

Encodings of society in Namibian literature*

Volker Winterfeldt and Helen Vale

Abstract

This article examines a selection of contemporary Namibian prose and poetry. In Brian Harlech-Jones's A Small Space (1999) and To Dream Again (2002), the embodiment of socio-cultural experience and its subjective adaptation, in the Bourdieuvian sense of a class-typical imprint of the individual's habitus, can be traced in the development of the novels' main protagonists. In Breaking Contract (1974), Vinnia Ndadi's autobiographical account of the transition of a migrant worker from peasant to colonial wage slave and, eventually, to party official, is not accompanied by evidence of a marked cultural transformation that would reflect the experience of different social worlds. Contemporary Namibian poetry, on the other hand, presents the most outspoken portrait of social reality, both of postcolonial conditions and of the authors themselves. From a sociological perspective, the paper investigates the aesthetic encoding of the social world of the authors and their work. The realities of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial realignment of society are reflected in the fictional identities of protagonists. The paper understands the fashioning of narratives as the creative process of re-enactment of the 'real' that takes place within the literary field.

Introduction

"History and story derive from exactly the same root, Latin historia [...] 'history' and 'story' are basically two aspects of the same process. Both involve the fashioning of narratives, which form ways of 'knowing the world.'"¹ From a sociological perspective, we are tempted to add: literary narratives form ways – aesthetic ways – of knowing the social world, knowing society. Creative literature not only constitutes the aesthetic pendant to the discourse history presents. The fashioning of a narrative, the modelling of the story, re-enacts reality. It reflects the act of intellectual appropriation of the world by aesthetic means. Likewise, from the author's perspective, it becomes an instrument of self-identification, especially in times of crucial societal transition. And, last but (for the sociologist) not least, the author's perception of society reflects in the literary work. Whether intended or merely coincidental the literary product marks the interface between creative writer and social field, the field of force in which the author acts. In this

* The essay draws on a joint paper presented by Helen Vale and Volker Winterfeldt, "Yesterday's future: Conflict and catharsis in new Namibian prose" on occasion of the conference held in Windhoek, 17-21 August 2004 on "1904-2004 – Decontaminating the Namibian Past. A commemorative conference".

¹ Rob Pope, *The English Studies Book*, London, Routledge 2000: 32.

sense, literature involves the social structural treatment of both the author's perception of history and his/her self-identification.

It is this element – the aesthetic encoding of the social world of the author and his/her work – which the essay undertakes to exemplify centring on recent Namibian literature in English. The literary genres of the novel, autobiography and poetry will be referred to. Not emerging until the dying days of colonialism, Namibian fiction often fuses 'story' and 'history' into fictionalised autobiography. In this last colony of the contemporary world, which only reached the age of majority as an independent nation in 2011, writers assimilated their individual experience of life in apartheid society by falling back on this particular genre. All genres produced several remarkable examples of cathartic analysis of the colonial past and of liberation. Their imagery portrays a burdened future: yesterday's future. Voices calling for the completion of liberation – social liberation – are heard, and frequently. They reveal the extent of societal contradictions and conflict lines, their power over the future of Namibian society after independence, and the sometimes painful repercussions on the individual's fate.

Literature and society

By a complex process integrating the intellectual appropriation of history and society as lived and experienced by the author, and their productive (i.e. aesthetic) re-constitution, the literary work creates its plots, its protagonists, and the advance of narration. It does so by adapting established narrative techniques, or by developing new techniques for representing the 'real'. Where tried and tested ways are deemed inadequate to fashion a reality perceived as new, fiction experiments with new formal instruments to capture its uniqueness.² In the process of writing the author re-creates reality by fictionalizing it, taking it beyond mimesis, the imitative representation or mechanical figuration. Fiction, the 'story', reflects a creative image of the real, perceived through the author's cognitive lens.

Time and again, literary theory has turned to debating the nature of the 'real'. Against the backdrop of the classical distinction of Greek philosophy between Socratic *diégêsis* and Aristotelian *mimêsis*, it differentiates between narrative mediation of reality and its faithful imitation. The European mid-18th century renewed the plea for mimesis, conceiving it as distanced representation of the real undisturbed by emotional distortions. In the second half of the century, Kantian aesthetics redefined mimesis. Beyond

² Examples, to name but two that were conceived in close historical proximity, range from James Joyce's technique of moulding the individual's internalization of the real into a stream of consciousness, in his novel *Ulysses* (1922); to John Dos Passos' 'camera eye', a narrative technique understood as an exigency to capture the de-individualised character of urban reality, the dramatic pace and erratic turn of New York's city life. *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) dispenses with some of the classical instruments of novel narrative, such as weaving a general plot around central character(s) and following their fateful development in progressing narrative time. The narrative structure of *Manhattan Transfer* replaces them with episodic narrative, montage and collage techniques playing with fragmented realities, patching them together, and dissolving them by abrupt fading.

naturalistic representation, mimesis was seen as the vehicle of the arts indispensable to the comprehension of nature and the inspirational portrayal of its sublimity.

Societal processes of individualization marked the turn towards a different aesthetic norm in the 19th century. The focus shifted from reality, the perceived object, to the perceiving subject, the author. Subjective understanding of the 'real' carried by the observer's empathy took centre stage in the fashioning of, often romantically transfigured, reality.³ The countermovement was not long in coming. In the wake of the bourgeois revolutions of the European mid-century, literary realism began to dominate the aesthetic scene. Disapproving of Romanticism's inwardness as a metaphysical distortion of reality, realism rejected the prominent position of the author and postulated the return to a strictly documentary mimesis. With regard to subjects, its inclination to literary naturalism favoured the anatomy of contemporary societies deeply troubled by industrial transformation but did not allow for social realism in a critical vein. The discriminating assessment of social conditions was seen as tantamount to subjective distortion of reality, as it re-introduced the prominence of the author over the literary matter.

In the 1930s, Georg Lukács sparked a broad literary debate on expressionism and realism⁴ amongst German anti-Fascist writers.⁵ Under the influence of materialist philosophy of history, the debate revisited bourgeois realism. Once again, literary theory objected to mimesis, this time labelled as distorted reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) of a societal cosmos objectified by the social relations of capitalism. Literature was to discard this 'fetish' of reality and to penetrate to the 'essence' of the real. Reacting to the oppressive political experience of Nazism, the debate pleaded for literary tendency – partisanship for liberation from dictatorship and for revolutionary transformation of society. Tendency, siding with the disadvantaged, was considered an indispensable component in the critical fashioning of a social reality, which was analysed as rife with class contradictions and conflicts. Realism in literature entailed unveiling unjust societal relations layer by layer, uncovering a reality deformed and misrepresented by the power of definition wielded by hegemonic culture. Conscientisation was declared the driver of partisan literary realism.

But how was a literary work to incorporate tendency? How to relate 'form' and 'content'? The debate's emancipatory thrust found its expression in proposing a set of narrative techniques and literary genres full of contrasts. Reportage or novel was the question asked; mere journalistic representation or creative shaping of reality; development of true-to-life, essential characters and a stirring plot, or crude montage of a fragmented reality; the author's rational distance or emotional identification with the

³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern, Francke, 1946.

⁴ Georg Lukács, "Größe und Verfall des Expressionismus", in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 7-42; idem, *Schriften zur Literatursoziologie*, Neuwied und Berlin, Luchterhand, 1970.

⁵ Involving amongst others Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch, Anna Seghers, Walter Benjamin, and Johannes Becher.

protagonists of the narration? Which genre is more appropriate to the educative goal? Was the novel to be considered an obsolete genre altogether, committed as it was to the Aristotelian principle of empathy, or is it amenable to new narrative techniques, which allow for critical dissociation from the narration?

In the heat of the political moment, the call for tendency tempted several of the contributors to the debate to flatly equate the literary quality of a work with its political tendency.⁶ They regarded offering a critical picture of the social reality of national socialist oppression, and popular resistance to it, as the crucial criterion for quality – an opinion that came heavily under fire. Realism could not be treated as equivalent to partisanship for social and political liberation, to mere propaganda, opponents argued.⁷ Tendency needs to be given a formal expression; only aesthetic quality allows the fashioning of the ‘real’ in a way that raises the audience’s political awareness. Walter Benjamin pointed to the dramaturgic recreation of Aristotelian principles in Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’. He maintained that tendency comes to fruition only where adequate narrative techniques cause the readers to disassociate themselves from the narration and reflect on the reality presented by the work of art.⁸

In the 1960s and 1970s, the social unrest of the young post-war generation revived the debate on literary realism in Europe.⁹ In the last third of the 20th century, postcolonial literary theory added a new facet which focused on issues of cultural difference, identity and alterity.¹⁰ It pictures postcolonial reality as disintegrating into ambivalent social subjectivities.¹¹ They reflect ambivalent identifications with hegemonic, subaltern and hybrid realities, and their genderised mutations.¹² Locating the ‘other’s’ identity within the postcolonial web of global and national power differentials, literary theory questions the legitimacy of authorship across the cultural divides of postcolonial realities. Can

⁶ Georg Lukács, “Reportage oder Gestaltung? Kritische Bemerkungen anlässlich eines Romans von Ottwalt”, in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 150-158; Ernst Ottwalt, “‘Tatsachenroman’ und Formexperiment – eine Entgegnung auf Georg Lukács”, in: Fritz J. Raddatz, *Marxismus und Literatur, Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 159-165.

⁷ Ernst Bloch and Hanns Eisler, “Die Kunst zu erben”, in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 105-109; Bertolt Brecht, “Die Essays von Georg Lukács”, in: Brecht, Bertolt, *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*, vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1967: 87-88; idem, *Vorschläge für den Intendanten des Rundfunks*, in: Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1967: 124-127.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Der Autor als Produzent*, in: Gerhard Seidel, (ed.), *Lesezeichen – Schriften zur deutschsprachigen Literatur*, Leipzig, Reclam, 1970: 351-372 (368f.).

⁹ Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969.

¹⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Garth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire writes back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literature*, London, Routledge, 2002.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.

¹² Gayatri C. Spivak, *Can the subaltern speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation*, Wien, Turia and Kant, 2008; Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2005.

hegemonic culture comprehend subaltern subjectivity? Does hegemonic socialization make it impossible for the author to visualise and portray life-worlds of the colonised? Answers vary, from strict rejection of any form of narrative 'othering', to conditional approval consenting to the literary 'intercession' of the cultural other only where narrative techniques ensure a significant distancing effect.¹³ As in previous instances, literary theory disapproves of mimesis, this time indicting the empathetic author for hegemonic misrepresentation of the colonised subject's realities.

However, from a sociological point of view, a critical remark concerning the conceptualization of the 'real' arises. As self-evident and appropriate as the rejection of 'othering' is, it leads post-colonialism to conceive the relationship between postcolonial intellectual and postcolonial subject principally, if not entirely, in cultural terms – or rather, in terms of cultural power differentials. Thus, it underestimates social structural, economic, and other material components that would make up an integral picture of postcolonial worlds and identities. Despite emancipation from colonialism, the former colonised is perceived in his/her 'cultural otherness'. S/he remains subject to the definition in relation to, and by, hegemonic culture – heteronomy reasserts itself. The postcolonial lens tends to reduce postcolonial society to a cultural entity. It fails to picture it as an integral whole of contrasting material conditions, conflicting classes, and lifestyles. Postcolonial societies, first and foremost, remain class societies, more often than not ridden by deeply entrenched social disparities. They place individuals at the extremes of a social divide rather than along a continuum of social status.

It is from the metropolitan perspective that cultural differentness and strangeness become so prominent. For the postcolonial subject him/herself, life-worlds are shaped by the entirety of social, economic, cultural, and political realities. It is the combination of these that configures identities, not cultural aspects alone. The impossibility of 'speaking for the subaltern', of portraying their life-world and subjectivity in a literary work, is not justified by cultural otherness alone but by the distance of the social planet the intellectual who is writing lives on.

Literature as a social space

From a sociological perspective, literary production can be analysed either as structure or process, depending on the observer's focus. Literature entails the production of a reality of its own, objectified by means of language; in two respects: it entails the production of meaning, and the production of a cultural commodity. This is not an

¹³ Bruno Arich-Gerz, "Postcolonial English language prose from and about Namibia. A survey of novels from 1993 to the present", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 7, 2010: 7-28 (13). Arich-Gerz cites Uwe Timm's Namibian novel *Morenga* (1978). Here, the author refrains from advancing the plot from the indigenous protagonist's or the colonial protagonists' perspectives, to avoid narrative *othering*. Instead, Timm takes pains to resort to varied techniques that produce a distancing refraction of the facets of colonial reality (Bruno Arich-Gerz, "Postkoloniale Prosaliteratur zwischen Einfühlungs- und Rezeptionsästhetik", in: Carlotta von Maltzan, (ed.), *Acta Germanica / German Studies in Africa*, Association for German Studies in Southern Africa, vol. 27, Frankfurt am Main, Lang 2009: 17-49 (38).

autonomous reality detached from society, and yet a material reality. Through the author, the literary work is interconnected with the literary field in which it is brought to life, to whose cultural traditions and socio-economic structures it owes its existence, and whose relative autonomy it shares.¹⁴ Cultural goods embody a specific discourse on society, which also reflects (on) social structure.¹⁵ As any other reality, aesthetic reality is socially constructed and encodes the author's social experience and knowledge at specific semantic levels.¹⁶ Sujet, narrative and characters reveal the social structural location and determination of the author, and vice versa.

Literary production coincides with agency, human agency that takes place in a definite but multidimensional social space. That is the space where author and audience meet; the space that involves other social agents contributing to the process of intellectual production, material distribution, economic exploitation, and interpretive consumption of literary goods. Such space reflects the specific societal conditions of the given historical time. Human agency not only takes place in a defined social space but gives expression to the structures, rules, and legitimation of that space. The indivisibility of structure and agency shapes the 'real'. In Bourdieu's terms: the "*real is the relational*": what exist in the social world are relations – not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals, but objective relations which exist 'independently of individual consciousness and will' as Marx said."¹⁷

Introducing the notion of the 'literary field' to capture the 'relational', Bourdieu analyses the scope for autonomy of aesthetic production in that force field that art and money

¹⁴ Max Fuchs, *Autonomie der Kunst. Systematische und historische Anmerkungen zu einem schwierigen Begriff*, 2005, www.kulturrat.de/pdf/134.pdf (accessed Mai 2011). Bourdieu's theory of the literary field (1999) insists on the notion of relative autonomy, the dual character of a cultural good, which reflects the aesthetic autonomy of a work of art that creates its own sujets and makes its own stylistic and narrative choices, but also – being a commodity – heavily depends on the laws of the economic and political fields. The literary field integrates both, aesthetic autonomy and interconnection with cultural industry (Pierre Bourdieu, *Die Regeln der Kunst: Genese und Struktur des literarischen Feldes*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999).

¹⁵ Siegfried Kracauer's biography of composer Jacques Offenbach provides an insightful example of the relational web between creative artist, opus, society and historical circumstances (Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, München, List, 1962).

¹⁶ Berger's and Luckmann's constructivist sociology of knowledge defines 'reality' as "quality of phenomena existing in spite of our will" (Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1970: 1). Human 'knowledge of reality' refers to the "certainty that phenomena are real and display determinable qualities" (ibid.). Such certainty is socially constructed; it is intersubjective; reality is subject to societal relativity. Objectification, on the other hand, mainly through language, creates a "paramount reality" (ibid.: 25) beyond intersubjectivity: a reality of objective character. Thus, society develops different realities, appropriated by the individual in the course of primary and secondary socialization, at different levels – everyday reality, i.e., the world of routine, and the meta-reality of theoretical constructs and symbolic universes. Individuals experience society as 'subjective' reality and 'objective' reality. 'Identity' reflects the semantic levels at which the individual appropriates reality.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Waquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992: 97 (original italics).

constitute.¹⁸ As in other societal fields, the specificity of individual agency is carved out by the characteristic coactions of economic, social, and cultural capital. However, the literary field follows an inverted logic. It differs from other social spaces, and from the all-embracing space of national society, in the importance its agents ascribe to the different forms of capital. They resist heteronomy by professing to the prestige symbolic capital confers on them, to a certain extent negating the logic of market and profit.¹⁹

The Bourdieuvian metaphor of the relational 'field' proposes the integration of the above-mentioned elements of structure and agency, mediating between society and individual aesthetic production. Suggesting the analogy to an electromagnetic field, the literary field shows a multiplicity of lines of force acting upon the author, and negotiated by the author, in a specific society in a specific epoch.²⁰ They are personified by other creative artists; they include the societal institutions involved in the economic, political, and aesthetic aspects of cultural production, and the set of rules developed by them.²¹ In particular, they reflect power differentials. The field, however, is also the arena of strategic relations between agents within which the individual author acts, negotiating his/her autonomy, making his/her own strategic decisions of aesthetic nature. The literary field is an embattled social space. It confronts the author with competing and changing definitions of the literary, its functions, genres, themes, and narrative techniques.²² In the course of everyday practice, with individual socialization providing the typical variation in cultural and social capital – the habitus, the writer appropriates a social disposition towards the field as the space for literary action.²³ That disposition, which informs the author's unique cognitive structure, translates into the sujets and aesthetic codes of the literary work. Under their surface, the contrasting logics of commerce and symbolic value and their concomitant realities of commoditization and meaning remain visible, inscribed in the work.

Analysing culture as a contradictory arena of power struggles over the political subject's mind, Gramsci identifies cultural class lines. His conceptual distinction between 'hegemony' and 'domination' addresses the fundamental character of culture as class-based agency. Class-cultural domination points to the imposition of the constitutive elements of a culture on the whole of society by those in power; cultural hegemony, on

¹⁸ Bourdieu, *Regeln*.

¹⁹ Joseph Jurt, "Autonomy and commitment in the French literary field: applying Pierre Bourdieu's approach", *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology*, 38 (1), 2001: 87-102.

²⁰ Bourdieu (*Invitation*: 97) defines the field as a "network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions [...]. In highly differentiated societies, the social cosmos is made up of a number of such relatively autonomous social microcosms, i.e., spaces of objective relations that are the site of a logic and a necessity that are specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields."

²¹ Alain Viala, "The theory of the literary field and the situation of the first modernity", *Paragraph*, 29 (1), 2006: 80-93 (80).

²² *Ibid.*: 81.

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984.

the other hand, signifies the effort to entrench a consensual counter-culture that mediates between subjected classes. Whereas the Bourdieuvian understanding accentuates the relative cultural autonomy of the individual within the constraints of relational space, Gramsci underscores the collective aspect of class-cultural agency.

Gramsci's realisation may suggest a shift of emphasis towards heteronomy in characterising the literary field – without giving way to crude determinism.²⁴ Reassessing the latitude of agency today, within the framework of a social space of cultural production rather dominated by industrial structures, stresses the weight of what Bourdieu labelled as 'objective relations'. Bourdieu's realisation of "embodied social structures"²⁵ – signified by the habitus – finds its precursor in Edmond Goblot's notion of 'social distinction'.²⁶ In Goblot's sociological portrayal of the French bourgeois class of the early 20th century, distinction is brought to the fore as key to bourgeois 'mentality': that what makes the class.²⁷ Looking into the cultural constituents of class, Goblot argues that the modern bourgeoisie not only is a class but has class. Distinction draws the intrinsic class pattern when tracing lifestyles, attitudes, judgements of taste. Bourdieu's concept of habitus develops the idea of 'distinction' further. The habitus marks class as a cognitive structure inscribed in the body. The cognitive internalization of attributes of 'distinction' acts upon the social identity of the individual, i.e. self-identification and identification by others. It underlies agency. In Bourdieu's words: the habitus "is at once a system of models for the production of practices and a system of models for the perception and appreciation of practices. And in both cases, its operations express the social position in which it was constructed [...] the habitus implies a 'sense of one's place' but also a 'sense of the other's place'."²⁸ The habitus "is itself the product of internalisation of the division into social classes."²⁹

To come back to the issue of the literary composition of the 'real': the writing certainly does not present a "direct reflection" of the social and historical cosmos but appears refracted through the author's social disposition towards the field.³⁰ Conceptually, field and disposition stand for the two components of that reality, the objective and the

²⁴ The difference in emphasis may be due to the different historical setting of the respective analyses. Bourdieu's interest focused on the historical *genesis* of the literary field in the first half of 19th century, based on the analysis of the singularity of Gustave Flaubert's œuvre and person. Gramsci, on the other hand, reacted to the experience of the hegemony of all-pervasive Catholic cultural traditions on which Italian fascism capitalised, legitimising its rule for a quarter of a century.

²⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 467.

²⁶ Edmond Goblot, *La barrière et le niveau. Étude sociologique sur la bourgeoisie française moderne*, Paris, Alcan, 1925.

²⁷ The bourgeoisie has no legal existence as a class but it distinguishes itself. Difference, cultural difference and the prestige derived from asserting it, become the building block of an identity that conceives itself as being individual and unique but as a matter of fact reflects class culture. Erecting cultural barriers perpetuated by cultural socialisation allows the demarcation from other classes (ibid.: 5ff.).

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *In other words*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990: 130.

²⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 170.

³⁰ Viala, "Theory": 81.

subjective. The writer's habitus completes the conceptual picture: the creative intellectual's 'real' is unique in that it combines the biographical assimilation of – and class-cultural socialisation by – the societal cosmos, and his/her active orientation in the literary field. In this sense of individual negotiation of society through praxis, the author's cognitive idiosyncrasy displays distinct social structural marks and distinctly individual traits, which translate into the literary creation. Narrative reference to education, symbolic goods, values, codes of life, the collective judgements the fictional characters share with their social equals, or which they reject: all these elements make up the fictional totality of their culturally defined social distinction from other social classes. Literature, we would argue, in modelling the protagonists' habitus, encodes the author's habitus.

Society, class, and habitus in Harlech-Jones' Namibian novels

Prior to independence, a considerable number of texts had been published in Afrikaans, and in some local languages such as Oshikwanyama, Otjiherero, Nama/Damara. A significant body of German fiction also existed. However, only a few books in English by black Namibians were published prior to 1990. Autobiography and fictionalised biography proved popular with works such as Vinnia Ndadi's *Breaking Contract* (1974), John Ya-Otto's *Battlefront Namibia* (1981) and *The Two Thousand Days of Haimbodi ya Haufiku* (1990) by Helmut Kangulohi Angula. English had only become Namibia's official language on independence,³¹ following the decision made in 1981 by SWAPO, the South West African People's Organisation.³²

The novel is still a relatively recent development in Namibian literature, with poetry, drama and autobiography playing a more dominant role. This initial paucity of creative writing in English is no longer so pronounced. At least five novels, six autobiographies, two volumes of plays and several collections of poetry³³ come to mind, all written in the last two decades since independence.³⁴

³¹ Ch.1, article 3(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia declares English as the country's official language (Republic of Namibia, *Constitution of the Republic of Namibia*, in: Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia, no.2, Windhoek, 21 March 1990: 3).

³² Brian Harlech-Jones, "Language, nationalism and modernization. Reflections from Namibia", in: Brian Harlech-Jones, Ismael Mbise and Helen Vale, (eds.), *Guardian of the word. Literature, language and politics in SADC countries. proceedings of the Fifth General Conference of the Association of University Teachers of Literature and Language (ATOLL), Windhoek, 16-20 August 1998*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2001: 108-127 (117).

³³ For a short survey of Namibian poetry in English until 2008, see Volker Winterfeldt, "In search of questions – an introduction", in: Keamogetsi J. Molapong, Christi Warner and Volker Winterfeldt, (eds.), *In search of questions. A collection of new Namibian poems*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2005: 15-29; Helen Vale, "Namibian poetry in English 1976 – 2006: between yesterday and tomorrow – unearthing the past, critiquing the present and envisioning the future", *Nawa. Journal of Language and Communication*, 2 (2), 2008: 27-57. Not featuring in these two essays: *Sungong* by Roy Allen (1980); *Through the flames – poems from the Namibian liberation struggle* (1988), edited by Helgard Patemann and Nangolo Mbumba. Since then, further poetry collections not listed in the above surveys were published: *Lukas vision* by Lukas

Brian Harlech-Jones' *A Small Space* is set in Namibia's recent history, covering the very last months of the ailing colonial regime and the immediate transition to independence. His protagonists take up numerous causes: the armed liberation struggle, exile, treatment of detainees by SWAPO, repatriation, reconciliation, the prospect of a non-racial future, a vision of social justice, indications of a betrayal of the noble goals of liberation and humanity, disappointment at the impossibility of a clean start into independence unburdened by the contradictions of the past, the first indications of an internal political and social differentiation within the new Namibian society once the freedom fighter returnees take over state power, the suffocation of human rights, gender issues, homophobia, interethnic love relationships, and cultural confrontation.

The plot is complex and makes use of a sophisticated narrative technique that interweaves two different sets of time and space: the time of Jan Jonker Afrikaner in the 1860s, set in the space of Herero-/ Damaraland; the time of transition in 1989, set in Windhoek, the capital city, a space of coloureds, whites and, soon, Owambo people. Julienne, the central female protagonist, serves as a catalyst for three generations of coloured women. Living in Windhoek where the political processes of transition converge, she connects with her ancestor Cornelia in her imagination. Cornelia was kin to the Oorlam Nama leader Jan Jonker and lived in Otjimbingwe.³⁵ Julienne's (day-)dreaming not only allows her to draw on Cornelia's generational wisdom in order to master her own apartheid-ridden life; it also allows Harlech-Jones to picture the difficult but not hopeless relationship between Europeans and Africans in a colonial society. The gap of time between the 1860s and the late 1980s is filled by the third woman, Aunt Margrieta, a child of the first half of the 20th century. With regard to space, living in Otjimbingwe, she personifies Julienne's real connection with the past in which Cornelia lived. She personifies a real, intermediate time and space within Harlech-Jones' literary construction, linking Cornelia (who is to be interpreted as a fictional element within fiction) to Julienne (who is the real element within fiction). Tracing Julienne's family

Kaunambili Amakali (no year); *A hellowish* by Habaitapeli Hendricks Macaba (2008); *Shower of voices* by Victoria T. Hasheela and Tumweneni M. Nghaamwa (2009); *Dance Mama* by Luna Fhulufhedzani Ramphaga (2009). On the initiative of Christi Warner and Joseph Molapong, a poetry magazine named *Poetree* was launched on 31 October 2008, of which there have been five issues to date, published at irregular intervals by Molapong's publishing and event arm *Township Productions*. Both Warner and Molapong also offer their poetry in frequent updates on the internet: <http://keamogetsi.blogspot.com>; www.myspace.com/christiwarner and www.facebook.com/pages/Christi-Warner.

³⁴ The novels are *Troubled Waters* (1993) by Joseph Diescho and *Meekulu's Children* (2000) by Kaleni Hiyalwa, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) by Neshani Andreas and *A Small Space* (1999) and *To Dream Again* (2002) by Brian Harlech-Jones whilst the plays are found in Terence Zeeman, (ed.), *New Namibian Plays. Volume 1*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 2000; idem, (ed.), *New Namibian Plays. Volume 2*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 2002. The autobiographies are *Never Follow the Wolf* by Helao Shityuwete (1990), *Tears over the Deserts* by Jackson Kaujeua (1994), *Go and Come Back Home* by Marcus Shivute (1997), *The Price of Freedom* by Ellen Namhila (1997), *Where Others Wavered* by Sam Nujoma (2001), and *A Journey to Exile* by Keshii Pelao Nathanael (2002).

³⁵ Cf. Arich-Gerz ("Postcolonial": 20ff.) for detailed analysis of the different layers of time and space introduced by Harlech-Jones.

history, Harlech-Jones sketches the complex socio-historical relations between Namas, Hereros, white missionaries offering Christianity and hunting for souls, and white traders hunting for profits. Later, the intricate net of relations between representatives of different ethnic groups that become players for hegemony in the anti-colonial game for independence comes into focus. This enables the author to depict a differentiated reality of contributions to the liberation struggle, as well as the emerging betrayal of its noble goals. For once, reality is not narrowed down to the conventional mainstream of PLAN's³⁶ and SWAPO's opposition to the South African military occupation.

Harlech-Jones confronts the reader with an abundant range of causes somewhat overloading his characters: advocating emancipation, rejection of abuse, tolerance, to add but a few to the above-mentioned. Not only does this create the impression that his first fictional opus is meant to contain at once all of the concerns on which the author, as a progressive Namibian citizen in opposition to apartheid, has set his humanistic heart and liberal mind, it is also of particular interest in the theoretical context of this paper. Harlech-Jones' way of shaping reality expresses in aesthetic terms the multiplicity of societal contradictions lived by him. It typifies the encoding of his social world and intellectual cosmos. It signifies the class stance of the white liberal academic that he is.

Significantly, *A Small Space* reflects Harlech-Jones' personal experience of political involvement during Namibia's period of transition to independence. The comparison of its plot with the account given in *A New Thing* proves this. The latter is the author's academic counter piece digesting exactly the same Namibian transition process of the years 1989-1990.³⁷ *A Small Space* and *A New Thing* both stand for the fashioning of narrative. They have the same sujet – but differently moulded into the different realities of story and history. The humanistic rationale shines through as the novel's intrinsic thread. It becomes the measure of all things when the author develops his plot of highly political character. However, as the plot soon proves, humanism and politics can hardly be reconciled. Thus, where the plot entangles the protagonists in intricate emotional relations, the author interferes, briefly halting the narrative flow. He rephrases his characters along more rational lines³⁸ that – beyond the euphoric finale of Independence Day – betray the author's scepticism that humanity may always work in those dense times of political transition and social transformation.

Such doubts as to the compatibility of politics of liberation and humanity foreshadow the themes of Harlech-Jones' second novel. *To Dream Again* aims at social realism, however fictitious the settings of the protagonist's life story may be. Kerem is a black child growing up in Keretani, a fictional southern African country, in the decades before independence. The novel traces the path of the protagonist from rural village to primary

³⁶ I.e., People's Liberation Army of Namibia.

³⁷ Brian Harlech-Jones, *A new thing. The Namibia independence process, 1989 – 1990*, Windhoek, EIN Publications, 1997. Harlech-Jones' "informed record" (ibid.: 4) of the intricacies of Namibia's transition was written right after independence in 1991. Passionate and academically reserved at the same time, the account gives evidence of the author's engagement in the process.

³⁸ For example, allowing the failure of their love relationship.

school, and thence to a prestigious high school in the capital, Fort Marnay, on a scholarship. The narrative follows Kerem's ongoing friendship with Father Arbuthnoir, the white priest; his close relationship to his parents; their death in a landmine explosion; his growing conscientisation and involvement in the liberation struggle as a student; his 15 years of exile in London after suffering detention at the hands of the KNF, the Keretani National Front, liberation movement and subsequent ruling party; his relationships with Rita (the white British girlfriend) and with Sanomi (his African childhood sweetheart); his eventual return to the now independent Keretani. Kerem's story is interwoven and contrasted with that of Nozam, his contemporary and class-mate who comes from the same rural highlands village of Totudi. The author's primary concern is not so much with the protagonists' social landscape as with the reaction of his two main characters, Kerem and Nozam, to that landscape. The narrative traces their trajectories, which are so full of contrast notwithstanding their common provenance and background. It searches for an explanation to the question of how and why they develop in such different ways.³⁹ Kerem's history incorporates both individual development and social advancement. The small peasant boy advances to become a newspaper editor. He himself – reluctantly – experiences social ascent, first being drawn into the tempting petit bourgeois circles of the London African exiles and their fashionable white supporters in the solidarity movement; then, once he returns from exile, the emerging black elite again tempts him with co-option into their ranks. But his independent views will make him a dissident in his own country. He opts for practising critical journalism, revealing plots laid by the former freedom fighters hand in hand with internal collaborators of the former regime.

Kerem's dissidence provides Harlech-Jones with a mirror in which the social structural concomitants of many a liberation struggle or social revolution are reflected. Narratologically, Nozam, friend of Kerem's youth and antagonist, personifies that mirror. Kerem exposes the machinations of the new black élite, of the new 'fat cats'. What on an individual level is seen as personal greed, lust for power or simple opportunism, on a societal level appears as a shift in social structure. Kerem is there to point to the fact that the formation of an indigenous affluent class follows the customary colonial model: it is based on the exploitation of one's fellow citizen, one's own brothers and sisters in colour. The author uses the first person narrator with Kerem telling his story chronologically from childhood. However, Harlech-Jones also employs a technique of disassociation, introducing frequent flashbacks. The progress of the narration is interspersed with comments from the adult Kerem reflecting on his earlier experiences. Harlech-Jones' narrative techniques reveal a circumstance of literary as well as socio-logical significance – 'othering'. The author, a white Namibian academic, has undertaken to put himself into the mind of his young black African protagonist in order to write in the first person – just as the black African Namibian author Joseph Diescho did in his novel *Troubled Waters* when portraying his Afrikaner protagonist. Interestingly, the adult Kerem appears as a consistent character, portrayed first in London's western,

³⁹ Harlech-Jones, informal interview with Helen Vale, 30 May 2002.

metropolitan social world and then, back in Fort Marnay, in a modern, westernised professional environment. But the youthful Kerem and his close social environment remain rather colourless in Harlech-Jones' narrative. Although he is brought up in an African peasant homestead somewhere in the southern regions of the continent, his family is described as a nuclear family, not an extended family; he is devoid of a rural boy's customary duties. The plot presents him chiefly as a pupil, that is, outside the traditional social setting of the rural family. Moreover, as reflected in the father's highly intellectual friendship with Father Arbuthnoir, the white, liberal, humanistic priest, he looks ageless, not childlike. Even the parents' loving relationship seems somewhat ideal in terms of equity and gender, foreign to the patriarchal cultural traditions of southern African rural areas.

These aspects also point to a certain lack of consistency of the narrative in Kerem's motives for turning to the liberation movement. Kerem, once at high school, is attracted by oppositional stances within a very short period of time. Such far-reaching transformation in such a short time seems improbable. One might detect a possible motive in his character formation influenced by the long contact with Father Arbuthnoir's humanism. But then, this is to motivate the black African schoolboy's participation in the political struggle by pointing exclusively to western values. Again, as in the previous novel, the main characters' political attitudes and social structural location seem to tell their own story about the author himself and his habitus. Contextualizing Harlech-Jones' literary design: creating Kerem contains an element of catharsis, but a 'reversed' catharsis; 'reversed' in the sense that, unusual as it may be in the Namibian literary context, it points to the white African author's efforts to come to terms with the past by putting himself in his black African protagonist's place. With Kerem, the reader relives the apartheid past, but as experienced by a white African opponent to the racist regime.

Race, class and culture: Vinnia Ndadi's autobiography

New Namibian prose draws a multi-facetted picture of social inequalities in the apartheid and post-apartheid society. Criticism and analysis contain several sub-themes mainly related to political oppression and resistance, racial discrimination, exploitation of labour and cultural arrogance. After independence, apart from gender, themes such as neo-colonialism, corruption, nepotism, poverty, unemployment, workers' rights, HIV/AIDS, alcoholism, and domestic violence become the focus of attention. More often than not, authors betray a strong sense of disillusionment with the promises of liberation not fulfilled, a decade or more after the demise of the colonial regime. These themes are also evident in contemporary Namibian poetry and drama.

The indictment of the notorious Contract Labour System of South West Africa certainly constitutes one of the pivotal themes of Namibian prose. Vinnia Ndadi's *Breaking Contract*, originally published in Canada in 1974 and reprinted in Namibia in 1989, was the first of a number of texts depicting the harsh fate of migrant labourers. Ndadi's autobiography was followed in 1988 by Diescho's first novel *Born of the Sun*, also first published abroad, in the USA. In the same year, Helmut Angula's *The Two Thousand*

Days of Haimbodi Ya Haufiku saw a first edition in German, while the English version of his fictionalised autobiography followed in 1990. Here, Ndadi's work will be examined as a representative sample of this literature.

Ndadi, born in Oukwanyama in 1928, relates his stirring story spanning nearly two decades of life as a migrant labourer and political organiser for SWAPO. The report, recorded and edited on behalf of an international anti-apartheid solidarity organisation, ends with the protagonist's exile in late 1964. The young Vinnia attends missionary school in Northern Namibia for seven years but then has to give up formal education because his family no longer afford the boarding fees. At the age of seventeen he applies for work at the Ondangwa recruiting station of the newly founded SWANLA.⁴⁰ From the personal perspective of many a young male African migrant, experiencing SWANLA and contract labour was of far-reaching significance. In the history of traditional Namibian societies prior to colonialism, labour had never developed into a commodity. Submission to the crude economic rationale of profit maximization, difficult enough to bear where it originated in western capitalism and culture, provided an even harsher life experience once set in the racialised political and cultural context of the South West African apartheid economy.

Ndadi can tell a thing or two about it. After having been rejected four times at the Ondangwa recruiting station, the youth is given employment at a Mariental farm for a pittance, a thousand kilometres away from home. Impressively, Ndadi relates his personal experience of hunger, daily physical exhaustion, exploitation, racial humiliation and subjection to violence. After three years of contract work he is returned home, but goes into hiding in order to do odd jobs for nearly a year in Windhoek. Then, after four more years, he rejoins his family back home in Owamboland, only to apply again for work with SWANLA. Miserable years of contract work follow; first as a domestic worker in Windhoek, then illegally as a construction worker in the capital, after he 'breaks' his contract for a first time, and later legally as a hotel boy in Rehoboth.⁴¹

More and more, in his autobiography, Ndadi's impressions of working life take second place to his political story. Having gone through the hardships of contract labour for a dozen years, learning to cope with it only on the basis of individual resistance, the thirty-one year old is now ready for a more conscious, political response to his personal history. It is here that the recent history of the Namibian resistance to the apartheid

⁴⁰ The South West Africa Native Labour Association had been created in 1943 to ensure a steady but controlled labour supply for the economy of the Police Zone of colonial South West Africa. SWANLA became the exclusive channel through which (male only) Owambo and Kavango migrant labour was placed with employers in the Police Zone, especially with the big mining companies. The recruiting agency stands for racial and spatial segregation, as well as for the control of the influx of rural migrants into the 'white' areas of SWA, the so-called Police Zone, for obvious political reasons.

⁴¹ Based on pass laws introduced first by the German colonial dispensation in 1907 and then reconfirmed by the South African administration in the 1920s, Africans hailing from the populous northern regions of the country were not allowed into the Police Zone, i.e. the central and southern parts of Namibia, other than for reasons of work. For them, work was only obtainable through SWANLA, the sole recruiting agency. Sojourn in town for a visit required documented reasons and was limited by law to 72 hours.

regime and Ndadi's story begin to coincide. He joins OPO in 1959, the Owamboland People's Organization, the former contract workers' congress. After its transformation into SWAPO in April 1960, he becomes a member of the newly formed party. Confined to Owamboland by the South African regime because of his political involvement, he is jailed. When in mid-1962 the colonial administration repeals the ban on SWAPO cadres taking up contract work, Ndadi resumes his former life as a migrant labourer. This time he works for TCL, the Tsumeb copper mine employing more than 4000 contract workers. He becomes the Tsumeb branch SWAPO secretary.

Ndadi's autobiography is a revealing and stirring contemporary document that reflects on the two spheres of labour and politics under apartheid. Thus, with regard to the plot's backdrop, aspects of class and race take centre stage. Typically though, the protagonist's transition from the traditional world of communal subsistence agriculture in the north of Namibia, to the colonial world of wage labour in the central and southern areas is not accompanied by any evidence of marked cultural transformation that would allude to the proletarian experience of urban living conditions, as is frequently the case in early novels of black South African writers.⁴² Here, the framework of the Contract Labour System makes its mark, allowing the registering of what the author's fictional reality typically misses. The contract form of colonial Namibian wage labour entailed limited employment periods after which workers were forced to reintegrate into the rural peasant economy. It aimed at suppressing the social structural process of proletarianisation, at preventing the emergence of a working class that could pose a political threat to the stability of the colonial regime. Helmut Angula, in the preface to his fictionalised biography of a migrant worker, expressly refers to this aspect to which Ndadi's narration pays little attention: "I have attempted to draw the picture of a country Namibian, the way of life and at the same time to show how intimately the protagonist is tied to the industrial economy of the urban areas. The reader should note that the emergence of classes in Namibian society has not yet taken shape in the classical sense. Because of the contract labour system, better known as labour migration, there is no peasant community independent of the industrial community, and because of the migration system there is no permanent working class in European terms."⁴³

Vinnia Ndadi's protagonist turns worker but the fictional development of his character does not feature concomitant class-cultural transitions. He remains the migrant worker moving back and forth between a peasant's and a wage slave's existence, who retains his traditional cultural roots until he slips into the role of the party official. It is the political coming of age the narration is interested in, not social transformation. Reading between the lines, however, the social trajectory comes to light. The author models the narration in a way that it excludes individual traits to a large extent. Aesthetically, the protagonist is conceived as an exemplary social character, not so much as an individual

⁴² See for example Peter Abrahams' *Mine boy* (1946), the first novel written by a black South African litterateur.

⁴³ Helmut Pau Kangulohi Angula, *The two thousand days of Haimbodi ya Hauliku*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1990: 5.

personality. The personal aspect, his private experience and emotions remain unmentioned almost throughout. The autobiography traces his development from communal peasant to factory worker, and to political activist. His story stands in place of the collective experience of Owambo contract workers, and of the history of their resistance. Story and history blend into a public document intended for educational consumption.

This possibly reflects the author's cultural norms, his habitus blending Owambo tradition and Christianity, which both prescribe, in the South West African colonial context, absolute reserve in public with regard to the private. There is reason to believe that the only passage in the narration that relates to gender relations may be seen against this backdrop. Only once does the story take the liberty of revealing the protagonist's feelings, when falling in love with the schoolgirl Sarah after his return from Walvis Bay in 1960. Ndadi proposes to her, without getting a definite answer. Calling on her more than a year later, he receives a final refusal. The thirty-three year old Vinnia behaves with detached understanding, justifying Sarah's negative reply with the political circumstances. In this instance, it becomes obvious that Ndadi's story tends to relate genderised history. The narrative discloses the exclusively male world of migrant labour and the mostly male world of liberation politics. However, the masking of the private and the individual may go beyond that. The de-individualisation of the protagonist may as well be due to the fact that he had become an executive member of SWAPO by the time his life story was recorded. Thus, from the personal perspective of the author, private life experience had to stand back behind the idealised public figure. Fictional individuality clashes with political opportunity, which favours a cultural perception of one's life story as limited in its communicable and publishable content once the public persona becomes prominent.

Lastly, and this is an element that makes it difficult to unambiguously identify what this essay refers to as encodings, Ndadi's autobiography was co-authored by a western author. On behalf of the Canadian Liberation Support Movement of British Columbia (LSM), Dennis Mercer recorded and edited Ndadi's account as a contribution to the *Life Histories from the Revolution Series*.⁴⁴ This complicates the reconstruction of the various layers of reality and their attribution to an author. It can be assumed that the political background of anti-apartheid solidarity that gave birth to the story favoured the impersonal conception of the life story, being more interested in presenting a progressive political character. Does this disclose a variation of 'othering' on different levels – focusing on the goals of a western support movement, presenting the disadvantaged peasant turned exploited migrant worker turned freedom fighter?

Generally, with the exception perhaps of Ellen Namhila's *The Price of Freedom*, Namibian autobiographies tend to be quite reserved in allowing the reader access to intimate, individual character traits. This is all the more surprising as one would expect unsparing directness particularly from this genre, which makes the individual life story and

⁴⁴ Cf. Vincent B. Khapoya, "Review of Breaking contract: The story of Vinnia Ndadi", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 9 (2), 1976: 279-281 (279).

personality the focal point. However, since the greater part of Namibian fictionalised autobiographies not only reflect a life of political activism but were written as instruments of political activism, this may offer an explanation. It is rather the Namibian novel, which attempts to break through the walls of privacy and provide a more integral view of the protagonist. Possibly, the reason is to be found in the fact that here the protagonist is not necessarily identified with the author.

The angry poets

Comparing the three genres of novel, autobiography and poetry, a provisional diagnosis imposes itself: aesthetically, contemporary Namibian poetry presents the most outspoken social portrait.⁴⁵ This is again surprising, as one would expect poetry rather to concentrate upon the individual's inner world and emotions, since it is arguably the most subjective of the genres. Indeed Namibian poetry does so, but traditionally in the past three decades the authors' inner monologue concentrates on their social world, on the societal and political contradictions they live. As a matter of fact, out of the fourteen books of poems published between 1976, the date of publication of the first Namibian poetry anthology, and 2005, ten would fall under the categories either of 'poetry of resistance' or 'poetry of social responsibility'.⁴⁶ The trend has not been changed greatly since then. The recent individual collections of poetry, as well as the *Poetree* magazine and online publications, sustain the tradition of social critique.⁴⁷

What are the reasons for this? One explanation may be found in the generational aspect. Poetry, in particular in the years of transition and in post-independence Namibia, has become the literary genre in which mainly youth engage. Today, the 'born free', the first generation to grow up enjoying the political freedom independence has brought, dare to question the parental and moral authority of the generations involved in the liberation struggle, when faced with the social contrasts between rich and poor that seem permanent. They are a generation socialised and educated between two cultural worlds, the customary world of traditional values and the westernised consumerist cosmos of an increasingly urbanised society.

Another explanation may lie in the fact that poetry is seen as the genre of the instant, a genre that captures the moment and in which writing does not require continuous involvement over an extended period of creative production. Lastly, the democratisation of society and state has made itself felt. Today, the freedom achieved with independence paves the way for literature to relax even further some of the self-imposed restraints practised by Namibian authors in apartheid times, when they were at pains to emphasise their unity in resistance.

⁴⁵ I.e., Namibian poetry published in English from the 1970s to date.

⁴⁶ Cf. Winterfeldt, "Search".

⁴⁷ Cf. footnote 34 in this article.

Thus, contemporary poetry is often marked by the unconcealed critique of the present iniquitous social conditions. The lyrical portrait of post-independence society is drawn in sometimes very harsh lines, opposing an increasingly marginalised and impoverished majority of the African population to an unashamedly privileged African élite. Masule Sibanga's *My Name Is* ⁴⁸ exemplifies this, stressing the social distance of life-worlds of returnees from exile and those who stayed in the country enduring apartheid:

[...]
 My name is he who remained
 to face harsh bullets
 of humiliation and indignation
 When you fled this country
 I remained in order to construct
 a solid foundation for your political base
 I also stayed in order to keep the fire
 while awaiting your return

My name is he in 'Move-a-mess' overalls
 My name is he on a street corner
 waiting for a job
 My name is casual worker
 on a construction site
 Indeed, you know me
 [...]

Do you want to know my name?
 I am the statistics of those
 who form a kilometre-long queue
 to cast a vote
 under the unforgiving Namibian sun

That's me
 He who recognises that
 the weight of his vote is far lighter
 than its harvest
 I am here at the periphery of society
 Because I spoke out against the system
 Thus, I earned expulsion from school
 from life
 While you soldiered in western education
 to learn not to have a heart for others.

In the post-apartheid topology of classes, the social location of the creative artist itself comes under scrutiny, as well as the mission of the arts. Condemnation is severe, in Joseph Molapong's *In Search of Questions*: ⁴⁹

⁴⁸ In: Keamogetsii J. Molapong, Christi Warner and Volker Winterfeldt, (eds.), *In search of questions. A collection of new Namibian poems*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2005: 88f.

⁴⁹ Ibid.: 95-97.

We face a cultural turmoil today
As we search through the traces
Questions, asked in past tenses
Answers, which have no meaning
to the lives of many of us Artists

Shall we look for the questions?
[...]
Why should I care for the answer, why?
...

Are we to worship the most awesome Kudu
guarding the lonely Independence Avenue
where we parade our sickness and lusts
[...]
Buildings and architectures that scream insult,
that harbour artefacts of colonial descent
[...]
Children, like Xmas decorations, irritate
Pull on the tolerance and ignorance
of the intolerant and ignorant, misers
As the economic-fleet of the president passes
the old man greets, oblivious, puzzled.

Who are you with big bellies and emptiness?
Bare-footed and befriended by flies, ugly, dirty
torn cloths, cold shoulders, smelly breath?
Who am I in my flashy car, perfumed smile?
Air-conditioned life of the rich and yet doomed
[...]
Are there questions to these many answers?
Charges to the sentences, to justify our terms
The servants we have become, in these services
of lips, limbs, links to the colonial craftsmen
Strings attached to politicians, humanitarian aid

The counting of pigments on all kinds of faces,
to calculate who is not what and why not that
The building up of political and religious resumes
for control, to dictate, patronise, oppress and kill
the humanity, beliefs, or just for simple promotion
[...]
The questions to these answers we face everyday
Who asked them, why accept all the answers
through hatred, crime, corruption, rape,
killing, stealing, cutting of ligaments?
Who asked the questions? Who drafted them?
Today, we feel the pinch of their answers
In the tone we detect the meaning, de-spiced
Money-less pockets we carry around, holed,
Crafts we have long sold to unknown curators
Art, we have no control of, unlicensed Artists.

Racism, the leitmotif of the apartheid past, is still virulent enough to force authors to re-inspect and reassert their cultural roots. In his public appearances, Joseph Molapong is accustomed to introduce himself as an unmistakably 'black' poet, by performing *Introduction*:⁵⁰

I was born black
By a strong black woman
In a black community
For the black people
Who love being black

As a black child
I grew up in black township
Which is called Katutura
A black word meaning
We the black nation
Of this black continent
Will never stay where
We don't feel black
The way black people felt
For they were black

Each line in my poem
Is from a black point of view
And being black my friend
Is part of my natural being
In order to relate to me
You will have to accept the fact
That I am a black man.

However, the 'inner eye', the contemplation of emotions and inner conflicts, gains ground in all of the above-mentioned publications. Interestingly, the two different strands of most recent Namibian poetry also tend to be voiced in two different sets of performances, even though not strictly separate. These are the monthly events of *Spoken Word*, and the events organised mostly in conjunction with Molapong's *Township Productions*. Spoken Word began its stagings in 2005/6, offering a platform to anybody wanting to recite a poem on stage.⁵¹ The events staged by poets loosely linked with Township Productions, Poetree, and Molapong's own performances were more sporadic over the last years.⁵²

For the sociological observer, both sets represent movements, to a certain extent. They are poetry movements, but not only. They are not clearly defined. Spoken Word's performers are a heterogeneous group mostly of Windhoek youths, of all colours. The events, and Spoken Word's dense online presence in social media such as *Facebook*

⁵⁰ Keamogetsi Joseph Molapong, <http://keamogetsi.blogspot.com>, blog posted 19 October 2010.

⁵¹ Vale, "Namibian poetry": 51.

⁵² Recently: the three performances of the *World Poetry Month*, 14, 21 and 28 April 2011, organised by Poetree and Township Productions; Molapong's *The scars on my skin – part 1* (24 March 2011).

and *Twitter*, show they are embedded in Namibia's modern youth culture, with quite a consumerist cultural touch, and an air of being fashionable. In social structural terms, they would rather be classed with the educated and comparatively affluent sections of the capital's society. However, performances offer a wide range of themes; age-related sujets and displays of individuality predominate but social commentary also features. The other set, around Township Productions, blends the Katutura-based generations of poets already involved as artists in the youth protest movement of the late 1980s and the post-independence poets. Occasionally, performances are reserved for poetry in indigenous languages.⁵³ Social and political critique takes centre stage but does not exclude other themes. In contrast to Spoken Word, where sophisticated modern musical instruments and electronic visual resources are employed, the stage often hosts African cultural groups and promotes musical accompaniment based on local instruments.⁵⁴

Joseph Molapong, perhaps the central figure of current Namibian critical poetry, attests signs of decline. Poetry dedicated to social themes is losing momentum, a reflection of rising individualism: "I have always used poetry to make social commentary and will continue to do so. Poetry has become a medium through which I expressed my observations and the questioning of some of the injustices. Be it political or social, I write about it [...] Poetry today has lost that sharpness in it. It has become just another thing, writing that reflects individual pleasures or pain. I suppose this mirrors the kind of society we have become, individuals. The themes poets or rather writers of poetry explore are limited to just words, sex and vanity. The social and political commentaries are left to politicians and analysts whom we know are removed from the general society."⁵⁵

Conclusion

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o observes a depressing situation in African societies once they achieved political independence. He concludes that only two 'tribes' remain in Africa: those who own property ('the haves') and those who do not (the 'have-nots'). In most post-colonial African countries there has emerged a minority class of rich and powerful men who became 'the inheritors of the role of the colonialists.'

But now whom do we see riding in long cars and changing them daily as if motorcars were clothes? It is those who did not take part in the movement, the same who ran to the shelter of schools and universities and administration. At political meetings you hear them shout: Uhuru, Uhuru, we fought for. Fought where? They are mere uncircumcised boys. They knew suffering as a word.⁵⁶

⁵³ David !Nanub's performance in Khoekhoegowab, Theatre School Windhoek College of the Arts, March 2007; *World Poetry Month*, Session 2, 21 March 2011.

⁵⁴ A tradition that dates back to the 1980s and that was taken up again in 1998 by the performance group *Kitso Poets* (cf. Winterfeldt "Search": 21).

⁵⁵ Molapong, <http://keamogetsi.blogspot.com>, blog posted 19 October 2010.

⁵⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in politics*, London, Heinemann, 1997: 80.

This idea of unfulfilled expectations is frequently found in African literature written after independence or depicting post-colonial society. Independence comes with its own class contradictions and pressing economic realities. Ellen Namhila's autobiography clearly expresses it:

The realities of independence have been harsher than most of us expected, though life in the refugee camps was by no means easy...the fight for jobs and survival resulted in competition, which in turn divided people into losers and winners, or into haves and the have-nots.⁵⁷

Harlech-Jones' *To Dream Again* offers a stinging indictment of 'liberated' society:

Inevitably we talked about politics. Arbuthnoir's face crinkled in distaste as he said, 'The way I see it, Keretani is already a classical case of the suffocating P's: privilege, paternalism, and patronage.' He rubbed his nose sceptically and grunted, 'The trouble is, right now most people like it that way, because they think that it offers them a way out of poverty.'

I was about to reply when Arbuthnoir raised a finger. From nearby, one or two streets away, we heard the sirens. A big-man politician was going somewhere, accompanied by the usual retinue of outriders, security police and traffic cops. I could visualise how the black Mercedes Benzes with darkened windows were sweeping down the avenues while the traffic lights blinked frantically on amber and pedestrians and motorists huddled at the kerb.⁵⁸

The theme of the 'Wabenzi people', as the ironic Swahili saying goes, has become prominent in Southern African literature. Writing encodes the aesthetic reality of new social contradictions and conflicts, which emerge beyond the racial divide of society.

Bibliography

- Abrahams, Peter, *Mine boy*, Oxford, Heinemann, 1989 [1946].
- Allen, Roy, *Sungong*, Windhoek, Gamsberg, 1980.
- Amakali, Lukas Kaunambili, *Lucas vision*, Windhoek, s.d.
- Angula, Helmut Pau Kangulohi, *The two thousand days of Haimbodi ya Haufiku*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1990.
- Arich-Gerz, Bruno, "Postkoloniale Prosaliteratur zwischen Einfühlungs- und Rezeptionsästhetik", in: Carlotta von Maltzan, (ed.), *Acta Germanica / German Studies in Africa*, Association for German Studies in Southern Africa, vol. 27, Frankfurt am Main, Lang 2009: 17-49.
- Arich-Gerz, Bruno, "Postcolonial English language prose from and about Namibia. A survey of novels from 1993 to the present", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 7, 2010: 7-28.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Garth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire writes back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literature*, London, Routledge, 2002.
- Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern, Francke, 1946.
- Benjamin, Walter, *Der Autor als Produzent*, in: Gerhard Seidel, (ed.), *Lesezeichen – Schriften zur deutschsprachigen Literatur*, Leipzig, Reclam, 1970 [1934]: 351-372.

⁵⁷ Namhila, *Price*: 191f.

⁵⁸ Harlech-Jones, "Language": 270.

- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1970.
- Bhabha, Homi K., *The location of culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.
- Bloch, Ernst and Hanns Eisler, "Die Kunst zu erben", in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 105-109.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *In other words*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Die Regeln der Kunst: Genese und Struktur des literarischen Feldes*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Brecht, Bertolt, *Vorschläge für den Intendanten des Rundfunks*, in: Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1967: 124-127.
- Brecht, Bertolt, "Die Essays von Georg Lukács", in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 87-88.
- Castro Varela, Maria do Mar and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2005.
- Diescho, Joseph, *Troubled Waters*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1993.
- Fuchs, Max, *Autonomie der Kunst. Systematische und historische Anmerkungen zu einem schwierigen Begriff*, 2005, www.kulturrat.de/pdf/134.pdf
- Goblot, Edmond, *La barrière et le niveau. Étude sociologique sur la bourgeoisie française moderne*, Paris, Alcan, 1925.
- Harlech-Jones, Brian, *A new thing. The Namibia independence process, 1989 – 1990*, Windhoek, EIN Publications, 1997.
- Harlech-Jones, Brian, *A Small Space*, London and Bordeaux, Online Originals, 1999.
- Harlech-Jones, Brian, "Language, nationalism and modernization. Reflections from Namibia", in: Brian Harlech-Jones, Ismael Mbise and Helen Vale, (eds.), *Guardian of the word. Literature, language and politics in SADC countries. proceedings of the Fifth General Conference of the Association of University Teachers of Literature and Language (ATOLL), Windhoek, 16-20 August 1998*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2001: 108-127.
- Harlech-Jones, Brian, *To Dream Again*, Cape Town, Kwela Books, 2002.
- Hasheela, Victoria T. and Tumweneni M. Nghaamwa, *Shower of voices*, Windhoek, Macmillan Education Publishers, 2009.
- Hiyalwa, Kaleni, *Meekulu's Children*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 2000.
- Jurt, Joseph, "Autonomy and commitment in the French literary field: applying Pierre Bourdieu's approach", *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology*, 38 (1), 2001: 87-102.
- Kaujeua, Jackson, *Tears over the Deserts*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 1994.
- Khapoya, Vincent B., "Review of Breaking contract: The story of Vinnia Ndadi", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 9 (2), 1976: 279-281.
- Kracauer, Siegfried, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, München, List, 1962 [1937].
- Lukács, Georg, "Größe und Verfall des Expressionismus", in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 7-42.
- Lukács, Georg, "Reportage oder Gestaltung? Kritische Bemerkungen anlässlich eines Romans von Ottwalt", in: Fritz J. Raddatz, (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 150-158.

- Lukács, Georg, *Schriften zur Literatursoziologie*, Neuwied und Berlin, Luchterhand, 1970.
- Macaba, Habaitapeli Hendricks, *A hellowish. A collection of poems in English*, Windhoek, Township Productions, 2008.
- Molapong, Keamogetsi J., Christi Warner and Volker Winterfeldt, (eds.), *In search of questions. A collection of new Namibian poems*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2005.
- Namhila, Ellen Ndeshi, *The price of freedom*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 1997.
- Nathanael, Keshii Pelao *A journey to exile*, Aberystwyth, Sosiumi Press, 2002.
- Ndadi, Vinnia Helao, *Breaking contract. The story of Vinnia Ndadi*, London, IDAF Publications, 1989 [1974].
- Neshani, Andreas, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Oxford, Heinemann, 2001.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, *Writers in politics*, London, Heinemann, 1997.
- Nujoma, Sam, *Where others wavered*, London, Panaf, 2001.
- Ottwalt, Ernst, "'Tatsachenroman' und Formexperiment – eine Entgegnung auf Georg Lukács", in: Fritz J. Raddatz, *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, vol. 2, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969: 159-165.
- Patemann, Helgard and Nangolo Mbumba, (eds.), *Through the flames – poems from the Namibian liberation struggle*, prepared for the Department of Education and Culture of SWAPO of Namibia, London, Zed Books, 1988.
- Pope, Rob, *The English Studies Book*, London, Routledge, 2000.
- Raddatz, Fritz J., (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1969.
- Ramphaga, Luna Fhulufhedzani, *Dance Mama – a collection of poems*, Windhoek, Township Productions, 2009.
- Republic of Namibia, *Constitution of the Republic of Namibia*, in: Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia, no.2, Windhoek, 21 March 1990.
- Shityuwete, Helao, *Never follow the wolf*, London, Kliptown Books, 1990.
- Shivute, Marcus, *Go and come back home: a Namibian's journey into exile and back*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1997.
- Spivak, Gayatri C., *Can the subaltern speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation*, Wien, Turia and Kant, 2008.
- Vale, Helen and Volker Winterfeldt, "Yesterday's future: Conflict and catharsis in new Namibian prose", unpubl. paper presented at "1904-2004 – Decontaminating the Namibian Past. A commemorative conference", Windhoek, 17-21 August 2004.
- Vale, Helen, "Namibian poetry in English 1976 – 2006: between yesterday and tomorrow – unearthing the past, critiquing the present and envisioning the future", *Nawa. Journal of Language and Communication*, 2 (2), 2008: 27-57.
- Viala, Alain, "The theory of the literary field and the situation of the first modernity", *Paragraph*, 29 (1), 2006: 80-93.
- Warner, Christi, (ed.), *Poetree (Enjoy the shade)*, magazine nos.1 to 5, Windhoek, Township Productions, 2008 ff.
- Winterfeldt, Volker, "In search of questions – an introduction", in: Keamogetsi J. Molapong, Christi Warner and Volker Winterfeldt, (eds.), *In search of questions. A collection of new Namibian poems*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2005: 15-29.
- Ya-Otto, John, *Battlefront Namibia. An autobiography*. Westport, Hill & Co., 1981.
- Zeeman, Terence (ed.), *New Namibian Plays. Volume 1*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 2000.
- Zeeman, Terence (ed.), *New Namibian Plays. Volume 2*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 2002.