

**"MINE IS BUT A SINCERE NARRATIVE OF A MELANCHOLY SITUATION":
SOL PLAATJE, ORALITY AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE**

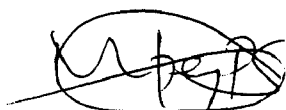
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Johannesburg, 1996

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Phaswane Mpe', enclosed within an oval shape.

Phaswane Mpe

10th day of June, 1996.

To
My Family
Ramathabatha Malatji
Sr Mary Anne Tobin

ABSTRACT

The dissertation investigates Sol Plaatje's strategies of mediating orality in writing, and the use to which orality is put in his novel, *Mhudi*. The underlying assumption is that one of the best ways of unpacking the complexities of the novel is through a thorough analysis of Plaatje's "invention" and employment of Setswana oral forms. The dissertation begins, in Chapter 1, by providing an overview of his novel's reception, as well as a critical framework for subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on the significance of colonial education to Plaatje's perception and mediation of Setswana oral artforms. Of particular concern is the influences of Shakespeare, the Bible and missionary education on Plaatje's endeavour. Equally, it argues that Setswana was important to his reading and interpretation of Shakespeare and certain aspects of the Bible. There is, in other words, a dialectic of complementarity between Shakespeare and the Bible on the one hand, and Setswana on the other hand. In Chapter 3 we look at the way in which Plaatje employs proverbs and songs as mediative strategies as well as agents of subversion. Oral prose narratives form the subject of Chapter 4. In this chapter we demonstrate their usefulness as narrative devices that serve to make *Mhudi* a self-reflexive and ambiguous text. Secondly, they help to suggest and project a multiplicity of readerships - both national and transnational. The conclusion suggests that what this dissertation has done is but one step towards a critical appreciation of Plaatje's remarkable creative project as well as his contribution to orality and literacy debates, and it suggests that such a study is something that we as critics should build upon.

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Ba bangwe batho ba thušitše ka mekgwa ye mengwe ye mentši. Bona ba akaretša Bana ba Koko: Papa Lemmie Kokotla, Warra Mogato Mogano, Motswala Matlole Mampshika, Tsala Reggie Ngako, Cousy (spelling!) Ntshwane Mogano, Kgoši Matšhipi Molepo, Blommetjie Mohlago Mokgohloa le Mmago-batho Gloria Matjila. Go lena ke re, "E be 'taba tša botse gape!"

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1. INTRODUCTION: *MHUDI* AND ITS CRITICS

"There is always something further, something more, to be understood in understanding." (William Ray)

Disavowing any claim to literary merit in his book *Native life in South Africa before and since the European war and the Boer Rebellion*, Sol Plaatje states that "[his] is but a sincere narrative of a melancholy situation, in which, with all its shortcomings, [he has] endeavoured to describe the difficulties of the South African natives under a very strange law, so as most readily to be understood by the sympathetic reader."¹ The law in question was, of course, the notorious Natives' Land Act of 1913, "whose purpose was mainly to remove African farmer-tenants from white lands throughout the country."² This Act also forms part of the subject of Plaatje's novel *Mhudi*. Thus the novel, written shortly after *Native life in South Africa*, is a continuation of this "sincere narrative".

There is, however, more to this melancholy situation than meets the eye. And the problem lies in the novel's critical reception. Many critics do point out that it is a complex work, yet their treatment of it does not go far enough in unveiling its complexities. There may be numerous reasons for these shortcomings. I would maintain, however, that one of the most important is that they fail to engage systematically and comprehensively with Plaatje's mediation of orality in the novel. For

¹ Sol Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1982), 15.

² Tim Couzens, "The dark side of the world: Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*." *English studies in Africa* 14.2(1971), 188.

much of the depth of the novel, both as a literary and a political discourse, is achieved through his use of oral artforms, and their interplay with literary forms.

This dissertation, therefore, proposes to go some way in broadening the critical reception of Plaatje's novel. This will be done in two ways. First, it endeavours to examine his perception of Setswana oral traditions. For if our argument is that he employs some of them in *Mhudi*, then it becomes necessary to have some understanding of how he viewed them, and in what ways he probably thought they could facilitate his narrative. Second, the dissertation will attempt a stylistic reading of the novel, so as to reveal how it employs oral forms, and, obviously linked to that, what implications Plaatje's narrative strategies have for our understanding of his novel. It is my conviction that to date critics of the novel have mostly been content to engage in a rather limiting exercise in which *Mhudi* is seen, in Couzens' words, as a "moral fable" and a "model for the future".³

Indeed, the latter point is expressed even more bluntly by J.M. Phelps. Recognising that Plaatje "conceived of his 'reading public' widely to include all South Africans, both his contemporaries and those in the future"⁴, Phelps focuses in his essay on *Mhudi* on the lessons we in the new South Africa can and, in fact, should learn from the novel:

³ See his articles, "The dark side of the world", and "Sol Plaatje and the first South African epic." *English in Africa* 14.1(1987). Also, see his introduction to the 1978 edition of the novel.

⁴ J. M. Phelps, "Sol Plaatje and democratic government." *English studies in Africa* 36.1(1993), 48.

Plaatje's portrayal of the Barolong's destruction shows, on the one hand, how individual agency, and the hubris from which it can derive, has a direct effect on history, and, on the other hand, how structures providing accountability and the scope for corrective criticism, though ignored, are inherent in the polity. We experience from the narrative's dynamic both the catharsis of tragic inevitability, and the critical perspective that suggest that we can learn from history.⁵

More specifically, Phelps is concerned to demonstrate the novel's successful portrayal of "how the pride of power works in destructive combination with the common human weakness of ascribing the cause of hostilities to the other side [and how the] narrative effectively dramatizes the countervailing resources in the various communities which can unite the generations, and which do prevail when they are fostered by tradition [sic] democratic process and respect for the freedom of speech."⁶

Even Stephen Gray, whose reading of *Mhudi* often centres around its literary influences like Shakespeare's plays and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's progress*, echoes Tim Couzens.⁷ And it is for similar reasons that he puts a case for inclusion of

⁵ Phelps, "Sol Plaatje and democratic government", 50.

⁶ Phelps, "Sol Plaatje and democratic government", 55.

⁷ See, for example, Stephen Gray, "Plaatje's Shakespeare." *English in Africa* 4.1(1971), 1-6. In this article Gray is concerned to illustrate how "Plaatje did 'monkey' Shakespeare [although] *Mhudi* is not a novel that gives in to colonial dominance", 1.

Mhudi in the South African literary canon.⁸ Brian Willan and Myrtle Hooper, too, would also probably agree that Mhudi should be afforded a place in the canon, as for them Mhudi offers voice to women⁹, while she also serves as a source of hope.¹⁰ Thus the critical reception of Mhudi, focusing mainly on the democratic impulse of the novel, its criticism of the Natives' Land Act as well as its revision of South African history, has largely been an echo of Couzens' at the expense of what Njabulo Ndebele rightly perceives as the crucial element of Plaatje's critical faculty:

What Plaatje recognised in language is the dialectic of ambiguity, of understatement, literary tradition, and subtle, highly suggestive allusion and other similar things. Such an awareness of dialectic in language shows in Plaatje a potential ability to recognise a similar dialectic in the material transformation of history.¹¹

Ndebele's observation was made as a form of corrective to the early critical reception of Native life in South Africa by readers who were either too short-sighted about

⁸ See Stephen Gray, "Redefining the canon: the case for Douglas Blackburn, Stephen Black and Sol T. Plaatje." Eds. Michael Chapman et al. *Perspectives on South African English literature* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1992).

⁹ Myrtle Hooper, "Rewriting history: the 'feminism' of Mhudi." *English studies in Africa* 35.1(1992), 72.

¹⁰ Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: a biography* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984), 350.

¹¹ Njabulo Ndebele, "Actors and interpreters." *Rediscovery of the ordinary: essays on South African literature and culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991), 79. We shall constantly have occasion to examine in some detail this dialectic of ambiguity later in the dissertation.

Plaatje's mission as a writer, or were simply engaged in an attempt at appropriating him for their own purposes. Yet the observation is also applicable to Mhudi.

To agree with Ndebele is, however, not to dismiss Couzens, who has done more than most in arousing an interest in, and taking a lead in the positive, if rather narrow critical reception of, Plaatje's novel. What we need to consider, though, is that Couzens was writing his critical essays on Mhudi for two main reasons. First, he was trying to find for Mhudi a warmer reception than the lukewarm one it had received from earlier critics, by demonstrating its relevance in its critical revision of the official (white) history of South Africa, and its criticism of the Natives' Land Act. Second, he was endeavouring to provide and maintain a sense of continuity in black South African literary history. These two projects were necessary in order for readers of this pioneering work to have some idea of South African literature, and African literature in general, in its fullness. Also, Couzens' motives were in line with his desire to question the teaching of literature in South African universities, which concentrated on the Great Tradition at the expense of South African, and especially black, writers.

Given these motives, it seems understandable that Couzens should have dealt with the novel as he did, trying to establish its worth both as an extremely original work of art and as a fresh look into the history of South Africa. Similar principles underlie Gray's resolution to undertake the daunting task of reading through and editing the original typescript of the novel, which shows Plaatje's artistry to be far more complex than the

first edition of the book suggests.¹² (The fruit of Gray's labour is the 1978 edition of *Mhudi*.) As David Johnson writes of Couzens and Willan (and Gray may be included, too): "Rejecting the patronising eurocentrism of earlier critics in favour of a more generous historical perspective, they both praise *Mhudi* for its literary subtlety, and its implicit embrace of democratic values."¹³

Johnson's paper is fascinating for the way in which it delineates the changing patterns in the reception of *Mhudi*. In his own words,

While the Couzens-Willan interpretation of *Mhudi* represented a minority position within the South African English Studies establishments in the 1970s and early 1980s, in the 1990s a new critical consensus now prevails in which Plaatje's status as the Shakespeare of South African Literature is unchallenged.¹⁴

¹² The first edition of *Mhudi* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1930) suppressed and deleted some of the strategies which Plaatje used to mediate a sense of oral history. Such strategies served to project a sense that Plaatje was Half-a-Crown's scribe, transcribing the Barolong oral history as told to him by this very Half-a-Crown. For a detailed discussion, see Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray, "Printers' and other devils: the texts of Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*." *Research in African literatures* 9.2(1978), 198-215.

¹³ David Johnson, "Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*: from protest to authority" (unpublished paper), 6.

¹⁴ Johnson, "Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*", 7. In a different paper, Johnson identifies some of the values associated with Shakespeare in the 1910s. While in England he was treated as a "handbook to patriotism" and Englishness, and of course as an exemplar of what good literature could be, in South Africa he was associated with the spirit of generosity and democracy, and with universality. For a comprehensive discussion of this, see Johnson, "Plaatje and Shakespeare: four readings" (unpublished paper).

The association of Plaatje with Shakespeare by South African literary critics often means that Plaatje comes to be seen as *the* authority in South African literature, not only because of his ability as an artist, but also because, like Shakespeare, he embraces democratic values. As such, the concerns of his novel are seen as reflective of the universal ideals of civilised societies. As Johnson observes, taking Couzens', Gray's and Phelps' "readings together Plaatje's message in *Mhudi* in the 1990s is then not too different from Nelson Mandela's inaugural messages for the new South Africa ...":

For Plaatje and for Mandela the same values are therefore paramount: a common unified South African nation; individual freedoms (of speech, association) protected in the constitution; democratic process (the right to vote) enshrined; and the rights of different (racial, religious, language) groups respected. To borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase, the community Plaatje tentatively imagined in literary discourse in *Mhudi* over seventy years ago is now being realised in political discourse in Mandela's speeches.¹⁵

Johnson protests against this critical hegemonic discourse, as its practitioners fail, according to him, to read *Mhudi* in its proper context. This context pertains to "[*Mhudi's*] relation to its own context and its own reception history, and also its relation

¹⁵ Johnson, "Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*", 8-9.

to *other* protest literatures, both from within and outside the boundaries of the South African nation."¹⁶ Also, it fails to explore the "political ambiguities" of the novel. Rather these are "flattened into a liberal ethic" which is then endorsed.¹⁷

As far as the question of ambiguities goes, Esterhuysen would probably be commended by Johnson for identifying and exploring some in *Mhudi*. Placing the novel within the framework of Fanon's characterisation of the evolution of black writing, Esterhuysen argues that *Mhudi* falls within the second phase. In this phase,

we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is . . .

Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depth of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.¹⁸

This phase, in other words, is characterised by tensions and contradictions. Esterhuysen perceives and identifies such tensions and contradictions in *Mhudi*:

¹⁶ Johnson, "Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*", 13.

¹⁷ Johnson, "Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*", 13.

¹⁸ Fanon, quoted in Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence: development in selected novels in English by black South African writers* (MA dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988), 69. "The first phase corresponds to a period of 'unqualified assimilation', while the third phase signals the beginnings of a 'revolutionary literature'." See Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 68.

[Plaatje's] merging of Tswana oral history, legends and proverbs within the conventions of the romance novel creates a sense of ambivalence. This, combined with the contrasting elements of stylisation and parody, makes the novel at times seem an uneasy rejoinder to the late-Victorian romance. A genre which is typified by the innumerable popular 'African' romances of Rider Haggard.¹⁹

In particular, Esterhuysen reads *Mhudi* as a rejoinder to Haggard's *Nada the Lily*.

According to him, some of the literary devices that Haggard employs to authenticate his depiction of the Zulu culture include a fictional oral narrator, who serves as an embodiment of Zulu oral narratives, and "the presence of a black narrator."²⁰ The use of such devices "sets [*Nada the Lily*] apart from many Victorian romances so successfully that the novel's distorted presentation of Zulu culture - which is drowned in melodrama and blood - escapes even modern scholars."²¹

What is of importance here, for our purpose, is that Haggard endeavours to present to his readership "the mind" of blacks, as well as "to preserve oral traditions which the authors [Haggard and Plaatje] felt were in danger of being forgotten (because of the

¹⁹ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 69.

²⁰ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 72.

²¹ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 72.

perceived changes taking place in black societies).²² While the authors' intentions and narrative strategies are somewhat similar²³, Haggard's novels remain

²² Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 73.

²³ It *must*, however, be remembered that Plaatje was only offering an interpretation of "one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'" rather than *the mind* of the Native. See Plaatje, Preface, *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 21. This edition of *Mhudi* has been subjected to criticism by Tony Voss. He cites a few examples, from the edition, which in his opinion illustrate that "Plaatje's novel was modified in its textualisation, being even further removed from an oral tradition in the process, with its political comment muffled." See his introduction to *Mhudi* (Johannesburg: AD. Donker, 1989), 21. This, however, is not Voss's main charge against the Heinemann edition. A more serious charge is that "the Couzens-Gray argument for the 'original typescript' [as a copy text for the Heinemann edition] suffers . . . because it conceives of the author as having at some moment in time, a clear and equally fixed original intention for his novel." *Mhudi* (1989), 21. Voss's concerns in producing an alternative edition of the novel "have been to maintain the clarity and consistency of Plaatje's text." *Mhudi* (1989), 22. While some of Voss's points seem to be justified, I still have reservations about his overall argument. Two points, in particular, are worth contesting. First, some of the examples he cites in order to illustrate that Gray's Heinemann edition removes *Mhudi* even further from an oral tradition are not shown, unequivocally, to do so - what seems clear to Voss is not necessarily equally clear to the reader. For example, Voss points out that Chapter 5 of the Heinemann edition refers to Ra-Thaga and *Mhudi* as "my father and mother" whereas the Lovedale edition refers to them as "our hero and heroine"; "the writer" in Chapter 12 of Lovedale becomes Half-a-Crown in Heinemann. He notes, too, that Ra-Thaga's speech in Chapter 19 of Heinemann has Half-a-Crown as its audience, which is not the case in Lovedale. These points have very little, if anything at all, to do with moving *Mhudi* away from an oral tradition. Secondly, the fact that Lovedale does not refer to the Voortrekker-Batswana-Griqua alliance as "the mighty intruders"; to the Ndebele defeat and humiliation as an "appalling revolution"; and, finally, to Mzilikazi's envisioned great Ndebele empire as "the Imperial structure of his super-expansionist dream", might be read as a muffling of Plaatje's political comment. However, this interpretation can be said to be entirely valid only on the condition that Lovedale is reliable. But, as Gray and Couzens argue in "Printers' and other devils", the 1930 Lovedale edition, which Voss uses as a copy text for his own edition, is a product of many voices imposing themselves on Plaatje's. The result was a change of style, tone, form, intention and at times even an omission of certain aspects of content, as Lovedale suppressed "the detail [in the typescript] which counterbalanced a delicate and subtle problem of syncretism . . . which favoured a complementary view that so-called pagan life had its own, no way inferior system of values." This was done "in favor of European, sometimes Christian values." See "Printers' and other devils", 201-205. Gray and Couzens offer numerous reasons which suggest, convincingly, that the "Lovedale edition . . . presents us always with the possibility that that might *not* have been Plaatje's real intention, that it *could* be another

unconvincing, especially on the level of characterisation. For example, Esterhuysen sees an underlying suggestion in Haggard's novels as one that views black people as "natural-born equivocators or even liars"²⁴, so that black characters in his novels are a suspicious lot. Linked to their essentially negative features are black characters' association with orality. Orality serves in Haggard's case to encourage these traits, so that oral traditions, especially that of praise poetry, are treated dismissively:

This dismissal of the tradition of praise poetry is an explicit example of cultural chauvinism, and shows how orality formed part of the iconography of the 'savage'. In these novels, the inferiority of the 'savage' is linked to the oral nature of his culture and institutions which engenders and perpetuates feeble-mindedness.²⁵

By contrast, in the hands of Plaatje, orality is treated with dignity. While almost all characters in *Mhudi* are storytellers, they nevertheless, as Esterhuysen observes, "show themselves to be perfectly capable of rational thought, nor are they trapped in the darkness of received tradition."²⁶ This is so because Plaatje was brought up within

voice intruding, or pragmatic considerations prevailing." See "Printers' and other devils", 214-15. Given the censorship that Plaatje was subjected to - and its implications that led to the acceptance for publication of the Lovedale edition - it seems to me that Lovedale might be more unreliable as a copy text for a new edition than the typescript. It is for this reason that I chose to rely, for my discussion of *Mhudi*, on the Heinemann edition.

²⁴ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 83.

²⁵ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 83.

²⁶ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 92.

the (mainly) oral Barolong society whose past he depicts in his novel, and, not surprisingly, he was able to see and experience the complexities of its modes of life. Haggard, on the other hand, received whatever oral tales he uses in his novels "from fellow colonials in South Africa, or had read [them] in ethnographic accounts such as Callaway's work dealing with the Zulus."²⁷ Moreover, Haggard must presumably have simply imagined for himself other oral narratives for his works. His consciousness of orality and African ways of life, being informed as it was by the eurocentric and racist discourse of his sources, must have dominated his imagination, so that his imaginative depiction of Africans would also become equally negative. Thus *Mhudi*, a product of a keen intellect which has the added advantage of being an insider to the society it sought to portray, is, inevitably, a critique rather than an endorsement of Haggard's novel.

Yet *Mhudi*, according to Esterhuysen, remains an uneasy rejoinder to Haggard's works in particular, and the Victorian romances in general. There is, for example, "No allusion . . . to the religious beliefs and rituals of the Barolong - myth forms no part of the rejoinder" in *Mhudi*.²⁸ This would seem to suggest that Plaatje had very little interest in the religious beliefs of his people, so that his endeavour to defend and represent their culture and history is rather tenuous. Alternatively, given his own context, he must have been influenced by Christianity so much that it insidiously permeates and pervades his novel's depiction of the pre-colonial society. Esterhuysen notes how,

²⁷ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 72.

²⁸ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 94.

even in their complexity, some of Plaatje's characters, including Mhudi herself, are reminiscent of "the more intelligent 'savages' in popular Victorian romances."²⁹ Also, because of his mixed linguistic register, Plaatje's "landscape is transformed into the landscape of the romance, the 'Africa' of Haggard's Zulu novels."³⁰ Esterhuysen sums up Plaatje's efforts thus:

The author draws on oral tradition in order to counter many of the stereotypes concerning black people - literally, to forge a voice for himself within a European literary tradition. But because the novel is directed at a white audience the result is an uneasy combination of stylisation (to make the enterprise accessible and acceptable) and parody; assimilation and rejoinder. Nonetheless, *Mhudi* is a pioneering novel, one which makes explicit the process of struggle underlying the development of the black English novel in Southern Africa - and a brave attempt at filling the human absence in the landscape of colonial fiction.³¹

Esterhuysen's is definitely an interesting reading of Plaatje's novel. However, the assumption that *Mhudi* was meant for a white readership is rather an oversimplification of Plaatje's enterprise. Of course, white readership has had a great deal to do with the novel, just as it has had a lot to do with other creative works by blacks. As Mark

²⁹ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 94.

³⁰ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 79.

³¹ Esterhuysen, *Patterns of confluence*, 97.

Heywood's study of Lovedale and its impact on early black writing shows, missionaries and their black students were aware that books were more than "containers for language": indeed, they saw books as "repositories for national culture, for morality, religion and the laws."³² For this reason, despite Lovedale's avowed purpose of encouraging and developing native literature, it heavily censored such literature when it seemed to be subversive of Christian morality or certain missionary teachings. Similar factors presumably account for the delayed publication of *Mhudi* by ten years. Couzens and Gray provide evidence to suggest that the novel was edited fairly often. Commenting on the typescript of the novel which they had discovered, Couzens and Gray write: "Since the changes made to the typescript are in Plaatje's handwriting, it seems reasonable to assume that they were made with his acquiescence. Whether they were by his own decision or were dictated to him is uncertain."³³

Yet, as I will argue in Chapter 4, Plaatje's novel employs oral forms to serve various purposes, one of which is allegorically to suggest and position the implied reader, so that a multiplicity of readers is implied, not only in the general scheme of the novel, but also within individual narratives. Accordingly, despite his having had to comply with the printers of his book, Plaatje was still able to defy them by addressing different readers simultaneously, and was thereby able to send different messages to these various readers. Esterhuysen nevertheless offers something to dig our teeth into by focusing

³² Mark Heywood, "Books made the white man's success, they said, and it shall make ours" - Lovedale, literature and cultural contestation, 1840-1940 (MA dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1994), 109.

³³ Couzens & Gray, "Printers' and other devils", 202.

in his discussion on the use to which Plaatje puts Setswana oral traditions.

Although many critics observe that oral traditions play a very crucial role in *Mhudi*, none, to my knowledge - with the exception of Esterhuysen - explores in any great detail how these are employed. Couzens, for example, simply observes that "Plaatje could have, almost certainly did, speak to old people who saw these happenings. ✓ *Mhudi* is therefore part of, has the feeling of, living oral history."³⁴ Even later, when he discusses the use of oral forms in the novel, Couzens does so in a way which seems to suggest that *Mhudi* is a true reflection of these forms.³⁵ Because he does not engage with the narrative strategies that go into giving the novel that feel of a living oral history, Couzens fails to perceive and explore some of the ambiguities which are partly an outcome of Plaatje's overall narrative technique.

These ambiguities form part of the subject of my BA Honours dissertation. The dissertation examines Plaatje's use of oral history as a narrative technique in his novel. It agrees with critics that *Mhudi* is Plaatje's imaginative strategy for holding a dialogue with the official history of South Africa as well as that of the Barolong - which, in its own ways, is characterised by narrow-mindedness. It further agrees that the novel is an allegorical mediation of the national politics of the 1910s, especially in its capacity as a criticism of the Natives' Land Act of 1913. The dissertation goes on to suggest, however, that "*Mhudi* is, through its utterances as well as silences, equally preoccupied

³⁴ Couzens, Introduction, *Mhudi*, 16.

³⁵ See Couzens, "Sol Plaatje and the first South African epic."

with holding a dialogue with itself."³⁶ To be specific,

it is concerned with the manner in which historical knowledge is created and mediated. This concern with the creation and mediation of historical knowledge implies that **Mhudi** reflects, perhaps not always consciously, upon itself as an instrument of such creation and mediation.³⁷

The dissertation then goes on to argue that the above is done and achieved through narrative strategies that endeavour to mediate a sense of oral history in the novel. These include the use of multiple narratives, narratives within narratives, oral prose narratives and the presence of an oral narrator, Half-a-Crown, and his scribe, the novelist. The result of Plaatje's narrative strategy is self-reflexiveness in the novel. In turn, this "self-reflexiveness results in ambiguities of representation"³⁸ - of societies and even of political messages. As far as the latter is concerned, I argue that Plaatje's "treatment of history results in a novel that seems to oscillate between hope and, on a subtextual level at least, despair over the probabilities of ever achieving that which is clearly so desirable: peace and justice."³⁹ Thus, while (as Couzens sees it) **Mhudi** is a moral fable, it is nevertheless one whose lesson is rather paradoxical.

³⁶ Phaswane Mpe, "'Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition': Plaatje's mediation of oral history in **Mhudi**" (BA Honours dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1995), 3. An edited version of the dissertation is due for publication in *Current writing* 8.1(1996).

³⁷ Mpe, "'Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition'", 4.

³⁸ Mpe, "'Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition'", 25.

³⁹ Mpe, "'Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition'", 28.

While Esterhuysen and I have attempted to look into Plaatje's use of oral forms in his novel, our mission, like the endeavours of many other critics, does not go far enough. The main weakness is that there has not been any comprehensive and systematic research into Plaatje's perception of Setswana oral traditions. Jane Starfield sheds some light on his views regarding lore and proverbs and their use in historical and political discourse⁴⁰, although she does not apply her observations to *Mhudi* in a comprehensive manner.

Since it is Plaatje's perception of oral traditions as mediated in *Mhudi* that forms the subject of this dissertation, I will in later chapters draw on Starfield's work. Obviously, a fuller understanding and appreciation of the novel, of how it comes to have a feel of living oral history, and of orality in general, necessitates a clearer sense or understanding of his perception of oral traditions. Unless this is done, critics will continue to interpret *Mhudi* without providing a necessary framework within which it may be read. At least one side-effect thereof is that we are all going to assume that *Mhudi*'s orality is self-evident, and therefore unproblematic. It is exactly this assumption which has for a long time been and continues to be a trend. And it is exactly this unproblematic view of orality as being simply reflected that Eileen Julien has recently warned against. As her work shows, such assumptions regarding the representation of orality fail to examine complex questions of narrative and aesthetics, and the use to which they are put. These assumptions are also almost inevitably tied up with racial stereotypes.

⁴⁰ Jane Starfield, "The lore and the proverbs: Sol Plaatje as historian" (African Studies seminar paper No.299, University of the Witwatersrand, 1991).

Julien begins by considering what it is that brought scholars to examine questions of orality in the African novel. The initial impulse was the annexation, appropriation and colonisation of African texts by eurocentric criticism.⁴¹ In particular, the African novel was seen as an appendix to the Western novel. Very often this meant that the African novel was judged unfavourably by eurocentric critics. As a response to this eurocentrism, some critics endeavoured to repossess the African novel by showing that it was in important ways continuous with African oral traditions.

Julien cites Leopold Senghor as one of the earliest critics "to signal [this] continuity of African verbal arts."⁴² Writing of his and his contemporaries' works, Senghor suggests: "For those wanting to discover our mentors, they would do best to look toward Africa."⁴³ What this means is that the potential discoverers would benefit by acquainting themselves with African oral traditions. As Julien points out, even in his written poetry Senghor alludes to oral traditions in the titles of his poems, and in "parenthetical, italicized scripts that are the equivalent of musical directions."⁴⁴ Also, the rhythm in Senghor's poetry, as well as the "'traditional' - that is to say, culturally specific and nature-based imagery,"⁴⁵ - are often viewed as derivations from oral poetry. In this way, Julien argues, "Senghor . . . aims - with what might be called . . . 'willed transference' -

⁴¹ Eileen Julien, *African novels and the question of orality* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), 4.

⁴² Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 5.

⁴³ Quoted in Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 5.

⁴⁴ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 5.

⁴⁵ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 5.

to situate his poetic practice vis-a-vis oral traditions and to guide the reception of his poems."⁴⁶

Mohamadou Kane, too, seems to marshal the view that the African novel is continuous with African oral traditions. Indeed, for him, it is this continuity that determines its originality:

[T]he originality of the African novel must be found more specifically in its relationship to forms of oral literature . . . Greater attention to the relationships, to the links of continuity between oral and written literatures would allow one to better understand the problems of the African novel.⁴⁷

Kane's observation conflates originality with continuity, and continuity is in turn viewed as originating from oral traditions. The texts of Mbwil a Mpang Ngal take Kane's point further. For example, for one of Ngal's characters, Giambatista, "the novel is Western; by implication then, 'Africanness' is located in the oral universe of the tale. The novel will have been 'tamed' or domesticated when it will have been touched and modified by orality."⁴⁸ Accordingly, orality comes to be seen as both origin and authenticity⁴⁹, so that if there is any continuity, originality and authenticity in written arts, they must then be located in orality.

⁴⁶ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 5.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 5.

⁴⁸ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 6.

⁴⁹ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 7.

in evolutionist terms, in which orality is associated with elementary stages in human civilisation. The stages will in turn be associated with an inability to think rationally, and sometimes, as Haggard's treatment of orality (according to Esterhuysen) does, with barbarism. Others will of course see such stages as being marked by innocence and closeness to nature. Orality here comes to be represented as an embodiment of purity and virtue.⁵²

Yet other critics view orality in purely functional terms, as an agent of social order.⁵³ Ogede, for example, in his appreciation of the short stories of Ayi Kwei Armah praises the writer for his courage in his treatment of race relations. He then equates Armah's role with that of the traditional bard, whose "vital function as the voice of conscience in his community"⁵⁴ should not be ignored. Not surprisingly, he agrees with Archie Mafeje that

courage is an essential attribute of the traditional bard, which enables him to combine the roles of a praise singer and that of a critic of his community whose leadership he must warn not to deviate from the customs and traditions of the society.⁵⁵

⁵² Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 12.

⁵³ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 12.

⁵⁴ Ode Ogede, "Oral echoes in Armah's short stories." *African literature today* 18(1992), 78.

⁵⁵ Cited in Ogede, "Oral echoes in Armah's short stories", 78.

The simplistic implication, clearly, is that those customs and traditions are undoubtedly good. It is worth noting in passing that this is an unwarranted, uncritical homogenisation of African traditions and customs.

Given the problematic of orality in the African novel, Julien suggests that, as readers and critics, "[w]hen we look at [the] interaction [between orality and literacy], it . . . should not be in an effort to prove or disprove cultural authenticity but rather to appreciate literature as a social and aesthetic act."⁵⁶ This means that we need to examine them as narrative strategies whose inclusion in respective genres is purposeful: it helps to address and solve certain ideological problems and to overcome aesthetic shortcomings.

The sets of ideas that Julien advances have recently been applied in South African literary studies. In her study of Bessie Head's treatment of orality and tradition, for example, Gloria Castrillon notes that her conception of these two derive from "ideological imperatives".⁵⁷ One such imperative is an anti-colonial sentiment which is influenced by Africanist assumptions. At least one effect of this is that orality comes to be synonymous with tradition, and, together, the two come to represent communality.⁵⁸ When such a conflation of orality and tradition with communality occurs, inaccuracies result when Head has to relate them to the history of Serowe. The

⁵⁶ Julien, *African novels and the question of orality*, 24.

⁵⁷ Gloria Castrillon, *Invention or reflection? - tradition and orality in the works of Bessie Head* (MA dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1993), 79-80.

⁵⁸ Castrillon, *Invention or reflection*, 84.

inaccuracies include the "glossing over of social and political divisions"⁵⁹, so that Serowe at times tends to be represented as a homogeneous, unchanging society.

Besides attributing the tensions and contradictions in Head's works to her ideological imperatives, Castrillon also notes that Head could not speak or understand Setswana.⁶⁰ She gathered her notions of oral traditions of the Batswana from the impressions she received from the people she interviewed, as well as from anthropological studies. Thus her success in creating an illusion of orality in her stories was often achieved through transcribing and rigorously editing the stories, until she was satisfied that they expressed what she wanted them to express. That Head was successful in creating an illusion of orality in her stories is clearly illustrated by Castrillon in her survey of the critical reception of Head's works.

Another South African attempt to grapple with representations of orality in writing is by Craig MacKenzie, in his examination and application of the concept of *skaz*. *Skaz*, which is Russian for "speech" (according to him) is "literature which has 'an orientation toward the oral form of narration'".⁶¹ A sense of the oralness of narration is mediated through the introduction of a fictional narrator who "tells", rather than "writes", the story. This narrator, according to Anne Banfield, "addresses the tale to some audience,"

⁵⁹ Castrillon, *Invention or reflection*, 85.

⁶⁰ Castrillon, *Invention or reflection*, 123.

⁶¹ Craig MacKenzie, "The *skaz* narrative mode in short stories by W.C. Scully, Percy FitzPatrick, Perceval Gibbon and Herman Charles Bosman." *Literator* 14.3(1993), 3.

whose presence is linguistically reflected in the tale itself.⁶² Bakhtin suggested that there were two types of *skaz* narrative, namely "simple *skaz*" and "parodistic *skaz*". Simple *skaz* employs a narrator whose attitudes are not ideologically divergent from those of the author, while parodistic *skaz* shows "an orientation toward another person's discourse."⁶³ There is very little or no stylisation that serves to mask the attitude and modes of speech and thinking of the author in simple *skaz*, mainly because the narrator and the author are one - they speak with one voice. In parodistic *skaz* the storyteller and the author are not one, and the two's modes of thought and speech may actually be at variance with one another. The storyteller here serves to "refract" the author's intentions with the result that "dialogic (double-voiced) narratives [which allow] the possibility of irony and parody," are created.⁶⁴ Through this literary mediation of orality in *skaz*, the author can commend or criticise the thoughts and attitudes of his or her fictional narrator and, through him/her, of those who hold similar views.

By applying the concept of *skaz* to some South African short stories MacKenzie demonstrates that the illusion of orality in any text depends on a complex layering of narrative strategies. In the case of Herman Charles Bosman, for example, the writer introduces a fictional storyteller by intimating that the stories are told by Oom Schalk Lourens to an internal audience composed of fellow Marico inhabitants. In "Makapan's Caves" Oom Schalk Lourens tells the story of himself and his brother when they leave for a battle. They are advised by their father to carry the Bible to war, and also to

⁶² Quoted in Craig MacKenzie, "The *skaz* narrative mode", 3.

⁶³ Mikhael Bakhtin, quoted in MacKenzie, "The *skaz* narrative mode", 4.

⁶⁴ MacKenzie, "The *skaz* narrative mode", 4.

remember to always "aim for the stomach" when they shoot at the enemy. MacKenzie points out that the juxtaposition of the Bible and violence serves to express the author's ironic criticism of Oom Schalk Lourens's father's callousness and his hypocrisy.

The work of Julien, Castrillon and MacKenzie suggests to us more compelling and useful ways of reading orality in the African novel than most critical essays on Mhudi have yet offered. According to this approach, orality is examined for the ideological ✓ and aesthetic ends that it serves, rather than as an agent of establishing authenticity ✓ (Africanness) and continuity (of the oral in the written) in the African novel. Besides ✓ being a misleading venture, such an exercise, as Julien observes elsewhere in her ✓ book, results in a mystification of orality and tradition as well as of the African past. ✓

A reading of Mhudi in the light of the above should prove rewarding. Written between 1917 and 1920, the novel was the first to be written in English by a black South African, and it was definitely one of the pioneers of this kind of literature in Africa. That even in those early years Plaatje was already tackling the question of orality and the African novel before it became a major item on the literary agenda, is clearly evidence of his originality. And it is this originality that the present dissertation hopes to bring forth as comprehensively as possible.

In looking at orality in written texts, then, Julien's approach requires us to move away ✓ from notions of continuity and simple reflection. Instead of seeing oral forms in written ✓ texts as an unproblematic mirroring of extant oral traditions, we need to ask how writers ✓ solve the manifest problems that come with this project. How, for example, does one ✓

conjure up the illusion of speech in writing? How, similarly, does one deal with representing oral forms of one language in another? What are the aesthetic, ideological and political possibilities that are opened up by such representations of orality?

This dissertation attempts to answer these questions in relation to Sol Plaatje's novel, *Mhudi*. The dissertation begins this task by examining Plaatje's views on Setswana oral artforms. Deeply committed to their preservation, Plaatje took up the issue of recording and translating Setswana proverbs and folktales in book form and involving himself in orthographical debates on how Setswana was to be represented in print. Central to all of these endeavours was the concern of how oral forms were to be represented, circulated and made accessible to a wider audience. This preoccupation was in turn intimately associated with questions of translation and of finding cultural equivalents and correspondences through which oral forms could be disseminated to wider audiences. Chapter 2 investigates in some depth how Plaatje negotiated his way around these questions of correspondence, equivalence and translation across language, medium and often continents.

Having established the ways in which Plaatje explored various strategies for "inventing" orality in print, the remaining chapters take up the task of examining oral artforms in *Mhudi* in close detail. In undertaking this analysis, we have been guided by Julien's advice to examine the aesthetic, political and ideological purposes for which writers appropriate and synthesize oral forms in novels. Chapter 3 begins this task by examining Plaatje's use of proverbs and songs. The main argument here is that

proverbs and songs serve at least two purposes in the novel. The first is to mediate in times of conflicts and difficult debates. The second is to subvert certain political ideologies as well as cultural stereotypes, especially those relating to the relationship between men and women in society. We then go on to argue in Chapter 4 that Plaatje's use of oral prose narratives, in addition to serving similar purposes as proverbs and songs, also contributes to making *Mhudi* a self-reflexive and self-deconstructive allegorical text. The outcome of this self-interrogation is that in many ways *Mhudi* becomes an ambiguous novel. Further, oral narratives are employed as a strategy to suggest and project multiple readerships within the novel, so that the text is not simply addressed to whites, as Esterhuysen suggests.

2. ORALITY/LITERACY: A DIALECTIC OF CROSS-REFERENCING AND COMPLEMENTARITY

Introduction

Besides being an allegorical indictment of the Natives' Land Act of 1913 as well as an interpretation of the history of South Africa in the early 1800s from a black perspective, Mhudi is also Plaatje's endeavour to preserve Setswana oral traditions. This is done in a number of ways, one of which is the inclusion of some oral artforms in the novel. Another one is spelled out in his preface to the novel, namely to use financial profits from Mhudi "to collect and print (for Bantu Schools) Sechuana folk-tales, which, with the spread of European ideas, are fast being forgotten" (21). His fear of the loss of the oral prose narratives also applies to proverbs. He states in an earlier book, *Sechuana proverbs with literal translations and their European equivalents*, that "[w]ith the spread of European speech and thought in South Africa, these primitive saws are fast being forgotten."⁶⁵ The object of *Sechuana proverbs*, and of course of his lost book of Setswana folktales⁶⁶ as well as Mhudi, is therefore "to save from oblivion, as far as this can be done, the proverbial expressions of the Bechuana people."⁶⁷ That Plaatje

⁶⁵ Sol Plaatje, *Sechuana proverbs* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, 1916), ix.

⁶⁶ According to Brian Willan, this book of folktales got lost, together with another book of poetry, because Plaatje insisted on having it published in a phonetic script, which was regarded as weird by many people. Publishers were as a result reluctant to publish a book in a "strange spelling". See Willan, *Sol Plaatje: a biography*, 342.

⁶⁷ Plaatje, *Sechuana proverbs*, 1.

invested so much time in these artforms demonstrates the seriousness with which he viewed them.

This chapter undertakes an examination of Plaatje's preservation of Setswana oral artforms. It argues that his perception and preservation of the artforms cannot be separated from the ideas that he gained about literature from colonial mission education. Shakespeare and the Bible, in particular, became major imaginative resources through which he recast Setswana oral forms in English. Indeed, as we shall see, the oral forms, biblical materials and some elements of Shakespeare's plays, in his opinion, possessed such affinities that there were virtually no boundaries between them. The affinity, especially in the case of Shakespeare, was such that, Plaatje felt, the playwright could easily be translated into written Setswana. Indeed, Plaatje's homage to Shakespeare shows that the playwright was also amenable to being oralised and indigenised, thus becoming part of the popular culture among some Batswana. The translation of Shakespeare's plays which Plaatje undertook, as well as the oralisation of Shakespeare, suggests that, for Plaatje, orality and literacy depended on each other. They suggest a dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity of which Plaatje was aware.

The dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity is also implied in Plaatje's preservation of Setswana folktales. The act of preservation often involved the writing down and translation of the folktales into English. In the matter of translation, as Plaatje was aware, a measure of success could only be achieved by finding cultural equivalents of the material being translated. That was how he managed to translate

Shakespeare's plays into Setswana.⁶⁸ Also, as we suggest, that was how he translated Setswana folktales into English. Yet, Plaatje's translation of the folktales betrays missionary influences to an extent that he could be said to have invented the folktales. Given the dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity between orality and literacy it becomes imperative to investigate, rather than to take at face value, his concern to preserve Setswana oral artforms as well as the final product of his endeavour. Such an investigation reveals a creative act of invention of the Setswana traditions on the part of Plaatje.

Shakespeare, Translation and the Search for Equivalents

This section examines Plaatje's homage to Shakespeare as well as one of his translations of the praise poems about Montsioa. We argue that his homage to Shakespeare reveals that Plaatje often thought of Shakespeare in terms that foreground the playwright's relevance in challenging South African racial political practices in general, and in enriching Setswana cultural artforms, especially that of storytelling, in particular. Indeed, in his writings on the reception of Shakespeare by some educated sections of Batswana, Plaatje suggests that Shakespeare was revered for his oratory skills, which were central to the cultural practices of the Batswana.

⁶⁸ *English in Africa* 3.2(1976), 9. When it was not possible to find equivalents in translation, Plaatje wrote, he "had to rely on the general sense of the whole passage to render the author's meaning in the vernacular, and that has been his difficulty." In an interview, Chinua Achebe makes a similar point about his translation of Ibo proverbs into English when he says that he has had to go "for the spirit" of the proverbs. See Nuruddin Farah, *Writers in conversation: Chinua Achebe with Nuruddin Farah* [Video cassette] (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986).

Plaatje adds that another factor that made Shakespeare's works readily acceptable was that some of the beliefs and practices displayed in his plays find cultural equivalents in Setswana. Because of these two factors, Shakespeare was often appropriated by the Batswana. The process involved translating into and retelling his stories in Setswana. There was thus two processes simultaneously at work. One was that of Africanising Shakespeare, and the second one involved oralising his plays.

But the process worked the other way, too. When, for example, Plaatje wanted to translate some of the praise poems of the Batswana chiefs, most notably, of Montsioa, into English, he had to find English equivalents of the poems. Being well acquainted with Shakespeare, presumably Plaatje frequently drew on him. Indeed, his translation of Montsioa's praise which we examine reveals this influence. Arguably, the Africanisation and oralisation of Shakespeare was accompanied by the "Shakespearisation" of Setswana artforms. It is this dual process that forms the subject of this section.

Writing in 1916, Plaatje said of intelligence in Africa that it was still disseminated by word of mouth. This was obviously true of historical as well as fictional forms of knowledge. In this context, where oral skills were crucial, Plaatje found Shakespeare handy. Because of his reading of the playwright, Plaatje writes of himself, he "always had a good story to tell"⁶⁹, a story often drawn from Shakespeare's plays. When it came to his reading of *The merchant of Venice*, we are told, "[t]he characters were so

⁶⁹ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 7.

real that I was asked more than once to which of certain speculators, then operating in Kimberley, Shakespeare referred as Shylock.⁷⁰ Being thus encouraged by his audience's interest in Shakespeare's characters, Plaatje extended his reading of the playwright.⁷¹ He learnt from the exercise that "the current quotations used by educated natives to embellish their speeches, which [he] had always taken for English proverbs, were culled from Shakespeare's works."⁷²

In retelling Shakespeare's stories orally, Plaatje presumably added or subtracted things from the original, depending on whether or not it suited him to do so. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: Shakespeare was oralised. And the process involved the telling of Shakespeare's written stories, giving them a voice or sound, with the audience participating by asking questions of the type mentioned above. Secondly, from the quotations of Shakespeare by Plaatje's educated contemporaries we may reasonably deduce that they too found Shakespeare not only a source of embellishment of their speeches, but also a source of fresh oral stories. What is implicit in Plaatje's account of his acquaintance with Shakespeare and the way in which he was received by Plaatje's educated contemporaries, is that his plays were not only oralised, but were also democratised. That is, the act of translating and circulating them orally, though perhaps in new forms, made his reception wider than would have been the case with the printed scripts only. There is a case to be made, then, that

⁷⁰ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 7.

⁷¹ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 7.

⁷² English in Africa 3.2(1976), 7.

Shakespeare's stories became part of the popular tradition of storytelling.

In addition, Shakespeare's sayings influenced Plaatje's journalistic pieces. When King Edward II and two Batswana chiefs Sebele and Bathoeng died around 1910, the year that Halley's Comet crossed the skies, Plaatje opened his obituary with the words: "When beggars die there are no comets seen;/ The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."⁷³ In *Mhudi* the defeat and humiliation of Mzilikazi is marked by the appearance of a comet, as predicted by his doctors. There is a historical basis for associating comets with deaths of great leaders, and it is perhaps on this basis that the defeat and humiliation of Mzilikazi and his nation in *Mhudi* is also associated with them. The cultural beliefs of the Batswana surely also contributed something towards their appreciation of Shakespeare's works, as his plays contain some aspects of their cultural beliefs.

Besides, Plaatje's account of the positive reception of Shakespeare within his society suggests an additional aspect of Setwana culture:

Besides being natural story-tellers, the Bechuana are good listeners, and legendary stories seldom fail to impress them. Thus, one morning, I visited the Chief's court at Mafeking and was asked for the name of 'the white man who spoke so well'. An educated Chieftain promptly replied for me; he said: William Tsikinya-Chaka (William Shake-the-Sword). The

⁷³ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 8.

translation, though perhaps more free than literal, is happy in its way considering how many of Shakespeare's characters met their death. Tsikinya-Chaka became noted among some of my readers as a reliable white oracle.⁷⁴

It was thus not enough to Africanise Shakespeare by translating him freely into Setswana and oralising him by giving his plays a human voice, but he also had to have a Setswana nickname. What is more, the word "oracle" emphasizes Shakespeare's oral rather than writing skills, although the different skills clearly reinforce each other in this particular case. What Plaatje's homage to Shakespeare reveals is that literacy, of which the white oracle is an incarnation, was not wiping orality out. Rather, what was happening was that literacy was domesticated or appropriated, through oralisation, and thus made to add to and enrich oral practices like that of storytelling. In other words, Shakespeare was used as a remarkable cultural resource. Given this, it becomes clear that Plaatje's view that European thinking was decimating Setswana oral artforms, a view which suggests that orality is vulnerable and at the mercy of literacy, is not unproblematic.

Plaatje's homage is in part a testimony to the tenacity of orality, a testimony that is reinforced by Isabel Hofmeyr's research on orality and literacy on a Berlin Mission in the northern Transvaal. She argues in her article "Jonah and the swallowing monster" that the effects of literacy, "like those of technology, are subordinated to their social

⁷⁴ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 8.

setting."⁷⁵ One instance of such subordination is the failure of the missionaries at the Berlin Mission Station to persuade their congregants to assume the missionaries' own understanding of literacy. Their understanding included the view of literacy as involving such ideals as "inner discipline" reinforced by "silent reading":

However, for a long time the missionaries were simply unable to implement their understanding of literacy as congregants and visitors to the mission continued their *selective* appropriation. As regards church services, these were appropriated by *popular taste* which helped to dictate the form and style of holy worship and other mission activities. These almost invariably relied on orality, performance, festival, spectacle and image, or, in other words, the central resources of African culture. (Emphasis added.)⁷⁶

In a similar manner, the oralisation and appropriation of Shakespeare, especially by Plaatje, constituted a rejection of received ideas about race and human behaviour.

⁷⁵ Isabel Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 633. Hofmeyr returns to this point in her survey of oral historical studies in southern Africa, in "Wailing for purity": point in her survey of oral historical studies in southern Africa, in "African studies 54.2(1995). The selective oral studies in southern African studies." *African studies* 54.2(1995). The selective nature in which black South Africans appropriated biblical scriptures and missionary teachings is also emphasised by Duncan Brown's study of the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and his church. Shembe sought to introduce Zulu cultural practices and traditional beliefs - like polygamous marriages, "first fruits" ceremonies, the "concept of the deity [that] . . . syncretised Christian and African cosmology", ancestor worship and so on - into his Nazarite church, something which missionaries disapproved. See Brown, "Orality and Christianity: the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites." *Current writing* 7.2(1995), 78.

⁷⁶ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 642.

As we shall recall from the overview of the critical reception of Mhudi, Shakespeare, according to David Johnson, represented in Plaatje's time the example of what good literature was. Linked to this was of course the attempt by some British subjects to use the playwright as a symbol of their patriotism, which thrived on imposing itself on other cultures and portraying them negatively. But if this symbol of civilisation and patriotism could be oralised and appropriated, surely those who could oralise and appropriate it did not consider their own culture to be any less important. Equally, their culture could not simply be dismissed as unsophisticated. The oralisation and appropriation of Shakespeare, therefore, amounted to a rejection of eurocentrism and racism. As Plaatje said in reaction to the pictures advertising some cinematographic show of the Crucifixion in London, in which Judas was the only black character, "Shakespeare's dramas . . . show that nobility and valour, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any colour."⁷⁷ It is such pictures that made it necessary for Plaatje to indicate that in writing *Native life in South Africa* he was not speaking for the cause of "hordes of cannibals".⁷⁸ He was instead writing on behalf of oppressed, loyal British subjects who could benefit from British intervention. Although Britain failed to offer some form of political intervention, Plaatje was nevertheless making use of their perhaps unintended cultural offer in the person of their great writer. In the process this writer was seen through the eyes of an oral society which was sophisticated enough to be able to collapse rigid boundaries between literacy and orality. Another fascinating development was that Setswana oral artforms were in turn perceived, by Plaatje in

⁷⁷ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 8.

⁷⁸ Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa*, 18.

particular, in relation to Shakespeare. That is, there was a constant dialectic between the two, a dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity.

The oralisation of Shakespeare registers the incompleteness or inadequacy of literacy in a predominantly oral society. With Plaatje, oral artforms without literate influences seem to have been inconceivable. In his opinion, for example, through such things as translations, African literature in its mature form will benefit from "some at least of Shakespeare's works": "That this could be done is suggested by the probability that some of the stories on which his dramas are based find equivalents in African folk lore."⁷⁹ In his opinion again, it is the task of writers and translators to ensure this inclusion of Shakespeare which should benefit Africans.

The issue of "equivalents" suggests that it will not always be clear as to whether, in any given story, the African writer is drawing on his or her oral traditional artforms or on Shakespeare (or, indeed, another exogenous cultural influence). Similarly, keeping in mind that some oral artforms find equivalents in the Bible and vice versa, it will not always be clear as to whether a particular writer draws on the Bible or not. Indeed, Setswana beliefs, Shakespeare and the Bible are tellingly linked in Plaatje's statement on Halley's Comet and the deaths in and around 1910 of the three rulers mentioned above.

Those events gave the colour of truth to a native belief that such

⁷⁹ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 18.

heavenly bodies never appear except as omens of wars or some great occurrences like the death of rulers. This belief finds corroboration in the records of civilised nations, as, for instance, the Bible story of the visit of the Magi, besides Shakespeare's writings, for the Bard of Avon wrote: 'When beggars die there are no comets seen, but the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.'⁸⁰

Plaatje goes on to refer to the missionaries' possible reinforcement of the African traditional beliefs in heavenly bodies:

In common with other Bantu tribes, the Bechuana attach many ominous traditions to stellar movements and the visitation of comets in particular. This superstition was by no means shaken by their contact with missionaries, and their perusal of the Bible story concerning the visit of the Magi.

The appearance of Halley's Comet in April [1910] (which found them disconcerted by thoughts of the impending Union of South African Colonies, and the possible inclusion therein of their territories) supplied them with considerable material for discussion. All kinds of disasters were foreshadowed, it being freely stated that the country was heading for a year of sickness, drought and deaths, especially of chiefs, and

⁸⁰ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 21-22.

nations by epidemics.⁸¹

Some of the disasters foreshadowed might not have materialised. What did materialise was the establishment of the Union Government which was to pass the 1913 Land Act, thereby taking away lands from these disturbed people.

A further example of Plaatje's perception of Setswana oral traditions in Shakespearean terms is evident from the biographies of some of the leaders to whom he paid tribute. One such tribute was to Montsioa, chief Tauana's son who seems to have played a major historical role in the execution of Mzilikazi's tax collector, Bhoya, in 1830. In a biography Plaatje quotes some of Montsioa's praises. Oral praise poetry, as Finnegan shows, is a very complex phenomenon. In a discussion of its style, she points out that its use of language can be obscure due to "its figurative quality [as well as allusion to] historical events, places, and peoples".⁸² In addition, a "series of pictures is conveyed to the listeners through a number of laconic and often rather staccato sentences, a grouping of ideas which may on different occasions come in a different order."⁸³ Karin Barber captures the fluidity of oral praise poetry in a simile in her discussion of oriki and similar praise poetry from Africa: "The whole [in oriki] is like a string of beads, a long chain of interchangeable parts, which can be extended or broken off at will without

⁸¹ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 23.

⁸² Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, 132.

⁸³ Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, 135.

significantly altering its form."⁸⁴ Because of this lack of form, as critics steeped in the New Critical approach would see it, "Oriki-type texts . . . offer . . . slippery and shifting ground [with no] sense of an ending."⁸⁵

Finnegan's and Barber's observations alert us to the immediate difficulty one would encounter in trying to translate such poetry. Also, because the poetry is fluid in nature, it is difficult to pin down through definition. Defining the praise poem of Montsioa would accordingly have presented serious challenges to Plaatje. Plaatje nevertheless overcomes the challenge by attempting to find English equivalents to refer to both the praise and the praise poets. He calls the praise an "irregular verse" and the poets become "court jesters".⁸⁶ His reference to "irregular verse" assumes that his readership will be acquainted with the British poetic conventions such as writing in iambic pentameters and rhyme scheme, while "court jesters" might owe a lot to his reading of Shakespeare's plays where court jesters feature fairly often. Having grappled with the question of what to call the praise, Plaatje still had to grapple with the actual process of translating it.

Duncan Brown raises important points about transcription and translation of oral poetry. "Like transcription," he says, "translation involves an important process of mediation."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Karin Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow: oriki, women, and the past in a Yoruba town* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 23.

⁸⁵ Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow*, 22.

⁸⁶ *English in Africa* 3.2(1976), 19.

⁸⁷ Duncan Brown, "Oral poetry and literary history in South Africa." *Current writing* 6.2(1994), 169.

The challenges in translation work not only stem from the fact that sometimes words and phrases in one language do not have equivalents in the language of the translation, a point of which Plaatje was keenly aware. Perhaps a more serious challenge raised by Brown is that there are times when literary forms in one language find no equivalents in another, as in the case of praise poetry. Brown continues: "The difficulties of translating oral poetry are exacerbated by the fact that the structure of rhythm and rhyme often differ greatly between languages and language groups, something which is particularly marked between English and African languages."⁸⁸ Faced with such difficulties, Brown points out, translators often represent oral poems in writing by using "print conventions of short lines and stanzas, seeking to create an equivalence of effect between the source language and target language."⁸⁹ As Brown so usefully reminds us a few lines later, equivalence and sameness are not necessarily identical, and as such translation actually involves an act of invention. Not surprisingly, one encounters some notable stylistic as well as semantic differences between the original praise of Montsioa and Plaatje's translation of it.

Plaatje quotes the original and then translates it as follows:

Mogatsa Majang, tau ga di kalo!

Tau ga di kalo, moroa Mhenyana.

⁸⁸ Brown, "Oral poetry and literary history in South Africa", 169.

⁸⁹ Brown, "Oral poetry and literary history in South Africa", 170.

Ga di ke di bolaoa leroborobo,
Di ba di etsa dipholofolo tsa gopo,
Di ba di edioa pitse tsa gopo,
Lekau ja Gontse-a-Tauana!
Tau di bolaoa dile thataro,
Lefa dile pedi dia bo di ntse.

(That's not the way to kill lions,
O, husband of Majang!
That's not the way, O, offspring of M'Henryana!
Lions should not be butchered by the score
Nor like hunted animals at the chase;
Lions should not be slaughtered in such numbers,
To litter the field like carcasses of dead zebra,
O, descendant of Gontse, son of Tauana!
Six lions at a time are quite enough
For, even two at a time are not too few!⁹⁰

Besides the fact that the translation comprises ten lines instead of eight as in the original, the translation deviates on a number of points. I offer my own word-for-word translation, as far as this can be done, in order to illustrate the deviations:

⁹⁰ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 18-19.

Spouse of Majang, lions are not that many!

Lions are not that many, son of Mhenyana.

They are not usually killed by the score,

Like animals at a chase,

Like zebras at a chase,

Lad of Gontse-of-Tauana!

Lions are killed six (at a time),

Even two (at a time) are still many.

In comparing my translation with Plaatje's, what stands out is that Plaatje invents sexual differentiation where it does not appear in the original and, where it does, he omits it ("spouse" becomes "husband", "offspring" becomes "son"). Secondly, as in the last line of his translation, he puts the point in the negative while the original puts it in the positive. Thirdly, the punctuation in his translation differs from the one in the original. His translation, for example, has at least two more exclamation marks. Indeed, the exclamation mark appears in the translation in each line that has "O", which does not appear in the original, and which might in fact owe much to his acquaintance with particular archaic registers of English literature. Also, Mhenyana of the original becomes M'Henyana in the translation. Arguably, this is to help with the pronunciation of the name in English. For had Plaatje not split the letters "M" and "H" with an apostrophe, the "H"-sound might have stood a chance of being omitted in English pronunciation. Other similar points can be raised about the dissimilarities between the original praise and Plaatje's translation. What is clear is that Plaatje's translation is a search for English equivalents for Setswana oral genres.

The appropriation and indigenisation of Shakespeare underlined the extent to which the plays became, as Karin Barber might have put it, orality-saturated in the hands of the Batswana. In much the same way, English versions of Setswana oral artforms in the hands of Plaatje became literacy-saturated. Orality, in other words, was mediated through literacy and vice versa. Mediating orality through literacy, as the above examples illustrate, sometimes involved not just a work of translation but also a creation of new meanings by adding words or phrases that did not appear in the original. Put simply, if Plaatje was endeavouring to preserve orality, then that preservation involved, in part at least, a process of invention. Couzens notes that "Plaatje's Setswana was rich soil for Shakespearean seed."⁹¹ In turn, Shakespeare was rich soil for Setswana. In particular, by translating some of Shakespeare's plays into Setswana Plaatje was partly enriching written Setswana literature.

Tim Couzens says of Shakespeare and Plaatje that they "matured at the time of a great revolution - when oral culture was being largely transformed to a written one."⁹² To the extent that in Plaatje's times there was a marked dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity between orality and literacy (as shown above), Couzens's assertion is perhaps slightly overstated. The assertion does, however, in part agree with Plaatje's rather evolutionist perspective that tends to view literacy as being stronger than, and consequently replacing, orality. Yet, even Shakespeare's plays themselves were intended for oral delivery on the stage. That is, they were written down, but with

⁹¹ Tim Couzens, "A moment in the past: William Tsikinya-chaka." *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 2(1988), 63.

⁹² Couzens, "A moment in the past", 63.

the underlying assumption that they would be rendered orally. The dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity was therefore often on display, if not always in the two writers' conception of orality and/or literacy, then at least in the interaction or interface they facilitated between the two phenomena.

The Transcription of Folktales

The folktales referred to in this chapter were recorded by Plaatje in *A Sechuana reader*, published in 1916, a year before he began working on *Mhudi*. As we have seen, Plaatje felt that Batswana pupils would in future have too little knowledge of their cultural artforms as these were being eroded by the spread of literacy and European ideas. Even in terms of orthography and representation of sound on paper he felt that five different spellings in Setswana, which were used by different missionaries and their students, did not auger well for the development of the language. Sometimes the different spellings made the Batswana literate in one form of spelling seem illiterate when confronted with a different form of spelling, and the pronunciation resulting from the confusion in spelling could be baffling. Thus, although he evidently appreciated the great efforts of Robert Moffat in putting Setswana on paper in his translation of the Bible in the 1840s Plaatje seems to have had a greater appreciation for Doke and Jones's representation of African languages, which made most extensive use of phonetic. His reverence for the phoneticians stem from his conviction that phonetics helps a great deal in the pronunciation of words and their tones. Even non-native

speakers can pronounce the words with appropriate tones accurately.⁹³ It is in this sense that phonetics can be said to be of some importance in oralising the written. Not surprisingly, Plaatje maintains that the best option for representing African languages would be to use the "principle of International Phonetics, of 'one sound, one letter'".⁹⁴ Indeed, the principle of "one sound, one letter" is a powerful indication that speaking and writing complement and reinforce each other. It is this mutual relationship that Plaatje recognises.

In the same spirit in which he wished to preserve accurate sounds and tones in Setswana, Plaatje thought to preserve some folktales in *A Sechuana* reader. As already pointed out, his *Sechuana* folktales got lost, and it is therefore not possible to compare his representation of folktales in it with that in *A Sechuana* reader. Be that as it may, research on South Sotho and North Sotho literatures by Daniel Kunene and Isabel Hofmeyr respectively, suggests that African oral prose narratives, as now transcribed, have lost some at least of their former stylistic features as well as meaning. Hofmeyr points out that "German missionaries in the northern Transvaal [as in other parts of southern Africa] began producing Sotho school readers from the 1870s":

Most probably modelled on German school and children's literature as well as primers that had already been produced by Lutheran missionaries in Tanganyika, the first of these books made up the *Padiso* series. Like

⁹³ For details see Plaatje's pieces on Setswana orthography and phonetics in *English in Africa* 3.2(1976), 35 & 45.

⁹⁴ *English in Africa* 3.2(1976), 45.

similar readers in Zulu, these books contained a range of forms which included *dinonwane* [North Sotho for folktales], Bible stories, prayers, hymns, proverbs and essays on a range of topics including social conduct, geography, agriculture and biology.⁹⁵

She further argues that "throughout all these changes in education policy [that is, from the introduction of these readers in the 1870s through their proliferation in subsequent years up to the 1960s], the use of *dinonwane* remained a standard feature of school life ..."⁹⁶ As the introduction of *dinonwane* in schools largely depended on writing them down, there was a change, in extreme cases, "from live performance in the household to silent reading in the classroom."⁹⁷ Besides the obvious loss of performative elements such as style and voice of the narrator, and spatial setting like the fire-place, the institutionalisation of *dinonwane* led to their redefinition.

Plaatje's book too, seems to be an endeavour not only to preserve the folktales but also to institutionalise them - more specifically, to turn them into objects of study. The title *A Sechuana reader* seems, like other readers in circulation at the time, to locate the book's content, including the folktales, in the realm of children's knowledge. This effectively gives the impression that folktales are indeed for children. Like missionaries, Plaatje's preservation of the folktales does not exclude their

⁹⁵ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 644.

⁹⁶ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 645.

⁹⁷ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 646.

"infantilization".

The process of infantilization involves, firstly, a shortening of the tales and a general tendency to favour animal rather than human stories, a "choice largely dictated by the model of the German fable and fairy tale, both nursery genres," an association which led to the notion that the "*nonwane* and the society from which it emanates were . . . child-like and insubstantial."⁹⁸ Secondly, there were omissions which included that of "bizarre, fantastic and grotesque aspects of stories which were consistently overlooked in favour of the tamer and more realistic ones."⁹⁹ Realism is seen here as a mode of narration that "favours rationality, clarity and coherence" as against "transgression, inversion, hallucination, disorder and fantasy" favoured by *dinonwane*.¹⁰⁰

For his part, Daniel Kunene emphasizes that missionaries and their converts in Lesotho used Sesotho folktales for evangelical purposes. In their endeavour, they would try to establish parallels between certain Sesotho folktales and biblical stories, or simply give the folktales a Christian interpretation by tacking on a moral at the end of the tales, a tendency later adopted by "many African-language writers whose works have a moralistic intent."¹⁰¹ Kunene continues:

⁹⁸ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 648.

⁹⁹ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 648.

¹⁰⁰ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 648.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Kunene, *Thomas Mofolo and the emergence of Sesotho prose* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1989), 55.

In this atmosphere, both the missionaries and the Basotho were ready to take advantage of the slightest similarity between Basotho traditions, customs or narratives to 'show' that the Basotho shared something of the redemptive religion of the 'civilised' nations of the west. These similarities, some of them no doubt coincidental, some acquired in the natural process of cultural assimilation, some very far-fetched indeed, were found, and much was made of them.¹⁰²

The fable, or the oral prose narrative generally, was favoured for this purpose as "[i]t was generally simple and directly to the point, so that the message should not be lost."¹⁰³

It is interesting that the processes described above were mainly the work of missionaries, and especially German Lutheran missionaries in Hofmeyr's study. For Plaatje's missionary primary education was overseen at Pniel by German Lutherans who were, like the ones that partly form the subject of Hofmeyr's study, part of the Berlin Mission Society.¹⁰⁴ They would presumably also have shared the views of those in the northern Transvaal, or at least have had in common an educational and cultural background that would have influenced the manner in which they introduced formal education to their pupils. Also noteworthy is that the school readers discussed were

¹⁰² Kunene, Thomas Mofolo and the emergence of Sesotho prose, 55.

¹⁰³ Kunene, Thomas Mofolo and the emergence of Sesotho prose, 53.

¹⁰⁴ Willan, Sol Plaatje: a biography, 3-23.

introduced in schools in the 1870s, the decade that saw the birth of Sol Plaatje. Plaatje, then, would probably have been introduced in the 1880s to such folktales with the constraints imposed on them. While the degree of their influence cannot be determined with any certainty, his folktales in *A Sechuana reader* betray some of the tendencies described by Hofmeyr and, though perhaps in a different sense, Kunene.

First, Plaatje's folktales are very short. Indeed, they read like summaries. No indication is made of who the narrator of each folktale might have been, or the setting in which each might have been narrated. Secondly, Plaatje offers no indication in the tales of their audience. *A Sechuana reader* is meant by Plaatje and Jones to be a "collection of reading-matter suitable either for native Bechuanas or for foreign learners of the Sechuana language."¹⁰⁵ What is of major importance here is that the Batswana are afforded some space in which to learn phonetics and foreign learners the opportunity to learn Setswana. The folktales, then, are more useful as tools for learning language and phonetics than for their significance as complex narratives intended for a specific audience. We must also recall that Plaatje's endeavour in writing *Mhudi* was to earn money which he could then use to collect and publish Setswana folktales for Bantu schools - which is to say mainly for children. Presumably, most of the Batswana whom Plaatje anticipated would read *A Sechuana reader* were children in schools. Arguably, although perhaps unintentionally, Plaatje gives an impression that he regards folktales as only worthy of consumption by children. In line with the omission of a very clear identification of who their audience would ordinarily

¹⁰⁵ Sol Plaatje and Daniel Jones, *A Sechuana reader in International Phonetic Orthography*. (London: London UP, 1916), xi.

be, is the lack of a description, no matter how brief, of how they would ordinarily be narrated or received. In other words, one is not given an idea of the aura that would be created by and/or around the tales.

Thirdly, the titles of the tales suggest that they conform to book production practices rather than with Setswana oral traditions. It is customary in printed texts to show numbers and titles of chapters and their respective sub-sections, where applicable, as well as page numbers. These clearly facilitate quick and easy reference. But in a culture in which such tales are partly borrowed from past traditions, which are not recorded, and partly invented by individual creative acts, such referencing is impossible. Fourthly, most of Plaatje's folktales contain an explicit lesson or message. Folktale II, although perhaps one of the shortest, is nevertheless representative of the rest in as far as it displays the features mentioned above:

II - MOURNING FOR THE HARTEBEEST AND THE HIDE

A Bechuana traveller was once walking in a lonely region carrying a hide, when he saw a lame hartebeest running along in the forest. So he placed his hide on the ground and chased the hartebeest. He chased it and chased it all day long through the forest until he was tired. At length the hartebeest got out of his reach, and he gave it up in despair.

When he returned he searched for his hide in the place where he had left it; but, search as he would through the forest, he could not find it again.

While he was intent upon catching the hartebeest, he forgot the proverb which says: 'Let spilt porridge alone, but hold on to that which you have in your hand.' He threw aside his hide and followed the hartebeest of the forest, and in consequence he was left empty-handed.

That is why the Bechuana people, in giving advice to the avaricious, say: 'Take care that you don't mourn for the hartebeest and the hide.'¹⁰⁶

From this brief example it is clear that Plaatje's preservation of Setswana folktales was also an act of constrained invention, of reducing them to skeletons as many missionaries had done. A fascinating deviation, however, is that the tacking on of a Christian moral does not seem to have been high on his agenda. Indeed, his basic lesson seems to have been either that the narratives reinforced or were origins of certain proverbs, a point also made by Guma in his study of oral artforms in

¹⁰⁶ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 37.

SouthernSotho.¹⁰⁷ Occasionally, as in the story of the King's Judgement¹⁰⁸, he was interested not only to explain the origin of some of Setswana proverbs, but also to highlight his point that oral traditions of his people and of other societies are not so dissimilar as to be mutually exclusive.

We have said that Plaatje's preservation of the folktales was constrained. The constraints were probably in part the outcome of missionary education which often insisted, as Hofmeyr writes, on suppressing or eliminating the "erotic" and the "scatological", and thus "bleach[ing] away much of the bawdy humour."¹⁰⁹ The

¹⁰⁷ In fables, Guma writes, "[h]uman actions and passions are attached to [animals] for purposes of instruction. Such instruction flows from the particular story and usually takes the form of a proverb. As a result, there is a close connection between certain fables and proverbs, the latter being a summary or condensed form of the former." See Samson Guma, *Content and technique of traditional literature in Southern Sotho* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1976), 11. The logic of these two writers finds support in the argument advanced by Emmanuel Obiechina on "narrative proverbs". Since material on Setswana oral traditions is relatively rare, I shall have to compare Plaatje's observations with those people working in the same of oral traditions in other African languages, like Guma and Kunene in Southern Sotho and Isabel Hofmeyr in Northern Sotho. This should not be very problematic, as the similarities between oral artforms in black South African languages are, according to research findings, quite strong. See Guma, *Content and technique of traditional literature in Southern Sotho*, 95 and Ruth Finnegan's survey of oral literature in Africa in *Oral literature in Africa*.

¹⁰⁸ This is folktale No. VII in *A Sechuana reader*. It is a well-known story of two women fighting over a baby because one of the women has inadvertently killed hers in her sleep, and now wants to claim the living baby. Their case is brought to a king. The king decides that since it is impossible to know who is right and who is not, the baby should be cut into two halves so that each woman can have her share. The mother of the child, in contrast to the other woman, protests against this judgement, suggesting that she would rather lose her baby to the rival than get it killed. According to Plaatje, this story, which is similar to the story of judgement of Solomon in the Bible, was known among the Batswana long before the translation of the Bible into Setswana. The story is the origin of the proverb, "The mother of the child is she who grasps the knife by the blade". See *English in Africa* 3.2(1976), 39-40.

¹⁰⁹ Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 648.

constraints were also attributable to traditional Setswana judicial discourse itself. This is implied by Plaatje himself in his account of why he found it necessary to omit some proverbs in his collection:

Much of the oral native philosophy is too plain and therefore too frank for civilised ears. This is particularly true in regard to some of the proverbs relating to the relation between men and women. In this collection, sayings of that class are carefully omitted. This omission is not inconsistent with primitive Sechuana custom. Old people never mentioned such sayings in the presence of youth or of uncircumcised adults, whom they always classed with the children.¹¹⁰

Two traditions therefore thus constrained Plaatje, so that even in his preservation of Setswana oral traditions he was inconsistent, not simply because he was partly inventing in the process of preserving them, but also partly because there were others he could not, for moral reasons, preserve.

Conclusion

Plaatje's perception and representations of Setswana oral traditions, and the problematic aspects of those perceptions and representations, lend much support to Julien's argument that the search for origins and authenticity of essential African

¹¹⁰ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 31.

identity in the study of African literature, using this literature's employment of oral artforms as an indicator of that essence, is a misguided venture. In addition, Julien is right in arguing that a study of their ideological, political and aesthetic appropriateness in specific historical and sociopolitical contexts is more useful. Indeed, Hofmeyr and Kunene's studies raise similar points concerning the need for contextualising studies of orality and literacy. Of equal importance is Hofmeyr's and Julien's insistence that orality and literacy are always engaged in an interactive process and that, therefore, to see the two phenomena as polar opposites is to limit severely one's understanding of them and of the interaction of cultural identities and changes they register.

As I have argued, Plaatje was aware of the dialectic of cross-referencing and complementarity between orality and literacy. To the extent that his work on Setswana oral traditions points to such awareness, we can reasonably conclude that Plaatje anticipated some of the theorisation on orality and literacy, and simultaneously criticised, in anticipation, the binary model of orality and literacy that is today associated with Walter Ong. Yet, in so far as Plaatje also offered, at times, an evolutionist model, which suggests a gradual extinction of orality, his perception of orality is ambiguous. In short, an investigation of Plaatje's contribution to orality and literacy debates is a study not only of inventions of Setswana oral artforms through translations into English as well as the oralisation and Africanisation of written traditions, but also a study in ambiguities and contradictions. I think that these inventions, ambiguities and contradictions must be foregrounded if we are to broaden significantly our understanding of Plaatje's contribution to cultural politics.

3. ORALITY, MEDIATION AND SUBVERSION IN *MHUDI*

Introduction

This chapter sets out to explore Plaatje's use of proverbs and songs in *Mhudi*. It will argue that these oral forms serve several political as well as ideological purposes.

First, they are often used by characters to strategically position themselves in political negotiations and conflict resolution. The positioning often involves explicit admission of a character's limitations as a person, while also asserting implicitly the character's superior thoughts and ideas. The whole process works by drawing analogies between the figures in proverbs (which often take the form of animal characters in *Mhudi*) and actual persons or characters involved in conflicts or negotiations. Because proverbs tend to generalise about human conduct, they can be said to be impersonal. Such impersonality can in turn help to make arguments seem impersonal because, in Ruth Finnegan's words, "[t]he speaker stands back, as it were, from the heat of the actual situation and draws attention, for himself or others, to its wider implications."¹¹¹ To the extent that they tend to act as go-between two or more parties, using common wisdom to generalise and impersonalise what might essentially be personal, proverbs can be said to be mediative strategies. Because of their potential as agents of mediation, it is not surprising that, in Finnegan's words, "[t]hough proverbs can occur in very many different kinds of context, they seem to be particularly important in situations where there is both conflict and, at the same time, some obligation that this conflict should not

¹¹¹ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, 407.

take on too open and personal a form."¹¹²

Plaatje in his own life often used proverbs in this way, particularly when he needed financial assistance from Silas Molema, who was the chief of the Tshidi branch of the Barolong and Plaatje's contemporary. In Mhudi characters often invoke proverbs or oral prose narratives when they are having a dispute over certain issues, or when they want to express a point succinctly and effectively. In the case of Half-a-Crown, the main narrator in the novel, even a passage from Song of Songs becomes equally handy, as in his description of the beauty of Umnandi, Mzilikazi's favourite wife.

Secondly, the oral artforms are used for critical and subversive purposes. Plaatje employs oral artforms as agents of subversion which challenge stereotypical views of both the artforms and the people - the Batswana and other black South Africans in particular - who most frequently use them. One such stereotype is mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study, where, according to Esterhuysen, orality and the use of oral forms serves as an indication of the backwardness and unreliability of Africans. There are, of course, times when Africans are looked down upon to such an extent that any recognition even of their oral forms is suppressed altogether. In his reading of Drayson's *Tales at the outspan* (1862), for example, Craig MacKenzie queries Drayson's complacency, which is evident in his finding "no difficulty in locating the

¹¹² Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, 412. Guma makes the point that as "unwritten laws of the people" proverbs are probably more useful than written laws inmmmmmmmm settling disputes as they have "sanction and approval of the people in general." See Guma, *Content and technique of traditional literature in Southern Sotho*, 99. Both Finnegan and Guma discuss the structure as well as functions of proverbs, and are therefore worth reading in this area.

respective centres of civilisation and savagery”:

This [complacency] can be seen in the text's naked racism. The issue of a human commonality between European and 'Tottie'/'Bushman'/'Kaffir' is adumbrated by *Tales at the outspan*, but denied by the ideological thrust of the text, which assigns a centrality to the white settlers and travelling hunters and consigns the other races to the periphery. This function is enacted by the narrative structure of the text itself: in *Tales at the outspan* European meets African, but the latter term refers to the white settlers only, and the native of Africa is utterly silent, a mere 'dark visage' around the camp-fire. So in a very fundamental sense, African voices are excluded from participating in the cultural meeting point that the camp-fire represents.¹¹³

Whether it is orality or silence that is foregrounded as a negative mark of Africanness, what is at stake here, then, is the contestation over identity between Plaatje and those

¹¹³ Craig MacKenzie, "The emergence of the South African oral-style story: A.W. Drayson's *Tales at the outspan*." *Current writing* 7.2(1995), 60. MacKenzie contrasts Drayson with Herman Charles Bosman and finds that Bosman was critical and subversive of racist discourse, using oral-style narrative in order to create complex forms of irony. For a more detailed discussion of Bosman's narrative strategy in Oom Schalk Lourens stories, see MacKenzie, "The skaz narrative mode." In both these articles, MacKenzie examines the way in which the oral-style narrative is used by South African short story writers for various ideological and political purposes. In the case of Drayson, writing in the 1860s, it was used for giving "local colour" to his tales while in the hands of the later writers, like Perceval Gibbon and Herman Charles Bosman, it "became a finely-honed complex of literary devices capable of dealing on a formal level with the increasing complexity of life in South Africa." See "The emergence of the South African oral-style story", 65.

Europeans who, in his opinion, threatened the cultural integrity of Batswana and, presumably, of other black South Africans. More broadly, oral artforms - proverbs in this particular case - serve to challenge and criticise unacceptable human conduct.

Reinforcing this use of proverbs is the use of songs. In discussing songs in the novel we shall pay particular attention to a passage from Song of Songs, as the passage offers complex ways in which criticism and subversion of certain ideological leanings and political tendencies can be realised. The biblical investigation is done in the context of Plaatje's intimation that, in his opinion at least,

[t]he similarity between all pastoral nations is such that some passages in the history of the Jews read uncommonly like a description of the Bechuana in the nineteenth century. In the Psalms the similarity is so emphasized that it seems difficult to persuade oneself that the writer was not a Mochuana, e.g. Psalm 144. 11-14 and numerous other passages. The same thing may be said of the stories of the Patriarchs in the Pentateuch.¹¹⁴

The similarities, in Plaatje's view, extend to proverbs. Commenting on the

¹¹⁴ Plaatje, *Sechuana proverbs*, 11. The similarity between oral artforms and biblical material seems to be evident even in the case of stories. Isabel Hofmeyr points out, for example, that "[t]he oral impulse of the Bible is always apparent and, hardly surprisingly, Bible stories proved consistently popular in church and school [at a Berlin Mission Station]. It was often their similarity to *dinonwane* that accounted for their appeal. One woman, for example, especially liked the story of Jonah and the whale, the Biblical variant of the swallowing monster motif that frequently crops up in the *dinonwane* tradition." See "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 642.

contradictory nature of proverbs, he observes that "such anomalies are not peculiar to Sechuana. Such ancient saws as the Proverbs of Solomon also contain seemingly contradictory passages, often in the same chapter . . ."¹¹⁵ Since this question of similarities of biblical material to Setswana oral artforms has already been addressed in the preceding chapter, it need not be dealt with in detail here. What is of importance, however, is that, since the similarities suggest some equivalence, there is a case to be made for the inclusion of biblical material in the discussion of Plaatje's employment of Setswana oral forms in Mhudi.

Proverbs

In her study of the correspondence between Plaatje and chief Silas Molema, Jane Starfield observes that his "use of proverbs to negotiate the formal relationship between subject and chief, evoked, for him, the whole social and political order of chiefly rule that he wished to preserve."¹¹⁶ Proverbs could perform, in his correspondence with Molema, "their timeless task of 'shifting' the balance of power in the relationship."¹¹⁷ In this task, he employed them to acknowledge the authority of the chief while simultaneously endeavouring to influence his decisions, which is partly what characters like chief Moroka in Mhudi attempt. Chief Moroka acknowledges the power that his people have as well as their ability to resolve difficult problems wisely, yet at the same

¹¹⁵ Plaatje, *Sechuana proverbs*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Starfield, "The lore and the proverbs", 4.

¹¹⁷ Starfield, "The lore and the proverbs", 15.

time he asserts that his word is the wise one. Proverbs thus serve for Plaatje and his character Moroka as a negotiation strategy as well as an instrument of subtle self-assertion.

Often the need for self-assertion on the part of Plaatje was an outcome of a crisis over land and chiefdom. In 1914, for example, Silas Molema requested Plaatje to be party in the negotiations with the British administration, when he wanted to present Barolong land claims. Plaatje in turn would request financial assistance from the chief. On many occasions Plaatje needed such assistance in order to finance the newspapers which he edited.¹¹⁸ The newspapers served a political purpose: through them Plaatje analysed and criticised the policies of the Union government, while at the same time calling for unity among all South Africans. In an indirect way, his use of proverbs also served this purpose. In other words, he resorted to ancient cultural wisdom and expression to influence present political change. Plaatje was clearly not just putting memory to paper, as he might have said, but was also using the memory as an agent of criticism and reconstruction. To the extent that he challenged the Union government, the proverbs also served a subversive purpose.

If proverbs can serve a good purpose, it does not mean that they cannot be misleading. In Mhudi, for instance, Ra-Thaga dismisses Mhudi, despite the fact that he has often benefited from her "sober judgement", when, for example, she advises him to be weary of having a close relationship with Ton Qon, who seemed to her to be a dubious

¹¹⁸ See Starfield's paper for details.

personality. Remembering the proverb, "Never be led by a female lest thou fall over a precipice", he takes Mhudi's advice not to go hunting with a party led by Ton Qon, to be a mere female idiosyncrasy (73-74).¹¹⁹ As matters turn out, he leaves with the party while Ton Qon stays behind, indicating that he will follow them the following day. In Ra-Thaga's absence Ton Qon visits Mhudi and engages her in undesirable talk. Having failed to win her favour, he follows the party of hunters, aiming to kill Ra-Thaga and later, hopefully, take Mhudi as his wife. From the consequences of Ra-Thaga's failure to listen to his wife we see a criticism of male chauvinism, while Ton Qon's conduct demonstrates that male leadership is not necessarily flawless. His behaviour blemishes his own name and that of the Qorannas, although their king, Mossouw, saves the latter by punishing Ton Qon. The proverb is set against hard facts so that the reader can perceive the naivete of vision of those who accept it. Men are, in a sense, the precipices over which they themselves fall, and it is Mhudi who is proved right. This proverb, whose purpose seems to be to reinforce and perpetuate the subordination of women, actually serve as a criticism in the hard fact that Mhudi is in many ways better than most of the men in the novel.

Another instance of this juxtaposition occurs when Nakedi, an old Morolong, complains that his old age is an obstacle to his fighting the Ndebele. In response one man raises

¹¹⁹ There may or may not be a similar proverb in Afrikaans, but it remains interesting to note that, in addition to the oppressive laws the Voortrekkers accuse the British administration of the Cape Colony of passing, the administration is also unsatisfactory to them because, in the words of their leader Sarel Cilliers, "the English may soon have a woman for a king and you must admit that a woman could not lead an army" (84). Both fighting and leadership being a man's business, it follows that, like Ra-Thaga, Cilliers probably also believes that women cannot be good leaders.

the point that even the weak can fight quite well. He reminds Nakedi and other Barolong around him that the Voortrekkers are able to defy the Ndebele and challenge them to fight partly because their women, supposedly weak, help them in their battles by loading and reloading their guns. Because the Ndebele kill women in their attacks on other tribes, the character says, it might be a good idea to take women along to fight the Ndebele. Women and old men presumably share one thing: physical weakness. Yet they can prove to be invaluable in difficult circumstances. Accordingly, they are not necessarily as useless as Nakedi suggests he is. Women and old men are a "fire" which is necessary for quenching "lightning fire", as the proverb goes (110). Indeed, Mhudi saves Ra-Thaga when he has been seriously injured by Ton Qon who has attempted to kill him. In this sense she has quenched some lightning fire because she was a fire herself. The two proverbs serve here to correct and balance each other because, as Plaatje says, "the whole truth about a fact cannot always be summed up in one pithy saying":

It may have several different aspects, which, taken separately, seem to be contradictory and have to be considered in connexion with their surrounding circumstances. To explain this connexion is the work of a sermon or essay, not a proverb. All the latter can do is to express each aspect by itself and let them balance each other.¹²⁰

A further act of balancing is suggested in Mhudi's advice to Umnandi, Mzilikazi's

¹²⁰ Plaatje, *Sechuana proverbs*, 12.

favourite wife, namely that Umnandi must try to quench fire by persuading her husband and her male acquaintances to stop waging unnecessary wars, in which mostly children and women die, or at least experience the pain of having their sons and husbands slain. We see here the use of a proverb to correct another proverb - the one that says women are not good leaders - and through that to challenge gender stereotypes and to question the justifiability of marginalising the aged. The second proverb about fire is subversive in that it undermines the general stereotype against women, not only within Barolong society but within all patriarchal societies.

Mhudi's criticism of men is also in part a criticism of their maker, for she associates men with brutality:

Surely He [the Maker] cannot be pleased with the Matabele or with Ton Qon; and if they too are the creatures of the God of life, what did He make such people for? Did He also make the dreadful venomous reptiles that infest the land, I wonder? And if so, why? (75)

"Land" reminds us that the struggles involve fighting over geographical space, while "reptiles" serves, metaphorically, to refer to Mzilikazi, Ton Qon and other men who, like animals, fail to think. Ton Qon's failure as a thinker is captured humorously when he engages Mhudi in the "highly objectionable conversation" already mentioned. Ton Qon, we are told, "did the *talking* in the light of the wood-fire on the hearth while she did the *thinking*" (74 - emphasis added). In her thinking she sees light: she successfully outwits him and manages to escape by pretending to go looking for more wood for the

fire.

As a mediative strategy, we see a fascinating use of proverbs by the chief of the Barolong, Moroka. In an attempt to persuade his nation to help the Voortrekkers fight the Ndebele, he reminds the Barolong that "the foolish dam suckles her young while lying down; but the wise dam suckles hers standing up and looking out for approaching hunters" (112). The hunters in this case are the Ndebele, who have mercilessly invaded the Voortrekkers' territory and killed a number of them, and who are possibly going to do likewise to the Barolong. Since the hunters are already in view - they have crossed a boundary, the Vaal River, and are now on the Barolong side - and the Barolong are made aware of this, it is up to them to respond to this imminent danger.

Knowing of the danger is part of suckling one's young on one's feet. Taking action by supporting the Voortrekkers would in Moroka's view complete this wise process of suckling one's young on one's feet, for then the danger would be eradicated. What is also appealing is that both the Barolong and the Voortrekkers will be avenging the deaths of their massacred people - the Barolong were killed in the Kunana massacre, which historically took place in 1832. The co-operation between the two groups would mean a strong force that would match the strength and ferocity of Mzilikazi's warriors. Inviting the Voortrekkers to come and stay next to him at the foot of Black Mountain, Moroka concludes by quoting an old saying: "the quarry of two dogs is never too strong" (113).

"Dogs" is a particularly apt word in that, since the Barolong and the Voortrekkers intend

pursuing the Ndebele, they now become the hunters while the latter become the hunted. It is now up to the Ndebele to conduct themselves like the wise dam. We see in the two proverbs a suggestion of position and power shifts. Also of importance is that the Barolong and the Voortrekkers, both as victims of Ndebele imperialism and as avengers, are, despite colour differences, equals. In other words, in invoking the proverbs, Moroka indirectly calls for racial unity, and through him Plaatje expresses the same idea. That is, there is an expression of a sense of racial (and possible national) unity both within and outside the text. The employment of proverbs in the cases mentioned above serves to negotiate difficult political matters, to influence people's decisions and to serve subversive ends without too blunt a personalisation of conflicts.

Unlike Barolong orators, Ndebele speakers seldom appear to use proverbs or to use them properly. For example, not a single proverb is to be found in Sitonga's oratory, which is a flattering celebration of Langa's leadership of the young Ndebele warriors who brought Kunana to ashes. Also noteworthy is the fact that, unlike Moroka and later Gubuza, Sitonga does not invoke elders in his narrowly patriotic speech.

Gubuza's reply to Sitonga's oratory and other speeches like it is also without proverbs. Unlike Sitonga, however, Gubuza's speech draws on what the old, whose experiences have presumably made them wiser, have said. Supporting neither Langa nor chief Tauana, he points out that there is no evidence to suggest that Tauana is guilty. In the same way there is nothing that seems to justify Langa's conduct. Indeed, Gubuza maintains, "[he has] heard nothing from previous speakers [Sitonga and other unnamed characters] to indicate that the prince [Langa] had asked Tauana for any

reasons [for killing the emissaries]; nothing to show that he would not in due course have appeared in Inzwinyani to explain his action” (55). From this Gubuza concludes that Langa’s conduct was rash, for now the Ndebele have made a fresh enemy. His success is like all cheap successes which, as “[w]iseacres of different nationalities [are agreed] are followed by grievous aftermaths” (54). Also, he warns, “[o]ld people are equally agreed that individuals, especially nations, should beware of the impetuosity of youth” (54).

What is fascinating about Gubuza’s criticism of Sitonga’s speech and Langa’s rashness is not only that it draws from ancient wisdom in the way that proverbs do: this wisdom, he says, is drawn from his travels. Plaatje would probably agree that travelling, like hunting and looking after livestock, exposes one to a variety of experiences - according to him a source of proverbs and wisdom. Also of interest is the fact that what Gubuza cites is to be found in different societies: in Zululand, Swaziland, Tongaland and Basotholand, as well as in the unnamed “northern forests”, “western deserts” and “eastern and southern seas”. Gubuza universalises human tradition and the wisdom it entails, in a manner rather similar to Plaatje’s suggestion that the similarity and nature of proverbs is universal. Drawing on this universal wisdom, Gubuza further attacks Langa’s short-sightedness as well as that of his blind followers. Because of his plain talk, he is, not too surprisingly, accused by his society of being unpatriotic (55) and by Dambuza of having spoken like a woman (57).

Songs

What is said of proverbs so far can also be said of songs. The best example of the complex usage of songs in Mhudi is possibly the reference to a "remarkable passage in the Song of Songs, namely":

'I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem,
As the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon.
Look not upon me because I am black,
For the Sun hath looked upon me.
My mother's children were angry with me,
They made me the keeper of the vineyards
But my own vineyards have I not kept.' (91-92)

Looked at simply, this passage serves to reinforce Half-a-Crown's description of Umnandi's beauty. There is, however, more to it than meets the eye.

The passage is also a look into oppression. The speaker appeals for compassion, which the Sun has failed to bestow on him because it made him different from other people who are not black. The lack of compassion on the side of the sun proved too costly as it angered his "mother's children", through no fault of his own - he is, after all, comely. Consequently, because of the colour difference, he was enslaved, ensuring that he takes care of their welfare at the expense of his own. We see in the broken brother/sisterhood bonds that external forces (sun and skin colour) change human behaviour (attitudes of brothers and sisters). Interestingly, the speaker ends up appealing for compassion from those outside his family. Even more interesting is the

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indication that he appeals to women (daughters of Jerusalem) for this compassion.

Half-a-Crown tries to make the passage meaningful by contextualising it - he substitutes "vineyards" for "cornfields", and suggests that he can now visualise Umnandi's beauty "with accuracy" (92). We may also contextualise the passage further by suggesting that Umnandi is in the same difficult position as the speaker in the passage. Because of her beauty and virtues, which win her Mzilikazi's favour, she is hated by his other wives. They use her childlessness as an occasion to pass sly remarks about and thereby torment her. In the end they plot against her and she is forced into exile.

In exile Umnandi finds some protection from the Barolong who are enemies of the Ndebele. She finds the greatest support from Mhudi who reveres her virtues and cares less for her childlessness, which is not her fault. When later Umnandi resolves to join the Ndebele with the potential danger of being unwelcome, Mhudi reminds her of their duties as women, namely to preach peace to their husbands and their male acquaintances. In both the passage from Song of Songs and Mhudi, women are seen as sources of compassion, love and sanctuary. This view of women, while perhaps stereotypical, nevertheless once again challenges the notion that women lead people astray if given leadership positions. Arguably, then, their status as women should not lead anyone into anger, much as people's blackness is no justification for their enslavement.

The passage is also used implicitly to criticise the behaviour of the Voortrekkers. They

look down upon blacks, including Ra-Thaga, "their friend", who is not allowed to share their utensils and who is, like other blacks, referred to as a "kafir" (118). Later, when the Barolong and the Griquas express their willingness and preparedness to combine forces with the Voortrekkers against Mzilikazi and his people, the Voortrekkers prove to be unwilling to share the spoils of the looming battle fairly. The Barolong join forces with the Voortrekkers on condition that, should they defeat the Ndebele, they will be able to keep their former territories while the latter shall take the land that belonged to the Ndebele (142). This condition runs against Potgieter's "word of honour that after killing off the Matabele and looting their property, they would make a just division of the spoil by keeping all the land for the Boers and handing over the captured cattle to the Barolong" (141). But, as chief Tauana asks, "what could one do with a number of cattle if he possessed no land on which to feed them? Will his cattle run on the clouds! And their grass grow in the air?" (142). Potgieter's absurd bargain is part of the superiority complex of the Voortrekkers: they assume that because they are racially different, they are superior and must be treated as such. They are, in short, inconsiderate and greedy. Their greed is made the subject of Mzilikazi's oratory (174), which we will examine in the next chapter.

In South Africa in the 1910s this greed finds expression in the Natives' Land Act of 1913, which allocated about thirteen per cent of land to blacks while the rest was allocated to whites. "Personally," writes Sol Plaatje of this Act,

if anyone had told us at the beginning of 1913, that a majority of members of the Union Parliament were capable of passing a law like the Natives'

Land Act, whose object is to prevent the natives from ever rising above the position of servants to whites, we would have regarded that person as a fit subject for the lunatic asylum. But the passing of that Act and its operation have rudely forced upon us the fact that the Union Parliament is capable of producing any measure that is subversive of native interests

. . . ¹²¹

If in the above quotation it is the members of the Union Parliament who are fit subjects for a mental asylum, in Mhudi it is Potgieter and his followers who are. Considering that the battles described in the novel took place during the Mfecane in the 1830s¹²², we begin to see the roots of racial oppression and unfair distribution of land in that period, if not earlier. In 1913, as in the 1830s, there was enough land for all, as Moroka and his people say (84), and this unfairness was uncalled for.

Shava argues that the "problems of segregation and land deprivation usually

¹²¹ Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa*, 71.

¹²² I am aware of the problems surrounding the term Mfecane. For example, Piniel Shava defines it as the "scattering of the Ngoni, Shangani and Ndebele ethnic groups to the north, west and south of Southern Africa after their defeat by Shaka." See *A people's voice: black South African writing in the twentieth century* (London: ZED Books, 1989), 5. John Wright maintains that the widespread warfare and scattering of ethnic groups did not result from conflicts with Shaka. See "If we can't call it the Mfecane, then what can we call it?: moving the debate forward" (African Studies seminar paper No.364, University of the Witwatersrand, 1994). Plaatje's version in Mhudi seems to suggest that the invasion of the Barolong lands between Central Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert by the Ndebele, was an outcome of the latter's unpreparedness to be ruled by Shaka (28).

associated with the Boers alone, were, in fact, created by the British government".¹²³ Mhudi, superficially, seems to suggest that the problems stem from the Voortrekkers. Yet, we are told that these Voortrekkers are fleeing the Cape Colony because they claim the British administration there oppresses them (83). Plaatje does not confirm this accusation. In much the same way, the Ndebele usurp the Barolong land because they do not like the way Shaka rules them. The problem of land distribution, Mhudi seems to suggest, is attributable to many racial and ethnic groups, with the deciding factor being an assumption that cultural and/or colour differences presuppose that one group is superior to another and is, as such, entitled to appropriate natural resources in its own favour at the expense of others, and, if possible, enslave the "inferior" groups. It is exactly this attitude that the passage from Song of Songs of which Half-a-Crown is reminded, criticises. Thus the passage can be seen to criticise, in the novel, the attitude of Mzilikazi and the Voortrekkers as well as the stern rule of Shaka and possibly of the British administration, while looking beyond the text, it allegorically subverts the ideology of the Union Parliament and its supporters.

An explicit criticism of the British administration is given as a direct attack on Lord Gladstone in *Native life in South Africa*. Gladstone, it seems, did not have the interests of blacks at heart. He had no problem, for example, in authorising the passing of the Natives' Land Act, thus reducing blacks to the level of squatters. The cruelty of the authorisation and the severity of the attack on Gladstone are captured in Plaatje's definition of a squatter as well as in his description of the readiness with which

¹²³ Shava, *A people's voice*, 10-11.

Gladstone authorised the Act:

A squatter in South Africa is a *native* who owns some livestock and, having no land of his own, *hires* a farm or grazing and ploughing rights from a land-owner, to raise grain for his own use and feed his stock. Hence, these squatters are hit very hard by an Act which passed both Houses of Parliament during the session of 1913, received the signature of the Governor-General on June 16, was gazetted on June 19, and forthwith came into operation. It may be here mentioned that on that day Lord Gladstone signed no fewer than sixteen new Acts of Parliament - some of them being rather voluminous - while three days earlier, His Excellency signed another batch of eight, of which the bulk was beyond the capability of any mortal to read and digest in four days.¹²⁴

With the extended harrowing description in *Native life in South Africa* of the suffering of blacks as a result of this Act, it is not surprising that Sol Plaatje could write: "Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a *pariah* in the land of his birth"¹²⁵ (emphasis added). To underscore the significance of the passage from *Song of Songs* as a commentary on racial politics, and perhaps also as an indication that racial injustices violate biblical teachings, he uses

¹²⁴ Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa*, 21-22.

¹²⁵ Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa*, 21.

this very passage as an epithet to Chapter 1 of *Native life in South Africa*.¹²⁶

If the speaker in the passage hopes for understanding, compassion and sanctuary from outsiders in the way that Umnandi does, then Plaatje, as one of those looked down upon because of their blackness, hopes for the same from the British government and people generally, to whom *Native life in South Africa* is largely addressed. The appeal for intervention in South African politics, he writes,

is not on behalf of the naked hordes of cannibals who are represented in fantastic pictures displayed in the shop-windows in Europe, most of them imaginary; but it is on behalf of five million loyal British subjects who shoulder 'the black man's burden' every day, doing so without looking forward to any decoration or thanks.¹²⁷

The passage from *Song of Songs*, read in conjunction with the political injustices described in *Mhudi* as well as in *Native life in South Africa*, and keeping in mind Plaatje's association of biblical songs with Setswana oral artforms, makes it clear that orality can, and for him does, serve a political purpose.

A song that Plaatje uses as an ironic criticism of Langa after the Kunana massacre reads:

¹²⁶ Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa*, 21.

¹²⁷ Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa*, 18.

Come, let us sing!

Mzilikazi has a son.

Come, let us sing!

Langa is the name of his son.

Come, let us dance!

Langa has a spear.

Come, let us prance!

His sword is a sharp pointed spear.

Go forth and summon the girls of Soduza

To the dance;

Go call the maidens to the Puza,

And the dance;

For Mzilikazi has a son!

Langa, the fighter, is his son! (51)

This celebration is in line with Sitonga's celebratory oration. The singers, like Sitonga, instead of considering the implications of Langa's expedition, are content to laud his victory. Gubuza's criticism of Sitonga's speech therefore applies equally to the song.

Even the narrator criticises the celebrations, for the Ndebele fail to demand, or at least ask for, an explanation for the massacre. For them the looting of the Barolong stock is enough:

They had heard that such an enormous booty of horned cattle had never

been captured in the history of human warfare. No one, much less a woman, cared to know the cause of the raid, for the end had amply justified the means. They knew, and for them the knowledge was enough, that Prince Langa had raided the Barolong cattle-outposts, killed the owners and captured every beast. Hence their joy was too great to consider the relatives of their own young fighters who fell at the point of the spear of the Barolong defenders. (51)

Even Mzilikazi justifies the celebrations, pointing out to Gubuza that "Langa paid a price for his victory and in the midst of our rejoicings some mothers' eyes were wet with tears'" (58). Clearly, it is the mothers and their dead children who have paid the price rather than Langa. For his part Langa earns himself status and power. This general failure to be considerate of other people's pain and suffering suggests that the song is at best an expression of barbarism. The song, in other words, is a severe criticism of warfare in general as well as being subversive of narrow Ndebele patriotism in particular.

The song also seems to suggest that Langa is now worthy of a wife, not only as Mzilikazi's son but also as a great fighter. Manhood, in this case, is associated with good fighting. Yet Gubuza argues that Langa is rash, and therefore surely not a great fighter. If Langa means the sun, and the light it implies, then Gubuza suggests that Mzilikazi's Langa can only mean darkness for and destruction of the Ndebele, for in his own words, he is "convinced that the owners of so many cattle will never rest until they recover them":

It should not be forgotten that all these cattle belonged to men and not to children [surely implicating Langa here]. It is clear that they increased and multiplied under the wands of clever magicians or they would never have bred in such abundance. We know not the manner in which the Barolong prepare their spells, and I shudder when I think of the day when the revengeful owners of those herds will come back for them. The carousels of those who are now enjoying themselves outside will not save us from their wrath. (57-58)

When finally the vengeful owners come with the Voortrekkers and the Griquas, it is experienced *men* like Gubuza rather than boys like Langa who are expected to do serious fighting - Langa actually gets killed in the battle (171). And, as Gubuza predicts, the Ndebele lose the battle and, humiliated, migrate immediately to Gubulawayo.

Stylistically, Langa's praise song provides yet another instance of Plaatje's search for English equivalents of Setswana oral artforms. The song takes the form of a sonnet. The first three quatrains have the rhyme scheme ababdcdefef, followed by a couplet with the rhyme scheme gg. The quatrains are not divided by line breaks. Rather, they are distinguished by what each emphasises. For example, the first emphasises the idea of singing and of genealogy ("Mzilikazi has a son"), naming (Langa) to suggest particularity. The second quatrain draws attention to fighting ("spear"), pride (suggested by "prance") and dancing rather than simply singing, fascinatingly linking voice to body language in order to reinforce the worth of both Langa's genealogy and

fighting skills. The third quatrain completes the process by pointing out that singing and dancing in praise of Langa falls short of recognising his worth. Accordingly, the singers recommend that maidens be summoned to join in the celebrations, possibly, as already argued, suggesting that he deserves a wife. The couplet closes off the development of the idea that Langa is worth a lot by reasserting his identity both as a fighter and as Mzilikazi's son. Despite this powerful dual identity recognised by the singers, Gubuza, as we have shown, reveals his damaging rashness that is a source of new hostilities.

Conclusion

Tim Couzens indicates that "[s]ongs are used [in Mhudi] as a kind of tonal punctuation and the Song of Songs which Plaatje quotes at the beginning of Chapter 10 was virtually Plaatje's signature tune, since he used it to preface most of his newspaper editorials" (15). We contend that the songs, and of course the proverbs, serve a more radical purpose than that of simply acting as tonal punctuation or proving variety. Oral artforms in Mhudi are mediators in important discussions in which both the authority of established wisdom - though subject to questioning and revision - as well as good interpersonal and social relationships are required. They serve, also, to criticise and subvert certain ideological tendencies and the political practices resulting therefrom.

4. ZUNGU, SHATTERED DREAMS AND MULTIPLICITY OF READERSHIPS IN MHUDI

Introduction

In an examination of the interplay between orality and literacy in the African novel, Emmanuel Obiechina notes:

One major aspect of this interplay of the oral and literary traditions in the African novel is the phenomenon of the story-within-a-story or the narrative proverb . . . The novelists reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature introduce oral stories - myths, oral prose narratives, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, etc. - within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes and the formulation of their artistic principles. These embedded stories are referred to as narrative proverbs, because they perform organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature.¹²⁸

We have already indicated that Sol Plaatje perceived literacy as a mode of preserving orality and the cultural wisdom it entails. We have also suggested that in his attempt to preserve Setswana oral artforms, Plaatje simultaneously employed these forms to challenge stereotypical views of orality as an iconography of the backward and

¹²⁸ Emmanuel Obiechina, "Narrative proverbs in the African novel." *Research in African literatures* 24.4(1993), 124.

unsophisticated African, while also using proverbs and songs, as we demonstrated in the preceding chapter, as mediative strategies as well as instruments of various forms of subversion. Because he viewed Setswana oral artforms as being similar to oral artforms of other societies, including the Jews written about in the Bible, he does not seem to have intended his employment of orality only as an illustration of the authenticity of his Setswana heritage. In addition, he was interested in the wisdom accumulated through ages and across ethnic-racial lines both in his society and world-wide. Also, he saw, in Mhudi at least, that he could employ orality for political purposes. This chapter sets out to show how Plaatje uses oral prose narratives¹²⁹, with particular emphasis on the story of Zungu, to allegorically address various political issues - like the Natives' Land Act of 1913 and marriage acts in the Transvaal - while

¹²⁹ I use the term "oral prose narratives" (or simply "prose narratives") instead of "folktales" because of the negative meanings generally attached to the latter. For this reason Isidore Okpewho has this to say about the advantage of using "oral narrative": "So long as we disabuse our minds of the sort of prejudice which earlier generations of scholars had about the concept of folk as the 'uneducated' and therefore irrational and unimaginative dwellers of small communities, then there may be situations in which we can excuse the use of the term 'folktale' for purposes of convenience. The term 'oral narrative' is, however, preferred not only because it leaves little room for that prejudice but also because - perhaps like the term 'oral literature' - it gives primary emphasis to the medium of expression of this form of art, which is word of mouth." See *African oral literature: backgrounds, characters, and continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), 163. Ruth Finnegan points out that the advantage of using "oral narratives" is that one does not fall into the trap of treating them as remnants of a dying or dead culture, or of having to distinguish between fables, myths, legends and other forms of prose narratives. She argues and even illustrates that such distinctions are often unfounded and misleading, and tend to be more blinding than illuminating. See *Oral literature in Africa*, 315-34. Sol Plaatje himself does not seem to have had problems with using "folktales" and "fables" interchangeably. See Willan, *Sol Plaatje: a biography*, 336. In our times, the real problem with "folktales" is that, in Isabel Hofmeyr's words, "there is an almost unshakeable belief that *dinonwane* are for children, a perception which may be indebted to the way these stories have been institutionalised in primary schools." See Hofmeyr, "Jonah and the swallowing monster", 647.

simultaneously suggesting a multiplicity of readerships.

In discussing oral prose narratives here we are not merely demonstrating that they serve similar purposes to that of proverbs. Such similarity of purpose is obvious in the context of *Mhudi*. What is of major importance to us is to suggest that oral prose narratives serve as allegories. Even in this case we do not simply offer a re-run of the criticism of the novel which we outlined in the first chapter. Rather, unlike other critics, we argue that allegory in *Mhudi*, especially in the story of Zungu, is self-reflexive while at the same time reflecting critically on other incidents and events in the novel. The result is sometimes a measure of ambiguity of meaning and intention - one is not entirely sure as to what Plaatje meant the reader to make of such an allegory. Also, we argue that oral narratives serve as a useful strategy for projecting a multiplicity of readerships - ethnic, national as well as transnational. These readerships are of course alluded to in various ways throughout the text. Accordingly, we need to look at a few examples of such allusions and examine the extent to which they reinforce the effect of the oral narratives. In illustrating our contention about the self-interrogating nature of allegory in *Mhudi*, and on oral narratives as a strategy for projecting multiple readerships, we offer a close reading of the most remarkable oral narrative in the novel, namely the story of Zungu.

The Story of Zungu

The story of Zungu is recalled by Mzilikazi after his nation is defeated and humiliated by the Barolong-Griqua-Voortrekker alliance. The story is about a man, Zungu, who

tries to tame a lion cub, hoping that he will in future use it to hunt valuable wild animals. Despite the fact that he feeds it with the milk of his cows, the cub grows up to betray him - true to its nature, Mzilikazi suggests. Initially it is "apparently tame and meek, just like an ordinary domestic puppy," but later on it eats his children and chews his wives, and, in killing it, Zungu is himself nearly killed (175).

The story is used by Mzilikazi to predict the inevitable betrayal of his enemies, the Barolong - and Batswana generally - by the Voortrekkers. In so far as the Barolong have provided shelter and other forms of assistance to the Voortrekkers, they are like Zungu while their assistance is similar to his feeding of the cub with his cows' milk. Since the Voortrekkers urgently needed the assistance, they seemed tame and meek, just like the cub. At least one manifestation of this meekness is their promise to let chiefs Tauana and Moroka keep the lands they want should the allies defeat the Ndebele.

It would seem that the Voortrekkers' misleading meekness is well known to Mzilikazi. They have, after all, displayed it in their treatment of Chaka: "Chaka served us just as treacherously. Where is Chaka's dynasty now? Extinguished, by the very Boers who poisoned my wives and are pursuing us today" (175). We see here that the comparison of the Barolong to Zungu is extended to include Chaka. According to Mzilikazi, Chaka, like the Barolong, was blinded by seeming friendship. Indeed, the Griquas are no different from the Barolong and the Zulus under Chaka. They have not only laid snares for Mzilikazi and his nation (174), they have also joined forces with the blind Barolong and the deceitful Voortrekkers. Like Zungu in the story, Chaka learnt

his bitter lesson, and in due course it would be the Barolong, and obviously the Griquas, who would learn theirs.

The seriousness of the predicted betrayal of the Barolong is described in disturbing terms, as it does not only mean the taking away of their land, but also their total enslavement and their dehumanisation. In this process of dehumanisation, it is perhaps women who will suffer the experience of slavery more severely than men, as it is both their physical labour and their sexuality that will be mercilessly abused:

They will turn Bechuana women into beasts of burden to drag their loaded waggons to their granaries, while their own bullocks are fattening on the hillside and pining for exercise. They will use the whiplash on the bare skins of women to accelerate their paces and quicken their activities: they shall take Bechuana women to wife and, with them, breed a race of half man and half goblin, and they will deny them their legitimate lobolo [sic]. With their cries unheeded these Bechuana will waste away in helpless fury till the gnome offspring of such miscegenation rise up against their cruel sires; by that time their mucus will blend with their tears past their chins down to their heels, then shall come our turn to laugh. (175)

The suffering of the Barolong that Mzilikazi predicts matches that of Zungu on various levels. First Zungu loses his children to his lion pet just as the Barolong will lose their youth to wars initiated by the Voortrekkers, without a reward (175). Secondly, they will

lose their womenfolk to the male Voortrekkers, like Zungu lost his to the lion. Thirdly, Zungu is a defeated man in that, in losing all the members of his family, he has lost all that matter most in his life, just as the Barolong will become defeated, lose all and become helpless.

To underscore this sense of helplessness, Mzilikazi says that they will not be able to wipe off their tears and mucus. According to Mzilikazi, such suffering seems to be a curse for anyone who defies tradition. For Zungu's defiance is expressed by his decision to tame the (naturally?) untameable, while the Barolong's finds expression in their alliance with "spirits":

'As for those other Bechuana robbers, the infernal spirits they have invoked upon me will recoil on them. Tradition tells of no instance where a man has ever found a neighbour in spirits of that kind. Spirits are not of this world and the witch who associates with them does so at his peril.'

(174)

Since the Barolong have defied tradition, Mzilikazi seems to suggest, it will be little wonder when the Voortrekkers defy the Barolong tradition by not paying lobola. A worse punishment, however, is that the Batswana women will give birth not to human beings but rather to grotesque animals (half man and half goblin) whose behaviour is equally bizarre, as they will revolt against their forefathers.

We cannot ignore the significance of the predicted sexual exploitation of Batswana

women by the Voortrekker men, for the inverse does not apply: the Batswana men will not exploit Voortrekker women. This question of sexuality, gender and race is made an issue in Sol Plaatje's *The mote and the beam*¹³⁰, in which he complains about the often one-sided application of marriage laws and policies in South Africa, especially in the Transvaal, in the 1910s. He observes, on the one hand, that in this province, while white men could not marry black women, cohabitation was nevertheless permitted. On the other hand, any love or sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman was likely to be construed as an instance of "Black Peril" by which, in Plaatje's words, "the South African Whites mean `assaults by black men upon white women.'" ¹³¹ The partiality of the law, in Plaatje's view, did not only allow for the abuse of black women by both their fellow black men and their white counterparts, but also for births of illegitimate children and the advent of prostitution. He sums up his view on the whites' contribution to the general social (im)morality of the Batswana thus: "... as it is true that white men brought Christianity and civilisation to Bechuanaland, it is also true that the first authenticated cases of rape, murder and suicide in Bechuanaland were the work of a white man." ¹³² The envisaged sexual exploitation of the Batswana women in Mhudi can arguably be read as marking the beginnings of such cases of rape.

Another point to note from the above is that the Voortrekkers will not only betray the

¹³⁰ Sol Plaatje, *The mote and the beam* (New York: Young's Book Exchange, 1921).

¹³¹ Plaatje, *The mote and the beam*, 3.

¹³² Plaatje, *The mote and the beam*, 15.

Barolong: they will also betray their own sense of racial purity and sanctity. Their reluctance to share their utensils with "kaffirs" is in sharp contrast to their preparedness to engage with them in a more intimate activity: sexual intercourse. The result is the birth of "mulattoes", a powerful reminder that attempts at maintaining racial purity are a futile exercise.

A keener sense of this self-betrayal is made explicit in *The mote and the beam* when Plaatje contrasts the racial/ethnic and sexual practices of the white South Africans of his time to those of blacks:

There was a time when it was an abomination for Basuto to have social intercourse with Shangaans, and when Bechuana custom forbade intermarriage with Matebele. They carried their prejudice to its logical conclusion and allowed no exceptions in favour of illegitimate unions with Shangaan or Matebele girls. But a white South African apparently finds no paradox in procreating illegitimate half-castes with the girls of a race he looks down upon.¹³³

Mzilikazi's prophecy is, as can be seen, partly an allegorical criticism of the Transvaal marriage laws in the 1910s, the failure of the Voortrekkers and their descendants to appreciate the assistance they received from the Barolong, the unnecessary endeavour and subsequent failure of the whites to keep to the "purity" of their race, as well as

¹³³ Plaatje, *The mote and the beam*, 9.

being an exploration and a criticism of some of the conditions that can lead to exploitative relationships that in turn lead to illegitimate children.

While the criticism in *The mote and the beam* is directed at white South Africans, the one in *Mhudi* is directed at both the Voortrekkers and the Batswana, as well as Chaka and his nation and the Griquas. All ethnic and racial groups in *Mhudi* contribute in various ways towards making political life difficult both for themselves and for others. Thus the criticism in Mzilikazi's speech is not just levelled at the Barolong: it is also levelled against the Voortrekkers and, arguably, the Ndebele themselves. For if the Barolong joined forces with the Griquas and the Voortrekkers, it is partly because the Ndebele terrorise the three groups. As such they are, in a sense, fellow sufferers. The Ndebele expansionist tendencies as well as their imposition of taxes on other tribes lead to the "unnatural" alliance. Therefore, the tendencies are themselves as unnatural and worthy of criticism as the alliance. Indeed, the defeat and humiliation of Mzilikazi and his nation by the allied forces, the re-appropriation by the Barolong and the Voortrekkers of the lands occupied by the Ndebele and the final migration of the Ndebele to Gu-Bulawayo can be seen as a shattering of their dream of a big Ndebele empire which Mzilikazi envisaged. The Barolong's dream of controlling their lands will also be shattered - in the same way that Zungu's was shattered. Arguably, the Ndebele, the Zulus under Chaka, the Barolong and the Griquas in the end prove themselves to be both wise and foolish in one, for their dreams of nation-building and/or self-protection as well as of owning and controlling their desired lands are at the same time a foundation for their own destruction.

Towards the end of Mhudi we sense the undertones of the impending Barolong defeat as Ra-Thaga and Mhudi part company with De Villiers and Hanneltjie. We are told that the two Voortrekkers offered the couple a waggon and its gear, as well as two bullocks to drag it along. De Villiers clearly mentions that the waggon "is in a rather poor state of repair" (184). Beyond that, Ra-Thaga and Mhudi have very little else, except the joy of going back to Thaba Nchu to join their people. Chief Tauana's desired lands, we must recall, include the destroyed Kunana and Notto's cattle outpost, and are therefore also in a rather poor state. The poor state of the waggon therefore comes to serve as a symbol of the poverty of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, and their chief and his nation generally. While Thaba Nchu - chief Moroka's dominion - is itself not destroyed, the fact that Kunana is implies that the Barolong have, on balance, and that Tauana's people may in part have to rely on the magnanimity of Moroka. If the Ndebele are to blame for the Barolong loss of natural resources like land in Mhudi, then the greed of white South Africans in the 1910s is to blame for the same reason. Both the Ndebele and these whites wanted more land for themselves despite the fact that they had enough already. The greed, in the case of the whites, is articulated through the Natives' Land Act of 1913. It is in this sense that Mhudi is often read as an allegorical reference to and criticism of this Act.

What is often left unstated, however, is the point that Plaatje's use of the story of Zungu is also a reference to the past. In his brief biography of the historical chief Moroka, Plaatje suggests that around 1834, the Voortrekkers received cruel treatment from the Ndebele, who usurped all their oxen and other useful possessions. Having come into contact with Moroka and his people previously, the Voortrekkers decided to

return to the Barolong to seek assistance, which they received in abundance. Together the Barolong and the Voortrekkers went to fight and defeat the Ndebele, with the Barolong losing "very dearly", and "for which history records absolutely no reciprocation on the part of the Boers."¹³⁴ In addition to this, the Voortrekkers, after Moroka's death, used the opportunity afforded by the strife between his two sons fighting over chieftaincy, to annex Moroka's lands. The annexation was engineered by President Brand. According to Plaatje, the ingratitude of the Voortrekkers and their descendants reaches its peak in 1913.¹³⁵

Bakwena

The question of the impending enslavement of the Barolong is given in the historical account as a request by Paul Kruger:

In the early fifties (1800s) Commandant Paul Kruger sent a Boer messenger to Dithakong, the headquarters of the Ra-Tshidi, stating that he was leading an army against Sechele, the Chief of the Bakwena in the Protectorate, and asking 'his friend Montsioa' to assist him with a couple of regiments, fully equipped [failing which] the Commandant would be satisfied if he sent a troop of men to act as guides, as ox wagon drivers and as herders to drive back to the Transvaal the looted Bakwena cattle, thus leaving the Boers to do the actual fighting.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 12.

¹³⁵ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 13.

¹³⁶ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 13-14.

Failing to understand what wrong Sechele had committed, Montsioa turned down Kruger's request. The Voortrekkers nevertheless ensured that Sechele suffered severely: he "was despoiled and denuded of his cattle; his homes were destroyed including the mission house of Dr. Livingstone, and many women and children were taken into the service of the victors."¹³⁷ Thus what looks on the surface to be a prediction by Mzilikazi in the novel is in fact Plaatje's strategy of alluding to the past, and using the past to allegorically draw parallels with both the present and the future.

In invoking the story of Zungu, Mzilikazi seems to be attempting to teach his nation a lesson. In practice, he suggests, they must have learnt it from Chaka, and they are about to learn more from the Barolong. However, we must not be led away from seeing the prose narrative as Mzilikazi's strategy of shifting focus away from his own complicity. Surely he knows that he is guilty for having threatened the Barolong and the Voortrekkers by remaining close to them instead of following the advice of his fortune-tellers to move northwards. He knows too, if only retrospectively, that in executing his commands when attacking Tauana's people at Kunana, Langa exceeded his orders, and did more damage than was called for (95). In these two cases, Mzilikazi, his son and the "patriotic" nation generally were like the unwise dam.

If Mzilikazi's dream of super-expansionism in the end leads to his defeat and humiliation, then he himself overlooks the importance of the defeat and the humiliation. Instead of trying to advise the Barolong and the Griquas about their mistake in co-

¹³⁷ English in Africa 3.2(1976), 14.

operating with the Voortrekkers, and instead of considering possibilities of reconciliation with them, he passes the lessons he draws from Zungu and Chaka's experiences to his nation and in the same breath undermines his own wisdom by calling for more Ndebele imperialism - which effectively means another grave threat to other African nations:

'Rally now to your burdens, Amandebele mothers; strap your babies to your waists; let us direct our toes to the north, for there is refuge there. The Mandebele assegai has served us well in the past. It shall be the indicator of our road to the land of plenty, in a far country that is good for raising corn and the grazing of cattle.' (175-76)

What happened in the past was that the assegai was used to usurp lands from others while there was enough fertile land for everyone, and thus the assegai comes to symbolise expansionism and greed. And in the past it was this abuse of the assegai that led to discontent and revolts by the oppressed groups like the Barolong. Presumably, the same process will repeat itself in the north, more so as Mzilikazi and Umnandi's son seems to be even more ruthless than Mzilikazi himself in pursuing the dream of a great Ndebele empire:

In due course the Matabele, having struck the Shashi camp, established a new capital named Gu-Bulawayo in the far north. There a magnificent feast was repeated a year later, for Umnandi had presented the king and nation with her son, the new born prince! In the course of a prosperous

life, during which the Matabele grew in power and affluence, Umnandi's son extended the awe-inspiring sway of his government to the distant territories of the hinterland; and when at length he succeeded his father as Matabele king, he wielded a yet greater power than that of his renowned father. (181)

As I have argued elsewhere, Umnandi's good nature does not seem to be a sufficient influence on her son, and possibly on other men.¹³⁸ Also, the expansionism seems to reinforce her view that "wars will remain as long as there are men on this planet."¹³⁹ It is possible that, like Ra-Thaga, the son might have dismissed Umnandi's teachings as mere female idiosyncrasy. More disturbingly, however, Mzilikazi's failure to learn from his experiences might suggest a general failure of human beings to learn. Alternatively, it might suggest the selective nature of learning. Looked at either way, his failure in many ways undermines the value of the story of Zungu to his people.

What perhaps reinforces this interpretation is the seemingly endless cycle of political dominance and betrayal that we see in the novel. According to Mzilikazi, the Ndebele are betrayed by Chaka and his Zulu nation, the Barolong and the Griquas. The Barolong, and by extension the Griquas and other black South Africans who co-operate with the Voortrekkers, will be betrayed by these very Voortrekkers, their children and their descendants. From the Barolong point of view, they are betrayed by the Ndebele

¹³⁸ Mpe, "Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition", 27.

¹³⁹ Mpe, "Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition", 28.

who destroy them and their city of Kunana because of the crime of one chief, Tauana. The Voortrekkers seem to blame the British in the Cape Colony for being unfair to them, while the British will probably also fail to understand the hostile outlook of the Voortrekkers towards them.

The story of Zungu, the destruction of Chaka's dynasty as well as the defeat and humiliation of the Ndebele are clearly meant to be lessons to learn from. Yet the cycle of dominance and betrayals deconstructs the force of both the story and the experiences as learning tools. If, as I argued earlier, the "treatment of history [in Mhudi] results in a novel that seems to oscillate between hope and, on a subtextual level at least, despair over the probabilities of ever achieving that which is clearly so desirable: peace and justice,"¹⁴⁰ then the oscillation is also between faith and lack of it in oral prose narratives - and proverbs and songs - as well as experience generally, as cognitive tools. While Plaatje values the use to which they can be put, he also implicitly seems to argue that the value attached to them is not entirely dependent on either the narrator or the writer as the latter, like the reader, is also engaged in the process of negotiating meaning with the audience or readership. As such they can only influence rather than determine the final interpretation. In this respect, Plaatje will probably agree with James Young on the nature of narrative and interpretation.

In his study of Holocaust narratives, Young makes an important point that events and their representation may be so closely linked that they are virtually inseparable. He

¹⁴⁰ Mpe, "Naturally these stories lost nothing by repetition", 28.

puts it thus:

Instead of isolating events from their representations, my approach recognizes that literary and historical truths of the Holocaust may not be entirely separable. That is, the truths of the Holocaust - both the factual and the interpretative - can no longer be said to lie beyond our understanding, but must now be seen to inhere in the ways we understand, interpret, and write its history. Indeed, since the facts of the Holocaust eventually obtain only in their narrative and cultural reconstructions, the interrelated problems of literary and historical interpretation might now be seen as conjoining in the study of 'literary historiography'. This is not to question the ultimate veracity in any given account, but it is to propose a search for the truth in the interpretation intrinsic to all versions of the Holocaust: both that interpretation which the writer consciously effects and that which his narrative necessarily accomplishes for him.¹⁴¹

Following Young's statement, the question of meaning in Zungu's story depends not only on the events in Zungu's life and the manner in which Mzilikazi narrates them, but also on the position of the narrator and his audience as this positioning influences interpretation of the story. The Ndebele, in this respect, interpret the narrative as victims. As such, an element of blame partly blinds them to the fact that the story

¹⁴¹ James Young, *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust: narrative and the consequences of interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 1-2.

doubles back on them, to include them in its criticism of the narrow vision that the Barolong and the Griquas are said by Mzilikazi to have. Their expansionist tendencies, we have pointed out, in the end outrage those that they oppress, and the latter in turn revolt. Yet the Ndebele fail to learn from these acts of revolt. This is an instance of the general narrowness of vision they accuse the Barolong of having. What we see is that if the construction or reconstruction of a narrative is a selective process, then so is an act of interpretation. In fact, interpretation involves a re-organisation of a given narrative, as it involves an act of linking or associating that narrative with other narratives and/or events. It is this linking or association that makes the narrative meaningful, or comprehensible.

Comprehension in narratives, according to Louis Mink, is "a characteristic kind of understanding which consists in thinking together in a single act, or in a cumulative series of acts, the complicated relationships of parts which can only be experienced *seriatim*."¹⁴² What is brought together in the Ndebele case is Zungu's folly, the Barolong and the Griquas' narrow vision, the Ndebele defeat and humiliation as well as their former military strength. As Mzilikazi's address shows, it is this former strength that encourages them to pursue further their military activities. If Mzilikazi and his nation are able to discern folly in others' political behaviour, then Plaatje probably meant the reader to see the same in the Ndebele.

In her essay on reading and interpretation, Naomi Schor identifies two types of

¹⁴² Louis Mink, "History and fiction as modes of comprehension." Ed. Ralph Cohen, *New directions in literary history* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 114.

interpreters: "the interpreting critic, for whom I reserve the term *interpreter*, and the interpreting character, whom I will refer to . . . as the *interpretend*."¹⁴³ The interpretend, she says, is "coextensive with the first-person narrator or main protagonist of the fiction."¹⁴⁴ Schor argues that it is through the interpretend that the writer endeavours to "tell the interpreter something *about* interpretation . . ."¹⁴⁵ We must note, however, that Schor focuses on texts that have only one interpretend. While in *Mhudi* Half-a-Crown is the main narrator there are, arguably, many characters that may reasonably be called interpretends in so far as they are allowed a substantial space within which to express themselves: their own experiences as well as their understanding of the significance or otherwise of those experiences. These include Mhudi, Ra-Thaga, Mzilikazi and even, perhaps to a lesser extent, the Voortrekkers. Since they have different ways of interpreting their experiences even when those experiences are similar, it becomes difficult to know exactly with whom Plaatje would agree. *Mhudi* is, in a sense, a dialogue of interpretations, dealing directly with the complexity and even ambiguous nature of interpretation. It thus needs a broader view of what text and reception are about.

Such a broader perspective is perhaps offered by David Shepherd in his essay on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Shepherd understands dialogism to be an ongoing

¹⁴³ Naomi Schor, "Fiction as interpretation/interpretation as fiction." Eds. Susan Suleiman & Inge Crosman, *The reader in the text: audience and interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), 168.

¹⁴⁴ Schor, "Fiction as interpretation", 168.

¹⁴⁵ Schor, "Fiction as interpretation", 170.

process of communication and influence between various contexts - contexts within texts, texts in given historical contexts, historical contexts in relation to other historical contexts and so on. Agreeing with Ken Hirschkop that "meaning lies neither in text nor context but in relation between them," Shepherd goes on to express his conviction that "Bakhtin's account of the novel and dialogism, even as it seemingly accepts and bolsters the self-sufficiency of 'literature', insistently gestures to a world outside it ..." ¹⁴⁶

In my understanding, the world outside the text refers to the historical context (setting) of the text, the historical context (moment) of its production as well as the historical context(s) it might be addressing itself to. In *Mhudi* the setting is South Africa in the 1830s, and the novel addresses itself to the 1910s. We have already argued that Sol Plaatje uses his past as a commentary on his present. In other words, two historical contexts are brought to bear and comment on each other. For we must remember that Plaatje's reconstruction or interpretation of his past is a direct response not only to the political injustices of his time, but also to the dominant written history that interpreted this "barbaric" past as an occasion for justifying the political sub-ordination of black South Africans. What is of particular interest to us, then, is how Plaatje relates the two historical contexts to each other in his text, and what his endeavour means in terms of his envisaged or projected readership.

The story of Zungu, we have argued, is analogous to that of Chaka, and will be analogous to that of the Barolong in the predicted future. We have also argued that we

¹⁴⁶ Eds. Ken Hirschkop & David Shepherd, *Bakhtin and the reader* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989), 94.

see in it the implication of possible revolt against and defeat of the Ndebele at Gubulawayo. In drawing the analogy and using it to criticise Chaka, Mzilikazi, the Barolong as well as the Griquas, Plaatje clearly meant his oral prose narrative to be a call for black reconciliation and unity. In addition, his criticism of the predicted betrayal of friendship by the Voortrekkers, read in the context of his implicit intimation that a revolt of the oppressed is always inevitable, might be interpreted, as Tim Couzens does¹⁴⁷, as a message to the sections of his white readership that would have been in a position to pass and/or enforce discriminatory Acts. Seen in this light Plaatje's analogy suggests a national audience and its complex make-up - victims of imperialism and greed, oppressors, traitors, people fallen victim to their own self-protection strategies and so on. In most instances, a group's identity can comprise more than one of the listed socio-political identities. This clearly points to Plaatje's sharp awareness of the heterogeneous nature of identity, even of black identity. His black characters, and by extension his black readership, for example, are not simply thrown into a category of innocent victims. If they are victims of white rule, they are also shown to be active - although sometimes unwitting - agents of their own victimisation.

A further point to note is that Mhudi's projected readership goes beyond national boundaries. The fact that the Ndebele migrate to the north, and once there pursue further their expansionist tendencies with military ferocity, suggests that their barbarism of the early pages repeats itself in the last pages of the text. Historically, Plaatje seems to say, the political upheavals in South Africa are carried across the country's borders

¹⁴⁷ See Mhudi, 19 and "The dark side of the world."

into Zimbabwe. Whether or not other ethnic groups at and around Gu-Bulawayo will employ the self-destructive strategies of the Barolong and the Griquas is not made clear. What seems obvious, though, is that an implicit warning is given to the Shona: that should they form an alliance with the whites against the Ndebele, their people will also fall victim to deceptive friendship like the Barolong.

We see in Plaatje's analogy not just the Mfecane repeating itself across geographical boundaries, but also the Mfecane serving in the text to link his own socio-political present with the history of Zimbabwe. In other words, the text brings in this case at least three historical contexts together, and the three in turn comment on each other. A fourth context, namely slavery, is alluded to in the opening pages of the novel. The Barolong peasants at Kunana, we are told, "thought nought of their overseas kinsmen who were making history in the plantations and harbours of Virginia and Mississippi at that time" (27).¹⁴⁸ The Barolong will later be enslaved by the Voortrekkers, according to Mzilikazi. In other words, the Voortrekkers and plantation owners share at least one thing in common: they are enslavers. Some Ndebele are themselves slaves, however. When the Barolong-Voortrekkers-Griqua forces attacked the Ndebele shepherds and

¹⁴⁸ It is worth highlighting the point about history-making by the oppressed groups. If by history we mean "the stuff children learn in school," as one character suggests in Herman Charles Bosman's short story - "The music-maker." Comp. Patrick Mynhardt, *The Bosman I like: a personal selection* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1981), 32 - then theirs may not be regarded as such. However, if we regard history as constituting events as well as their interpretation and narration, then the history of slavery is very important to both enslavers and the slaves themselves, albeit for different reasons. In terms of Sol Plaatje's perception, we gather, one needs to take seriously slavery and oppression generally if one is to fight it. This fighting is also, obviously, yet another process in the making of history. To the extent that Plaatje's novel is a part of the fight against oppression, it is an agent in the making of history.

herdsmen at their outposts, "[s]ome of the herders were taken captive and permanently retained by the Boers as slaves" (142). The Ndebele too were, like black Americans, making history as slaves. Accordingly, any political message intended for the Barolong - and other enslaved Africans - on the issue of slavery is surely simultaneously addressed to the black slaves across the Atlantic. Similarly, a political message to the Voortrekkers arguably also applies to American enslavers. Thus, as pointed out in Chapter 1, *Mhudi* is not just addressed, as Peter Esterhuysen argues, to a white audience. Its readership is varied - in terms of race, ethnicity and even geographical location. In the broadest terms, in so far as it is an examination of imperialism and colonialism, *Mhudi*'s readership is ideally universal.¹⁴⁹

This spirit of universal readership is actually hinted at in Plaatje's tongue-in-cheek refusal to say explicitly who his envisaged readership is. He simply states that one of the objects of *Mhudi* is "to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'" (21). Furthermore, Plaatje gives some hints that may imply a non-South African readership. For example, he makes an effort to explain that a "lake" is called a "pan" in South Africa (154-55). Were he simply addressing a South African readership he would simply have used "pan" with no explanation. Given such instances, it is erroneous and perhaps even unfair to simply reduce his projected readership to white or black or national. Rather, we should examine his projected audience by looking at individual narratives within the novel, as these imply either

¹⁴⁹ I wish to indicate that, in my opinion, questions of locality versus universality in themselves are insignificant. Accordingly, my point is not to prove the universality of the text's message, but rather to highlight strategies that go into the projection of universal readership.

different or multiple readerships.

Further, the broad terms in which Plaatje refers to his readership suggest that he viewed Mhudi not only as transnational - rather than national - property, but also as a trans-historical document. That is, he seems to have conceived of it as a novel that must be subjected to re-contextualisation. Such a re-contextualisation highlights the importance Plaatje attached to his readers as interpreters, and in that sense as fellow writers and actors in a political enterprise.

Mhudi's story

Another prose narrative that Plaatje employs to position the reader is narrated to Ra-
Thaga by Mhudi (45-46). It is about two men who want to find out how the sun resumes
its daily journey from the east in the morning after it has set in the west in the evening.
Having been informed that if they stayed up for the whole night, facing westwards, they
will see it go back to the east - and die shortly thereafter - they determine to take the
risk. In fact, they take "a strong dose of medicine to prevent death" (45) before they
risk their lives. One of them gets overcome by cowardice and consequently retires to
bed. The other one stays behind. This latter witnesses "a big round ball as red as
blood . . . tearing the skies like a meteor" (45-46). When he excitedly calls upon his
friend to come and bear witness to the extraordinary spectacle, the coward in the hut
proves to be too scared to come out. He wakes up in the morning to find his brave
friend has died. Whether the brave man dies because he saw "the sun" on its journey
back to the east - which is what Mhudi seems inclined to believe - or because the

strong dose of medicine was just too much for him is not clear. Whatever the case, the point remains that his curiosity and bravery have killed him.

This story operates on a number of levels. First, and quite clearly, it is used by Plaatje for effect. Through it we enter and begin to understand Mhudi's consciousness, especially her strong fear, in her running away from the Ndebele, when "[s]uddenly a red glow appeared towards what [she] took to be the western horizon" (45). She feels that the glow is a signal, or rather an incarnation, of her death. To her relief the red glow turns out to be "nothing more dangerous than the rising of the moon" (46). Secondly, and more broadly, this tale anticipates the defeat of the Ndebele. In as much as Mhudi and the brave man witness "strange" heavenly bodies the Ndebele will later see a "strange" star with a tail (comet) which, their witchdoctors have said, would be an indication of the beginning of the destruction of the Ndebele nation. It is, in other words, a bad omen, an embodiment of the curse and revenge, according to these doctors, by the spirits of the massacred Barolong. While in Mhudi's case the strange sight proves to be the source of light that will give her some sense of direction - she had lost her bearings - in the other two cases it is death that follows. Like the brave man Mzilikazi does not listen when told to migrate northwards before the appearance of the comet. If the brave man had boundless faith and confidence in the death-preventing medicine, Mzilikazi's infinite confidence is in the military strength of his nation. As he says, "[a] Zulu never stepped back for any man . . . If any man considers himself a foe worthy of my spear, let him come. I shall spit him out - (spitting) - like the

saliva in my mouth . . ." (138)¹⁵⁰ In both cases the confidence is shown to be misplaced.

Very much as in the story of Zungu, those who believe in their own power and/or cunning get defeated in the end. In this sense the story of the brave man, like Zungu's, is not just a criticism of Mzilikazi, but also an allegorical indictment of the white government of the 1910s. For, like Mzilikazi's, it relies for its strength on economic exploitation (taxation, unfair distribution of land) assisted, where and when necessary, by brutal use of force (military, law). When other strange heavenly bodies appear later, one feels, this white government will perish like Mzilikazi's - in the Barolong lands at least. If the story of Zungu is an implicit warning to white as well as black oppressors, then so is this story of the brave man. Perhaps the fallibility of the cunning and the mighty is also a message to the oppressed to resist and maybe even revolt against the seemingly infallible.¹⁵¹ Once more, then, we see in the story the wide readership implied in the one of Zungu.

¹⁵⁰ The ethnic arrogance displayed in Mzilikazi's speech is evident in other speeches by various Ndebele characters. See, for example, Sitonga's praise of Langa (52-53) and Dambuzi's bitter reply to Gubuza's criticism of Sitonga's speech (55). We learn that their confidence is so inflated that they do not even bother to spy on their enemies: "... they relied mainly on their spears and felt secure in the frightful terror they instilled in the hearts of their neighbours. They did their usual hunting and cattle-herding and never troubled about a possible danger against them" (155).

¹⁵¹ Tim Couzens argues elsewhere that in the final oratory of Mzilikazi Plaatje was simply issuing a warning about the inevitability of revolt by the perpetually oppressed, rather than calling for such a revolt. This might very well be the case. But, as I argue in my BA Hons dissertation, an act of revolt or revolution needs someone or some people to initiate it. And Plaatje seems to provide no indication as to who should take on this role.

Conclusion

Given the varied and complex ways in which oral prose narratives could be employed, we suggest that it is insufficient to perceive them simply as equivalents of proverbs. They are that, clearly. But they also assist as devices for self-reflexive allegories. In addition they serve as narrative devices for suggesting and projecting a multiplicity of readerships.

5. CONCLUSION

We began this dissertation by offering an overview of the contemporary reception of Sol Plaatje's novel. The dominant trend in this reception, we suggested, was to view Mhudi in terms of its allegorical nature, with particular emphasis on the text's nationalist agenda. Such reception has often meant or necessitated an overlooking of the fuller complexity of the novel. In particular, as David Johnson has pointed out, ambiguities and contradictions were flattened out in favour of the foregrounding of aspects of protest. What is perhaps more disturbing is that such a homogenising discourse is carried into the 1990s. According to this critical hegemony, Johnson shows, Mhudi is appreciated more for its democratic values rather than for its fuller, and probably more challenging, complexities.

It is in the context of this general trend in the reception of the novel that we decided to afford it a closer scrutiny. While agreeing with some of the points raised by its critics, we suggested that one of the ways of enriching our understanding of it would be by analysing some of its narrative strategies, with specific reference to oral artforms such as proverbs, songs as well as oral prose narratives. This discussion of oral artforms should not be read in isolation from my discussion of Mhudi's employment of oral history as another narrative technique, which I undertook in the B.A. Honours dissertation referred to several times. In fact it was this dissertation that led to my feeling that a broader examination of the novel's use of oral forms would be in order. In this dissertation quite a number of important issues surface, which perhaps merit more research.

On looking into **Plaatje's** use of oral history in **Mhudi** what emerges is that he did not only employ it to challenge and criticise the colonial view of history that tended to decontextualise such historical events as the **Mfecane**. Such a decontextualisation of the history of black South Africa has often perpetuated and reinforced a stereotypical view of this history as barbaric and dominated by unthinking tyrants. Set against this negative stereotype was yet another stereotype that presented the Great Trek as if it was the most important historical movement in the country. By contextualising the two historical movements, **Plaatje** shows the Great Trek to be yet another political movement borne out of the need for land and desire for political power like the **Mfecane**, both of course having negative implications as they involve an unsettling of groups which are militarily weak or simply peaceful. **Plaatje**, as we argue, does not only challenge colonial historical versions. He also offers a challenge to the popular history of the **Barolong**, and the **Batswana** generally, which is as biased against the **Ndebele** - though not without cause - as the colonial historical discourse is against blacks in general. **Mhudi's** insistence on the use of multiple historical voices which are engaged in a dialogue, foregrounds the fact that history is a site of contestation. It is represented and mediated in various ways depending on the political and ideological drives, as well as on the narrative skills, of its mediators. Indeed, the novel itself, in as far it contests certain histories, is an agent of historical understanding. It is in this capacity that it registers a number of ambiguities of meaning.

The present dissertation broadens the initial approach. Here, following **Eileen Julien's** suggestion that an examination of orality in the African novel would benefit more from examining the political and ideological use to which orality is put rather than identifying

the use of orality as an indication of the authenticity or Africanness of the novel, we decided to focus on Mhudi's use of proverbs, songs and oral prose narratives. We argued, in Chapter 3, that proverbs serve as agents of mediation as well as strategies for subversion. We looked, for example, at proverbs that seem to reinforce oppression based on gender, and how such proverbs are set against either incidents, and events, or other proverbs that undermine them. In such cases what was at stake was a contestation over the political role that women can play in society, a contestation which is in sharp contrast to the male characters' view that women are basically weak and therefore not worth giving leadership positions. This, we argued, was subversive of patriarchal discourses.

As regards mediation, we looked, for example, at the way in which chief Moroka uses proverbs in order to negotiate a difficult situation whereby he needed to persuade his subjects to assist Voortrekkers when under attack by Mzilikazi. The proverbs and his skilful usage of them partly suggest his faith in the wisdom of his people, while simultaneously implicitly indicating that, of himself and his subjects, he is actually the wiser. Thus, in an understated manner, proverbs come to the Voortrekkers' rescue. As Jane Starfield also suggests, Plaatje had to make recourse to proverbs in negotiating his political and journalistic deals with chief Silas Molema, using, as I suggested, the same strategy of influencing the decisions of his addressee as his character, chief Moroka.

Songs, we argued, serve a similar purpose. A fascinating instance is Plaatje's complex employment of a passage from Song of Songs, which is used both to describe the

beauty and virtues of Umnandi, Mzilikazi's favourite wife, while also offering a criticism of racial oppression and slavery. The relevance of this passage for Plaatje's political discourse generally hints at the uses of the Bible in a cultural struggle against oppression and injustice.

As far as oral prose narratives are concerned, we demonstrated, in Chapter 4, their role as allegories. Focusing on the story of Zungu, we argued that, as allegories, they serve as devices that facilitate self-reflexiveness in *Mhudi*. The self-reflexiveness in turn enhances the ambiguous nature of the novel. For example, while seemingly intended to serve as cognitive tools, they also reflect on the question of the selective nature of their own narration and, therefore, of their own reception. The result is that their status as cognitive tools is interrogated seriously.

We added that these narratives are also Plaatje's narrative strategy of suggesting and projecting a multiplicity of readerships. In this capacity, they challenge the narrow view that *Mhudi* was intended for a white readership. In addition, the equally limited view of the novel as a nationalist text is disputed. *Mhudi* shows itself to be a novel addressed to blacks and whites both within and outside the boundaries of South Africa. It is, in this respect, a transnational text.

Before examining the political and ideological roles played by the use of oral artforms in *Mhudi*, we looked at Plaatje's understanding of orality in relation to literacy. We pointed out in Chapter 2 that his view that Setswana oral artforms needed to be preserved was indicative of his implicit assumption that orality was weak and under

threat, a view that was standard for the time. We showed in the same chapter, however, that he also saw orality as engaging in a dialogue with literacy. Indeed, the very act of preserving oral artforms by writing them down is suggestive of this dialogue. More specifically, we argued that orality and literacy complement and reinforce each other in various ways. This is clearly illustrated by Plaatje and his contemporaries' oralisation of Shakespeare as well as his translation of the playwright into Setswana, a step that was partly meant to promote Setswana language and literature and partly to question the view that Shakespeare was too great a writer to be successfully translated into an African language.

The question of translation of course raises the issue of equivalents. Plaatje states that in translating Shakespeare into Setswana he had to search for Setswana equivalents of Shakespeare's English. Similarly, as we argued in Chapter 2, his translation of Setswana praises and oral prose narratives involved a use of equivalents. The equivalents in turn meant an alteration of the original in terms of structure and meaning, as in the case of praises, and of the nature of the original as in the case of narratives. In short, the search for equivalents leads to a process of the reconstruction of the original, so that the final product is in fact a new object, an "invention".

Two things are hopefully clear at this stage. First, that if our appreciation of Mhudi is to broaden significantly, then our main project should be to examine closely the novel's narrative strategies and their political as well as ideological imperatives and implications, without being constrained by the assumed task of attempting to turn it into a bill on human rights. Secondly, we need to appreciate Plaatje's very important

contribution in attempting to preserve Setswana cultural forms of knowledge, with the point of departure being that such an appreciation cannot be realised unless his views and implicit assumptions are foregrounded and interrogated. Plaatje believed, like some of his characters, that there were always at least two sides to everything. He would no doubt have found Ezeulu's statement that life is like a dancing mask which can only be understood if looked at from different positions¹⁵², very fascinating. Mhudi, too, is like Ezeulu's mask, and as such cannot be understood if only looked at from the dominant critical discourse that emphasises its salient qualities as protest literature. Its deeper meaning is, I suggest, situated in the ambiguities that it displays.

¹⁵² Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1974), 46.

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