacity of liberating the capacity of the author to question the unquestionable, that is to say the dogmatic, and opens eyes of his contemporaries on

the valuable hidden voice of white women. Here, we can paraphrase Desmond Tutu by saying that these women are charged to unearth the truth about their dark past, that is to say the false stories written by men.

Like this, Brink reminds us the capacity of this category of human being to talk, act and make themselves responsible of the serious and positive change occurred in South Africa and in their own life. They acknowledge themselves their sense of a political responsibility and their freedom to choose and voice their own history. It is what Kristien Muller expresses when she says:

I have chosen this place, not because I was born here and feel destined to remain, but because I went away and then come back and now I am here by choice. Perhaps for the time in my life it is a decision that has not been forced on me from outside, by circumstances, but which has been shaped inside myself, like a child in the womb. This one I shall not deny. It is mine¹¹.

The author is showing like this a vision of women capable of taking their own responsibility by organizing and deciding themselves without being forced or guided by whoever. By doing so, they participate in the making or the building of a collective memory and therefore making history. It is also another way of examining the nature and truth of women's knowledge and approach of their history as a collective inheritance. History can be, according to Paul Ricoeur's words: « *a drug which can be either poison or medicine* »¹². As such, it contains implicitly within the question of an epistemological inquiry into the historical science to answer whether it is a remedy or a poison.

Ouma senses Kristien's confusion, her lack of direction and historical awareness. She wants to leave her granddaughter with a legacy of hope and the only way she can do that is to give her back her "memory" (Imaginings: 325), which becomes synonymous with identity because, as Sarah Nuttall (1998:76) points out: "*Memory is always as much about the present as it is about the past*"¹³. In this way, Ouma can restore her granddaughter's belief in herself as an Afrikaner and a woman (in the same way that Brink

11 - André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand*, London, Secker & Warburg, p. 176, 1996

12 - Paul Ricoeur in Memory, History, Oblivion: Ricoeur on the Human condition, *Ars Disputandi* 1, London University, www.Arsdisputandi.org, pp37-58, 2002 by HETTEMA, Theo L.

13 - Sarah Nuttall, (1998:76)

is trying to conscientize the reader). The implication is that one has to know one's origins to be able to understand a given situation.

Consequently, history assumes the guise of fiction. Kristien becomes the repository of the past which has to be unravelled, interpreted and reconciled with the present because, as she notes: "*the very fabric of our fictions betrays the predicament of a culture*"¹⁴.

The fact for the novelist Brink to speak through the mouth of female white characters can therefore have a political aspect that cannot be neglected as it is an impressive account and contribution to the knowledge of the fair and true history of South Africa. In attempting to give voice to women through his female white characters, namely Ouma Kristian, Muller Kristien, Brink shows another way of possibilities even if the reality is something else.

Contrary to a popular belief which regards storytelling as a foolish and childish pastime, only reserved for old women, responsibility comes with storytelling, not only because it develops the ability to enter the thoughts and feelings of another character or person, but also to reflect on one's own actions. This empathy and self-reflection is the foundation of a peaceful, democratic and civil society because it prevents one from privileging and setting as absolute one's own position or history over everyone else's.

Thus, in opposition to a male family tree, Ouma Kristian in *Imaginations of Sand* creates a family history which traces ancestry through the mothers. Ouma Kristian, the grandmother of Muller Kristien is very clear and categorical when it comes to the question of who begot whom: « *it is not the men, who have any kind of certain claim to the lineage. What have the Mullers got to do with it? : She asks, irritated. Let's keep the men out of this... Our story is different, it doesn't run in a straight line, as you should know now* »¹⁵.

*The surnames are of no importance. Those have all been added on, you can't rely on them. Every time a man becomes a father he's all too eager to get his surname into the picture. But how can we be sure that what he puts in it is the same as what comes out? We're the only ones who can tell for certain, and sometimes we prefer to keep it secret.*¹⁶

14 - André Brink, *Imaginations of Sand*, London, Secker & Warburg, p. 130, 1996

15- André Brink, *Imaginations of Sand*, London, Secker & Warburg, p. 92, 1996

16- André Brink, *Ibidem*, p. 98, 1996

As we can see through this assertion, storytelling can be seen as a deeply philosophical meditation on the meaning of history and historicism, as an act of remembering, an act of inscribing women deeds in time, a way of participating in the building of another South Africa, and why not a way of negotiating competing claims for justice and also an act of witnessing, as the narrator's role is to denounce the inequality between men and women.

Therefore, Paul Ricoeur is right when he consistently rejects any claim where the self is immediately transparent to itself or fully master of itself when he says: «*Self-knowledge only comes through our relation to the world and our life with and among others in that world*». ¹⁷ Kristien, Ouma and indirectly Brink claim a communion of spirits which will not be dependent on the deeds or actions of a person or a group of persons only, but focusing on the group as a whole, in other words a kind of story voiced according the vision of unity. This also raises the question whether a man only is allowed to adopt, what is often perceived as an appropriation of a female voice. It appears that it was Ouma Kristian's intention all along to reconcile Muller Kristien to her Afrikaans identity through her magical stories, not from an exclusive patriarchal and racist point of view, but within the wider South African context which is seen to be non-racist and non-sexist.

This retelling of history in which ordinary women and men of all races and conditions are inextricably bound up seems to be the precondition of a fully reconciled and democratic South Africa. Brink investigates like this the legacy of apartheid at two major levels: the cultural and the gender by reverting to a meta-history of women through the medium of magic realism to juxtapose past and present and make the past more relevant to the present.

Imaginations of Sand is also for me, among many others, one of the recent powerful novel examining the fears, hopes and realities surrounding South Africa's transition to legitimate statehood in the 1990s. Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*¹⁸ dealt mainly with imagined fears alongside valued relationships, whereas J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* encountered messy reality. André Brink's project in his novel is both more ambitious and more mundane, and it is also more successful. Young Kristien, newly returned from London where

17- Paul Ricœur in Memory, History, Oblivion: Ricoeur on the Human condition, *Ars Disputandi* 1, London University, www.Arsdisputandi.org, pp37-58, 2002 by HETTEMA, Theo L.

18- Nadine Gordimer, *July's People*, Viking Press (USA), 195, 1981

she lived a life that was perfectly inconceivable for her grandmother, her parents and even her own sister, learns much and understands more from her grandmother's stories. We sense the widening perspective that she sees.

We can conclude that, one of the subversive even political strategies of Brink is the fact of rewriting a traditional male genealogy as a female genealogy, without forgetting that genealogy, according to the Horn, is: «*the instrument which confers legitimacy and controls the transfer of authority and prosperity through various judicial processes*». ¹⁹

he question, which arises out from this, is: «*can a man, a famous novelist he is, talk through the mouth of a woman? Can he allow the feminine that traverses his subjectivity to emerge without creating a fiction of it?*» ²⁰ These are questions arisen by Peter Horn and Anette Horn in their *Article Female Genealogies in André Brink's Imaginings the Sand*.

The answer of such a preoccupation is André Brinks philosophy of perceiving the notion of gender and its importance in history. For him, being a man or a woman can't constitute a mobile of discordance between these two entities that God has created to live together. Women are considered as men counter parts. Both of them are obliged to live together and peacefully. If this primordial mission is not fulfilled, the writer who is supposed to be the gendarme of the society has to denounce it, and better, accept to reinstate the value women deserve in all respect in the building of any history. It is what Brink tries to do in this novel.

In contrast to politicized polemics of academic feminist theory, this novel recognizes, articulates, and teaches one about the almost overwhelming complexity of history as an idea, as a form of memory, and as evidence for witnessing and justice. In contrast to easy but hip pronouncements about the mission of history, history is just another form of fiction, and history is "always political" as all history is a tainted vehicle of ideological coercion that we can somehow do without any kind of social action.

19- Anette and Peter Horn, African Journals Online, Vol42 (1) Female Genealogies in Andre Brink's *Imaginings the Sand*, Johannesburg, South Africa, p.108, 2005

20- Ibid, p.108

CONCLUSION

Brink attempts to re-define and re-write, from a magical realism perspective, the voice of women in the South African history and emphasize their dual role as women and guardians of our collective memories. André Brink's *Imaginations of Sand* illustrates the creative and regenerative ability of literature to revoice, reconstruct and rewrite the past. In the similar vein, Brink also emphasizes the role of women in assuming responsibility for their own life and for the positive future of South Africa. Kristien effectively illustrates this idea when she realizes that it is her responsibility to continue women's fight for justice.

André Brink wants to connect here memory, history, and social remembrance in such a way that they avoid the easy, and often dangerous, sidetracks of commemoration or historicism as mere explanation or stories that forget ideologically women. He wants a humanized history based in lived memory that can be used to create common ground between people of difference sex and different color or origin as well as viable evidence in the negotiation of justice claims for all in a peaceful South Africa. Whether he gets this is debatable, but the attempt is honorable and must be encouraged even if facts can say the contrary.

Therefore, it is extremely significant that a male author like André Brink participates in such an enterprise. His contribution not only emphasizes the need to include white women voice in the South African history, but surely to incorporate black women as an undeniable part of that history. J.M. Coetzee, with whom Brink has published an anthology called *A Land Apart: A South African Reader* (1986) is right when he sees in Brink an example of a writer who is «*an organ developed by society to respond to its need for meaning, and one whose focus is now not on the existential duty of the writer but on the strategy of battle*». ²¹ That is to say, Brink is eminently a political writer and a real feminist in a South Africa where the voice of women constitutes, even today the gadgets of the society and history.

Brink also contributes through this novel to the reconstruction of a “multi-voiced” history in his country. By relying on authentic historical and political events to constitute the social fabric of his novel, by engaging in expanding the scope of a creative literature nearly close to their own history, Brink's essays and novels are most of the time recognized as important statements on literature and politics.

21- J. M. Coetzee, in *A Land Apart, A South African Reader*, London, Faber & Faber, 1986, p.240

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