

https://dspace.org/

The South African short story and its mediation of the hegemonic tendencies of nationalism

Maithufi, Sopelekae

2010-04-01T10:22:15Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7934

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Chapter Three

Black Christianity as Intellectual Resource[1] in Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories*[2]

In the previous two chapters, the centrality of memory in Matlou and Maseko's stories formed part of the discussion. The argument was that the characters in Matlou and Maseko's stories are depicted as building a sense of affinity with the cultural time and space from which they had been alienated because of migrancy. However, Matlou and Maseko's strategies differ. For Matlou, autobiography strongly consolidates the kind of self that he projects, one that is consistent with how different black people contest apartheid by originating strategic positions that are mostly fanciful. In line with this diplomacy, Matlou designs images or drawings that are mostly non-realist in order to mediate the deleterious effects of apartheid policy. Both Matlou and Maseko privilege the motif of the odyssey, but the latter relies on different '*skaz*' narrators who construct blackness as heterogeneous, and as a form of power that individuals appropriate discursively. This is why self-construction in Maseko's stories is overtly entangled in the dominant discourses that are being contested.

In this chapter that focuses on Njabulo Ndebele's stories, two key issues are investigated. The first concerns depersonalisation as it is perceived to be manifesting itself on the

---

1 An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "Black Christianity as Intellectual Resource in Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories,*" *English in Africa*, (Vol.31, No.1, May 2004), pp.139-147.

2 Njabulo S. Ndebele, *Fools and other stories*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983).

body. Comparable to Matlou who uses graphics and stories to represent colonial alienation, Ndebele depicts the same theme exclusively via fiction. The second subject that this chapter addresses relates to the techniques that are devised to achieve therapy or healing. It is argued that the cure that Ndebele depicts is refracted in people who initiate symbolic and ritual performances with the purpose of dealing with the sense of racial negation that apartheid is considered to inscribe on black bodies. As a recurring symbol in Ndebele's stories, water is seen as a symbol that connotes cleansing. Water is discussed in this chapter as an allusion to purification that the African Initiated Christian churches rely on in order to cultivate in the worshippers a sense of the "ordinary." As already argued in the introductory chapter to this study, the "ordinary" gives rise to an ironic distancing, a stance that enables the reclamation of self central to this thesis.[3] In contrast to the scholarship on Ndebele's theories and short fiction,[4] this chapter submits that his narrators' foregrounding of the constructions of subjectivities in terms that are

---

3 For an extensive analysis of Njabulo Ndebele's notion of the "ordinary," refer mainly to the chapters "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction," and "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," in his *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), pp.1-54.

4 Compare, for example, the scholarship that attributes the narrative perspectives of these stories to a middle class background, as opposed to orality. (Michael Vaughan, "Storytelling and Politics in Fiction," *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*, Martin Trump ed., (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990), p.186-204. Ndebele's stories, Helgesson argues, "tend to be overshadowed by his [Ndebele's] essays." ("*Sports of Culture: Writing the Resistant Subject in South Africa (Readings of Ndebele, Gordimer, Coetzee)*," Unpublished PhD., University of Uppsala, 1999.) (See Tony Morphet, "Ordinary — Modern — Post-Modern," in *Theoria*, (October, 1992), pp.129-141.) Craig MacKenzie summarizes this scholarship when he remarks that Ndebele's stories merely "thematise" "oral cultural modes and values… without significantly affecting the manner in which the stories are told." (Craig MacKenzie, "The Skaz Narrative in short stories by W.C. Scully, Percy FitzPatrick, Perceval Gibbon and Herman Charles Bosman" in *Literator*, (Vol.14, No.3, Nov.1993), pp.1-19.

redolent of African Initiated Christianity suggests a definition of narrative that is not reliant on antinomies.

The argument proceeds in two steps. It begins by briefly outlining several key features of popular black Christianity, and then provides a series of readings of several stories that examine the dilemma of alienation of various protagonists and the cleansing rituals that they undergo.

***

From the title of a story like 'The Prophetess' to invocations of the Dutch Reformed Church as a landmark in the township of Charterston, to the character Uncle's concern with Buddhism in 'Uncle', religion is a constant presence in Ndebele's stories. Scholars have hitherto made little attempt to disaggregate the types of Christianity dealt with in the text. This is despite the climactic conclusion of the title story, 'Fools', where the main character does not resist being flogged seemingly in an attempt to thwart or undermine the existential crisis that is generated by white racism's whip. These stories are narrated from the third person omniscient perspective. This means that a storyteller is often a logical rather than a manifest presence. The motifs of which the narrators make use in order to portray depersonalisation as well as of the strategies of redress are thus given special attention.

This chapter attempts to broach the subject of healing by considering the ways in which popular black Christianity forms not only a theme in Ndebele's stories but is also a structuring template in the collection. This template can be detected in the plot structure

in which a protagonist finds himself trapped in the liminal space of alienation and self-loathing that the oppressive machinery of apartheid induces. One possible route out of this space of contradiction comes through a set of purificatory rituals often involving water, as noted. The process of healing through purification mirrors the key structures of popular black Christianity, or African Initiated Christianity (AIC) as it is sometimes called. This chapter explores these parallels and suggests that Ndebele draws on popular black Christianity as an intellectual resource through which to theorise the question of how to improvise a self under a social order premised on the negation of black subjectivity and identity.

As the extensive body of scholarship on black Christianity demonstrates,[5] health and healing form a powerful preoccupation in the numerous and varying expressions that this popular form of spirituality takes. Healing is almost always achieved by means of various purificatory rituals that take diverse forms. Across various black churches, these ritual performances may include one or more of the following: fasting, lively dance and singing, hand-clapping, excessive imbibing of blessed water to induce vomiting or peristaltic movement. Allegedly, the last mentioned redresses perceived misfortune or demonic possession, or anxieties caused by new challenges or psychosomatic disturbances, or attends to the known and unknown causes of social deviancy. As

[5] Quoted in Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in The 20th Century*, (Trenton, New Jersey & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 2001), See also Robert. R. Edgar and Hilary Sapire, *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999), and Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Comaroff argues, "sickness and affliction [are] also religious experiences".[6] Although it is not common, but found among the Zionist Christian Churches, corporal punishment is inflicted on the subject if it is suspected that the cause of his or her instability is psychiatric or psychological in manifestation. These rituals are generally administered to those who find themselves caught in (a spiritual) limbo, in a liminal state of the various orders of schizophrenia that is understood as spiritual in black cultures.

Comaroff presents one of the cogent analyses of the centrality of water in the African Initiated Christian churches. She argues, "water was an essential part of politico-ritual power in the precolonial system," a focal point of such conflicts as "between missionaries and chiefs," and also played a key role in "rites of purification in healing and initiation… as solvent." Hence, for example, the African Initiated Christian churches use water in their diverse ceremonies because it is embedded in both the Christian and African ritual contexts and is seen as having the capacity "to dissolve form and usurp space, [and hence] constitute[s] a medium within which categorical relations can be reformed and physical and social boundaries redrawn."[7]

Another key feature of these African Initiated churches, and indeed one of their major forms of appeal, is the way in which the spiritual authority to heal is devolved from church leaders to ordinary rank-and-file followers. Also inspired mainly by the African

---

[6] Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in The 20th Century*, (Trenton, New Jersey & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 2001), p.35.

[7] Jean Comaroff, *Body Of Power Spirit Of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People,* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp.200-201.

cultures of divination, African Initiated Churches are led by a "figure head," sometimes referred to as a "Bishop", or "Prophet," who interprets for the followers God's messages as purportedly relayed to him/her by God in a vision.[8] This pattern relates to the anthropocentric tendencies in many churches where the Christian affirmation of Jesus Christ as the sole king and dispenser of spiritual sustenance is downplayed. To this end, ordinary material, such as tea, "sewasho" (ash remains of the "motswere"/white African thorn tree) and water feature in cleansing rituals. The delegated healers are popular: they regularly anoint other church members in order for them to minister to the spiritually starved and troubled. Hence therapy is not an exclusive preserve of a single "figurehead".

The success of such ritual practices depends mainly on incantation. This is a process in which a person who possesses "*ubwenge*" or "intelligence" in the sense in which s/he knows the "nature and relationships of the world" beyond their mere causal relations "activate[s] the forces asleep in" inanimate objects,[9] or "command[s] things with words to practise 'magic'".[10] In the process, s/he also transforms because s/he too is an object, and "is subject to the same magic of constant transformation."[11] An example of such incantation is when s/he speaks in the name of a living and dead collective,[12] imploring deliverance to bolster human relationships, as well as people's understandings of the spiritual, psychical and cosmic spaces.

---

[8] The Zion Christian Church and various Zion Apostolic Churches call these messages "ditaelo" (literally, "instructions").

[9] Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and The Western World*, trans., Marjorie Grene, (New York: Grove Press, 1990), p.123.

[10] Op. cit., p.135.

[11] Op. cit., p.138.

[12] Op. cit., p.143.

A final key feature of the African Initiated Churches, as Jean Comaroff has demonstrated, is their social and political role. In Comaroff's words, the spiritual ideals of these churches provide followers with a capacity to deal with "the depersonalization and powerlessness of the urban labour experiences".[13] Particularly during the apartheid years, these churches became sites of spiritual force and dispensed "a religious ideology for the dignity and self-reliance of the black person".[14] And in the 60s, after the outlawing of the major liberation movements, churches and cultural organisations carried this political burden of resistance openly. At all levels — social, political, spiritual and corporal — popular black Christian traditions offer a message of healing and redemption through ritual.

Given these features, the profile of a likely conscript to these churches would be someone plagued by both spiritual and social burdens, seeking release from a stultifying paralysis of social and political alienation. An interview with one of the first key role players in the formation of one of these churches, that is, St. John Apostolic (already referred to) hints at the possible link between the genesis of this church and the expansion of black Christianity. It was reported that the founder, MaNku, came from the remote town of "Vlier" (perhaps a Southern Sotho translation of what is known in the official geography as "Villiers") just a few kilometres south of the Vaal river in the North Eastern part of the Free State Province, to Everton, located a few kilometres on the northern side of the Vaal

---

[13] Comaroff in Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in The 20th Century*, (Trenton, New Jersey & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 2001), p.37.

[14] Op. cit., p.54.

river. According to African Christian legend, MaNku had been vainly looking for therapy[15] among the African/black traditional healers, because she was plagued by "moya," a form of schizophrenia that the African Initiated Christians speak of mainly as profound alienation of the human being's spirit from God. As Jean Comaroff also observes with reference to the Zionists of BaRolong boo Ratshidi in Mafikeng,

> *moya* is also the indigenous term for the spirit force practically incorporated in human life, standing in stark contrast to the transcendent God of Protestant orthodoxy. This contrast is reinforced by the linking of spirit and water, for the latter serves as the impersonal embodiment of spirit in this scheme, the means through which it becomes accessible to manipulation. Spirit, breath, and water are all seen as essentially animating; they are substantial yet fluid, containable yet self-regulating, and they are capable of pervading space within and outside the body. In this manner, the Zionist scheme reverses the process of reification, inverting the progressive segregation of matter and spirit that was central to the mission church and industrial workplace.

Many of Ndebele's protagonists conform to this paradigm of (spiritual) disorientation that similarly plagued MaNku: they face a profound crisis in the existential sense. His focus is, however, nuanced; he presents alienation in these stories largely as it affects a

---

[15] It is possible that the quest such as MaNku undertook had its origins in the spread of charismatic churches in the Eastern Cape from around the cattle-killing episode of Nongqawuse (1856), and reached its zenith with the 1918 influenza epidemic. This outbreak follows the passing of the infamous 1913 South Africa's Land Act that proscribed blacks to 13% of South Africa, and thereby forcing many active black males to work for a pittance. (See Allan Anderson for a brief historical analysis of this movement, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in The 20th Century*, (Trenton, New Jersey & Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 2001), p.532.) One such prophet, Nontetha Nkwenkwe, born in about 1875 near King Williams Town, was outspoken against racism, and for this she was unjustly incarcerated in Pretoria's Weskoppies mental asylum from 1922 where she died in 1935. Refer to Robert. R. Edgar and Hilary Sapire, *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999), p.87.

male. Such scenarios as the quest for heroism through soccer ('The Test'), the tussle for a woman in a street brawl ('Uncle'), erectile dysfunction, alcohol abuse and violence ('Fools') and sado-masochism ('The Prophetess'), are examples. With the exception of the title story, water is manipulated to redress the individuals' crisis as it is apparent in their "physical bod[ies in the] immediate spatiotemporal location[s]".[16]

***

Ndebele's collection of stories centres on this theme of black alienation under modernity. In 'The Test', the young boys in the street are worried about who they are in relation to a horse that they see grazing unconcernedly in the cold rain. Prior to this moment of reflection, the principal characters had been preoccupied with a game of soccer, and could not conclude it because of the rain. In South Africa, soccer (and sport in general) is a major arena for the parading of (black) male power. Because the game of soccer in this story ends without anyone clearly emerging victorious, the principal characters have to seek out another contest and begin to size one another up on a variety of petty issues. For the purpose of healing, it is important that they give vent to their emotions.

Ndebele's choice of male characters is not accidental. One consistent theme in his stories is that self-awareness depends on its shadow other. In 'The Test', the boys are in a perpetual state of competition: playing soccer and running out in the rain without admitting to or giving in to fatigue, being like "a horse in the rain" and "go[ing] into the rain without [your] shirt." (16) In these episodes, the male ego suspends the physical

[16] Jean Comaroff, *Body Of Power Spirit Of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.200.

sensation of pain as the boys endure the cold rain to demonstrate their corporal (rather than their mental) prowess. As the plot draws to a close, the focus is no longer on the contest, but on Thoba.

The narrator presents Thoba as too young (and possibly naïve) to consider his angst a result of black depersonalisation. However, the recurrence of the images of the sense of angst in the black male characters of 'The Test' (and explicitly of emasculation in the character, Zamani, in 'Fools' and in the hero's argument on the significance of bathing for the black working class in 'Uncle') makes a contrasting picture of Thoba. An argument is suggested that Ndebele's portrayal of Thoba broaches precisely how racial negation can manifest itself. Thoba's exploits in the rain, therefore, imply that he defeats his own sense of fatigue and meaninglessness (as a victim of racial apartheid) rather than merely outclassing his friends in unmediated displays of male bravado. In other words, his manipulation of rain water signals a cleansing ritual and a different kind of moral authority from the one that finds expression through sheer brute force.

In a form of worship typical of St. John Apostolic Church, the body is taken through a process of ecstatic singing, dance and handclapping that sometimes engenders a trance experience, and also intensifies awareness. The parallel of this activity in 'The Test' is implied in the seemingly haphazard arguments and in running out into the cold rain — which lead to a heightened physical sense but also a feeling of self-worth. As Thoba runs shirtless, he feels "something freeing in the tickling pressure of the soft needles of rain on his skin," "a pleasant sensation; a soft, pattering sensation". (21) Thoba brushes aside the

temptation to see himself from a third-person point of view. This is also the observer's perspective that situates him as "teacher Mbele's son," (24) or "[s]taff nurse Mbele's son". (26) In this role, he deserves to be patronised and saved from the cold rain, the effect of which he struggles to ignore: "He began to feel exposed" (23). "But the pain in the calves. The pain in the thighs. He just would stand still. Then he began to shiver violently" (25). Thoba's self-doubt is triggered by "the piercing cold; and the stinging pain of muscles" (27), and brought to his consciousness by people who pity him. Both class and the body are stumbling blocks that Thoba needs to overcome. And what better way for him than through a ritual involving bodily experience and water that turns "pain" into "something deeply satisfying and pleasurable" and warms him inside (29).

Elsewhere in the story, this theme of purifying water is explored via an allusion that strengthens the view that the protagonist is to be understood to be negotiating apartheid. On his way home in the rain, Thoba looks at the Dutch Reformed Church and asks rhetorically: "What would happen if the water went into the church and flooded it? Would it float like Noah's ark?" (23) The Dutch Reformed Church is inconceivable outside the Calvinist principles and South Africa's system of racism. In Thoba's logic, by implication, the church would not float in the event of flooding by virtue of this ideological apparatus' attachment to the history of racism. For both Thoba and the narrator, therefore, the falling rain is evocative of the archetypal floods that God unleashed to cleanse the world of sin. Running in the rain without being overcome, Thoba resembles a mini-Noah, the one who survives trial by water to establish a new world. The story of Noah is also linked to that of his cursed son Ham, condemned to

permanent servitude by his angry father. The story of Ham was in turn taken up by the Dutch Reformed Church as one of the justifications for apartheid. In terms of the proponents of apartheid, black people were considered to be the children of Ham, and therefore destined to slavery and oppression. Thoba's black body stands in the lineage of the politically damned, a metaphor of essential otherness. Seen through the image of Ham, a person who initiates an alternative discourse or identity, Thoba can be regarded as a father and a son to himself. By passing through rituals of purification, Thoba starts to discover ways of overcoming the negations of apartheid.

The narrator indirectly traces a framework of another form of cleansing through Thoba. He is less actively involved in his colleagues' arguments. His petit-bourgeois background, that is, as Teacher Mbele's son, also marginalises him from the poverty that his friends who come from a relatively poor upbringing endure. However, he uses his isolation strategically to appreciate his comrades' tensions fully, and to seek to experience catharsis. Hence, when the story draws to a close, he runs alone into the rain in a manner that suggests that he has achieved spiritual and ethical growth.

The nature of the experience that leads to the maturity of Thoba's fellows is crucial. As they play animatedly, Thoba's friends constantly argue and valorise bravery in a manner that sometimes exceeds decorum. In these boyhood games, his friends incite one another to the excesses that are convenient to the purging of pent-up emotions. One such quarrel is about the ability of the next of kin of one of their colleagues to withstand the elements. For instance, one of the boys, Mpiyakhe, remarks about Vusi's family, "'Your family

gets knocked down with all kinds of diseases. Everybody knows that. Softies, all of you. You're too higher-up. That's your problem. Instead of eating papa [staple diet made of maize meal] and beans, you have too many sandwiches'" (14). In another argument expressed through at least two ways, Thoba's colleague appropriates a question that Thoba poses in order to raise another issue. It seems the aim of this wrestling is to expose an opponent for not being circumspect. Largely because he is reflecting on the sound that the rain makes on the corrugated roof of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (another African Initiated church), Thoba asks the first question "'[i]f there was a service in there… would the people hear the sermon?'" (9) To Mpiyakhe's response to Thoba's question that "'Reverend Mkhabela has a big voice,'" Vusi follows, "'[n]o voice can be bigger than thunder'" (10). Utilising Vusi's response to Mpiyakhe in order to suggest another potential philosophical arena for contestation, Simangele quips, "[t]here is no thunder out there. It's only rain out there,'" and then attacks Vusi's earlier remark that Mkhabela's voice is big by saying, "'[e]ither there is thunder, or there is no thunder." (10)

On being impressed by the ability of a horse to graze seemingly unconcerned about the cold wet weather, Thoba asks the second question "'Does a horse ever catch cold?'" (11). Once more, his mates manipulate the question that he brings up to ridicule one another. First, to Vusi's answer that "'[a] horse… got an iron skin… They just don't get to coughing like people,'" Simangele counters, "'[n]ow you want to tell us that a horse can cough'". (The truth of course is that horses do catch cold, and they do cough.) Also similar to the earlier argument that develops after Thoba had raised a question about the

ability of a congregation to hear Mkhabela's sermon clearly in the event of rain falling on the church's roof, Simangele and Vusi elaborate on this second question by posing and counter-posing, seemingly in a tangential way, other moot issues, and in a way that suggests that they are aware that their contest will be decided on the ability to deploy subtlety and on (rhetorical) acumen. The conclusion of this verbal sparring says it all. Simangele confidently argues that "'[t]here's no person in this world who never gets ill'" in response to Vusi's "'[m]e… I just don't catch cold.'" Vusi's witty "'I never said "'never'" implicitly creates the impression that this story foregrounds primarily a self-initiated difference, as opposed to one that dogma and convention dictates. In other words, these sparring read as mock fights that train an individual participant to utilise an adversary's texts via the mode of insurgence that is typical in the African Christian Initiated practices.

Ironically, Thoba does not participate actively and meaningfully in these arguments but, instead, implicitly regrets his privileged background. He registers his awareness of his marginality by noting that he began to shiver, and that his "teeth clattered for a moment as a cold breeze blew and then stopped" (5) while, except for Nana, all his mates interacted with one another indifferent to the cold. In spite of viewing Nana in a condescending manner, Thoba nevertheless feels that he is experientially poorer because, unlike the other boys, his feet are not cracked because he has three pairs of shoes (5) and that he heeds his mother's instruction that he should wear them regularly. It is, therefore, evident when he braves the rain and runs home that he is impressed with his colleagues who in his view create a sense of self-awareness and authority against angst.

In contrast to all the stories in the collection, however, the depiction of the alienating consequence of apartheid violence on the black male and of the African Initiated Christian conception of healing that is relied on in order to address this trauma are most obvious in the title story, 'Fools'. The first time we encounter the protagonist Zamani, he is at a railway station sizing up Zani, the brother of Mimi whom Zamani had raped some time ago. Like a grown-up version of the young boys in 'The Test', Zamani appears to be in a permanent state of measuring himself competitively against everyone he encounters. For example, he experiences a sense of powerlessness before Zani. The older man feels "so naked before him, like a frog that was being dissected alive, and there was nothing in the world it could do about its misfortune" (167). Zamani is frightened by Zani's gaze: "I looked at him, and felt somewhat overwhelmed" (156); "He looked at me with a steady gaze… but something of the intimidating look I had seen earlier still remained"; "He looked at me as if he had the right to say anything to me and I was obliged to listen" (160). Zamani's intention to interview Zani is simultaneously demeaning and self-aggrandizing: "After all," Zamani thinks aloud, "hadn't I been chewing food for many more years than he? I knew all the ways of chewing and swallowing, so I could afford to make concessions, and gain authority in the process." (154)

Indeed, when the story opens, a pervasive sense of apathy permeates Zamani's interaction with people. The story draws attention to his biography of shame through his awareness of Zani's family, the young man whom Zamani intends to intimidate and psychologically disarm when the story begins. The latter seems to have little or no recollection of his

former student, and cannot at first associate him with Mimi, his sister, who now has a three year old daughter with Zamani after he had raped her (168). Via Zani, the reader learns that Zamani came to Charterston, the setting of this story, when he was "fresh from Ohlange Teacher's Training School… a young man of thirty-two, full of new ideas, and dying to change the township and put some life into it" (165). Zani's power over his teacher emanates from knowing his scandalous history. The irony is that Zamani's profession as a teacher and a respected learned man puts him in a socially commanding position in relation to Zani. Against the outlined disparity, the story unfolds with Zamani, as opposed to Zani, occupying the centre stage, and merely recollecting in agony and indifference a series of incidents in his disgraceful life. In other words, while Zamani accurately identifies the enormity of his shame, he nevertheless retreats into it and fails to rise above his sense of guilt. By contrast, Zani is passionate about how he relates to people, and this is most probably indicative of the fact that he purges excess emotions freely through verbal communication, albeit sometimes without thinking things through clearly.[17] Zani's taunting and reminding of Zamani to reflect on his fall from grace is supposed to manifest itself through remorse and anger, that is, excess emotions, because growth takes place only after confronting one's violent past and after admitting it.

Contrition justifiably eats Zamani from inside causing him to indulge in an extra-marital relationship. In other words, he is an emotionally rich person, and this is obvious when he

---

17 David Attwell attributes Zani's immaturity to the portrait of a Black Consciousness activist that Ndebele allegedly presents of himself in Steve Biko's *Viewpoint*. See Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*, (Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), pp.169-204.

suffers guilt whenever he is in his wife Nosipho's presence. The boys in the other stories resolve this sense of shrinking through uninhibited self-expression. He is aware of the fact that his society pities him for his moral failures and confusion (175), especially given the fact that people at first physically attacked him after he had raped Mimi (196). Ironically, it is also typical of Zamani to persevere in misdemeanours despite the sense of wrong and guilt that clearly registers in his mind each time he commits his corporal body to the act. Consider, for instance, the brutality of, as well as his sheer indifference to, the horror that he physically perpetrates. This viciousness registers in his mind by ironically reversing the cleansing significance of the water that we read about in the other stories:

> I want to come into the water, but I can't. I am trapped behind thin screens of ice. I must break it down. I heave! And I heave! And there is a deafening scream of squawking geese. The pain of heaving! The frightening screams! And the ice cracks with the tearing sound of mutilation. And I break through with such a convulsion. And I'm in the water… And I swim through eyes which look at me with enchantment and revulsion. (195)

The occasion is his sexual violation of Mimi. Despite the moral limbo that he implicitly feigns to be in, Zamani nevertheless displays a capacity to rationalise his guilt, yet fails to be decisive. He is, therefore, constantly reflecting incoherently on diverse episodes of his life history without committing himself to a specific moral plane that generates in him a commensurate unambiguous emotional response. For instance, he persists against his conscious judgment to offer the official version of education, the racist orientation of which he finds outrageous (208). To this effect, he is also reluctant to allow Zani to address the pupils of his *alma mater* about the liberation struggle. Zamani persists in being non-committal despite his awareness of the futility of Zani's ambitious enterprise,

and maintains this ambivalence even when the principal finds Zani showing the pupils the racial humiliation of celebrating "Dingaan's Day", a holiday promulgated by the "Voortrekkers" (a band of Dutch warriors who imperially conquered the Zulu nation after a war with them in what came to be know as the "Blood River Battle of 1838") to commemorate the defeat of the Zulu army led by Dingaan on the sixteenth of December[18] (214-217). A similar ambivalence is evident in him when, just after his encounter with Zani at the station when the plot develops, Zamani wildly reflects on what it means for him to connect with Zani. He remarks to himself that

> [t]here was something painfully immediate yet strangely liberating about [Zani]… It was as if he plunged me into experiencing the purest of sensations, the most uninhibited of impulses… That boy! He was pure fear, pure concern, pure indignation, pure conceit, pure profligacy, pure reason, pure irrationality. He seemed like a… concept which you retain only for as long as your mind is being exercised by it. And then it is gone, and you have to grapple with it again… And deep down in me, I was heinously grateful that it was he whose sister I had so horribly assaulted… I wanted to see him as much as I wanted to avoid him (196).

The sense of ambivalence that permeates Zamani's recollection of Zani, and the sense of guilt that Zamani sees Zani to be inciting are indicative of the paralysis in which (genuine) self-reproach is incommensurate with emotional experience, and hence fails to eventuate through penance. Essentially, Zamani is trapped in a form of moral atrophy that makes him act in bad faith, given that he is aware of, understands and accepts the severity of his transgression but does not make amends for it. Instead of loathing his fall from innocence for raping Zani's sister, Zamani tries to ease his guilt by attempting to patronise Zani.

---

18 Refer, for instance, to C, De K. Fowler and G.J.J. Smit, *Senior History,* (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Kimberley: Maskew Miller, 1974), pp.277-278.

Zamani is caught up in a cycle of inflicting and perpetuating violence. As with the coloniser that Fanon discusses,[19] one of the ways in which Zamani enacts his desire for violent superiority is through his eyes, which paralyse their target. He thinks aloud about Zani: "I suddenly felt a growing urge to unsettle him; to torture him with a cold stare" (153); "He was just the kind of boy I liked to break. But what was special about this one was that he was articulate. That was harder to deal with" (163); "Again I looked him in the eyes, wanting to be much heavier for him than he could ever be for me" (159).

Zamani's alienation is further apparent in his confusion:

> Since I had told myself it was the day for thinking, I had willed myself to think; but my mind had been unable to focus on any specific thing. I had willed without any direction. And I had become aware that I did not really know how to think; how to induce the mind to work; that it was really possible to be conscious of; dedicated without any real aims to be conscious of; that it was possible to have smoke without fire, only if you think of smoke. That is the ultimate ignorance. Ignorance is not knowing something, it is wanting to know something without knowing what to know (263).

This confusion is writ large in his emotional and psychological faculties. This means that he is unable to distinguish between how his body should respond to his wife and how it should respond to the young Mimi. Zamani is a person in need of healing. He is an individual languishing in spiritual limbo because he has failed to commit his body to ritualistic self-cleansing despite vaguely presenting Zani as a metaphor through which purgation of excess emotions is possible (196).

---

19 See Franz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans., Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp.109-140.

It appears that the narrator sandwiches Zamani's turmoil between two episodes of cleansing in the story. One involves the ending, when Zamani submits his body to corporal punishment. This episode has generally been read as a case of racial violence being turned against itself.[20] An additional interpretation would be to see it as a type of cleansing ritual that emerges from within the worshipper, with the body containing the fundamental impurity from which the worshipper would like to be liberated. He is therefore reminiscent of the boys in the opening story who expose their bodies to the cold rain in terms that are reminiscent of cleansing. (This form of cleansing is also apparent in Witbooi's death that results from being assaulted because of allegedly being a livestock thief.[21])

The second episode of healing can be read in the encounter between Zamani and the mother of Mimi. Three years prior to this encounter, Zamani had raped and impregnated Zani's sister, Mimi as already mentioned, and had never sought forgiveness. Locked in his guilty conscience, or rather in the knowledge of his dishonour, Zamani is to be seen as being desperate for the release that he experiences in being told by Mimi's mother that he is "a disgrace"(189). In thus naming him, it is as if she ultimately helps him to renounce what his body had committed, that is, "the heaviness of my shame"(190), in the same way that he deliberately accepts corporal punishment for anathematic purposes at the end of this story.

---

20 See Stefan Helgesson, "Sports of Culture: Writing the Resistant Subject in South Africa (Readings of Ndebele, Gordimer, Coetzee)," Unpublished PhD., (University of Uppsala, 1999), p.82.

21 Refer to the discussion of Bheki Maseko's stories, Chapter Two of this study.

In this concluding story, Zamani's stoical submission to corporal punishment suggests that he turns racial violence onto itself. For, having killed the physical sensation of pain, he now transcends a sense of shame that, in his view, is inscribed by apartheid on his body. This theme echoes that of the opening story, 'The Test', where the principal characters understand blackness in terms of an apartheid-constructed predicament, and from which a resolution is possible through a self-originated cleansing ritual, that is, by exposing the body to the cold rain. In this process, the body stands for the depersonalisation from which Zamani would like to be liberated. The mode of the desire to be purified, that is, "fanciful [or imagined] and dramatic,"[22] is typically African Christian Initiated.

Unlike in the rest of the stories, and also in a move that indirectly defines blackness away from the male bravado that the other stories dramatise (seemingly as an inward-turned gendered enterprise), Ndebele's focus in 'The Prophetess' is an ailing black woman, the mother of the central character, referred to only as "the boy". The exact nature of her illness is not revealed, but like many worshippers in the black Christian tradition she may be spiritually plagued, and hence compares well with the male characters who suffer angst in the other stories. In this story, the mother sends her young son to fetch "holy" water from the prophetess. On his way back, the protagonist spills this water, and then decides to refill the container with ordinary tap water. His mother recuperates after consuming what she thinks is the prophetess's blessed water. After drinking, the mother

22 Noel C. Manganyi, *Looking Through the Keyhole*, (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1981), p.80.

comments: "'I think I feel better already. This water, and you… I can feel a soothing coolness deep down'" (52). Implicitly after being activated with a healing power, water in this case thus serves to consolidate subjectivity at the levels of the individual, the family and the community. The greater part of the story focuses on the healing effect of the water that her son brings her as well as the community of the mother's friends that is brought together to discuss the water and its curing effects. The story is then explicitly located in the world of popular black Christian traditions.

Therapy in this story does not primarily involve having to affirm a masculinity trope like running shirtless in the rain (although on the way home the boy does witness a group of township boys boasting about their sexual conquests). Instead, in this story, we are in the world of female spiritual healers and the role they play in addressing the trauma of the black urban labour experience. It is significant for the main character to heal his mother because she, as well as the Prophetess, are the only characters in this collection who lucidly describe the transmogrification of water into a healing medium. (Both remind us of the centrality of motherhood in Maseko's 'The Night of the Long Knives' where one of the "beheaders", Slang, is indirectly urged to reconcile with the childhood that he seems to have lost. As already argued in the previous chapter, healing from the sense of schizophrenia that results from black migrancy involves harmonising the states of childhood and motherhood. In Matlou's stories, (see Chapter One) deliverance from the displacement of migrancy is resolved when he imagines himself as a baby on his mother's back.)

It has been noted that one theme in popular Christian healing is the way in which this power and skill can be delegated downwards. Indeed, at one point the prophetess blesses the boy and appears to authorize him. She places "her hands on his head"; "the hands of the prophetess moved all over the boy's head, seeming to feel for something" (43); "Now they covered his face" (44). She then says to him: "My son… we are made of all that is in the world. Go. Go and heal your mother'" (44). Earlier she had advised him: "'Always listen to new things. Then try to create too. Just as I have learnt never to page through the dead leaves of hymn books" (40).

In another episode of the same encounter, she provides more details of her ritual immediately on hearing the principal character saying to her that he had come to "ask for water". Clear communication, she begins her short lecture, is a mark of both a reverence to God and a sense of wisdom. Also in her view, the religious desire to worship and the process of intellectualising interact through the creative enterprise. "Words," she argues, "are a gift from the Almighty, the Eternal Wisdom. He gave us all a little pinch of his mind and called on us to think. That is why it is folly to misuse words or not to know how to use them well" (39). Far from the unrefined (if not the unorthodox), however, she portrays the skill of speaking as a causal product of the thinking process. She remarks that the latter is quintessentially a Divine preoccupation. She further argues that Divinity is implicit, for instance, in the protagonist's heeding of his mother's guidance, and defines respect for the elderly as equivalent to an act of appropriation and improvisation in line with the philanthropic:

> You are very fortunate, indeed to have such a parent.
> Remember, when she says, 'My boy, take this message to

> that house,' go. When she says, 'My boy, let me send you to the shop,' go. And when she says, 'My boy, pick up a book and read,' pick up a book and read. In all this she is actually saying to you, learn and serve. Those two things, little man, are the greatest inheritance (40).

In keeping with this Christian logic of atonement and application, the boy thus takes it upon himself to produce holy water. Despite initially seeing water only in terms defined by the prophetess, the boy generates his own discourse of action and therapy and is hence able to operate as an independent agent. Because of its alkalinic and acidic neutrality, (clean) water in this case serves as a blank sign that is manipulated by the young boy. He is qualified, as it were, to manoeuvre the water's chemical simplicity to turn it into a healing substance in much the same way as the therapist who, through official training, is prepared for the task. By taking on this devolved authority, the boy can experience a rediscovery of himself. Through his own improvised performances, he is able to cure his mother's body and, by extension, the dilemma that other bodies pose as a result of lack of self-confidence, illness, or alienation from self.

The story 'Uncle' provides a nuanced explication of this non-institutionalised therapy that takes shape mainly as a result of the deployment of ordinary material by human beings. The mechanics or principles of this therapy are implicit in 'The Prophetess' and in 'The Test'. Neither Thoba in 'The Test' nor the young boy in 'The Prophetess' owes heroism to the mandate of the church or any other institution. Instead, they use their creativity to turn themselves from patients into healers. Ndebele's leading characters do not operate from within the strictures of any ideological apparatus and, in the case of the

young boy, he draws on available religious resources but turns them to his own ends and uses.

Nowhere in *Fools* is this continuum of the therapist/healer and patient roles more obvious than in 'Uncle'. In this story, the context of which is again the particular way in which apartheid induces angst in black men, Uncle becomes the tutor of the nephew and the lessons he needs to learn are those that can help him deal with the kind of intimidation that is evident in the actions of Thoba's colleagues in 'The Test'.

The character Uncle tutors his nephew on being creative and averse to violence. As in 'The Test' and 'The Prophetess', the human body in 'Uncle' necessarily constitutes an impediment, but more explicitly so in this story: Uncle tells the boy that heads require frequent washing because "the mind takes in everything it comes across. . . the dirt of the week." (100) Uncle makes the boy understand that bathing is a process of cleansing on many levels. Spiritually, Uncle continues, bathing is critical. Uncle does not state explicitly that bathing cleanses the negation inscribed on the black body as a result of racial exploitation. Nor does he overtly claim that eking out a living as a cheap labourer chastens the spirit. Consistent with the images of crisis in the protagonists that Ndebele experiments with in the 'The Test' and in Teacher Zamani in 'Fools', however, it appears that Ndebele's portrait of Uncle's ritual is to be understood as political. In particular, Ndebele is concerned with constructing the kind of black agency that goes beyond the "spectacular".

As a musician, Uncle has learnt to stake his own freedom by improvising music "moving from scale to scale and from rhythm to rhythm" (76), singing South Africa without recognising its ideological polarities as reflected in the names that are given to various places. The artist's role is to populate the world with new signs, while working out how to decode them. And so, paradoxically, he becomes his own audience. Mandla, Uncle's friend, demonstrates this process when he reads his own sculptures and drawings into Uncle's musical performance, generating knowledge, as he remarks, "'from an imagined somethingness that has always sustained [the people]'" (80), and thereby making "'ordinary things extraordinary'" (78). Here, one artistic medium modulates into another, in the same way that belief in the prophetess's "holy" water leads to convalescence and recovery.

Ndebele insists on a belief that is self-authored, a phenomenological experience that Uncle calls communication with one's "soul" (100). Uncle privileges belief above the dogma that, he implicitly submits, polarises the body and soul (as, for example, holy communion (116)), instead of reconciling them. This process of integration takes the form of a repetitive questions-and-answers, typical of the classic African healing session where the healer persistently goads the client into coming to terms with the trauma or problematic that he or she has experienced. Uncle involves his naïve nephew in such a session after the nephew had seen his uncle's girlfriend naked, and had overheard their moments of rapture (82-83).

The process that Uncle improvises to redress the violation that his nephew incurs is reminiscent of the rite that the prophetess in 'The Prophetess' presents through rhetorical acumen. While the prophetess's ceremony exudes more theory than practice, Uncle's relies more on involving his nephew in the dramatic, and explicitly aims at invoking in him a consciousness of Divinity primarily for the purpose of aiding him through a simulated rite of passage. In this case, Uncle relies on an inconsistent shower of light coming from the outside into his bedroom possibly through a curtain that opens and closes, blowing intermittently in the wind. This to and fro movement plunges the room in an endless play of darkness and light (84-87) that complements Uncle's interrogation of his nephew, and sets up an ambience for the establishment of the concepts and words that are necessary to redress his trauma. He tells his naïve nephew that the (seemingly) moving silhouettes are "spirits travelling along the wall," and further exhorts him to look at them because "[t]hey want the truth". His aim is to lead his nephew into an intense reflection in which he is able to see a need to expunge his consciousness of the primary data of shock after hearing Uncle and his girlfriend making love. Throughout this ritual in which the body is expected to express thoughts in words, Uncle poses the question "'What did you see?'" regularly, and does not let go, because he wants his nephew to conquer the primary site of what traumatised him.[23]

The symbolic use of water in 'The Test', 'The Prophetess' and 'Uncle' gives rise to a reconceptualisation of the therapist–patient relationship. In the Western psychiatric tradition, this relationship is a one-sided interaction in which the therapist is strategically

---

23 Compare with the healing rituals in Mandla Langa's stories in the following chapter.

positioned to unlock through questions that which is repressed within the patient in order to trigger latent forms of power. Geared by the therapist towards a specific goal, the patient can hardly be said to have developed to the point of being self-reliant. At the end of scheduled therapy sessions, patients unwittingly maintain a love–hate relationship with the predicament that they are believed to have overcome, because they always retain a fear of relapsing. In other words, we do not have recovering patients emerging as free, that is, where the past has ceased to have a bearing on the present. In opposition to this paradigm, Ndebele's stories offer a continuum between the healer and the patient with the authority to heal continually being devolved. Through using the resources of everyday life or, in the words of the prophetess, "of all that is in the world" (44), characters create methods of healing. Put in Gramscian terms, "*homo faber* [man the maker] cannot be separated from *homo sapiens* [man the thinker]."[24]

***

Ndebele's stories challenge the reader to become a typical worshipper who experiences depersonalisation in terms of self-alienation. Ndebele relies on the paradigm of the therapist in order to invest his characters with the capacity to heal themselves, deploying ordinary material to perform variations of established or institutionalised rituals. By stamping these rituals with individual traces, these characters imagine themselves through the aura that is articulated in the public political texts, the grammar of which is for the elite to control and regulate other people.

---

24 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith eds., (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.9.