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The eyes of the naked: what do the eyes of the naked see?

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Abstract

Protest literature is dead! Modify it or kill it, said many, including the likes of Professor Njabulo Ndebele and Justice Albie Sachs. At the dawn of the South African democracy, the latter is famously reported to have requested that, at the very least, the genre be sent into a five-year coma (Plummer, 1998). At its height, protest literature was criticised for its lack of creative depth and complexity. A 'go-to' for many African writers, it became too ubiquitous. Most of the genre's authors produced works that were said to suffer from too much sameness. Their white characters were often predictably and typically oppressive, and their African ones were necessarily good. Among other recurring themes, existed political turmoil, violence, death and communities engaging in politically-charged funerals (Lockwood, 2008). Themes did not venture much beyond the struggle against apartheid. It was argued – by Professor Ndebele and others – that a plethora of other themes were part of the South African human experience and they also warranted exploration in literature.

This Masters in Creative Writing work, which is comprised of a novel and a complementary reflexive essay (titled *The Eyes of the Naked: What Do The Eyes of the Naked See?*), explores the notion that, despite the end of apartheid, the conditions that gave rise to protest literature endure. There remains much to protest. There was plenty to protest before the advent of apartheid. Thus, in the essay, the novel *The Eyes of the Naked* is positioned in the South African canon between a seminal protest literature novel in Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* and a pivotal post-apartheid literature text in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. In all three novels there is a colonial thread that traverses epochs. It is suggested that *The Eyes of the Naked* is a reimagining of protest literature. However, this new variety unequivocally aspires towards complexity and depth. In the novel, protest is located in myriad themes that have their roots in the colonial (and apartheid) experience. These are themes such as civilian violence/crime; love; sexuality; filial disconnection; cultural deracination; masculinity/femininity; the migrant labour system; racism/xenophobia/revolution vs. terrorism.

In the end, however, one must submit that *The Eyes of the Naked* is not classic protest literature. It is a revival of it that seeks to address, with creative depth and complexity, and through a host of other themes, the unrelenting subjugation of Africans in a land that is their home – on soil which most of their feet have never left.