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Conflicting Humours

Race, Gender and National Identity in *Madam & Eve*



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RESEARCH REPORT
MA (by coursework)
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I hereby declare that this research report "Conflicting Humours: race, gender and national identity in Madam & Eve" is my own original, unaided work towards the degree of Master of Arts (by coursework) in the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



Sarah Jane Britten
24 February 1998

ABSTRACT

Madam & Eve is South Africa's most successful cartoon strip. Created by three white, middle class men, it has received praise both locally and overseas. At the same time, it has been the subject of very little published criticism. Comic strips are narratives which operate in specific ways, using specific strategies to tell their stories. Analysis reveals several strategies through which *Madam & Eve* addresses the South African situation, for example, recasting Eurocentric cultural phenomena in an indigenous mould. Following the cartoons from their inception in 1992 to the present reveals a narrative of the evolution of a national identity. *Madam & Eve* addresses an emblematic racial situation, that of the white madam and her black maid. But in tending to exclude men from its satire, it fails to examine gender roles critically. A closer examination of the charge that Eve as an "icon of black femininity" is "oppressed" reveals that it is Madam who is the most stereotypical of the characters; there is a risk that this type of postcolonial criticism will itself slip into racism.

Humour is, by its very nature, politically incorrect. It exposes the cracks in society and, in its opposition to authority, is profoundly democratic in orientation. In the context of South African humour, *Madam & Eve* steers a middle path between (white) conservative reaction and left-wing invective. Its brand of satire is too gentle to be truly subversive. For all its shortcomings, *Madam & Eve* deserves credit for addressing issues from a South African perspective. It encourages South Africans to laugh at issues that usually provoke anger. Humour is society's safety valve: in order for humour to change, society must change first. Those who wish to see politically correct humour will have to create their own, and allow audiences to judge for themselves.

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A note on the title

Before the word "humour" referred to the comic, it described the four chief fluids of the body - blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy - that were thought to determine a person's mental and physical qualities. The word "humorous", in fact, originally referred to an excess of "humours" in the body. A "humorous" person, therefore, suffered from some form of exaggerated tendency - which made him funny. In its continuing search for identity, South Africa today can be a read as a nation of conflicting tendencies - or humours, as scholars would have described them a few centuries ago. Will we embrace the sanguine, or the melancholic? Or perhaps - as people have in the past - the choleric?

"Conflicting humours" also refers to the different viewpoints on what is funny and what may be laughed at that emerge through the course of this report. *Madam & Eve's* business is humour, but not all of its critics find much to laugh at (see Chapter Two). Finally, the title also refers to the many different types of humour (a word I use out of practical necessity), many of which come into conflict, not only with each other, but with commonly accepted notions of decency as well as authority. Humour, which fuels laughter, is also a site of anger and danger.

INTRODUCTION

Humour, shews us as we *are*.

William Congreve, 1695 (60: 199)

Laughter [is] the cipher-key wherewith we decipher the whole man.

Thomas Carlyle, 1833 (92: 1)

"Extraordinary...a South African phenomenon" - *Mail & Guardian*
"The most popular cartoon in South Africa" - *The Wall Street Journal*
"World class" - *Eastern Province Herald*
"*Madam and Eve* is the hilariously ironic comic strip which acutely reflects the changes in modern South African society through the antics of a rich suburban housewife and her liberated black maid"- *The Big Issue* (London)
"The most painless way of understanding South African politics" - *The Guardian*



Figure 1

Madam & Eve, South Africa's most successful cartoon strip, celebrated its fifth anniversary in June 1997. Gwen Anderson and Eve Sisulu first appeared on the scene at a critical juncture in South Africa's history and in the five years of their existence have become favourite national figures (see figs 1, 2). Now appearing in nine daily newspapers, four weeklies and three magazines, *Madam & Eve* is read by an estimated four million a month (Hansen, 97: 3). The strip also appears overseas in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian (Francis et al, 97: 175) and in January 1998 10,000 copies of a French *Madam & Eve* collection were published (Louw, 98: 19). "[W]e think Madam and Eve and their hiccups are really universal. The French could relate to that," the publisher has said (ibid.). The creators of *Madam & Eve* have given countless interviews, appeared on television and met President Mandela to present him with a series of original cartoons featuring him. Alongside more conventional South African celebrities, the characters are often "asked"

about what they will be doing for Easter, for example, or Christmas. Even *Madam & Eve the musical*, to be performed at the Agfa Theatre in Sandton Square in May 1998, is in the pipeline.

"The three men receive praise and acclaim from all corners of South Africa" (Hansen, 97: 3) and if anything, reaction to *Madam & Eve* in the international media has been even more extraordinary than local commercial success. Articles on *Madam & Eve* have - to date - appeared in *The Guardian, The London Sunday Telegraph, The Weekly Telegraph, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Le Monde, The Economist, Newsweek* and the *Jerusalem Post*.

Why such extraordinary success? S. Francis, H. Dugmore and Rico have their own suggestions:

> Partly, we think, because [the cartoon] is topical. And partly because it uses satire to subvert and challenge racial and ethnic stereotypes. And also because South Africans are learning to laugh at themselves.
>
> These are some of the reasons we've heard - and some of them we've even offered ourselves during interviews. But the truth is, we don't really know. We like to think, in our less modest moments, that it may be because the cartoons are funny.
>
> Francis et al, 97: 176

The creation of three white, middle class men, *Madam & Eve* escaped unscathed by published criticism until a December 1996 article in the local feminist journal *Agenda* concluded that the cartoon was fulfilling a "conservative agenda" (96: 34). Gail Smith objects to the fact that Madam and Eve "does not force white South Africans to challenge their white supremacist reading of black female subjectivity" (ibid.). Whether I agree with her conclusions or not remains to be determined in the body of this report, but her reading is also an indication of the pressure under which much of our humour - and other cultural activities - now finds itself. One can only conclude that humour appropriate to the new South African dispensation, according to this analysis, should be non-sexist, non-racist, non-offensive and change society for the better. Whether humour can and should be expected to serve such lofty ideals is one of the questions I hope to answer.

But why study humour at all? Since the time of Plato, humour has been regarded as a subject unworthy of serious study, a trivial addendum to the real business of life. But like Murray S. Davis in his book *What's So Funny? The comic conception of culture and society*, I believe that humour "belongs in the centre stage of life" (93: 5). The sociologist Joyce Hertzler (1970) felt that humour can serve

> as a kind of sociocultural index of the culture or society, the groups and population segments, the communities or localities, and the eras in which it occurs...What a people

> laugh at any given time can reveal what they are interested in, concerned about, amused by, disgusted with, preoccupied with.
>
> (ibid.)

Humour can reveal the truth about a society (Davis, 92: 2).



Figure 2

My aim in the pages that follow is to analyse *Madam & Eve* in terms of style and content before critiquing its representation of race, gender and national identity. The third and final chapter will include the placement of *Madam & Eve* in the broader context of humour, including specifically South African humour. Humour is a cultural phenomenon for which the rules are different; any critique of *Madam & Eve* that does not take into account the way humour functions will be flawed and incomplete. Any value judgments made about the cartoon's representation of race, gender and national identity need to acknowledge that its raison d'etre is to make people laugh - to be *funny* - and I do not believe it is appropriate to judge humour in the same way one would evaluate discourse that is not intentionally humorous.

Contextualisation includes a necessarily brief overview of laughter and its implications; an analysis of a comic strip cannot be complete without some examination of the way in which humour and satire function. Humour and its relation to national identity cannot be ignored either, particularly in the case of a narrative as wedded to South African politics and mores as *Madam & Eve*. Finally, based on my discussions in the first three chapters, I will attempt to evaluate the significance of *Madam & Eve* in post-apartheid South African culture and make some (tentative) suggestions about its value for a society still in the process of (trans)formation.

CHAPTER ONE

Madams are from Mars, maids are from Venus

"Why should we learn Zulu?" my Standard Four Zulu teacher, Mr Larson, asked the class one fine day in 1986. Hands went up. "Yes?" Mr Larson looked hopeful."So you can speak to your maid." For many whites, maids (and occasionally 'garden boys') represented the only close contact they had with blacks. Madams and maid are found in many parts of the world but "Nowhere," observes *The Economist* (97: 7), "does the relationship between a white madam and her black maid so encapsulate the social and racial contradictions of a society as in South Africa".

So the Madam-and-Maid situation is an obvious one to satirise. During the apartheid years it crystalised the absurdities of the idea of "separate development": here at the heart of the white home was the black woman who cooked, cleaned and looked after the children. It was a position of both great trust and deep suspicion, where a woman charged with the task of babysitting might be accused of stealing the sugar. The theme of *Madam & Eve*, therefore, "is to explore ways people can share an intimate space and yet remain strangers" (Taylor, 93: A19).

At the same time, Madam and Eve do not live in the real world described by *The Economist*. They exist in a comic strip, and the world of the comic strip is quite distinct from worlds created in other cultural forms such as film or the novel. Curiously, for a cultural activity so much a part of our lives and so commercially successful, the comic strip has been virtually ignored by cultural critics in favour of film, television and advertising. Consequently there are no critical parameters defined specifically for the comic strip and much of my analysis of *Madam & Eve* takes me into territory for which maps are hard to come by.

So I will start with a few broad definitions. One of the most distinctive features of the modern comic strip (and here I use "comic" in its literal sense) is the use of caricature. It is important to note that, while frequently imbricated, cartoon and caricature are not one and the same thing. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines caricature as "the distorted presentation of a person, type or action" (63: 905). 'Cartoon' referred to the final drawn preparation for a painting until the early 1840s, when it suddenly came to describe a pictorial parody. The comic strip is "a pictorial anecdote or a serial story from contemporary anonymous history" which employs the methods of "the caricaturist, the cartoonist, the dramatist, and the raconteur"(ibid). Cartoons offer generalised comic illustrated representations of types; there is usually a caption in which a point is made and much of the humour is located. A caricature (especially of a public figure) can stand on its own without the help of a punchline; the criticism is self-evident. Caricatures are

concerned with the distortion of appearance and physical features, cartoons with the parodying of social mores and personality; caricatures are most frequently associated with political figures and current events, cartoons and comic strips with jokes at the expense of humanity in general.

Caricature and cartoon are relatively recent phenomena. The first caricatures in a recognisably modern sense were produced by the Italian Agostino Caracci during the late sixteenth century. Historically, both forms are strongly rooted in satire. The 18th century was the golden age of caricature, when artists such as Hogarth lampooned society and political figures with remarkable viciousness. During the 19th century the French artist Honore Daumier brought a new dimension of political and social critique to the cartoon. The comic strip first came into being towards the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century became astonishingly successful. Comic strips as we know them today are an American phenomenon, developed as weekly humour sections for the New York Sunday papers, with the goal of increasing circulation: that comic strips developed at all was due in part to technological advances and a circulation war between Joseph Pulitzer and Randolph Hearst (Goulart, 95: 2).

Comic strips are thus deeply rooted in capitalism; Umberto Eco describes the comic strip as an "industrial product' (94:38) and that therefore, in most cases, the comic strip "reflects the implicit pedagogy of a dominant system and acts as a hidden reinforcement of the dominant myths and values" (ibid.). Comic strips were also instruments of globalisation long before the phenomenon became a buzzword. Characters from America such as Garfield, Charlie Brown and Dagwood Bumstead are known worldwide through syndication to hundreds of local newspapers (and in the case of *Garfield* and *Peanuts*, through spin-off merchandise and animated television series). Yet for all its commercialism, the comic strip is capable of attaining the lyrical heights and profound insights of poetry; in 1963, Eco described Charles Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*, as a poet, and avowed that *Peanuts* is "something true, tender and gentle" (94: 37). For

> Isn't Charlie Brown a moment of the Universal Consciousness, a Hero of our Time, a 16mm Leopold Bloom, a Positive Type, our pocket, portable Everyman, the suburban Philoctetes of the paperbacks, a Jeremiah of the strip-Bible which mercenary apocrypha have occasionally presented to us in receptive and malevolent translations, undermining our faith, and thus demanding a legion of Erasmuses to re-establish the texts and the glosses?
>
> (ibid.)

In line with the need for the broad worldwide appeal that offers greater possibilities for syndication, comic strips usually offer generalised, anonymous types and situations with which a wide range of readers from different cultural backgrounds can identify. Some strips (such as *Madam & Eve* and *Doonesbury*) occasionally feature figures from the 'real' world, but are anchored by fictional characters. The creator of *Garfield*, probably

the most commercially successful comic strip of all time, has said that he avoids culture-and-country-specific situations so that everyone can identify with the situations in his cartoon strip.

Madam & Eve bucks the trend by being much more culture-specific than most strips. Its characters and situations are most readily recognised by South Africans (or those at least familiar with South African culture) and many of its situations are based upon current scandals or issues in local politics. Even for South Africans, going through the *Madam and Eve* archives can be confusing because the events that inspired them are forgotten and unfamiliar by now. But for all its specificity, the characters in *Madam & Eve* are stereotypical enough to allow a wide range of readers to identify with them. "I couldn't meet Madam and Eve on the street and recognise them, they could be anybody" commented one interviewer (Omotoso, 96: 32).

One of the key characteristics of the artificial world of the comic strip is its relation to time and narrative. In the space of three or four small panels, the typical daily strip presents a situation, alters it and then resolves the new situation with a punchline that delivers the laugh. We find the characters in a state of equilibrium; there is then a joining of the action before the characters are returned to a new state of equilibrium. As we read from left to right, time progresses in both our world and the world of the cartoon characters. Punchlines require some form of closure - an unresolved situation would not be funny - and where a series deals with the same subject over several days, the final state of equilibrium in one strip becomes the initial situation in the following day's strip. Resolution is never final in the comic strip. *Madam & Eve* is funnier when read in book form , as the daily strips can be read together in sequence and each humorous situation is able to build on the previous one.

Since most comic strips comment in some way on daily life and the human condition, they take place in a time frame with some relation to the present. Comic strips can function in a time that is the present but remains undefined (*Garfield, Peanuts*), an anachronistic past in which characters are able to comment on modern day life (*The Wizard of Id, Redeye, Hagar*) or a present that corresponds to that of the reader (*Cathy, Doonesbury, Madam & Eve*). Time and narrative in the comic strip are dualistic, both static and in a constant state of forward movement: the narrative takes place both within our time as we experience it while reading and in a parallel eternal present. Characters do not age or change in any fundamental way. Children do not grow up (with the exception of office culture strip *On the Fastrack*) and, despite joining the working world and starting a catering business in the 90's, Blondie has acquired no wrinkles since her debut in 1930. Madam and Eve always wear the same clothing and function within the same static situation from year to year. The exception is the character whose activities have changed significantly since the strip's inception, Eve, who was graduated from university in

order to lampoon the ironies of affirmative action. The characters and situations in *Madam & Eve* must necessarily remain familiar to its regular readers with the passage of time but be flexible enough to reflect changes in the "real" world.

The comics page is really a collection of parallel universes: each cast of characters inhabits a separate world with a characteristic style and governed by certain rules, which may conform to or flout the conventions of 'reality'. The world of *Blondie* more or less approximates the way the 'real' world works, whereas a cat that throws snowballs at his owner, 'speaks' on the phone and is capable of thinking in English is confined to the panels of *Garfield*. *Madam & Eve* is unusual in that the boundaries between the world of the characters and the world of their creators are occasionally blurred, and use is made of self-referential devices. Madam and Eve might be held up at gunpoint and watch as hijackers run off with the panels that make up their world, leaving them stranded in empty space. Occasionally the creators pay tribute to some of their influences, as in the following self-reflexive example where Madam and Eve are visited by a "humour consultant" (a response to the Mpumalanga consultant scandal that was making headlines at the time). In the final panel one of the characters from Doonesbury shows up - they have also rejected the unwanted advice.



Figure 3

In this way, Rapid Phase cunningly align their own creation with that of their comic idol. Eve's mini-businesses, which reflect her entrepreneural abilities (Omotoso, 96: 22), also come from a "rich cartoon tradition" (97: 105) (Lucy in *Peanuts* being one example) and the character of Thandi was inspired by *Calvin and Hobbes* (22).

All comic strips tell stories about people and situations. Narratives are significant in analyses of gender, race and concepts of the nation because we all use stories through which to understand issues of difference and sameness. Stories are very useful for explaining why things are the way they are - hence the myths that appear in every culture. John Goode argues that gender is "explained entirely by narrative" (92: 136). Well into the nineteenth century, it was the story of Adam and his rib that was repeated as the reason for gender, not biological difference. (The reference to the story of Adam and Eve in the title *Madam and Eve* is, of course, obvious.)

But narratives contain the seeds of their own subversion; their very presence suggests that there is a gap in the ideology and that questions - which cannot be answered satisfactorily within the framework of the narrative - have to be answered. "By their readability, [narratives] are also the means of recognition"(Ibid.). As Goode points out

> It is not merely the defects of fictional coherence that open up the ideological closure, it is the fictionality itself that discloses a problematic in the ideology, otherwise you would not need to tell stories about it. (ibid.)

Apart from their pariah status as "popular"culture, one possible reason why comic strips have been neglected in the critical canon is that they can be viewed as a combination of art and literature and so fall between two stools. Comic strips feature a combination of graphics and written words, which are usually used to signify speech or thought on the part of the characters. A narrator rarely intervenes to comment on the situation; the characters ostensibly speak for themselves. Gesture without words is sometimes also used, in which case gesture and action are deemed self-explanatory. This device appears frequently in *Madam & Eve*.

Style is one of the most salient characteristics of the comic strip. The success of a strip lies not only in the quality of the humour but in the aptness and instant recognisability of the caricatures. As we have seen, the style of *Madam & Eve* is relatively spartan. The women are signified by conventions easily recognised as feminine: long hair, earrings, skirts, jewellery. Eve is given carefully shaped facial features which make her look more feminine (and beautiful) than the plain straight lines that form Madam and the maids. Apart from the caricature of the notoriously pneumatic health minister Dr Zuma - who has put in the occasional appearance whenever a health ministry scandal is the topic of the day - none of the women are given breasts.

Lastly, but not least: this should be obvious but it needs to be pointed out that all the cartoon strips under discussion here are meant to be funny. They are there to make people laugh. Gary Larson of *The Far Side* - cited as an influence by the creators of *Madam & Eve* (Gidish, 96: 44) - is one of the most successful - and controversial - contemporary cartoonists. Reflecting on the uncertainty that is the lot of the cartoonist, he writes

> Cartoon humour is strange in that it's a totally silent world of creation and reaction. The cartoonist never hears laughter, groans, curses, fits of rage, or anything...It's a daily shoot-in-the-dark approach to humour - some things hit their target and some things don't. The target, of course, is anyone who shares a similar sense of humour. (90:155)

As Larson goes on to demonstrate, he frequently attracts the attention of readers who do not find his cartoons funny at all, a problem that applies as much to the comic strip as it does to the cartoon.

What, then, is the silent world of creation and reaction that is *Madam & Eve*? The *Madam & Eve* "Home sweet homepage" cast of characters features Gwen Anderson, Eve Sisulu, Mother Anderson, Eric and his girlfriend Lizeka and Lizeka's niece, Thandi. Madam is described as "a typical white madam struggling to come to terms with the new South Africa". Mother Anderson is an "old Empire type" with "deeply paternalistic views". Eve, however, is "bright and sassy and spot-on with her observations about Madam's shortcomings...Like Madam, Eve is also divorced, but is not particularly concerned about the men in her life". Thandi "with her childish innocence, can often see things which adults miss or take for granted". The world of *Madam and Eve* is very much a female universe. Apart from the occasional appearance of Eric a relatively minor character, there are no men in the inner circle. The creators appear to be at a loss to explain the absence of men. "People always ask us where the men are. We never really have an answer because they've never come into it...Madam's never even been out on a date" (in Omotoso, 96:32).

All comic strips, like almost all narratives, include an element of conflict. In the early days of *Madam & Eve*, conflict was centered between its two main characters: the conservative madam versus the clever maid. After a year, however, the creators felt that Madam was becoming too liberal under Eve's "constant satirical supervision". So Mother Anderson, old, conservative and set in her ways was brought in as a foil to Eve. Mother later developed an aversion to the piercing yells of the Mielie Lady, resulting in an ongoing feud. Thandi also spends a lot of time with Mother Anderson, a situation rich in conflict between the generations.

Madam is the most obviously stereotypical of the characters. She is marked as "typical" and therefore ordinary. She is clearly not as "bright" as Eve and often functions as the butt of the joke. Mother Anderson, as an old "Empire" type, marks Madam as a representative of a certain language group with certain ethnic origins, in this case the white English-speaking South African with close ties to England. Eve, on the other hand, is given positive attributes not historically associated with black women in apartheid South Africa: she is younger, more beautiful and more intelligent than Madam. In contrast to the simple caricature that describes Madam's features, the artist has given Eve large eyes, a shapely nose, defined cheekbones and lips. Together with Lizeka, her features are the least distorted of all the characters, although, like the white women, she has a flat chest. As a "domestic maintenance engineer" with aspirations to leave the world of domestic work, she is not a typical 'maid'. From the character descriptions alone, it is evident that the black female characters are marked with desirable characteristics in relation to their white

counterparts. They function as critical observers in contrast to the ignorance of the white women and are therefore most often the ones the reader laughs with.

Typically the characters of *Madam and Eve* are to be found within the domestic sphere of the home. If they encounter the issues of the day - such as crime - it is through everyday activities such as visiting a bank or going to the supermarket. In a patriarchal society in which there is still a sharp divide between the space of 'home' and the space of 'work', these are activities associated with the figure of the housewife. Work that is done in the home is 'domestic work', which worldwide has not historically been regarded as 'real' work. For direct criticism of the more traditionally masculine arena of business and politics, the creators leave their main characters and go directly to the Union Buildings or Parliament. Occasionally the spheres of the characters and the real world of politics overlap, when Mother Anderson is visited by President Mandela or Evander Holyfield or when Madam, Eve and Mother Anderson go on a tour of the Union Buildings and find themselves in the President's office. Here Rapid Phase satirise the Bill Clinton oral sex scandal (otherwise known as "Fornigate") by having Mother Anderson encounter the President (Mail & Guardian, Jan 30 98: 29):

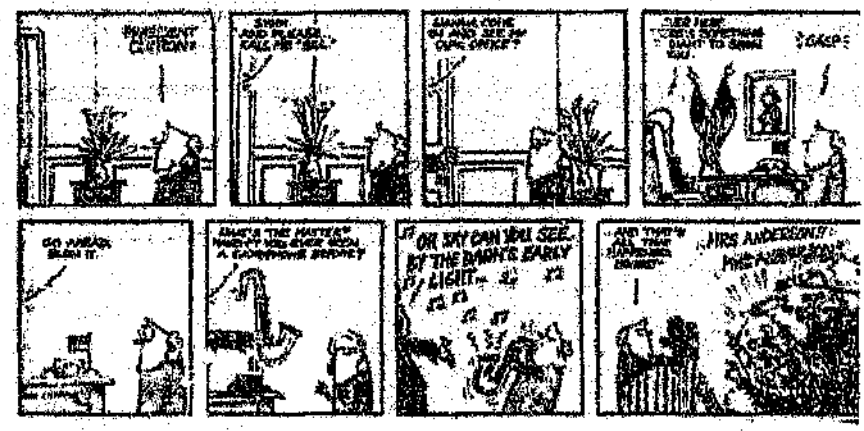

Figure 4

A 1997 strip that appeared in response to the Deputy Speaker driver's licence scandal (*Mail & Guardian*, May 16 - 22) has Eve being charged R500 for a driver's licence by a shady official. The punchline, Mother Anderson observing that the licence building is on fire, refers to the scandal in which a building housing an Mpumalanga licensing department was burnt down to destroy evidence of corruption. Curiously, Eve shows up at the counter carrying a businesslike handbag and wearing the maid's uniform indicated by her apron.

Mother Anderson, as the feisty old lady with a distinct lack of scruples, is a character who can be used to enact scenarios that would not be believable if carried out by the more cautious Madam. The gin and tonics that Mother Anderson loves are a fairly specific cultural marker for (English) colonialism; G and T's on the verandah at sundown are part of the mythology of colonial Africa.

Thandi, the irrepressible six year old, is frequently contrasted with the bad-tempered Mother Anderson. She brings in an element of childish observation, always a useful tool for humour both of the *ag shame!* and the ironic, satirical varieties. Rapid Phaze admit that their admiration for the cartoon *Calvin and Hobbes* led them to introduce a child (97: 22). Thandi has also been used to make political points, as in a game of Public Protectors and Corrupt Government Officials she plays with her friends (M&G, 1997):

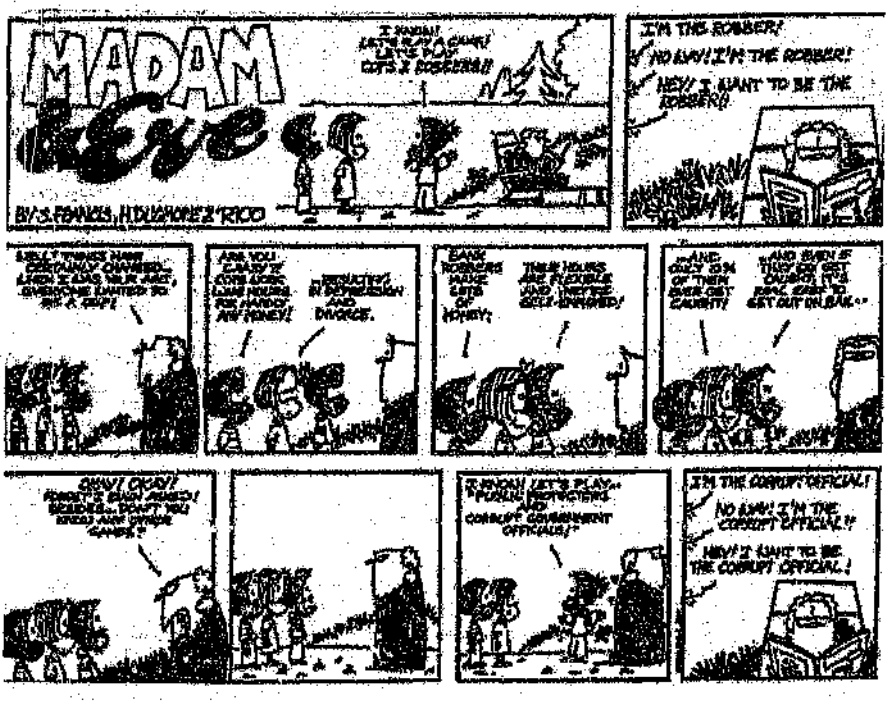

Figure 5

Reading all of the *Madam & Eve* collections in sequence, one soon becomes aware of how the cartoons chronicle the history of South Africa in the 1990's. In many ways, *Madam & Eve* is a narrative of the nation: its development, its issues and concerns, the textures of its people. Current events treated in the strip over the years include the Madonna book, the AWB invasion of the Codesa negotiations at the World Trade Centre (the AWB crashes into one of the cartoon panels (97:43)), the death of Chris Hani, Hazel Crane's gift of a house to Winnie, the Rugby World Cup, Sarafina II, Michael Jackson's visits,

"dirty tricks" revelations, the Andre Markgraaff tape scandal, the Mars Rover and the Evander Holyfield visit (he gives boxing lessons to Mother Anderson).

Aspects of South African culture and society dealt with in *Madam & Eve* include tokoloshes, affirmative action, South African "sound effects" (97: 126) and of course, crime. The strip often adjusts Western traditions and cultural forms to suit local conditions. An action comic features a battle between FW de Klerek and Tokyo Sexwale. The film "The People vs Larry Flynt" is turned into "The People vs Louis Luyt"; all the film credits feature various Luyts, satirising the nepotism of which Luyt is continually accused in the media. Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker as well as Father Christmas and the Tooth fairy are grilled by the TRC (Mail & Guardian 5 Dec 1997):

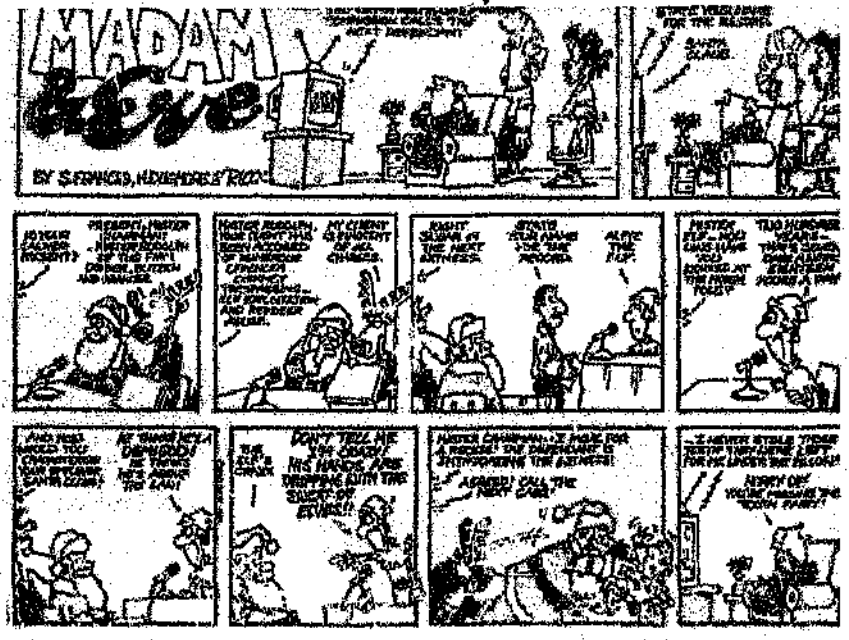

Figure 6

At the end of every year, Christmas carols are given a local twist. 1994, for instance, ended with:

> On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me...twelve singers praising... eleven cellphones ringing...ten workers striking...nine squatters squatting...eight madams shopping...seven maids a-cleaning...six crates of beans and candles...five gold-en handshakes! Four Parktown prawns,...three French inveators...two tons of silverware...and a free house to give to Win-nie!
>
> (97: 110)

while 1997 was commemorated with:

> On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me twelve beggars begging... eleven markets crashing...ten jailbirds jumping...nine taxis fighting...eight cars a-

hijacked...seven hawkers hawking...six people lying [at the TRC]...five gol-den [Olympic] rings! Four gin and tonics...three workers staring...two mielie ladies... and a gorilla to keep them all away!

(in Fair Lady, 24 December 1997)

Even road signs are ingeniously adjusted to suit current realities:



Figure 7

South Africa emerges as a nation dominated by politics and personalities, a nation filled with bizarre ambiguities and inconsistencies. We are a nation of hijackers and shoppers, squatters and cellphones. But ultimately we all want the same things, peace, justice, safety and a good laugh. To be South African is to search for commonality in the face of confusion. In the early days of the cartoon, unity was possible through shared discovery of freedom. Now unity is possible through shared criticism of what is wrong with the country (see Fig 7).

Madam & Eve by its nature calls race relations into question, though this is usually restricted to women. With the exception of Eric, there are no men in the family, and Eve's boyfriend Sol appeared only in the early strips. One intriguing strip had Madam buy an inflatable "husband", an anti-hijack device. The catch is that Madam buys the wrong model - a black man. Here prevalent attitudes amongst white women toward black men and widespread opposition to miscegenation are brought into play. Madam's mistake has created a 'mixed couple', even if only to scare away criminals. The cartoon in Figure 8 mocks not only racism, but all forms of name-calling and categorisation which are

becoming so prevalent in the new South Africa (M&G, 1997). The punchline delivers the point that while human beings are inveterate name-callers, there is a difference between assumption and the obvious. A man carrying a double bass must surely be a bassist - but how can one know just by looking at a person whether they are racist - other than by assuming racist attitudes oneself?

Another strip deals with the phenomenon of increasing black economic empowerment by imagining a meeting of black 'madams' who feel guilty about having maids (a situation which, judging from complaints by domestic workers about black 'madams' (Bridgland, 93) is wishful thinking). They call in Mother Anderson - who here [illegible]s briefly and inexplicably swopped places with her twin sister Edith - for advice. A similar meeting involving white madams worried about the implications of the new Labour Relations Act has Madam list the key facts about it and so also serves an educational function.

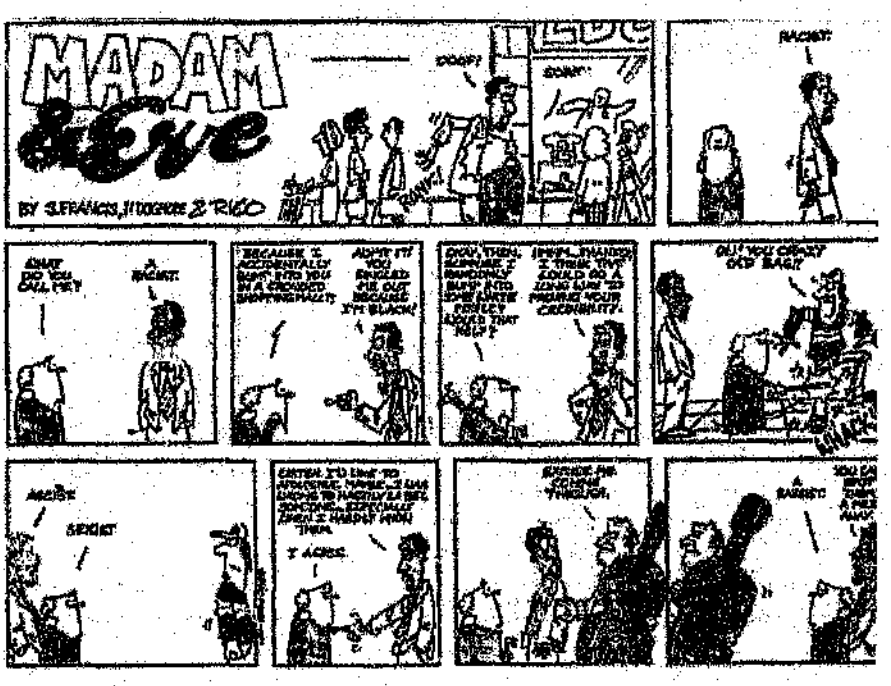

Figure 8

The rich black madams described above are an exception. Most of the cartoons, whether consciously or not, reflect unequal economic relations between black and white women in South African society. (With men, it is somewhat different, in the ongoing drama of Eric and his friend Sipho Mbuli, who thanks to the demands of affirmative action is making a fortune while Eric struggles.)

Apart from the unequal relationship between Madam and Eve, there is the fraught relationship between Mother Anderson and the Mielie Lady. Conflict spills over into violence, with Mother Anderson using a catapult against her noisy adversary. Recently Mother Anderson even gatecrashed a Mielie Lady convention, and even Father Christmas becomes acquainted with her vocal charms, and joins Mother in chasing her nemesis down the street (M&G, 12 December 1997).

Groups of black men sitting in the back of bakkies are a regularly satirised feature of South African life. Other features of South African life that appear in *Madam & Eve* include roadside beggars, squatters, and Post Office ineptitude. Not unexpectedly, crime appears again and again.

White liberals are often mocked, though more so in the first three years of the strip's existence (now that everyone is concerned with crime). Racism was dealt with in a cartoon showing a racist dog owned by Indians growling at both Madam and Eve (97: 23). One of the cleverest *Madam & Eve* cartoons that directly deals with the attitudes of whites to blacks has Madam confessing all to her therapist while two black painters work in the room. After Madam leaves, one painter says to the other, "The next one should be good....." (97: 34). When Mandela meets Betsy Verwoerd in the world of *Madam & Eve*, she assumes he's a servant (127) and the wife of the Albert Speer of apartheid is turned into a rather quaint figure of fun. There is the well-known cartoon mocking those whites who don't even know their maid's surname (when Eve tells Madam her surname is "Sisulu", Madam thinks she is sneezing). When Madam fantasizes about exploring Eve's room, she imagines that it is full of stolen coffee and sugar (40). In a strip from 1997, Madam loses a poker game to Eve and has to swop roles for her for a week. "Of course, I practically treat her like a member of the family," Eve tells a friend over tea (97: 22). The expression on Madam's face says it all: she hates being confronted with her own patronising platitudes.

Marketing

One of the reasons why *Madam & Eve* interests me is its extraordinary progression from a cult cartoon in a newspaper read by a predominantly left-wing elite to a national icon factory (see fig 3). Commercial success is always a reliable a sign that a product has struck a chord in the minds and hearts of the buying public. No matter the critical, academic verdict on the merits of *Madam & Eve*, it has clearly won the approval of a significant section of the South African people.[1]

[1] When I described the closing scene of the French film *Ridicule* - which is set at the time of the French Revolution - to a friend of mine, he made an interesting observation: white South Africans, he suggested, have responded favourably to *Madam & Eve* precisely because they did not lose their heads. They did not end up in front of ANC firing squads, and so there is a certain fascination with a relationship that could have so easily been

In line with the need to promote their product, Francis, Dugmore and Schacherl have created a group persona specifically for the media. As the creators of *Madam & Eve*, they project an image as a team of 'mad' creative types. Each has his own carefully defined identity: Harry is the respectable one with the doctorate, Stephen is the African who never stops talking, Rico is the quiet one who does the drawings. Magazine articles about "those witty boys at Rapid Phase" (*Mail & Guardian*, June 13 1997) refer to constant mocking banter and ready wit (Gidish, 96: 42), behaviour which has also been evident in their television appearances (on M-Net's *Front Row* and the SABC's *Green Machine* and *Good Morning South Africa*).

Madam & Eve is avowedly commercial in orientation, using its success to generate additional income for its creators. In this it is merely following the traditional path paved with such enormous success by *Peanuts* and *Garfield*. As with most successful cartoon strips, *Madam & Eve* have branched out into the world of merchandising. "There's a whole cottage industry out there: T-shirts, mugs, calendars and coolboxes," says Francis. "We're pretty proud of our three *Madam & Eve* books too, especially since the last one knocked Nelson Mandela off the number one spot!" (Gidish, 96: 44). Rapid Phase never hesitate to promote their products, even it if it is under the guise of self-mocking irony (O'Grady, 96). In a sign confirming the status of Madam and Eve as national figures, the SABC used live action representatives of Madam, Eve, Mother Anderson and the Mielie Lady in a television advert promoting the corporation as an advertising medium. The advert may have badly misjudged the socioeconomic mise-en-scene of the cartoon, but the origin of the characters and situations was clearly recognisable. Rapid Phase sued the SABC for using their characters without permission and lost, costing them R100,000.

The fifth anniversary *Madam & Eve* collection, *Madam & Eve Greatest Hits*, was marketed with unusual fanfare for a local publication. Sponsored by CNA and Fiat (which gave away a specially painted Uno), the creators launched a *Madam & Eve* roadshow that took them from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth, Durban and finally Johannesburg. An exhibition of original cartoon art as well as book launches and signing sessions formed part of the itinerary (see fig 4). The final launch in Johannesburg, at the exclusive northern suburbs shopping centre Hyde Park Corner, featured a live crossing to M-Net's entertainment programme *Front Row* where compere Jeremy Mansfield was shown visiting the Rapid Phase offices. Specially catered, it was sponsored by CNA, Simonsberg Cheese and Gilbey's Gin and included merchandising, promotions, a competition to win a specially painted car, and a donation to a charity for children with cancer. The notorious morning radio personality Mansfield (whom I will be discussing in chapter three) spoke about how *Madam & Eve* "keep us sane", while Dugmore thanked "the two special

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turned on its head - and wasn't. How many whites were convinced that their maids were planning to seize their houses from them once the ANC came into power?

women in our lives". Virtually everything was for sale, from the artworks on exhibit to the book to the *Madam & Eve* coffee mugs, T shirts and kitchen aprons (see Figure 9).

Considering the politically charged nature of everyday life in South Africa, it is surprising that *Madam & Eve* has been subject to so little serious criticism - either negative or favourable. It seems that humour, particularly in the form of the comic strip, is not considered a subject worthy of serious analysis. Jacqueline Bobo argues that mainstream (read white, usually male) critics draw from their own social and cultural backgrounds in their analyses of culture, seeing things that confirm their own worldview whether they are in the work in question or not (70). This is one explanation for the unanimously positive reviews of *Madam & Eve* in the overseas press.

Another possible reason why *Madam & Eve* should have been received with almost unanimous enthusiasm is that the strip started out with its political alliances cleverly in place. It has been aligned from the beginning with the *Mail & Guardian*, from its inception in 1986 as the *Weekly Mail* a newspaper with a rock-solid reputation as a progressive, leftwing publication with plenty of Struggle credibility. While in the more complex politics of the present, the *Mail & Guardian* no longer has the same anti-establishment profile, the reputation of *Madam & Eve* has long since been secured by association circa 1992 - long before anyone was criticising an ANC government or gravy trains.

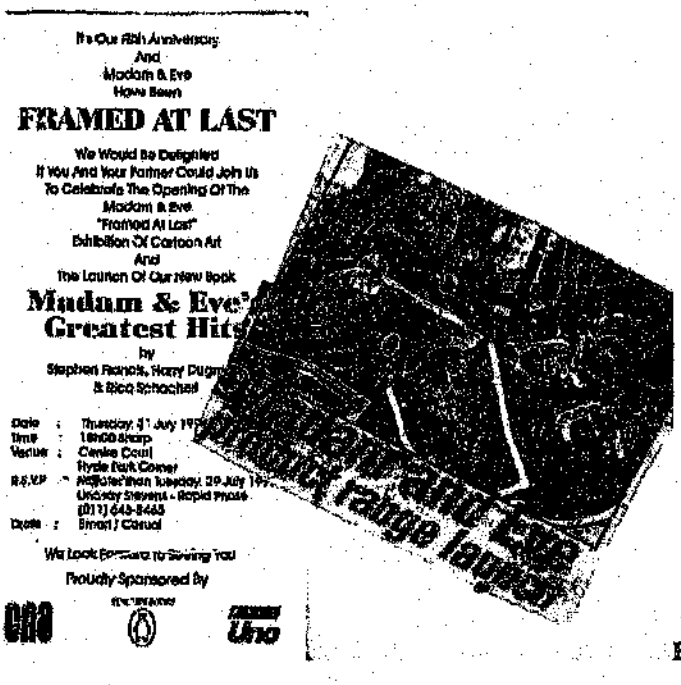

Figure 9

Furthermore, the strip is still intimately associated with the *Mail & Guardian*, which until recently carried the *Madam & Eve* homepage on its server and vigorously promotes the *Madam & Eve* collections. It is possible that had *Madam & Eve* first appeared in a newspaper with a more centrist or conservative profile - such as *The Star* or *The Sunday Times* - it would have been subject to a great deal more critical analysis by now.

CHAPTER TWO

Madam & Eve, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, makes certain statements, both explicit and implicit, about race and gender. The strip as a narrative of the changing fortunes of post-apartheid South Africa represents a certain notion of "South African-ness". This brings me to a number of questions. How does *Madam & Eve* promote an idea of what it is to be South African, and what is South African-ness as defined in the comic strip? Is it progressive or conservative and if the latter, should it be forced to promote more progressive ideologies? In other words, is *Madam & Eve* politically correct and if not, should it be?

Does *Madam & Eve*, in Eco's words, reflect "the implicit pedagogy of a system and [act] as hidden reinforcement of the dominant myths and values" (94:38)? Which system are we talking about? In some ways, *Madam & Eve* reinforces the new sensibilities of a post-apartheid society, that racism is wrong, that unequal economic and power relations do not necessarily imply inferiority or superiority. There is *simunye*-esque optimism at the heart of *Madam & Eve*, an implicit embrace of the new order of things. The comic strip is not backward-looking: there is no nostalgia for life under apartheid, even if the situation of the cartoon is a product of the apartheid system. Even as the cartoons criticise corruption or incompetence in the new government, there is never any question of returning to a system based on racial hierarchies. On the surface, *Madam & Eve* has embraced the new South Africa.

But is *Madam & Eve* really as progressive and positive as this analysis suggests? As Stuart Hall has observed, the process of representation is a politically charged act (in Bobo, 93: 66). "Meaning is always political" (Weedon, 87: 137) and located in social networks in which power and knowledge are imbricated.

Power and the domestic worker (and we're not talking about where to plug in the vacuum cleaner)

> Tonight....we look at another possible solution to the crime problem: the establishment of a 'maids' army' for the protection of those women who stay at home alone all day on their owners' property.

A slip of the tongue on the part of Derek Watts (15 June 1997), one of the presenters of M-Net's popular Sunday evening investigative program, *Carte Blanche*, is indicative of a widely-held (if probably unconscious) perception that domestic workers are somehow 'owned' by their employers.

In Figure 9, Eve and her friends reveal the subtle power dynamic between maids and madam. Madams are the butt of the jokes. They are , incompetent and lazy (why else would they need maids?); they also harbour mean prejudices and suspicions about their

servants. The cartoon is at its most serious - and subversive - when one of the maids asks "What's lazy, steals jewellery and whistles?" and then, in lieu of an answer, whistles herself.

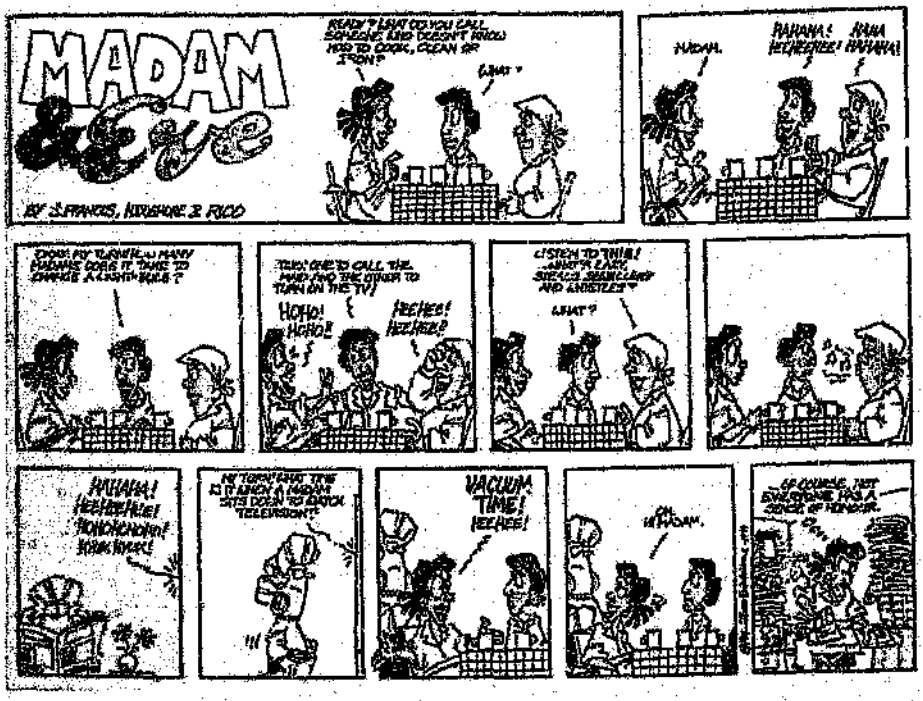

Figure 10

The maids get back at their madams in little, subtle ways - for example, by vacuuming when the madams want to watch television. But because this is reality - and because the cartoon cannot risk leaving open the door to revolution - Madam, who senses insurrection in her kitchen, triumphs in the end. Eve has to do the ironing; Madam has not found her jokes funny. But those kinds of situations, when *Madam & Eve* is at its most critical of white power, are rare. And Eve is always put in her place at the end, as in the following cartoon, apparently Dugmore's favourite (97: 30):

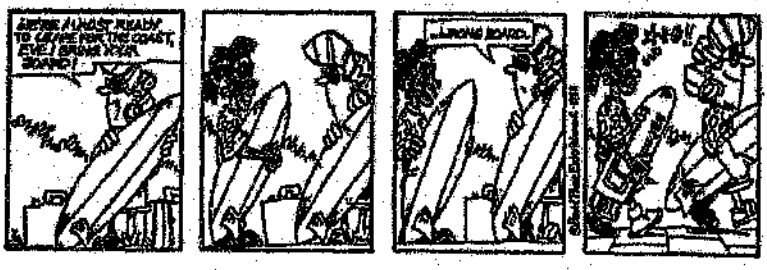

Figure 11

The joke revolves around a pun on two very different kinds of boa[illegible] Madam (perhaps

unrealistically) takes a surfboard on holiday. Eve wants to enjoy her holiday, too, but Madam will not allow her to forget that she is a servant whose major function in life is housework. So she is made to exchange her surfboard for an ironing board. Eve does not take kindly to being thwarted, swearing behind Madam's back. This kind of situation demonstrates how Eve is "constantly reminded of the limits of her power" (Smith, 96: 36).

"To practise literary criticism is to produce readings of literary texts and in the process of interpretation temporarily to fix meaning and privilege particular social interests" (Weedon. 87: 136). Cultural criticism, says Wallace, is a form of resistance, especially for black women. Thus Gail Smith's criti... in *Agenda of Madam & Eve* can be read as resistance to the representation of black women by white men, a representation that has apparently been enthusiastically embraced by the South African public. Smith describes herself as a black South African woman, the "spectre at the 'Simunye' feast" who believes that apartheid still exists.

Eve's fate, she complains, is to be "forever manipulated by the gods of Rapid Phase, who will speak for her"(34). Smith objects to the fact that *Madam & Eve* "does not force white South Africans to challenge their white supremacist reading of black female subjectivity". She argues that "As a leading icon of black femininity in South Africa, Eve, the sassy maid, is no more than a stereotype of oppressed black womanhood" (96: 33). Smith quotes Jacqueline Bobo to support her assertion that "[t]he way a group of people is represented can play a determining role in how these people are treated socially and politically" (33). In a similar way, Michele Wallace is concerned that, despite greater representation of blacks in the media, there has been no material improvement in the lives of most blacks:

> Moreover, it may even be that the economic and political victimisation of the urban and rural black poor in the US and worldwide is somehow exacerbated by the deeply flawed and inadequate representations of 'race' currently sponsored by both blacks and non-blacks in both 'high' a... 'low' culture.
>
> (94: 118-119)

Smith appears to be concerned that Eve as " leading icon of black femininity in South Africa" will influence the way in which *real* black women are treated. According to Smith's assessment, the creators of Rapid Phase have failed in their duty to present successful, realistic, non-stereotyped, liberated black female characters to the South African public, thus forcing them to reassess their white supremacist attitudes.

The creators have argued that there are indeed intelligent, articulate women in the country who have to "suppress their intelligence in their relationships with men" and "that's why we feel comfortable to make satire around that stereotype" (Omotoso, 96: 32). Yet *Madam and Eve*, Smith argues, "legitimates white stereotypification of black experience"

(96: 34). It is not really subversive:

> Eve's character is doomed to betray her initial promise as a potentially radical or transgressive portrayal of black South African femininity. As the maid stereotype, Eve is presented as evidence of 'change' in South Africa. Yet at the same time the Maid-Madam power dynamic ensures that she cannot become too threatening. The 'fresh aspect' of the cartoon is that she talks back and is not a victim, but the character is tightly controlled and remains essentially unthreatening.(96: 34)

In fact, the reason why Eve is there in the first place is that she brings "the necessary blackness to a narrative that argues the idea that with the 'birth' of the new democracy in South Africa, it is no longer necessary to be passionate about oppression and domination" (35). Furthermore, it not only makes use of stereotypes, it depicts women as adversaries and "does not challenge the politics of housework, or the ways in which women's labour is undervalued" (ibid.). Smith points to *The Guardian's* comment that Madam and Eve is the most 'painless' way of understanding South African politics. The cartoon is painless, she says, precisely because "it does not force White South Africans to challenge their white supremacist reading of black female subjectivity" (39). Men, she observes, particularly white men, are absent.

Smith does have a point there. Where, indeed, are the white men? We see black men in the figures of the men in the bakkie, but apart from the scrupulously politically correct pairings of black and white hijackers and robbers, white men are nowhere to be seen in Madam and Eve's world. The creators have said that "men never really come into it" (Omotoso, 96: 31) and the absence of white men seems to have been an unconscious act of exclusion. Perhaps, self-consciousness of their now politically incorrect demographics (Dugmore apparently wanted to call the company 'Three White Guys' before Francis selected the name 'Rapid Phase' at random from a copy of *Newsweek*), there is a desire to remove themselves from their own scrutiny - and more importantly the scrutiny of others. Failure to satirise types like themselves means that the men behind *Madam and Eve* can avoid confronting themselves and questioning the way they operate in the world. We know what S Francis and H Dugmore (and to a lesser extent, Rico) think of everyone else, but we can only speculate as to what they think of themselves. The appearances of Eric and his black friend from university are revealing: while Eric cannot find a job because of affirmative action, Thami has a BMW, a huge salary and a lot of white executives desperate to keep him. But the appearances of such male characters do not "challenge the heterosexism of South African society, or the ways in which notions of 'the family' determine and police social relationships" (36). The two main characters may both be divorced women, but they are both confined largely to domestic space, and there are no gay or lesbian characters. The cartoon, charges Smith, "never engages the politics of race,

women and housework" (35), which, given that men are very rarely seen inside the domestic sphere - let alone near an ironing board - is a valid point.

In the light of these points, I find it curious that Delia Rothnie-Jones and Dugmore should discuss a tradition of making men the butt of jokes in an interview in women's literary magazine herStoriA (97: 2-3). Making men the butt of the joke is not the point of *Madam & Eve* at all, as Smith complains (96: 37). The fact that men are "not important" because neither Madam nor Eve bother with them does not mean that they are being mocked. By not including men, the comic strip avoids the issue entirely. To get back to basics, "Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal discourse the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male"(Weedon, 87: 2). In this case the norm is the absent, literally controlling male power which - however benevolent -determines both how the characters look and what they say and do.

There are times when the cartoon does make a serious attempt to challenge racial stereotypes - such as that all members of a particular race group look the same - by using it against whites as well as blacks. However, they always use women to make their point (95: 37):

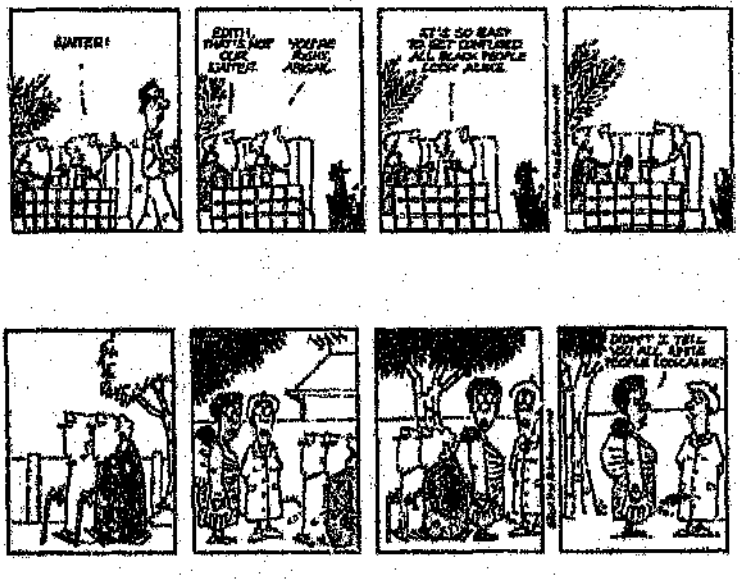

Figure 12

Conflict in *Madam & Eve* is almost always between women. The oppositional black/white relationship between Madam and Eve is paralleled by that between Mother Anderson and the Mielie Lady:

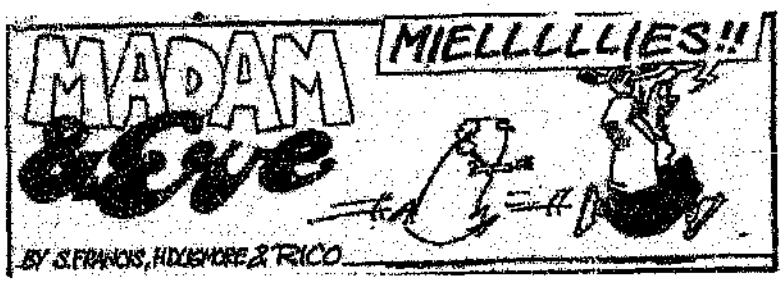

Figure 13

The latter remains something of an enigma - she rarely speaks except to shout "mielies!" - whereas Mother Anderson a strongly characterised. Mother Anderson is an old lady with 'sass'. She conforms to the stereotype of the eccentric old English woman and her lack of scruples serves as a foil to Madam's misguided decency. She usually serves as the target of the humour. On the other hand, she does subvert common perceptions of the elderly as helpless inmates of old age homes longer of any relevance to contemporary life. Mother Anderson (who is supposed to be in her mid 80's) establishes the presence of the elderly in a popular daily cartoon. The geriatric section of the population does not appear very often in popular culture unless they are deaf and stupid, as in an advertisement for Spur Steak Ranches flighted on television in November 1997. Mother Anderson is not deaf, she has bad habits, and she is capable of using her walking stick as a mean weapon. She is probably the most subversive character in *Madam & Eve*.

In contrast, conflict involving men usually deals with "real-life" political figures, the Louis Luyts, the President Mandelas, the Thabo Mbekis or whole categories and types such as beggars or police officers. (The rare exception is Eric and his more successful friend Thami.) *Madam & Eve* almost never features conflict *between* men and women. Madam might be held up by robbers (who are always men, one white and one black to avoid charges of racism) but these are generic criminals rather than defined characters.

"Many socially constructed markers of group membership are used to allocate power" (from Apfelbaum in Hurtado: 833). Aida Hurtado argues that white women and "women of color (sic)" are subordinated in different ways. White women are *seduced* by white men; black women are *rejected* by white men. "The definition of *woman* is constructed differently for white women and for women of Color, though gender is the marking mechanism through which the subordination of each is maintained" (845). Like the cartoon itself, Dugmore's comment indicates a possible unwillingness to grapple with issues of patriarchy and representation, men and their relation to women. On the other hand, should the cartoon be required to grapple with these issues at all? Smith argues that yes, it should.

Maids and madams (as in all master-servant relationships) deal with power at a very basic and easily defined level. As a university psychology lecturer who studied the attitudes of black madams reports, "For some black women, employing a maid is the ultimate expression of power which had previously been the privilege of white women" (Bridgland, 93). The relationships satirised in *Madam & Eve* are based on either power differences or racial ones, but not on gender. If Madam has a black male psychotherapist, it is to explore her white middle class hang-ups about dealing with a black professional who sports dreadlocks rather than an investigation of gender relationships. The following cartoon suggests that sexism is infinitely preferable to racism (95: 61):

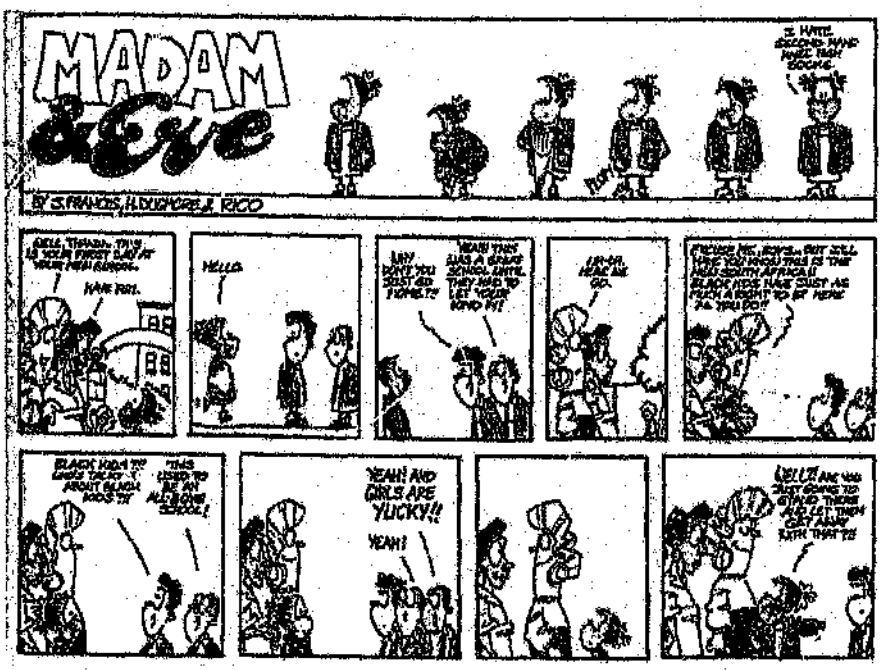

Figure 14

Madam and Eve obviously assume that when Thandi is not welcomed at her new school, it is because she is black. The enormous relief on their faces when they realise that it is because she is a girl says a lot about attitudes towards discrimination in South Africa. We are so terrified of the prospect of racism that anything, even sexism, is preferable. Clearly sexism is not considered as important an issue as other forms of prejudice.

Aside from the quality of the humour, part of the reason why *Madam & Eve* struck a chord with white audiences both local and overseas is, I suspect, linked to the way in which anxieties about the changing situation in South Africa can be displaced onto the unthreatening figures of the women in *Madam & Eve* - all of whom are disempowered in some way - and into the 'safe' space of the home. The real power, so the popular logic goes, lies elsewhere. The realities of the New South Africa are somehow less disturbing

when viewed as an interaction between a white madam and her black maid than a black president and his white deputy. This cartoon deals with the common ... aplaint that whites have not really entered into the spirit of the new South Africa - for one thing, they don't know the words to Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika (94: 140):



Figure 15

Eve's face registers the disappointment of those black South Africans who keep hoping that their white compatriots will make a concerted effort to change. Smith complains that such a cartoon is symptomatic of the assumption that blacks have a "natural awareness" of the ways in which apartheid oppressed them - but whites are not. "Blacks are expected to 'understand the politics of oppression' while whites are allowed the privilege of ignorance" (96: 38). The cartoon fails to challenge these assumptions.

Harry Dugmore has acknowledged the absurdity of the situation satirised in *Madam & Eve*, where a white madam might claim to be best friends with her maid yet not allow her to use the crockery: "In cartoon terms, they are delicious ironies, but in social terms they are bitter realities, because the intimacy is completely false" (The Economist, 97: 87)[2] The creators maintain that the aim of the cartoon is to subvert, rather than uphold the stereotype, though whether this happens in practice will depend on the reader. I know madams who assume the point of view of Madam without seeing any of the irony directed at her and what she represents. As for Smith's criticisms about the non-existence of the "'sassy" maid, the creators do not think that what they do is escapist humour. "It's in touch with reality" (Bridgland, 93). Later, however, Dugmore admits that a real Eve would probably be fired (97: 152).

"Eve's illusion of liberation," says Smith, "is fast becoming the post-apartheid version of the strong black woman that is called into play whenever people but not challenge oppressive power relationships want to highlight an issue around black femininity but not challenge oppressive power relationships" (36).

[2] Not necessarily completely false; there are relationships between maids and madams (or masters) that are close - but they are rare.

In response to Smith, Dugmore says, "The Agenda article shows no understanding of the process of critical dissent" (97: 11). It is true that in parts of her article, Smith tends to read *Madam & Eve* far too literally. She uses Madam's horror at Eric's choice of a black girlfriend to bolster her argument, when in fact the cartoon is mocking those very attitudes. There is also a serious slippage between fantasy and reality at the heart of Smith's argument. Eve, she contends, is one of the best-known black women in South Africa. But "[u]nlike Ms Madikizela-Mandela, Dr Zuma, Ms Mabuza-Suttle and Ms Mofokeng, Eve really is the only black woman in Eden who can't speak back" (34. My first reaction is to point out that of course Eve can't speak back - she doesn't exist. She's a *cartoon* character, a figment of the national imagination, a collection of black lines and white spaces. How can Smith possibly compare Eve to real, flesh and blood black women and expect her argument to hold water? This slippage between real black women and a fictional one seriously damages Smith's contention that Rapid Phase should be challenging stereotypes and power relations more than they do - because her argument is based on fallacious assumptions. She also contradicts herself in criticising *Madam & Eve* for both presenting a black female character that is not sufficiently positive and for being unrealistic. A black maid with "sass", she maintains, would soon get fired (34).

In fact it is Madam, as I have already noted, is the most obviously stereotyped character - far more so than Eve. She is a combination of several types found in the contemporary South African mythology: English-speaking twinset and pearls type, northern suburbs madam (an entire essay could be written on the Northern Suburbs, South Africa's version of the Elysian fields, and its place in the popular imagination), upper class type, hopeless housewife, staid and stuck in the mire of middle class sensibilities. A divorced, unglamorous woman in her late 50's, she is a character vulnerable to criticism. Who could possibly object, when "White women signify hegemonic, institutionalised whiteness by virtue of their association with a pure, chaste, asexual before-the-fall womanhood...attained and maintained via middle-class respectability, with its implicit heterosexuality" (Davy, 95: 197).

After all, "What would whiteness be without middle class respectability?" (Vincente L Rafael in Davy, 95) It is easy to laugh at Madam's kind of middle class respectability, because it is so obvious, and because middle class respectability has been under critical attack for decades. In this age of awareness of who one has permission to laugh at and who is taboo, a middle aged, middle class white woman is a relatively safe target. While Madam presumably has the economic wherewithal to afford a house in the northern suburbs, a cellphone, a BMW and a string of pearls, she has no real power. Furthermore, she is incompetent (see Figure 10). Her white womanhood is not linked to white supremacy - unless it is an unstated white male supremacy. Madam exists in a domestic sphere but transfers the requirement that she do domestic work onto Eve. According to

her character's description on the homepage, Madam needs Eve to tell her which machine is for the dishes and which machine does the clothes.

Richard Dyer, in a study of whiteness in classical films, found that whiteness is enacted in terms of "rationality, rigidity, gentility, order, stability, and the capacity to set boundaries" (Davy, 95: 196). Eve disrupts the stability of Madam's life by refusing to conform to boundaries that Madam sets for her. She sleeps on the ironing board, invites her friends in for parties, when Madam goes on holiday, asks for raises, opens small businesses and plays with irritating puppets. But a balance must be maintained (or the situation would not be remotely believable) and so Madam also gets to reassert her power every now and then. This is when we realise that, despite her shortcomings, Madam is the one with the economic power, and therefore the veto on anything Eve says or does. Gail Smith does not believe that domestic workers with 'sass' would keep their jobs. How many black women with 'sass', she asks, exist in South African popular culture? (96: 34)

Subversion of stereotypes presents an added problem is that if the cartoon does challenge stereotypes, and have Eve go off to university, there would be no more cartoon (and consequently, no more successful, highly visible product and accompanying marketing opportunities. "At the end of the day, it is a cartoon strip and there are certain limits". (32) Should *Madam & Eve* present realities as they are (such as the fact that most madams are white, most maids are black) in the form of a situation that is recognisable to most readers, or should offer a vision of society's power structures in a way that might risk alienating its audience? As I have already suggested, much of *Madam & Eve's* appeal lies in its nonthreatening satirisation of race and power relationships. Rapid Phase never make the mistake of allowing the cartoon to become overtly polemical.

"We like to think our cartoon has edge, but at the end of the day, it is a feel-good cartoon" (96: 32) say the men of Rapid Phase, and therein lies the key to any potential for subversion. For *Madam & Eve* to remain 'feel-good', it cannot be too challenging. Borrowing ammunition from a review in The Guardian, *Madam & Eve* is "painless", Smith argues, "because it does not force white South Africans to challenge their white supremacist reading of black female subjectivity" (96: 39). The creators have chosen the feel-good factor over painful criticism. That is their choice, and in terms of commercial success, almost certainly the right one. In this sense, Smith is right. Madam and Eve are characters the reader is allowed to feel comfortable with; the caricatures are affectionate rather than vicious and through them it is possible to imagine a South Africa where blacks and whites, even when they laugh at one another, are really rather nice people. Thus, says Smith, "Eve's portrayal is doomed to betray her initial promise as a potentially radical or transgressive portrayal of black South African femininity" (34). So I will move on to a woman who portrays herself as a radical and transgressive version of black femininity: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

Where's Winnie?

There is one "character" in *Madam & Eve*, who while she only appears in the comic strip when she occupies the political centre stage in "real" life, manages to embody all of the concerns of this report: around Winnie, issues of race, gender and national identity circulate continually. She is a powerful black woman, once married to the New South Africa's patron saint, Nelson Mandela. Her life, a melange of martyrdom and murder, in many ways reflects the ambiguities of the recent history of this country. Nkosazana Zuma is another powerful, prominent black woman politician but she doesn't inspire fear. She might make mistakes, but she doesn't terrify people. She has been accused of being stupid, but not evil.

Winnie has been a favourite target of *Madam & Eve* from the beginning (95: 68):



Figure 16

Now as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela - or usually just 'Winnie' - she has come to stand in for a whole collection of anxieties, particularly white anxieties, and - I would suggest, judging by the number of Winnie jokes that appear in publications traditionally catering for white middle class men[3] as well as casual conversation - especially white *male* anxieties. As a powerful female personality in possession of countless political lives, Winnie is a kind of avatar of the Mother Africa of popular mythology, who both creates and destroys. Dark, mysterious and implacable behind those designer sunglasses, she is the leading candidate for the honour of South Africa's representative of the monstrous feminine. The following joke suggests that much of the fear that circulates around Winnie stems from her perceived megalomania:

> Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and Winnie all die in a plane crash. They go to heaven, all get amnesty at the Pearly Gates and go in. There sits God on his great white throne. God addresses Thabo first.
>
> "Thabo, what do you believe?"

[3] Financial magazines such Finance Week, Financial Mail and F&T Weekly, which regularly include Winnie jokes in their humour sections.

> Thabo replies, "I believe that the combustion engine is evil and we need to save the planet from CFC's and that if any more freon is released into the atmosphere, the earth will become a greenhouse and we'll all die."
>
> "Sounds good enough," says God. "Come and sit at my left."
>
> Then God turns to Nelson.
>
> "Nelson, what do you believe?"
>
> Nelson replies, "Lord, I believe in power to the people. I also believe in feeling people's pain and standing for what you believe in, even if the press criticises you."
>
> "Now I second that!" says God, impressed. "Come and sit at my right."
>
> Then God addresses Winnie.
>
> "Winnie, what do you believe?"
>
> Winnie raises her eyebrows. "I believe," she says, " you're sitting in my chair."

Comparing Mandela's new consort, Graca Machel, [illegible]ie, women's magazine *Fair Lady* notes the contrast between Machel's short nails and Winnie's "highly painted talons" (Lamb, 97: 40) and observes, "It doesn't take long to discover what attracted Mandela to his new love. It's easy to mark the contrast [illegible]n Winnie Mandela, who always makes an entrance, and is as loud and large as Machel is reserved and softspoken" (39).

Winnie has always been notorious for the flamboyance of her appearance (DP leader Tony Leon once complained that the outfits she wore to parliament made her look like an overdressed sofa) and her charisma, and this has been exploited by cartoonists. The serpentine green hat she wore to the Presidential Inauguration almost succeeded in overshadowing Mandela himself. After the inauguration she came to be represented in *Madam & Eve* strips as the silhouette of that infamous hat, occasionally rising above a sea of bodyguards. When she was fired from the cabinet in 1995, Rapid Phase had Madam and Eve trying to imagine South African politics without her. "No more scandals." "No more hilarious mistakes." "No more goofy green hats." "No more bodyguards." "No more biting satire!" "No more great punchlines!" (95: 70). Francis et al describe Winnie as

> a gift. A cartoonist's dream. Someone who was always in the news. Someone who was consistently controversial. Someone whose bodyguards even got into trouble. Winnie Mandela, we love you. And we thank you from the bottom of our inkwells. Keep up the good work.
>
> (97: 101)

Certainly Winnie is a favourite target for caricature by South African cartoonists. Zapiro (aka Jonathan Shapiro), probably the country's most astute political cartoonist, has shown Winnie as a vengeful genie demanding her three wishes, "Populism, Exonerate my murky past, Presidency" (Mail & Guardian November 1997) (see Fig 17) or as the only survivor,



Figure 17

along with the cockroaches, of a nuclear holocaust (Fig 18). Here she is featured wearing the bizarre Inauguration headpiece that has become a kind of visual synecdoche for Winnie and all that she connotes.



Figure 18

Whenever Winnie reappears in the limelight, she features - usually indirectly - in t panels of *Madam & Eve*. In 1994, it was the news of a gift of a house from a wealthy white businesswoman. Later, President Mandela flipped a coin to decide whether to fire her from the cabinet. When the court tried unsuccessfully to serve Winnie with divorce papers - because it could not locate her - Rapid Phase leapt onto the news with relish. Figure 19 features a cartoon (my favourite) which is a parody of the British "Where's Wally" comic activity books (95: 176). Note all the detail - protest marches, collapsing airlines, hijackings, taxi violence, squatters, hawkers; this particular cartoon can be read as a kind of visual summary of South African events and issues the latter half of 1995. In early 1997, Rapid Phase used the news that Winnie was selling bottles of soil from 'Heroes' Acre' - her back garden - for R50 each to good effect and had Mother Anderson joining forces with Eve and going off to Soweto to steal soil from her garden. In November 1997, as witnesses appeared to testify against Winnie at the TRC hearings

and the possibility loomed that she might get to be deputy president, not only of the ANC, but of the country, Madam attends a meeting of Winniephobes Anonymous and visits her black, dreadlocked psychotherapist in an attempt to deal with her terrible fear of Winnie.



Figure 19

The following two panels are from the Winniephobes Anonymous meeting; the second includes a caricature of Winnie herself, complete with the by now instantly recognisable sunglasses and hat.

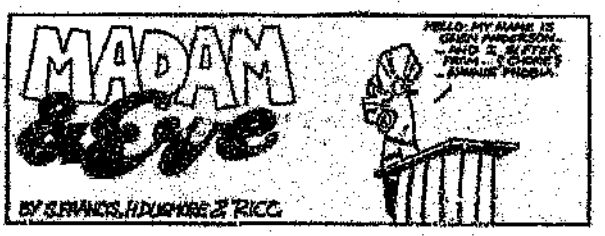



Figure 20

This cartoon pokes fun at the terror Winnie that inspires in ordinary white South Africans - and the protruding tongue and wide grin of the Winnie-in-a-box suggests that the creators of *Madam & Eve* suspect that Winnie *knows* that she inspires that kind of fear, and enjoys it.

The Winnie phobia cartoons were followed by a week featuring the familiar figure of the Hollywood movie producer - he has visited Mandela on previous occasions - who approaches Winnie with the idea of making a movie of her life. Nelson already has "Long Walk to Freedom", so Winnie's movie will have to be "Long walk to ..." either prison or the presidency. "No problem!" says the producer. "We shoot two endings!" (Madam & Eve site: December 3 97). When auditions for the leading role are announced, Madam, Eve, Mother Anderson and even Thandi dress up, complete with Inauguration hat, for the role. Mandela gets a horrible fright when his limousine passes a long queue of Winnie wannabes waiting to audition. (The impact of this cartoon was somewhat reduced when the Mandelas publicly embraced at the ANC national congress a few days later.)

Visually, Winnie is coded by South African cartoonists as a frightening figure, with the contortions of her Inauguration hat reminiscent of the tresses of Medusa. Her face is never shown in *Madam & Eve* but other cartoonists regularly focus on her penetrating gaze and sharp nose and a mouth pursed as if in satisfaction (see Fig 17). At the time of the TRC hearings, the *Mail & Guardian* cover featured an illustration depicting Winnie with glowing eyes and a manic expression, wearing a hat that suggested devil's horns.

Why does Winnie inspire such fear? "If Winnie becomes President, I'm leaving the country," is a common suburban refrain. Zapiro goes so far as to compare her to the great despots of this century: Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Verwoerd and Mobuto (Mail & Guardian, November 28 97). Part of this fear stems from memories of her notorious advocacy of violence during the 80's - liberating the country by means of matchsticks and the necklace - while simultaneously enjoying the role of the "mother of the nation" as the international face of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The allegations about the activities of the Mandela United football club and Winnie's murky involvement in many murders are confirmation of long-held fears and suspicions: around Winnie coagulate frightening images of a populist demagogue seizing power by whatever means and using violence to achieve her ends.

Winnie makes apparent the fragility of democratic government - after all, Hitler was elected to power, democratically - and the example of countless post-independence African despots makes the possibility of the same fate befalling South Africa horribly real. She is a political hydra who, no matter how many scandals apparently condemn her to the sidelines, manages to keep power within her grasp.

That the creators of *Madam & Eve* manage to turn Winnie into a figure of fun does not entirely disguise their own misgivings about her. Their satire is a great deal less vicious than that of other cartoonists (or that of, for example, Pieter-Dirk Uys who wears earrings made out of toy car tyres when he plays her) but does this mean that they are any less concerned?

In a paper entitled "The cryptic humour of political jokes (there's more to a joke than the PC think)", Charles Schutz argues that the comic form conceals hostility: "the greater the potential for conflict, the greater the comic veil" (96: 1). In America, for example, the dominant form of political humour is comic invective (3). Exaggeration and distortion of the kind we have seen in various comic dealings with Winnie "make it easy to laugh off the seemingly deep slights" because of the "unreality of them" (ibid.).[4]

Political humour can, notes Schutz, be of the "broadaxe variety". Its target and message are certain, for example Zapiro's depiction of Winnie in Figure 17. However, "a little ingenuity and imagination impart cryptic qualities to humor (sic)" (5). Distortion - as in the case of Winnie's conversations with movie directors in *Madam & Eve* - can conceal in order to reveal. In the case of the latter, the humorist has a more difficult task, as he "must rely on his audience's innate sense of humor plus tacit cultural understandings, group prejudices, colloquialisms, symbols, and so on" (ibid.). Cryptic humour, of the type that the creators of *Madam & Eve* often rely on in their treatment of Winnie, allows "non-violent violence" (ibid.). They are in fact much more critical of Winnie than a surface analysis of the cartoons would suggest. Curiously, Gail Smith makes no reference to the persona of Winnie in her criticism of *Madam & Eve*. Their relative gentleness - everyone in *Madam & Eve* is really rather charming - tends to deny Winnie her power. It can be argued that by reducing Winnie to a figure of fun, Rapid Phase attempt to neutralise her status as a black woman capable of inspiring fear - a very rare power indeed.

Drawing the boundaries, in black and white

Madam & Eve, Smith argues, "legitimates white stereotypification of black experience" (96: 34). Eve is an example of "white objectification - a character created by whites for whites in which blacks enter merely to validate dominant perceptions of the 'native' and threatening other" (38).

Not unexpectedly, the ordinary, fairly unpoliticised reader finds it difficult to agree with Smith's views, which bring to the fore uncomfortable issues of race, gender and ideology. After reading Smith's article, Colleen Ryan found herself "downright depressed that this critic refused to find anything redeeming about Madam & Eve, not even the way Mother Anderson mixes her gin and tonics"(97: 24). Smith clearly belongs to the "School of No Sense of Humour" and "seems to imply that having invented Eve, her creators should have the good sense to ensure all her lines are cleared by the Gender Commission"

---

[4] Pieter-Dirk Uys, when he told me the story of his performance as Winnie for the ANC, related with amazement the reaction of the lady herself - who happened to be in the audience. Her bodyguards informed him that she enjoyed the caricature because Uys had "made her beautiful".

(ibid.). Smith herself notes that the reaction of most people to her criticism was that she should have a sense of humour (96: 38).

In a similar vein to the debate between Gail Smith and *Madam & Eve*, the debate over the representation of black women by white artists spilled into the pages of newspapers during the first half of 1997. The Nigerian curator of the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, Okwui Enwezor, charged that white (mainly female) artists who used representations of the formally oppressed in their work were "sexist and patronising" and that their work betrayed "neocolonialist" hankerings and they [were] the handmaidens of white male oppressors" (Greig, 97: 18). Candice Breitz, one of the artists heavily criticised for the use of images of black women in her work, argued in return that what Enwezor and his supporters were suggesting a kind of intellectual and artistic policing.

> To conflate the act of representing the body of another with speaking for another can ultimately only lead to most censorial prescription. Which is to suggest tha..... cultural prescription - followed by the most invisible and pernicious forms of self-censorship - cannot be far behind.
>
> (Breitz in Greig, 97: 18)

Another artist argues that

> South African history is about nothing if it is not about the various, often violent encounters between different groups of people and individuals - most significantly for us today about the encounters that involved Europeans. Who then is entitled to speak for those encounters?
>
> (Skotnes, ibid.)

She goes on to object to the implication that only members of a group may speak for it, thus parcelling the world into racial and social categories.

In the light of this as well the impending Employment Equity Bill, the continuing debate over affirmative action and the well-worn argument between Eurocentrism and Africanisation, such parcelling appears to be a growing trend in South African society. It is the newest and most pernicious local form of political correctness, also known as PC. And political correctness has important implications for humour, whether we are talking about *Madam & Eve* or a standup comedian in a pub at the Randburg Waterfront.

According to the Jewish Australian comic, George Smilovici, who refers to political correctness as "Comicus Interruptus"[5]

> P.C. is trying to enforce tolerance through intolerance - whereas comedy embraces the dynamic of both...P.C. is trying to liberate people from their oppression by inhibi-

[5] He suggests an alternative title to his address on comedy and political correctness as "Who took the Die out of Dictionary?" (96: 1)

ting, proscribing and prescribing correct conduct.

(96: 3)

Smilovici is disturbed by the promise of political correctness, which he defines as "the process of purification of language".

> It is the eliminator, it contaminates and poisons like a virus, which will not finish its work until there are no words at all.
>
> (96: 3)

Bernard Saper denounces political correctness as

> the latest fashionable mantra for intolerant, self-righteous, group-think opinions of activists....it has spawned a wave of justifiable back-lash, which has equated it to intellectual censorship, political preaching, inquisitorial bullying, anti-free speech, thought policing, and/or anti-academic freedom. If the crybabies, busybodies and PC activists continue to insist on the right to stop others from using "dirty" words, raunchy rap, or certain unwelcome, indelicate, or disparaging ideas, they risk undermining the vitality and vigour of our pluralistic ideas. Of course, there should be limits to what society - even a free and open society - should be prepared to tolerate. But those limits have to be very, very wide indeed.
>
> (96: 1)

Political correctness can be characterised as a device for intimidating people who disagree with your point of view (ibid.), and if this is the case, it is a threat to democracy. Argues. Ian McFayden

> Political correctness is just a modern word - a politically correct word if you will - for dogma...In past ages dogma was set down by a central religious authority. Today it is imposed by a network of committees, working parties, advisers, lobby groups, academics, think tanks, authors and of course journalists...Political correctness...is no more than the faddish morality of the age.
>
> (95: 3)

The Economist, however, is less worried about political correctness - which it labels "ineffectual" - than the state censors "which often seek to protect the powerful from the justified jeers of their subjects". Governments. they point out, have the power suppress humour they dislike - even to the point of executing the joker, as in the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa (97: 1).

On a less life-and-death level, debates around who has permission to represent whom can easily lead into the mire of political correctness. In one of the few academic analyses of the phenomenon, Ellen Shohat and Robert Stam argue that political correctness, is premised on distance and a lack of intimacy (93: 341). In attempting to define the problem at the heart of PC, they take the wonderfully ironic step of placing it within a metaphor of capitalism:

> While the laudatory goal behind PC is to stimulate respect and mutual answerability in a reciprocity that takes past oppressions into account, in practice it often degenerates into the sadomasochistic self-flagellations of guilty liberals and a competition for oppressed status among the subaltern - victimhood and 'one-downs-personship' as cultural capital in a fluctuating identity stock market.

(ibid.)

Shohat and Stam go on to explore a dilemma that is at the heart of any critical gender- and race-centred debate around *Madam & Eve*: can members of one group (let alone the dominant group) speak for those of another (let alone the group that is oppressed)? hooks (whose rejection of upper case allies her with white middle class male, ee cummings), has a phrase she uses repeatedly in her writings on black Americans and Blackness: 'white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy'. This construction is accepted as given to the point that it appears to become a mantra. hooks obviously feels justified in fixing it as a concrete reality of the West, but my concern is that it will become a rigid concept closed to questioning (and it does have a certain hypnotic rhythm to it). It is not a term that fits neatly into the South African situation where economic power is still largely a white preserve, but blacks hold political power and there is a growing - and rich powerful - black elite. White middle class men in South Africa do not occupy the same sociopolitical, economic and ideological space that they fill in the US, where they form part of the majority.

What implications does this then have for white men representing black women, especially in South Africa? As Shohat and Stam ask, "Is permission to represent a given community limited to card-carrying, epidermically suitable representatives of that community?" (343). Rephrasing Gayatry Spivak's seminal question, they question whether the 'non-subaltern' can speak (ibid.).

In response to this dilemma, they suggest a solution, that people of different identities speak together in a progressive 'plurilog'. A cultural polyphony, they argue, "would orchestrate a multifaceted polylog among all those interested in restructuring power in more egalitarian ways" (326). Is this a solution applicable to a cartoon strip? Should Rapid Phase hire a black woman as a consultant? David Chaney suggests that such interventions into the expressions of culture can be seen as the censorship of the morally righteous, an attempt to promote popular culture as a form of social engineering (94: 84-5). Cornel West argues that "Any notions of 'the real Black community' and 'positive images' are "value-laden, socially loaded, and ideologically charged" (93: 211). Gail Smith has opened the debate on *Madam & Eve* from a very specific location as a black South African woman who has studied in the UK; what is needed now to continue the debate are perspectives from other locations in space, time and history.

Perhaps the most succinct, intelligent and sharp response to Smith and her strategy by an academic comes from the Indian intellectual Sara Suleri, who in a paper pondering the problem of anti-intellectualism in the mass media, strongly criticises the "embarrassed privilege granted to racially encoded feminism"(92:758). Is the source of the problem of parody in the mass media perhaps in academic discourse itself? "The coupling," Suleri argues, "of *postcolonial* with *woman*...almost inevitably that leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for "the good"" (759). Suleri goes on to caution against "the dangerous democracy accorded the coalition between postcolonial and feminist theories, in which each term serves to reify the potential pietism of the other" (ibid.). Smith and Suleri would have plenty to argue about.

Suleri is highly critical of bell hooks in particular. In *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, hooks "rehearses a postcolonial fallacy in order to conduct some highly misguided readings of competing feminisms within the context of racial experiences. She establishes a hierarchy of color that depressingly segregates divergent racial perspectives into a complete absence of intellectual exchange" (764). Feminist intellectuals like hooks do more harm than good, Suleri feels; "such claims to radical revisionism take refuge in the political untouchability that is accorded the category of Third World Woman, and in the process sully the crucial knowledge that such a category has still to offer to the dialogue of feminism today" (765). Suleri's observations have plenty of import for South Africa circa 1997. "Political untouchability" of the kind she describes is an indigenous hydra raising more and more of its ugly heads as charges of "racism" are flung about like deadly weapons every time, for example, a (black) public figure is criticised by a ("white") newspaper.

In his volume on the complex relationship between ethics and history, *The Morals of History* (1991 trans 1995), Tzvetan Todorov is strongly critical of the rhetoric of decolonization that is at the heart of the debate over representation. The ideological debates at the core of postcolonialism, he argues, are similar to those that propped up the rhetoric of colonialism: both are based upon motives that are "inadmissible" (47) and so other motives, suitable for public consumption, must be found. Colonialism, for example, was always quite obviously the pursuit of self-interest though the exploitation of one's fellow man. Making oneself rich and powerful at the expense of others was encouraged by neither Christian nor humanitarian morality; therefore, other arguments were required to justify colonization. Todorov argues that the proponents of decolonization are also guilty of citing the wrong motives. While acknowledging that the stakes are very different - freedom as opposed to enrichment - Todorov refuses the idea that evil is specific to colonialism. If one man kills another man, it is wrong because murder is morally wrong, not because one man is white and the other black. Skin colour is irrelevant: the barbarities

is irrelevant: the barbarities of colonialism would be just as odious had they occurred outside of the colonial framework. And this is the crux of Todorov's argument: the colony, he proposes, is just a framework in which morally insupportable crimes become legitimate. Thus, "in positioning oneself in the territory of anticolonialism, one chooses to accept the framework imposed by colonialism itself, and to transform what could have been a fight for human rights into a fight between nations" (54). [6]

The proponents of decolonization - from Cesaire and Fanon to (I would suggest, at times) bell hooks - use the same arguments championed by the proponents of colonization, falling back on well-worn myths of race and origin to justify their cause (55). "By not wanting to imitate Europe, [anticolonial ideologues] imitated the worst of Europe" Todorov concludes (59). Underlying his argument in this chapter - in fact the entire book - is a tangible desire for a common *morality*. Todorov completely rejects relativism in the quest for a common good, and a common evil. Extrapolating his argument, I would suggest that Todorov, both as a writer of history and in his rejection of racism in any form (no matter how apparently palatable), would also refuse the notion that only black may represent black.[7]

Madam & Eve, like all comic strips, is a mixture of art and literature: it uses both illustration and the printed word to convey meaning. The literary aspect of the comic strip tends, inevitably, to be subsumed to the more obvious visual style - but this does not mean that a literary analysis might not possibly be useful in analysing it. For this reason I find some aspects of literary criticism, particularly those practices highlighted by the so-called "new historicism" useful in this study.

"New historicists" have been described as similar to social historians in that "Literary critics and social historians seek on some level to explain what we have come to call *mentalite*" (Kelly and Kelly, 94; 677). It is quite possible to imagine some future historian examining *Madam & Eve* cartoons for clues to the *mentalite* of South Africa in the 1990's. H. Aram Veeser outlines the core assumptions of New Historicism as follows:

> 1. Every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
>
> 2. every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;

---

[6] Anticolonialism slips into nationalism, even racism - the very things it criticizes in the discourse and actions of the enemy. Racist, nationalist and relativist arguments - all of which Todorov the structuralist humanist (if such a creature is possible) detests - appear throughout anticolonial discourse. It hardly seems necessary at this point to reflect on the abysmal human rights record of so many African nations during the process of decolonization - the examples of Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, both Congos, Somalia, Sudan and Algeria gives Todorov's words a particularly poignant ring.

[7] The debate over whether whites may *only* be represented by whites has remained apparently unexplored.

Apartheid, together with colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism has left a legacy of certain people in certain roles. South African society is still riddled with gendered and racialised roles. *Madam & Eve* reflects this reality: Mielie ladies are black. Workers sitting in the backs of bakkies are black. Most maids are black. Most madams are still white. Criminals, on the other hand, can be any race, and even a cursory view of the archives will reveal that the artist is careful to maintain the rainbow nation in his criminal gangs.

According to *Madam & Eve*, racial reconciliation and even friendship is possible among economic unequals within the confines of a stable, familiar relationship: in this case, the relationship between Madam, Eve and their readers. The creators emphasise that Madam and Eve are actually "the best of friends" (97: 15). Should this be condemned, despite the general unreality of the situation? Smith herself outlines a possible solution.

> An essential part of asserting our rights to be black and female and a self-defining subject, is that we must confront the apartheid ideology that still lurks in the imagination of white South Africa, and which stands in the way of our being represented in all our diversity. We will not automatically be given spaces in which to create black female subjects who are unconstrained by racism. We must make these spaces and maybe in doing so we too will have the choice of laughing at ourselves in all our multiplicity of identities. (96: 39)

This is a more constructive route out of the impasse that Smith writes herself into: that while she is not advocating censorship or laagers of racially-defined creation ("rather, she says, "I'm intervening in a monologue"), she argues that *Madam & Eve* should present a worldview congruent with her own ideological standards. It is not the criticisms themselves which are unsettling; some of her points, as I have argued, are valid. Rather, it is Smith's implicit assertion that the cartoons should actively promote a consciousness-raising, overtly ideological agenda that is disturbing. In other words, *Madam & Eve* is not politically correct - when it should be.

Smith is in fact lobbying for a form of censorship that is - however noble and forcibly enlightening it may appear - doomed to failure. The purpose of *Madam & Eve* is not to induce mass guilt in white South Africa, it is to make people laugh - and ultimately, to make money. Smith's argument is not so much with the creators of *Madam & Eve* as the audience that reads and enjoys the cartoon week after week, year after year - and at the critics who have failed to raise questions of the construction of black female subjectivity. The cartoon is a symptom of the shortcomings of the new South Africa, not their cause. Popular culture can persuade, but it cannot force its audiences to make en masse for the nearest road to Damascus. Such power is beyond even the most gifted creative minds - for which, those of us who value an open, democratic society, should probably be grateful.

Finally, we have heard from the critics and the creators - but what about the reaction of the maids themselves? "We read [*Madam & Eve*] here all the time," the treasurer of the South African Domestic Workers Union said in 1993. "Some of it is very funny. Some of it isn't funny at all. It's reality." (Taylor, 93: A26). Violet Mothlasedi, president of the Domestic Workers Union, "likes the cartoon. It reminds her of her own 11-year asso ation with a Gwen Anderson whom she described as so very good, after 1 trained he. '" (Bridgland, 93). Their reactions suggest that the black woman who works as a domestic servant needs less protecting than some critics might assume. And she also has a sense of humour.

CHAPTER THREE

The Act of Laughter

In analysing the representation of such phenomena as "race, gender and national identity" in *Madam & Eve* it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that it is a *comic* strip. The raison d'etre of *Madam & Eve* is humour: its purpose is to make its readers laugh, and through laughter, to make them think. So an analysis of Madam & Eve without taking into consideration the complex psychological and social politics of humour and its corollary, laughter, would be fatally flawed.

Laughter, it is said, is good for us. "Spontaneous laughter," the Encyclopedia Britannica Online (1996) tells us, "is a motor reflex produced by the coordinated contraction of 15 facial muscles in a stereotyped pattern and accompanied by altered breathing." Not only is laughter good exercise (a hearty laugh is said to burn more calories than a ten minute jog), but it gets the blood flowing, releases toxins trapped in the lymph and encourages the secretion of positive brain chemicals. "In the same way that exercise does, laughter stimulates endorphins. These endorphins stimulate the immune system. Therefore, people who laugh or exercise a lot do not get sick as easily as those who do not. If you both laugh and exercise a lot, you are well on the way to supreme happiness and health" (Daniels, 97: 15). Laughter and its associated emotions has been credited with helping to cure cancer (Davis, 96: 2). There seems little doubt that if everyone laughed a little more, the world would be a better place.

But laughter is also a political act, and it can be a potentially dangerous site of conflict: one person's laughter is another person's deeply insulting slur. It depends on who's doing the laughing, and who's being laughed at. Jewish jokes are a prime example: the same joke told by an anti-Semite and a Jew becomes either an expression of racist prejudice or a celebration of a people's ability to laugh at itself. The surest way to tell what matters about a person is to find out what he or she finds funny. When you laugh, you give yourself away.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica Online, humour is a unique form of art.

> *Humour is the only form of communication in which a stimulus on a high level of complexity produces a stereotyped, predictable response on the physiological reflex level.*
>
> (Their emphasis)[9]

[9] I would argue that humour is not the only form of communication to produce a stereotyped, predictable response on a physiological level. Erotica, both written and visual, is well-known for its ability to produce predictable, stereotyped physical responses of a most basic kind, especially in men. This is the major reason for the success of the pornography industry. And like humour, different kinds

Following Koestler, the study of humour, therefore, "provides clues for the study of creativity in general" (ibid.).

Freud - whom Barry Sanders calls "the father of stand-up comedy" (95: 246) - distinguishes between wit, the comic and humour. Wit, he argues, develops from "an economy of expenditure in inhibition", the comic from "an economy of expenditure in thought" and humour from "an economy of expenditure in feeling" (60: 236). "The discovery that it is in our power to make another person comical opens the way to unsuspected gains in comic pleasure, and forms the foundation of a highly developed technique" notes Freud (60: 232). Henri Bergson speaks about the tension and elasticity of life (60: 216). Inelasticity leads to laughter: we laugh at excessively 'rigid' people, those who are unable to adapt themselves to changing circumstance (60: 216).

Certain types of humour (the much-maligned pun, for instance) undermine logical rationality and linguistic meaningfulness. Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that jokes could demonstrate "the fundamental philosophical paradoxes to which our language and our logic lead us" (Davis, 92: 66). (One can only reflect on how much more readable most works of post-structuralism would be had they used humour to explore the instability of meaning.) Murray S. Davis points out that most humour theories, Freud's and Bergson's included, only explain one aspect of humour. He goes on to define the basic process involved in humour as the following:

> An individual (1) who perceives through humour an "incongruity" in the outer world, (2) expresses through laughter the "release" or "relief" of being subjectively unaffected by this objective contradiction, and (3) consequently feels [that] his laughingly sustained subjective integration manifests his superiority to the humorously disintegrated object. (92: 7)

In other words, humour results from a sense of relief that one fits into the world as one knows it - and is therefore superior to anything or anyone that does not fit in.

The dual effects of tension and release are central elements of all forms of laughter (or humour; the two terms tend to be used interchangeably even if "laughter" is more correctly a synecdoche of "humour" rather than a synonym). Laughter can be an explosive form of release, especially when it would be inappropriate to laugh (during a classmate's speech, for example, or a funeral). Through humour, tension is generated and discharged. Forms which we know to be humorous in purpose - the joke, the cartoon, the comedy - build up expectations, which are either satisfied or failed. If we do not find a joke funny, the tension built up in expectation that it would be funny is not dissipated -

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of erotica produce different responses in different individuals, the only difference being that the measure of its success is sexual arousal rather than laughter.

leading to irritation and even anger. Laughter is often a reaction to a tense situation. We often speak of 'nervous laughter', which is a reaction to fear and a means of discharging the tension associated with it.

Anger is, in fact, a vital element of most (I would hesitate to say all) forms of humour - here is Freud's economy of expenditure in feeling at work. Anger is most obvious in coarse forms of humour - where the emotion charged is "aggression robbed of its purpose" (Encyclopedia Britannica Online) - and becomes more sublimated as the humour becomes more subtle. Laughter, like lightning in a thunderstorm, serves to disperse emotional tension that has become pointless: there is nowhere for it to go (or a situation requiring the response), so it is "worked off along physiological channels of least resistance" (ibid.). Britannica goes on to define the key ingredient of humour:

> There is a bewildering variety of moods involved in different forms of humour, including mixed or contradictory feelings; but whatever the mixture, it must contain a basic ingredient that is indispensable: an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension.
>
> (Ibid.)

Laughter is very often the result of an absence of compassion. Aggression turns the pathetic into the comic, pathos into bathos. For Nietszche, only laughter can set people free from traditional morality. Caricature, for him, was the first sign of a "higher psychic life' (Sanders, 95: 284).

Bergson argues that "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (60: 215). Humour does not work in isolation. We are encouraged to laugh by the laughter of others: laugh, and the world laughs with you. In another vein, Louis Kronenberger defines comedy (as opposed to tragedy) as criticism "because it exposes human beings for what they are in contrast to what they profess to be" (60: 195). Comedy tends to be sceptical, drawing attention to the absurdity of our actions. If tragedy laments the self-destructive flaws in man, comedy searches for them. Kronenberger also makes the point that comedy is subject to changes in fashion and taste; "one generation's pleasure is the next generation's embarrassment" (197).

Alan Megill feels that the comic imagination "requires a measure of acceptance and toleration" (85: 267). Comedy's theme is the "integration of society". The comic is not possible in a universe facing crisis; thus some form of optimism is an essential element of the comic (though Megill makes the point that the tragic, too, is incompatible with a world viewed as crisis-ridden).

Power is a key word in any consideration of humour, for the ability to laugh at someone or something implies power over it, even if it is nothing more than the power of scorn. Humiliation remains a great fear for most of us because of the possibility of our own powerlessness in the face of the mockery of others. Humour has historically been a

weapon against oppressive regimes; the Nazi era in Germany was prodigiously fecund when it came to the political joke (Larsen, 80).

Humour comes in many forms. The creators of *Madam & Eve* have described what they do as satire, the most political form of humour and the one which most frequently engages directly with the way in which power operates in society.

It's a Funny Country

In the French film *Ridicule*, the denizens of a Louis XVI salon are informed by a well-travelled baron that, in England, they have what is known as "humour". The listeners are intrigued; there is no such thing as "humour" in France, only "wit". The film ends with an escaped marquis standing on the cliffs of Dover with an English colleague. The wind blows his hat into the sea and he curses. "I have lost my hat!" he complains. "Be grateful that you did not lose your head," the English lord responds drily. The Frenchman bursts out laughing. "C'est le *humour* - English humour!"

This example illustrates quite neatly how humour can take on the mantle of national identity. A national sense of humour becomes part of a national myth perpetuated by both insiders and outsiders, and humour becomes yet another national narrative. As William Congreve argued in 1695 (60: 202)

> I will make but one Observation...That there is more of Humour in our English Comick Writers than in any others, I do not at all wonder at it, for I look upon Humour to be almost of English Growth; at least, it does not seem to have found such Encrease on any other Soil.

The idea of humour as an aspect of national identity becomes problematic, however, when one reflects that the idea of the 'nation' itself cannot be taken for granted. Homi Bhabha observes that the nation is an ambivalent concept, for "the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a....transitional social reality" (90: 1). South Africa is an extreme example of the nation in transition. The identity of South Africa- the-nation, for example, has morphed through several vastly different personae in less than a decade: polecat-of-the-world, hope-of-the-world, rainbow nation, banana-republic-in-waiting, crime-capital-of-the-world. Here there is probably greater awareness that nations are creations in perpetual transition (towards the great goal of transformation, to use a local buzz word) than anywhere else in the world.

Is it possible, then, to define a 'national' sense of humour? Can there be such a thing as 'South African humour'? Bhabha poses a pertinent question: "If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and

discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness' [7]" (2). As I have argued in the previous two chapters, *Madam and Eve* - which both attempts to create a space for a humour appropriate for the new dispensation and traces the progress of South African society and politics over the past five years - is a prime example of a postapartheid South African narrative.

Humour keeps people going through difficult times; the most fruitful era in the production of political jokes was Nazi Germany (Larsen 1980). Humour is a powerful element in such groundbreaking anti-apartheid plays such as *The Island* and *Woza Albert*. "While apartheid was insuperably evil, it provided us with read-made sketches that could brighten our lives," recalls Mandla Langa (97: 12). The banning of slurs against politicians and ideologies always signifies that something is wrong. By that definition, South African democracy is reasonably healthy: nobody has been put up against a wall for circulating a Winnie joke - so far.[10]

South African humour appears not to be highly regarded by outsiders, if the opinions expressed in a *Washington Post* article on *Madam & Eve* are anything to go by. South Africa, the writer - citing language and religious differences - observed, is "rugged terrain for comedy" (Taylor, 93: A26). The lack of a common culture, he maintained, excluded the possibility of a 'South African' sense of humour:

> Blacks and mixed-race Coloreds have a rich oral tradition of township humor-of-the-oppressed, but it remains largely inaccessible to the white media and artistic establishment. White humor draws from a European heritage of Dutch Calvinism and British irony that don't thrive especially well in Africa. Throw in decades of censorship, the angst of apartheid and the shame of being a world pariah, and it's no wonder South African humor tends to be low, slapstick and silly.
>
> (ibid.)

Apart from the patronising tone of these views, the analysis is rather glib. Having categorised types of humour according to race - silly for the whites, political for the non-whites - Taylor proceeds to ignore the many different kinds of humour found in different communities (rural humour is clearly not the same as township or city humour because the kind of life experienced is not the same), as well as the common denominator of a bizarre, tragic shared history. What of the contribution by highly politicised white satirists such as Pieter-Dirk Uys, whose anti-government gibes were (for various reasons) by far the most vocal of the '80's? Uys had the advantage of being white, but he was one of the few satirists whose targets got to hear what he was saying about them.

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[10] Even slurs against President Mandela - such as the one published in *Hustler* during January 1998 - have gone unpunished. The president has signified that he is unwilling to interfere in public discourse (The Star, 6 February 1998)

Former archbishop Desmond Tutu, a man well-known for his fondness of laughter, has observed that, "In South Africa, we have fertile ground for the cartoonist's pen. The diversity of our nation and its young democracy gives endless opportunity for showing up our weaknesses and shortcomings." (forward to *The Hole* Truth, 97). South Africa offers plenty of good compost for verbal political humour, too. A favourite political joke currently doing the rounds goes like this:

> Why did Dr Zuma ban Disprin?
>
> Because it's white and it's working.

Along with the Health minister, favourite political targets include Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (remember the "Winnie's in the Pooh" graffiti of the late 80's?), rugby supremo Louis Luyt, Finance minister Trevor Manuel ("everyone else's economy is on automatic") and to a lesser extent, Mandela himself. Or there's humour that uses the vocabulary of both apartheid and the New South Africa to mock working class whites:

> What's the definition of a caravan park?
>
> A whites-only squatter camp.

Fred Khumalo, author of a humour column in the Sunday Times, devoted his final column of 1997 to a collection of mock "awards" for various politicians and personalities:

> The Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others Recognition Award will be shared by the deputy speaker of Parliament, Baleka Mbete-Kgositsile, and the finance MEC in Mpumalanga, Jacques Modipane. Mbete-Kgositsile got her driver's licence without undergoing the obligatory driver's test and standing in the obligatory queues; Modipane fought for his right to drive a bigger car at taxpayers' expense in a cash-strapped province, justifying the luxury car thus: 'I am a leader in my community and therefore have a certain status - you can't be saying that I should drive a 1600 cc vehicle."
>
> (97:24)

Louis Luyt gets the Conscientious Family Man Award "for ensuring that South African rugby is a happy family affair", while Sol Kerzner gets the I Have Nothing To Hide But You won't See My Dirty Laundry In Public Award. Trevor Tutu, briefly notorious for having made a fake bomb threat at East London Airport in the early 90's and subsequently awarded amnesty, is honoured with the Incredibly Pompous Black Pommie Award (ibid.).

Further to the left, there's the biting, bitter satire of this example from the *Mail & Guardian's Krisjan Lemmer* column:

> **Truth and Reconciliation Commission.** An exercise conducted on the southern tip of Africa in the late 20th century aimed at discovering the undiscoverable and achieving the

undesirable. resulted in the forgiveness of mass-murderers, torturers, poisoners and other public-spirited civil servants.

(97: 25)

The same column also quoted excerpts from the radical Cape Town satirical newspaper *Hei Voetsek!* (edited, written and illustrated by a Rastafarian who calls himself Zebulon Dread) criticising the mainstream Cape Town daily *The Argus*:

> In the province at the shitend of Africa a newspaper, part of the Strangulated Non Independent Honky Wanker International group of Megalomaniacs, owned by an Irishman, Stony O'Filthy Rich bastard is called The Fake Fargus...a cursory glance through their newsroom will reveal a sea of white faces who are employed to enslave this provincial enclave to bullshit Caucasian values, tourism and that unholy load of bullshit perpetrated by that Balls-up called the Olympics.
>
> (ibid.)

Pieter-Dirk Uys observed recently that the satirists are in danger of losing their jobs to the politicians. Politics has always been a reliable source of humour - our apartheid governors came close to parodying themselves - and as long as Dr Zuma announces that AIDS is spreading because people have no entertainment (they have sex because they are bored), we will not lack for laughter. Uys was the most prominent local satirist of the apartheid era and he and his alter-ego Evita Bezuidenhout are synonymous with South African humour. Post-1990, Evita has wafted elegantly from the realm of parody to the bright quasi-reality of television. Together with Gwen Anderson and Eve Sisulu, Evita is South Africa's most famous woman who doesn't exist. Uys is also the source of one of my favourite South African jokes. When he first told it to me, he was describing an incident in a new play he was writing about a gay African-American couple visiting the Motherland. Later, it became more topical in Uys's show *Boerassic Park*;

> Michael Jackson arrives in South Africa. He's so thrilled to be back "home" that he decides to take the first African name he sees for himself. So he spots a name on a signpost on the way back from the airport and calls himself "Lti-ga-weh". He'd just seen the Afrikaans directions to the *lughawe*.
>
> (October 1997)

This joke can only be truly effective in the telling, as the humour lies in the distance between the pronunciation of the familiar Afrikaans word *lughawe* and the mistake of the African-American who assumes it is an African word and pronounces it accordingly. It appeals to me because it has more than one level of meaning as well as a strong, concise element of social critique. Here are black Americans who patronisingly presume that just because they are returning to a part of Africa, this is the "Motherland", and that they are automotically in a position to embrace an authentic Africanness. In reality, they are alienated from African culture. One of the many ironies here is that Afrikaans *is* an

authentic indigenous language that developed in Africa, and so *lughawe* is in a way an African name - though what it refers to, airport, deflates any grandiose notions about what an "African" name might "mean".

Then there are the ordinary people, neither celebrities nor politicians. Curiously - for a nation divided not only by race and cultural affiliation but language and the ever-ominous weight of history as well - it is the ordinary Afrikaner *ou* without too much upstairs, Van der Merwe, who is the archetypal white South African figure of fun. Where the English have Irish jokes and the Americans poke fun at the Polish, white South Africans find folly at the heart of the nation:

> "Hey, Van, there's a man at the corner selling the national flag cheap. All sizes. I'm on my way, do you want one?
> "What colours?"
> "You know, blue and red and yellow and black and..."
> "I'll take a green one."

But is Van der Merwe found in the townships? I have read that the Shangaan is our equivalent of the Irish man and *Panic Mechanic* did well at Ster-Moribo, but language barriers and low literacy levels mean that I do not have access to most black South African humour. Uys argues that, in his experience as a performer, black audiences prefer more physical comedy. "They do not listen," he sighs. "I have to use gesture, I go back to Commedia del'Arte," he says (Britten, 97: 5), which is perhaps why *Panic Mechanic*, with its strong element of slapstick, did so well.

Locally produced comedies like *Going Up* and *Suburban Bliss*, which have both high ratings with mixed (but mainly black) audiences, provide clues to a 'South African' sense of humour. Though I personally found the latter closer to agony than bliss, it has struck a chord with a large number of viewers, which is what counts. At a Christmas party in Rustenburg (attended by various C- and D-band workers at a platinum mine and their partners), I was able to witness first-hand the impression *Suburban Bliss* has made on ordinary working- and lower middle class South Africans. Supper was over, everyone was nicely tanked up on *klippies* and Coke and "Abby" Abdenour - a "Leb" and proud of it - was telling Hamilton Khumalo's wife to make sure he got to work on time in future. Mrs Khumalo shrieked with laughter. "You are our own Billy Dwyer," she giggled. "Billy Dwyer from *Suburban Bliss*."

Advertising is another significant source of humour on a national level, by virtue of its high level of exposure on television. One of the most successful campaigns of recent years to use humour to sell a product is Vodacom's "Yebo Gogo" series. The first advertisement featured an unusually rationalised situation: a rich white male "bagel", together with his floozy, approaches a rather distinguished-looking black man selling wire

windmills at the side of the road. "Yebo gogo," he says. "Yes granny" - a terrible insult for a black man. But he has his come-uppance when he locks his keys in his BMW and the black man sells him all of the windmills in exchange for calling for help on his cellphone. This advert achieved unprecedented viewer response and gave rise to more adverts featuring the bagel and his African nemesis. "Yebo gogo" has become part of local vocabulary.

But for all its success, I believe that the Vodacom campaign offers a completely fake vision of black and white South African characters, with the black character in particular heavily influenced by stereotypes of the American South. Anyone who has ever bought wire windmills from the coloured children outside Cradock will recognise how different the Vodacom advert is from reality. That "Gogo" is actually portrayed by a

distinguished Nigerian professor only emphasises its artificiality.[11] On the other hand, a popular award-winning Sasol advertisement - with an enthusiastic taxi driver who admires his collection of stickers commemorating the achievements of South Africa's national sports teams while polishing his minibus in front of an appreciative black audience - features a South African character who is significantly more recognisable as "genuine". By having a black character praising the national rugby, cricket and soccer teams, the advert suggests that this is where national unity is to be found. Taxis are also a prominent - usually maligned - feature of local life, and showing a taxi driver in a positive, affectionately amusing light is both original and progressive.

According to a South African stand-up comedian, "The revival of local comedy could be attributed to the new democratic government and a feeling of creative freedom" (Beaver, 98: 6).

Look beyond the borders of the Rainbow Nation and you will find that tracking down the humour of the newly dethroned and disgruntled white South African male is relatively easy. Obvious locations include radio, *Hustler* magazine and finance weeklies. The back pages of finance magazines feature jokes about blondes and sex and humorous anecdotes about potholes in Zimbabwe and the failures of the present government. Fast forward a generation or two and you will find that jokes about race, homosexuality and rival schools dominate the playgrounds of private boys schools. ("How do you separate the men from the boys at St Johns? With a crowbar.") It's depressing that racist jokes should circulate at schools that have been integrated for years, but racism of course is taboo, and humour is drawn to taboos like moths to a security light. Satire, after all, is the comedy of prejudice.

Take what is today the single most taboo word in our local vocabulary, kaffir (or 'kaffer' in Afrikaans). Ex-Springbok rugby coach Andre Markgraaff found himself at the centre of a national scandal when a tape recording of him using the K-word more than once was released to the media. Markgraaff made a public apology and resigned in disgrace. Yet Leon Schuster built two sketches around the word in *Panic Mechanic* (one involving a black gaffer on a film crew and a very obvious aural pun) and got away with it. In his candid camera scenes, Schuster is - whether intentionally or not - magnificently ironic; all sides of society come in for a poke in the ribs, but those most prejudiced ended up looking the silliest. Schuster addresses race issues head on, and the comedy in his films is all the more potent because the people who come across as racist caricatures are not caricatures because they are real people, and they are not acting. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Schuster is that, like his victims, he is an Afrikaner. When he criticises them, it is from the point of view of an insider, and this saves his observations from accusations of anti-Afrikaner prejudice.

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[11] The Johannesburg Zoo, for example has an annual "Yebo goggo' festival which celebrates the insect

Pieter-Dirk Uys thinks that what Schuster does is "lowest common denominator stuff" (Britten, 96: unpublished section of interview), but no matter what high culture might think of Schuster, he is at least instrumental in maintaining a genuinely local culture of comedy. Much of what passes for South African humour is more Pittsburgh than Pretoria. Even the jokes page in *You* magazine, host to Van der Merwe and riddles along the lines of "What sport do people from Gauteng like to play when they come to the beach? Valie-ball", is becoming filled with overseas imports. The Internet, with its large database of easily accessible American jokes, is the major villain here. Even a site devoted to 'South African humour' (called *The Humour Hole*, which should have warned me) consists of nothing more than recycled American humour. A collection of 'South African Pickup lines' (which nothing to do with bakkies) includes such witticisms as "2. Can I borrow a quarter? I want to phone your mother to thank her" and "37. Your left leg is Thanksgiving and your right leg is Christmas. Can I come between the holidays?" Sexist humour remains overwhelmingly prevalent - and popular in South Africa, which is not surprising. We are historically a profoundly patriarchal society in which women are gaining more political and economic power than ever before. The sexist, racist and homophobic humour circulating around society suggests that the general public is still in the process of getting to grips with change.

White, middle class, male and overweight, morning radio celebrity Jeremy Mansfield (who also happens to be the country's most convincing Mandela mimic) is the most prominent current representative of 'braaivleis-and-beer' humour. An recent article in the Sunday Times *Inside* magazine praised Mansfield and a rival morning radio personality for their controversial style:

> They are brash, opinionated and controversial. They are loudmouths - the kind of men who chuck the stuff that hits the fan and crack jokes while others clean it up. They mimic the slew of South African characters who make life the black comedy it is. They are not, thank God, of the abominable politically correct tribe who cast cold water on anyone who sails close to the wind.
>
> (Nevill, 97: 12)

Judging by his past repartee on Radio 702 and his more recent exploits on Highveld Stereo,, Mansfield has designs on becoming the Howard Stern of South Africa. Mansfield often deploys humour at the expense of blacks and women, notably black women. During his tenure at 702 he was the centre of controversy over on-air speculation that a black colleague had given birth in a mielie field; more recently he appeared before the Broadcasting Complaints Commission in response to sexist remarks he had made about 'red tide'. (He had compared a marine disaster to menstruation.) "There's only one person, purely out of respect, that I would never be mean to," Mansfield says, "and that's

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world.

Land[13] when it criticises crime and affirmative action, at its most left wing when it mocks the hypocrisies of white liberals or shows white men lying to the TRC. Given its national profile and its commitment to representing South African situations, *Madam & Eve* makes a significant contribution to the development of a wider fabric of indigenous humour, and more importantly, humour that is not restricted to a certain race or class.

The Special Case of Satire

Does *Madam & Eve* get to qualify as satire? Its creators frequently refer to what they do as satire (Omotoso, 96:). Satire is an "artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement". If sick jokes operate on repressed sadism, satire trades off righteous indignation (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

Satire can be defined as a "verbal caricature" (ibid.) The satirist creates a distorted mirror image of the real world which is then juxtaposed with reality as the reader knows it to be. Through the satire we see the absurdity in the familiar. "Without this double vision the satire would be humourless" (ibid.). Irony is a key ingredient of satire. An attack unmediated by some form of ironic (and therefore obvious) exaggeration is not satire, and not funny.

The political nature of satire means that it is the most dangerous form of humour - for those in power. Recent history is littered with sad cases of satirists jailed, banned, exiled and worse; Stalin had executed a man who dared to lampoon him; Ken Saro-Wiwa suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Nigerian junta. The devil's advocate has always had a dangerous job. In North Korea, satire is banned because there everything is officially perfect and therefore there is nothing to mock. Only the Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il - according to his officials "a priceless master of witty remarks" - may make jokes along the lines of "To expect victory in the revolution without the leader is as good as to expect a flower to bloom without the sun" (*The Economist*, 97: 1). Indeed, it is true that satire is not necessary in North Korea, an enormous, vicious parody masquerading as a country. In more open societies, satire's claim to access to the truth about the human

[13] 702 Talk Radio, the Gauteng medium wave station, is dominated by the voices of ordinary, fairly conservative middle class South Africans who phone in to air their views on crime, for example, sex or the appointment of the new national soccer coach. In 1997, management decided that the program content needed lightening up and chose to target a more specifically white audience.

condition and its subsequent sociopolitical profile lend it a relatively high status. Marie Mills talks about the "privileged and totemic position of the satirist" (95: 1). Satire

> highlights irrationality hypocrisy, lies and inconsistencies in people's attitudes and behaviour and as such, is a powerful tool in that it can, if successful, make people question the infallibility of its targets and in some cases, lose respect for them altogether.
>
> (McFayden, 95: 1)

In this way, satire can be a powerful political weapon.

Satire is also a term used too frequently when describing humour. As an attack on society's norms and power structures, it is inherently subversive. By this definition, what often passes for 'satire' is not really satire. Satire takes chances where humour does not:

> Where the comedy of humour may overturn our expectations and then come back to standards that are considered conventional within our society; satirical comedy pushes the conventional limits further, undermines and even subverts those limits, and leaves us with a sense of thoughtful scepticism and even pessimism.
>
> (Mills, 95: 1)

Satire, unlike humour, is never *nice*. Its characters are less likeable (Devlin, 95: 2). "What Satire endeavours to do is to take aggressive denunciation and combine it with aesthetic pleasure to amuse the audience," argues Hodgart (in Devlin, ibid.). "Satire is not comfortable like Humour." Satire also presumes "that its audience has an awareness of what is being satirised" (Mills, 95: 1). Barry Sanders suggests that satire and irony can be read as "ridicule with class" (95: 234). Can *Madam & Eve*, by these definitions, be classed as satire? The political nature of its subject matter suggests that this is the case. However, if the task of satire is to trick its audience "into questioning its own attitudes and assumptions" (McFayden, 95: 1), then *Madam & Eve* frequently shies away from the satirical. Humour, on the other hand,

> looks upon the world with gentle irony...humour is a mild self-mimickery of the human race, it anticipates the attack and cushions the blows of fate. Humour is the enemy of satire because it is merely a curiosity about the oddities of life.
>
> (Hodgart in Devlin, 95: 2)

Comic strips mocking cellular phone culture or criticising high levels of crime are hardly likely to challenge the assumptions of their middle class readers, because those assumptions and attitudes are there already. In general, *Madam & Eve*, as I have argued in Chapter Two, uses the feel-good, humorous approach outlined above. Only occasionally there are moments where prevailing attitudes are more obviously criticised, such as in an early cartoon where Madam gives Eve household cleaning equipment and washing powder for Christmas (97: 113). The expressions on the faces of Madam and Eve are telling - of a disappointment verging on anger of Eve, and the embarrassment of Madam

who realises how inappropriate and thoughtless her Christmas gift is. The creators have suggested that their expressions "capture South African reality, we think, with unusual poignancy" (ibid.). Suddenly Eve becomes human, with human desires. What ordinary person would like to get household cleaning equipment for Christmas? Eve, the maid, is no different. Madam and all the real madams who have ever done the same are suddenly faced with their own meanness. Guilt hovers above the page. This is a very simple cartoon that manages to convey a great deal of subversive meaning.

The case of Howard Stern - whose coarse brand of humour involves lashing out at gays, lesbians, blacks and other minorities, crude jokes about women and so on - offers a useful current example of the difficulty of prying out "genuine" satire. Stern claims (in less academic terms) that he is undermining the entrenched hegemony of political correctness. His critics are less sure. Andrew Clements writes in the *Mail & Guardian* (June 20 1997):

> Stern's great achievement, the secret of his sustained success, is to appear cutting edge to a mainstream audience. His prejudices, despite the supposed hegemony of political correctness, are those of the mass ranks of the white, lower-middle class who commute by car. He is the angry sound of the suburbs, the repressed id of the outer boroughs let loose - farting, frothing and fulminating - downtown.

Stern's case is significant because it points to how humour that is subversive at face value - humour that attacks middle class sensibilities, notions of what is and is not acceptable, and what is perceived as the obsessive political correctness of the prevailing political climate - is upon closer analysis a reflection of white be considered the *real* hegemony: the reactionary attitudes of middle America objecting to a changing social order that threatens their power. Stern is successful because he expresses those prejudices that have been silenced by official disapproval. On the other hand, it can be argued that Stern is merely reflecting the suppressed opinions of many millions of Americans and it is better to know what is going on than to pretend it does not exist. Furthermore, what if Stern is being ironic, and through exaggeration, is satirising those very prejudices he voices?

These are arguments that emerge whenever there is a debate around humour (or for that matter, any cultural activity) that certain members of society may find offensive, and which I will address in more detail when I look at humour and its political impact. These are questions of representation, power and the way in which humour is understood, and they are central to the bona fides of *Madam & Eve*.

Humour and Politics

The case of satire would suggest that certain forms of humour, especially political humour, can have a political impact? Judging by the attitudes of authoritarian regimes towards anything that provokes uncontrolled laughter, humour can be a progressive political force. John Major, after he lost the 1997 British general elections, probably rues

the day he was first depicted by a cartoonist as a man in nothing but a pair of horribly practical underpants; this image - which became the standard depiction of Major for most of the 90's - no doubt contributed to the voting public's perception of him as a weak, grey man.

"Humour," Davis (92: 313) argues, "separates the joints of the seemingly seamless social structure, making them visible." In this sense, humour is always political, for it is concerned with finding the cracks in those organising structures, cultural and social, that determine how and where power is held. Humour attacks the notion of structure itself; it weakens "the legitimacy of the *dominant* conceptual structure" (Davis, after Mary Douglas, 309). Comedians and humorists view the world form a no-fly zone between the structuralist and antistructuralist camps:

> The humorist, then, is a humanist - sustaining a precariously balanced worldview between pairs of extreme philosophical positions that give precedence to extrahuman structures of power.
>
> (310)

Most forms of humour (can *anything* be laughed at?) are concerned, above all, with the importance of the *human*: this explains to an extent the historical importance of humour amongst oppressed peoples ruled by repressive regimes, particularly regimes based on highly structured and theorised ideologies. Political jokes, Larsen (80:1) points out, "have been circulating throughout history in periods of stress and hardship, particularly in countries where authoritarian regimes suppressed freedom of speech." Freud observed that humour is rebellious rather than resigned (3); it is one strategy by which an oppressed people can preserve its sanity - and exact some kind of revenge on the oppressor. A politician or public figure can do little to defend him- or herself against a joke without appearing ridiculous. The political cartoonist gets away with far more than any of the other commentators on the editorial pages, and since jokes usually emerge as if by immaculate conception, whom is the offended party to sue? Most humour resides, by common consent, in a parallel universe dominated by fiction and possibility, which makes it difficult for jokes to be construed as reported truth. So a publication can print as many jokes about say, Sol Kerzner, as it wishes without fear of the reprisal one would risk by printing a salacious rumour.

Humour in and of itself occupies a political middle ground:

> Comedy's political implications are paradoxical, for it makes both conservative statements - "A system's traditional elements are *necessary* to this system" - and radical statements - "The traditional system as a whole is *arbitrary*" - simultaneously.
>
> (Davis, 92: 311)

At the same time of course, humour can come from anywhere on the political spectrum, as the examples I cited in the previous section demonstrate. (In the interests of brevity, I

use the word "humour" even though it suggests a unitary phenomenon, which it is not. One has to remind oneself, every time one makes sweeping statements about the nature of humour, that all jokes are not equal.) Humour can be used to advance or reinforce conservative or radical points of view (as well as all the views in between), and so it can be argued that humour can be a force for good or evil, depending on one's point of view.

Davis argues that humour's concern is with humanity - but at the same time it lacks compassion, for laughter requires bathos in the place of pathos. How then is it possible for humour to be both humanist, and lack compassion? Humour is concerned with human frailties and requires simultaneous identification and distancing in order to function: one must identify with a situation in order to recognise it, but not over-identify with it or it becomes threatening. Humour is not entirely compatible with compassion, and this brings me to the question of whether humour can have positive or negative effects on society. Do blonde jokes encourage misogyny? Is a fascist guffawing at racist jokes finding a vital outlet for repressed anger, or are those jokes reinforcing his prejudices?

And in that case, do humorists and satirists have a responsibility to take people's sensibilities into account, and avoid hurting feelings or offending beliefs? Those who believe that potentially offensive humour of any kind is wrong and should be stopped have been labelled "that abominable politically correct tribe" (Nevill, 97; 12) by the other camp, which objects to any attempt to censor humour. Here's the vicious virtuoso Robert Kirby reacting to complaint by a Kate Wood of Yeoville about his use of words like "dago" and "yid" in a previous column. Wood, Kirby suggests, "showed touching naivety in her belief that writers are always what they write about" (97: 27):

> Her letter did me real proud because, in it, she called me xenophobic and that's a first. In my long and dingy career I've been called many nasty things; anti-Afrikaans, anti-Semitic, sexist, anti-Christian, an arse-licking pro-British ponce and a royalist hater. There have been dozens of chauvinists flung at me, I've dodged barrages of racists and kaffirboetles and queer-bashers. The late AM van Schoor called me a deeply unpatriotic traitor, while a colleague of his synchronously named me a closet Nationalist Party fascist pig. I've been called an exploitative puritanical shithead and a self-fascinated opportunistic anti-apartheid carpetbagger - no, I'm wrong, that one was aimed at Andre Brink.
>
> (ibid.)

The satirist's lot is a difficult one, for in South Africa there is little understanding of irony; the notion that one is not necessarily what one writes about is beyond the comprehension of most of our moral watchdogs.

As for genuinely - rather than ironically - racist humour, Charles Schutz argues in a paper entitled "The Sociability of Ethnic Jokes" that ethnic humour is "democratic humour" (96: 2) and serves a valuable social function. Racist or sexist jokes are rarely told in front

of the objects of their derision, or then they would be actions intended to provoke violence. To argue that because ethnic humour is mean it is immoral and should be banned ignores the psychology of humour and "our real experience of it" (3). Besides, Schutz avers, ethnic humour can have the positive effect of reducing tension and fear. "Something that can be laughed at is less threatening and a little more familiar."

> Like comic invective in general, ethnic political humour is overtly hostile but covertly serves stability and assimilation of out-groups. Hostility couched in humour retains sting but loses fear through enjoyment of it. At the same time, that which is being aggressively ridiculed becomes familiar through its pleasurable exposure. It becomes subject to rational criticism rather than prejudiced hostility. A feared "trait" of a rival ethnic group is treated as laughable foible and thereby, the in-group become tolerant of the foreign. In turn, the ethnic target of the humour is more acceptable in the larger society, and the minority group comes to see itself and the objectionable features of its behaviour in the light of the standards of the larger society.
>
> (ibid.)

Bernard Saper argues that there is no evidence that hostile humour has any influence on behaviour, and that jokes that demean are generally kept in check but consensual disapproval. "In no instance should joking and other forms of humorous expression be interpreted as "fighting words" and equated with despicable law-violating and norm-violating conduct - whether hate-motivated or not" (96: 3). On the other hand, ethnic humour can, in the case of the Jewish joke, can create a powerful sense of community in the group under attack. Controversially, Schutz also argues that ethnic humour can have the positive effect of enforcing assimilation and thus wider social cohesion:

> The moralistic criticism of ethnic humour supposes that it is divisive and demeaning to groups in society, but the causal divisions is between the norms and ways of the ethnic groups and the dominant culture of society. It would seem that if a society is to cohere and its members to cooperate, it must have some superior standards and some basic correspondence in its ways of life. In so doing, ethnic humour generally proclaims and supports the latter, thereby serving the sociability of the larger whole.
>
> (96: 4)

Schutz's views are contentious but I do agree that laughter is preferable to violence. Where tension exists, it requires a safety valve. Ethnic humour is a *product* of societal tension, not its cause; this confusion is a mistake made by most proponents of political correctness, Gail Smith and Jeremy Mansfield's detractors included. To ban ist/sexist/any-ist humour would be a dangerous form of denial; it should rather be

viewed as an gauge of conflict within a society. [14] Society has to be changed before it ceases to laugh at that which some of us might deem politically incorrect - not the other way round. An attempt to achieve the latter is doomed to failure.

I would agree that humour that targets specific groups *is* an indication of their status in society. The example of the gay community in South Africa comes to mind: whereas the recent rise to prominence of homosexual men in the local community is reflected in the profusion of gay jokes, lesbian jokes are few and far between. Lesbians are not enough of a feature of modern society - and therefore a potential threat that must be accordingly sublimated - to warrant much laughter at their expense. As has been pointed out before, what a society laughs at is a fair indication of what matters to it.

Taking Schutz's line, it could be further argued that humour that attacks specific groups is one arena where the battle for a common national culture is taking place. "Out-groups" can be conservative rural whites or WASPs as well as blacks or gays. The frequently encountered 'backwoods" redneck jokes of America (incest being the demeaning characteristic most commonly associated with this group) are an indication of the ascendancy of the urban cynic in that particular society. And it should be pointed out that Eugene Terre'blanche is subject to more contempt in the jokes of white South Africa than either Winnie or Dr Zuma; he is even further outside of the broad circle of commonality that determines - roughly - what should be part of South African society circa 1998 and what should not. Mandla Langa, discussing jokes that are "seriously hazardous to liberal sensitivities" (97: 12), suggests that it would be a good idea for South Africans to learn more national languages. "In that way there would be a sort of communion" (ibid.) instead of people feeling excluded. Langa, despite his regard for politically incorrect or irreverent humour, feels that South African humour should take certain precautions:

> This humour...must be based on a mutual acceptance of equality and must be totally free of abuse.
>
> (ibid.)

This kind of humour is something worth aiming for, but any notion of enforcing kinder, gentler laughter will soon become a victim of political correctness. In South Africa, Langa's prescription remains a tall order. On a more hopeful note, the general worldwide

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[14] General Constand Viljoen managed to get the December 1995 issue of *Hustler* banned for including him in a mocking (and rather rude) magazine cover parody. In January 1998, *Hustler* went uncensored despite complaints by a Christian group about an obscene reference to President Mandela in its Asshole of the Month column. Also in January 1998, Eugene De Kock's aunt tried to get a Nando's radio advertisement that "featured" him ordering chicken from jail taken off the air on the grounds that it was offensive to her nephew (Haffajee, 98: 18)

trend (at least in more developed societies) is away from the humour of prejudice. *The Economist* points out that jokes that target minorities are being told less often, because audience's taste have changed. "Punters are bored of stale anti-immigrant jokes" (97: 1). These days, jokes tend to target the strong - such as lawyers and politicians - rather than the weak (ibid.). Society does not need laughter police to tell it what it may or may not laugh at; it will probably move to less abusive forms of humour without being forced.

It is worth remembering that political correctness is nothing new and that debates over the desirability of rude and offensive humour are centuries old - and offensive, insensitive humour is as healthy as ever. During the Renaissance, the English Puritans took a dim view of laughter. "Refusing to laugh at the deformities or misfortunes of others became the principle way for Puritan aristocracy to separate itself form the general riffraff," notes Barry Sanders (95: 218), who argues that vulgar laughter is the laughter of the peasant.[15] The laughter that proponents of a kind, gentle and just society find so upsetting has ancient roots in the laughter of Bakhtin's carnival, in the loud laughter of peasant revels. Grotesque, violent humour that targets minorities is inevitable:

> [F]or those who stand outside the middle class, grossness is the only role it is practical to fulfill, the only form to fill. The marginal, the outsiders, are already misshapen; they are already perceived by the majority as deviants. This makes sense of the social outsider - the Jew or the black - not only a prime source of humour, but as a prime target for comics.
>
> (219)

Laughter remains resistant to control, as it has for centuries, indeed millenia.

One of the most important but often overlooked factors that determine the reception of humour and whether it is read as acceptable or politically incorrect, "progressive" or "reactionary" (relative terms, considering that most forms of political humour are, quite literally, reactionary) is who is laughing at whom. Would Gail Smith have been so critical of *Madam & Eve* were it the creation of three (preferably non-white) women? A white writer, for instance, would never get away with the following typically wry commentary by award-winning playwright and novelist Zakes Mda:

> The lack of a work ethic...is a South African [problem]. It is found in all sectors of our society, especially in government. It is also found among all races, although my black compatriots excel in this department. They fail dismally to distinguish between service and servitude.
>
> (97: 24)

The line between (especially satirical) humour and reality in South Africa is often precariously thin - often to the benefit, as we have seen, of *Madam & Eve*. As Pieter-Dirk

[15] Are Howard Stern and Jeremy Mansfield, then, the modern day equivalents of the rowdy, unrepentant peasant joker?

Uys is fond of observing, the Nationalist government made things easy for him - they wrote his scripts for him (Britten, 97: 3).

I have already noted how global information technology in the form of the Internet has impacted on South African humour. But "now this computer network has the potential to become the catalyst for global economic and political change" (McLeod, 97: 29) and just as humour is being affected - Di- and Michael Hutche.. jokes, for instance, spread worldwide within hours of their deaths - so are other cultural and social phenomena. Some intellectuals are worried about the negative impact the Internet could have on democracy. "Interactivity," argues the US historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr (31), "encourages instant responses, discourages second thoughts and offers outlets for demagoguery, egomania, insult and hate." Along with the Internet has come a greater emphasis on the individual "world citizen" and a global trend towards capitalism that has even billionaire financier and philanthropist George Soros worried:

> Though I have made a fortune out of financial markets, I now fear that the untrammelled intensification of laissez-faire capitalism and the spread of market values into all areas of life is endangering our democratic society.
>
> (29)

In such a world, where will humour, especially political humour, fit in? At the most practical level, the Internet allows the rapid circulation of humour. Humour is able to react almost instantaneously to significant world events. In February 1998, Yahoo! listed 5 site categories (including one dedicated to Monica Lewinsky/Bill Clinton humour) and 86 individual sites devoted to political humor(sic). Most of these are American.[16] "Global" humour (which is mainly American, with some local influences) will develop further, as the influence of American media and the Internet encourages facility in English and familiarity with American and "world" issues. "Humour is universal," points out *The Economist*. "But language is not." (97: 1). The humour that is able to breach cultural and language barriers is often "the crassest" (ibid.). Domestic humour, in contrast, "is subtler and generally speaking, more revealing" (ibid.). But

> [f]ortunately for the cause of comedic globalisation, we have all heard of Bill Gates who, when he owns the entire world in the next century, will be the butt of all jokes everywhere.
>
> (ibid.)

If the information superhighway is to benefit indigenous forms of humour, it will be through a reinforcement of democratic tendencies rather than by spreading parochial forms of humour to more people. For people living under authoritarian regimes, the spoken word will continue to be a safer option for the spreading of political humour than the printed one.

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[16] There are 123 humour site categories in Yahoo! alone, ranging from tasteless humour to cows to lawyers, so there should, theoretically be something for everyone.

Humour, in its constant search for the cracks in the facade of authority in whatever form, is profoundly democratic in orientation. Laughter *is* a valuable constituent of the lifeblood of a healthy civil society. In it the energies of ordinary people come frothing noisily to the surface to demand that we cut down to size those who rule over us. *Style* magazine has observed of Zapiro that "We should be grateful that the South African democracy has a watchdog of this calibre" (back cover, *The Hole Truth*). Given the seriousness with which those in power everywhere take themselves, humour serves as an important corrective force. "In general," *The Economist* observes, "the less democratic the government, the less developed its leaders sense of humour" (97: 1). To put it crudely: whatever its failings, complexities and ambiguities, humour is still the best bullshit-meter we have. For this reason, we should guard our right to create it, spread it, enjoy it - even to be offended by it - jealously.

CONCLUSION

Madam & Eve is South Africa's only truly local cartoon strip. It deals with issues that are pertinent to people living in South Africa, and it reflects at least part of South African society and reality. A first analysis reveals that, in its representation of the figure of the black woman, *Madam & Eve* is progressive to the point of no longer reflecting reality. The real Eve would have been fired long ago by a much less tolerant Madam, or gone on to become CEO of a parastatal. But *Madam & Eve* serves an important function: here race issues are put into a space where they can be confronted without generating the kind of fear and hostility that could spark further conflict. In Chapter One I described the comic strip as a mixture of art and literature. Like a piece of visual art, the comic strip uses visual codes to construct a certain view of the world; like a work of literature, the comic strip can be a privileged site of gender, class and race issues which can be rehearsed in a "controlled space" (Goode, 92: 127). As Chris Weedon argues,

> The power of fiction lies in its ability to construct for the reader ways of being and understanding the world.
>
> (87: 144)

Madam & Eve deserves credit for addressing issues that until recently have remained opaque to the public eye, as well as encouraging South Africans to laugh about issues that usually provoke anger and frustration. In this way it helps to refocus emotional energy in more positive directions.

Critical analysis based on issues of race, gender and representation, however, reveals that the cartoon may not be as progressive or subversive as it appears to be. The cartoonists still fall back on gendered stereotypes, particularly in the figure of Madam. Targets for *Madam & Eve's* satire are very selective. Often the subjects of its criticism seem no different from the diatribes against crime, corruption and government incompetence that appear on the letters pages of (historically white) newspapers. As part of mainstream South African society, *Madam & Eve* - which is, after all, the creation of people who are very much part of middle class South Africa and all its attendant concerns - is inevitably invested in patriarchal structures, and through its marketing, in the exigencies of capitalism. The need to promote *Madam & Eve* as a product which must have broad appeal in order to sell further undermines its potential for subversion. In trying to be positive and "fun", the satirical edge is blunted. It should not be forgotten that the primary reason for *Madam & Eve's* success is that it is good at its job, which is making people laugh. This laughter is rarely uncomfortable.

For bell hooks, the function of the critic is "to see things that other folks don't and to call them out" (93: 53). When it comes to calling out the less obvious aspects of humour as ostensibly in line with the (non-racist, non-sexist) New South Africa as *Madam & Eve* there is bound to be resistance to such critiques. Judging from the attitudes to academic

analysis presented in the popular - and even the more erudite - media, many *Madam & Eve* fans would find accusations of underlying patriarchal assumptions a subject for vicious mockery. Humour is one area of cultural expression where political correctness (which is what Gail Smith, despite her assertions to the contrary, is asking for) can never be mandatory - for humour is by its very nature politically incorrect.

As is inevitable when dealing with issues of humour and gender, the spectre of the stereotypical humourless feminist rises once more. I often (though not always) find *Madam & Eve* very funny and I believe that it is possible to laugh and be critical, simultaneously. It is not necessary to deny people the right to laugh because what they laugh at happens not to be in line with one's notions of a just society. Humour is society's safety valve, and in this sense, *Madam & Eve's* shortcomings are also a reflection of the wider anxieties and unspoken concerns of a society in turbulent transition. *Madam & Eve* should be telling the critic about where South African society has come from and in which direction it may be heading: race and gender equality are still some way off, and in many respects, men still control the lives of women. It is a reality that should be recognised and changed in the real world first; only then can popular humour deal with the changed structures of power - as it most certainly will.

Those who wish expressions of popular culture (or at least, culture that sells well) to demonstrate the possibilities of a just society to a society that is still in the process of reaching that goal, should remember that culture cannot be a tool of social engineering (Chaney, 94). It is in the nature of humour to offend and this will never change: someone has to be laughed at. If we do see truly liberated, subversive rather than submissive women in a South African comic strip, it will be because the people who want to see them there have created those characters and comic strips themselves. Once that has been done, audiences will be able to judge for themselves.

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