

MASTER OF ARTS
CREATIVE WRITING

By dissertation

Reflexive Essay

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Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Creative Writing.



Introduction

What Lies is the story of a marriage gone wrong, and the consequences of repressing one's history. The story is set in contemporary Bellville, Cape Town and opens with Hendrick, who is married to Chalita, driving down Voortrekker Road, the main road in the area. He meets Xolisa, a young student from the Eastern Cape whom he spots being mugged. He pulls over and attempts to rescue her as the assailant takes her phone and flees. She is a student from the Eastern Cape and living on the residence at her university. She has since dropped out from her studies and, reluctant to go back home a failure, has taken up prostitution as a way to make ends meet until she figures out her next move.

The truth about the dysfunction of Hendrick and Chalita's marriage cannot be contained any longer and it all comes to a head at a party when she humiliates her husband (p.21). Chalita is dealing with anger and does not always know how to contain it. She has faced a trauma as a girl in a mountainous hamlet, the fictional town of Bergfontein. Chalita comes to realise that she married Hendrick as a means of escape from her former life. She drinks as a way of further escaping, as well as going to the casino often. As Hendrick is torn between duty and passion; what he feels is right and what he knows is wrong, he is conflicted as he is forced to choose between his marriage and love.

Hendrick and Xolisa's relationship is therefore indicative of a transgressive love narrative. It starts uneasily (as he does not even know her name when she is robbed, and only meets her later after he has a fight with his wife) and is not the typical romantic idea of love. He represents the ambiguity of someone who wants to be in love, yet still feels he is betraying his wife by falling in love with a younger woman, who is not his wife, but also black. This is still viewed as a taboo by many.

The idea for the story began fleetingly as I drove past a young female prostitute and wondered what I never had before, "What is her story?" I was inspired in a seminar with writer Tracy Farren 30 July 2012 who said, of giving her characters life, "Give them an opportunity to explain themselves. See the details of the character, but don't take control." I attempted this with these characters. As Stephen King says, "[g]ood story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere" in which "two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new" (King, 2000: 29).

The idea was reinforced as I travelled with the train to Cape Town (CBD) every morning for a few months. The divisions of first class and third class on the train emphasized the divisions in the crowds of people. Many people, when observed, displayed traits which were subtle yet conveyed a sense of uneasiness, which is captured in Chalita's character. Another stark image which I have witnessed is that of the black and coloured men who stand on street corners, hoping to be picked up for a job as a labourer. These crowds have grown substantially over the past few years as the economy falters. This piece would require interviews with people specifically about how they feel regarding their race, gender and place in society.

In this way the idea evolved organically as I started making connections with other stories I had heard in the media and in my sphere. Untold stories of shame and isolation became apparent as I listened actively for these stories. I had heard about students at my university who were mostly from the Eastern Cape, and also other parts of the country, who came to Cape Town to improve their lives. Many of these students arrive with enough money for registration, and possibly to fund their first year. Thereafter their funding is not always secured. With political wrangling and bureaucracy, the financial aid schemes are often used as a tool for politicking, with students bearing the brunt of the politics.

The title is an intended double meaning, which could be the first part of the collocation "What lies" (which is meant to be combined with any of the following: ahead, within, beneath), as well as an exclamation of untruth. The former refers to what we suppress when we do not express our histories, and the consequences thereof. The latter conveys the unreliability of said suppression.

My intention was to highlight what lies behind the beautiful façade of Cape Town. Bellville and particular, Voortrekker road is renowned for being glamorous in any way. He is reminded of this as he notes the mountain in passing, not the reverence with which it is usually described.

And there it was, that mountain. There was nothing more to think about it. It meant nothing to him; a big rock, a marker to remind where he was.. The rich people were there by the mountain; he was not. He drove on. (p.1)

An aspect of apartheid that is not often discussed is the people of colour who were happier during this time. Chalita acts as a symbol for this disgruntled group. Chalita represents the spilling over of suppression. She treats Hendrick badly for seemingly to him, no reason other

than they have drifted apart in their marriage. A trauma in her childhood which is unfolded. Due to this trauma she often drifts off and reminisces about her childhood growing up in Bergsfontein. This hermetic town, a Christian outpost, is physically and ideologically closed off from the outside. The trauma she faces is symbolic of an end of innocence. Her hatred is displayed as aggression and humiliation towards her husband, as well as racist attitudes and sentiments.

Through the narrative, I have attempted to capture and probe the simmering tension which undercuts the political and social situation in which South Africa now finds itself. Yet this was all alluded to, such as strike action like Marikana which is seen in the media, but does not directly affect people unless it is in their own backyards.

Letting them speak

The problem in letting a character speak, and who is letting that character speak, is an all too real one with a complex subject matter. The issue of prostitution was complicated because Xolisa as a young black female presents problems of representation. These three aspects of her character make her prone to misrepresentation, and according to Alcoff (1995: 98)

[f]eminist scholarship has a liberatory agenda that almost requires that women scholars speak on behalf of other women, yet the dangers of speaking across differences of race, culture, sexuality, and power are becoming increasingly clear

This rigid prescription would not allow for a male writer to speak on behalf of a character. Instead, these matters are handled with sensitivity and an awareness of the characters, and not compromising their integrity. The intention should be – and it was mine - to avoid what Alcoff states as

the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation.

The key to allowing a character to speak in a sensitive way, without monopolising on the character's voice is empathy, which comes in the description. King describes it as “what

makes the reader a sensory participant in the story” and that “[d]escription begins with visualization of what it is you want the reader to experience” (2000: 201)

Xolisa’s foray into prostitution was not broached as a main theme, but merely a consequence of bad decisions. Also, and again, thematically, this was a symbol for the descent of hope of the new generation. The issue of student hunger is something not often discussed. The stigma attached to hunger in South Africa is prominent, with barely any students speaking up about this. However, the number of students I’ve encountered affected by this are contrary. Xolisa selling herself is indicative of the undercover nature of this act. In a 2009 article by SL (Student Life) magazine about prostitution by young people in Cape Town, the naiveté of the character of Xolisa is highlighted. On the “high-end side of prostitution, young women can earn up to R10,000 a month. However, Xolisa represents the bottom end, where women earn between R50 and, if they’re lucky, up to R500 per trick.” She does not have a pimp or madam, which indicates how new she is to it.

Prostitution, especially in the streets, is representative of the taboo which many people see, yet still do not speak about. The fact that Xolisa still has a place to stay in the residence on campus, her friendship with Mike, as well as her new relationship with Hendrick represents a new hope for her. The character of Xolisa represents the shame which many young people feel as they have been disenfranchised by their conditions.

She is a complex character, who presents different sides of herself, as she has to adapt to her new circumstances. Her name means “to make peace” in isiXhosa, can be pronounced in two different ways and is unisex. Her middle name is Sinthemba, which means “we have hope” in isiXhosa, another unisex name. She is, in a sense, a mirror image of herself, reflecting the side which is not respectable in the eyes of society, while also a new hope, which translates as a heavy burden for her as it is to many students in this position.. This side of her only comes out when she was truly desperate and when she turns a trick, we see a young woman who is guarded, sassy, yet very hostile. When she meets Hendrick in the bar, she is still hostile, which displays her clouded judgement. When she is with the client in his car, she is in control, but this is done to hide her desperation and fear.

A big concern was the depiction of characters, especially females and with the subject of prostitution. Not making an empty symbol of Xolisa was delicate as it is all too easy to fall into the trap of sexualisation and othering, especially as a male writer. This notion is asserted by Hames, who asks “whether the studies on gender and masculinities have depoliticised

feminist research and methodologies or whether they have enhanced the work of feminists” (Hames, 2010). Maintaining sensitivity to the subjects with whom I spoke, and also to the characters, was the main concern when writing. As Hames iterates, “[f]eminist research is essentially the ‘sense-making’ of women’s experiences and realities” (2010).

I was therefore careful in preserving anonymity of the subjects I spoke to in researching the story. I spoke to various students who have faced hunger on campus, as well as the rumours about students who have resorted to prostitution as a last resort. This story was also an indictment to the powers that be who have failed the people of South Africa, particularly the younger generation. This generation is often referred to as “Born Frees”, with reference to the 1994 election and people born around this time. Xolisa is twenty years old, so she would have been in 1992.

Race and relations

The subject of race in South Africa is significant as it affects everyday relations, as well as relationships. In a country like South Africa, where the issues of race is still a reality, the aftereffects linger. Chalita faces a childhood trauma which affects her outlook. This results in anger which comes spilling out at times. These incidences of pent-up anger are evidenced when she slaps one of the children begging on the train (p.6), when she embarrasses Hendrick at the pool party (p. 21) and when she claws at her abdomen in the bathroom (p. 17). These incidences were symbolic of the observances of people who were disenfranchised and frustrated by the idea of the “new” South Africa, and often prefer the old.

Another symbol which is highlighted is the disgruntled people of South Africa who were looking forward to a new start at the turn of democracy. These are the people who were looking forward to the ideal of the Rainbow Nation, and who were ultimately let down by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Chalita and Hendrick, and Xolisa represent the old and new guards respectively. The former generation is set in their ways and often resistant to change, whereas students are “at an age where they could appreciate the magnitude of such a transition” (Mahmood). As race is still being dealt with on various levels in South Africa, language and culture factor into the way in which perceptions are shaped. This was one of the reasons why the ages and races of the characters were so crucial to their interactions. Hendrick, ready for change but still content to stay in the past, represents

The ameliorating aspects of the introspection of subject matter of this nature is expressed by Mahmood, who iterates that

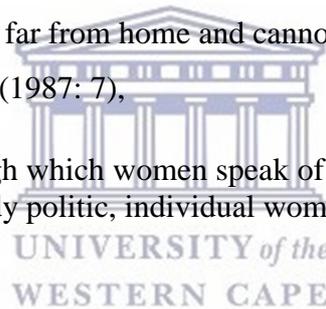
the struggle for identity within a pluralistic society must begin with one's self. For the South African people to build a new sense of community, they need to negotiate their notions of identity both within themselves and within their new, shared world

This amelioration is represented by the changes in both Hendrick and Xolisa, particularly when they change their appearances by new hairdos (p.51-56), and the beginning of change for Chalita.

Let them eat

At the core of the story is the issue of hunger. I use this in the literal sense, equating it to socioeconomic factors as Xolisa is far from home and cannot afford food. She therefore turns to prostitution. Says Susie Orbach (1987: 7),

[f]ood is a metaphor through which women speak of their inner experiences. Until we have a real voice in the body politic, individual women are likely to use their bodies as their mouthpieces



However, the unfulfilled feelings within Xolisa are also quelled by a different kind of hunger. The lack of love between Hendrick and Xolisa are what ultimately drives them apart, as well as forging the connection between Hendrick and Xolisa. Chalita, on the other hand, turns to gambling to fill the proverbial void, but this numbing technique is not enough for her. What lies beneath the surface for her is a hurt that she cannot contain and these feelings come spilling out in erratic ways. Chalita's behaviour makes her easy to vilify, but a trauma provides room for empathy, which in turn mirrors Xolisa as an inadvertent seductress figure. Xolisa does not take care about Hendrick's wife because she knows that Hendrick was drawn to her for a reason with its roots in the breakdown of their marriage.

Drawing loosely on Freud's oral fixation theory, food has a way of not only telling the reader about a character's culture and heritage, but also drawing attention to a form of sexuality.

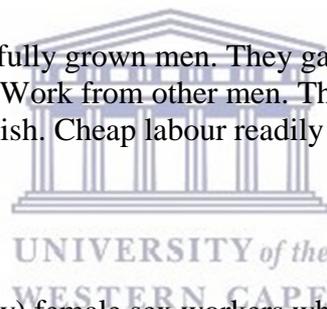
This is made evident as the

connection between eating and sexuality is made unconsciously or, if it is made overtly, its relevance is taken in subconsciously. An obvious example is the pre-seduction dinner routine where the man buys food and expects to receive sex from the woman in return. Although this convention has been current for many years, the meaning of exchange (food for sex) is rarely acknowledged openly

Hendrick and Xolisa subvert this notion as she buys them food on one of their dates. This is done with the money that she uses after she has turned a trick. Their seduction is also usually under the cover of darkness or in a parking lot where they eat their food.

The subject of prostitution is not meant to be dwelled on, and is used as a way of conveying the hopelessness which is felt by individuals in her situation. The parallels between situations of hunger and unemployment across gender lines are drawn in the beginning when the men who Hendrick picks up for work are found on street corners. This comparison is made evident, as is noted:

The boys in question were fully grown men. They gathered on the street corners every morning looking for work. Work from other men. They were fast becoming a South African trademark, or blemish. Cheap labour readily available, like fruit vendors, or whores. (p.5)



The connotations of (predominantly) female sex workers who also wait on street corners for clients is particularly stark and is, in this context, not meant to be a glorification of sex. Xolisa represents the bridge between the masses of unemployed black people who are hungry, angry and desperate. This anger is felt in glimpses when Hendricka and Xolisa drive past the protest, and when Mike tells her about the student protests. These instances display the apathy of many people to such protests and also the burning underbelly of discontent in the country.

Conclusion

By transposing ideas of traditional love, Hendrick and Xolisa are subversive as they are new voices in the South African narrative. In South Africa, the other could be a neighbour. With constant referrals to the past and fighting the enemy (during the struggle), many have suppressed the hurt and anger from their pasts. The past has robbed us of our histories, and

pride thereof. This novella was the beginning of trying to understand the other, even within ourselves. By placing two characters who embody this inversion of the norm of conventional relationships (heterosexual partners of the same race), as well as defiance of the norms of monogamy and marriage, Hendrick and Xolisa display a subversive political act which proves to be far bigger than they had anticipated. Over and above catharsis, a regular reason for writers to do what they love, the expectation of this project is amelioration, and the healing power of unearthing the histories which are buried with a trauma such as the one which South Africa went through. Picking at the scab has potentially harmful consequences, but ultimately allows for healing once it is dealt with.



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