

Postcolonial English language prose from and about Namibia.

A survey of novels from 1993 to the present*

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Abstract

*Twenty years after Namibia became the last country on the African continent to gain independence, this article takes stock of the prose narratives in English that have recently appeared in and about Namibia. It examines narratives by Namibian writers and compares them with the work of renowned non-Namibian novelists which likewise deal with the theme, or sujet, of Namibian realities past and present. The study focuses on Joseph Diescho's *Troubled Waters* (1993), Brian Harlech-Jones' *A Small Space* (1999) and Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) alongside U.S. American novelist Peter Orner's *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo* (2006). At the beginning, South African writer André Brink's novel *The Other Side of Silence* (2002) is analysed in greater detail: a novel which, due to the difficult relationship between inner fictional portrayal of a female protagonist and her meta-fictional evaluation by a male narrator and the problematic mimicry of *écriture féminine* by a male author is presented as an only moderately successful example. The analysis proceeds with special emphasis on Namibia's postcolonial present by applying key concepts of postcolonial thought developed by theoreticians such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.*

In March 1990, after a more than thirty-year-long war of liberation against the South African occupiers, Namibia became the last country in Africa to achieve independence. If one includes the preceding Imperial German colonial period (1884 – 1915), one may speak of postcolonialisms (in the plural form)¹: a token and at the same time a difference that makes a difference, compared with the single-colonial past that is characteristic of Asian countries in general, and India in particular, from which considerable impulses came for the constitution of post-colonial theories that are currently applied in cultural studies. Not only did the process of decolonisation begin late in South-West of Africa, it also had consequences for art and, in particular, literary work as a result of this delay: "Narrative or poetic formats", declared Henning Melber in

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¹ Cf. Bruno Arich-Berz, *Namibias Postkolonialismen. Texte zu Gegenwart und Vergangenheiten in Südwestafrika*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 2008.

1993, “are nowhere to be seen at the moment. This is, however, not what one could or should expect in the this country which is two and a half times the size of Germany but with a total population of less than one and a half million people.” As a consequence, one needs to be patient and should invest in creative writing and other programmes. Eventually, “the waiting for a Namibian work that can be a candidate for the Nobel prize for literature” will be rewarded, one may hope, which would in turn uplift the literary scene in Namibia to the level of its Southern neighbour from where the award-winning Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee come.²

More than one and a half decades after Melber’s prognosis it is possible to take stock of the situation, and examine more closely those narratives by Namibian writers which have been produced and published in English – English being one of the official languages of the country along with German, Afrikaans and Oshivambo. A comparison with the work of renowned non-Namibian novelists, – likewise published in English and dealing with the theme, or *sujet*, of Namibian realities past and present – will shed light on the literary quality of the narratives originating from post-independence Namibia. More specifically, the study will consider Joseph Diescho’s *Troubled Waters* (1993), Brian Harlech-Jones’ *A Small Space* (1999) and Neshani Andreas’ *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) alongside U.S. American novelist Peter Orner’s *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo* (2006). At the beginning, South African writer André Brink’s novel *The Other Side of Silence* (2002) will be looked at: a novel which due to the difficult relationship between inner fictional portrayal of a female protagonist and her meta-fictional evaluation by a male narrator and the problematic mimicry of *écriture féminine* by a male author is presented as an only moderately successful example and thus is used as contrast material for the assessment of the native Namibian stories. All works – those of Namibian origin as well as those written by English-speaking novelists from outside the country – will be analysed with particular reference to key concepts of postcolonial thought developed by theoreticians such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

South African prose and colonial non-emancipation: André Brink’s *The Other Side of Silence* (2002)

As far as its formal arrangement is concerned, André Brink’s *The Other Side of Silence* repeatedly changes the narrative perspective from the level of the characters at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries to that of the narrator, who guides the reader with comments and reflective inserts through the action in North Germany and in German South-West as well as during the sea passage aboard the *Woermann Linie* steamer. In the first of these inserts the narrator describes his research in collections of documents and in newspaper archives into the fate of young German

² Melber, Henning, “Literarische Ver- und Entwicklungen: Von ‘Deutsch-Südwest’ bis Namibia”, *Börsenblatt. Wochenmagazin für den deutschen Buchhandel*, 60, 30.7.1993: 47-49 (49).

women who were chosen by the *Frauenbund der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft* for settlement in South-West Africa: “to the remote African colony in the years between 1900 and 1914 or thereabouts to assuage the need of men desperate for matrimony, procreation or an uncomplicated fuck.” One name stands out: “Among all of them was that solitary first name unattached to a surname. Hanna X. Town of origin, Bremen. That much was known, but no more”.³ The male narrator deliberately chooses this woman for his literary endeavour, and unfolds the story of her childhood (she is an orphan) and youth in the style of earlier picaresque novels, i.e., as a path of sufferings, ordeals and deprivations that takes her from one guardian to the next. Hanna counters the constant torment, humiliation and sexual assaults with escapist phantasies, triggered by literary and travel descriptions she voraciously consumes, before she finally takes the decision to flee the misery of life without rights or possessions as a member of the lowest class in the empire and to discover the exotic palm-speckled landscapes of her books. She successfully undergoes the questioning by the representative of the *Frauenbund* without realising the exact goals of the programme to transport women, and goes aboard the *Hans Woermann* in 1902. During the passage she has a short, enormously fulfilling erotic affair with a fellow traveller, Lotte, who takes her own life before their arrival in Swakopmund, though. As a result of a mix-up Hanna’s name is given as that of her dead lover; Hanna’s protests to the registrar fall on deaf ears: “Now please just leave me in peace and accept that Hanna X is dead and buried”.⁴ The snuffing out of her identity by an indifferent administrative official – her death ‘as Hanna X’ – is the start of many arbitrary acts which grow in their brutality until they become intolerable, and which systematically rob Hanna of her physical identity and of her ability to speak. Indeed her life, as the narrator reveals earlier on, is “marked by her own several deaths”.⁵

In Swakopmund she meets her designated husband, “a mean-spirited, vicious, hard-drinking, abusive loser” and boards a train for the interior of the country.⁶ On the train she successfully defends herself against his brutal approaches and flees from the compartment. She does not escape another man, however: “There is a small, very unpleasant grin on his face. ‘When I fuck a woman,’ says *Hauptmann* (Captain) Böhlke of the imperial army in a voice as still and keen as a blade of very fine steel, ‘she stays fucked.’ And then he fucks her.”⁷ Scenes follow in which her tongue is cut out and she is abandoned in the desert, where she miraculously survives until a group of Nama find her, nurse her back to health and eventually bring her to Frauenstein, a refuge for all the women who have been rejected as candidates for marriage, procreation or copulation, and who have thus become useless in the eyes of the colonial masters and the *Frauenbund*. Enraged by her condition, members of the colonial army at Frauenstein

³ André Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2003 (12002): 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 145.

take up the hunt for the Nama, track them down and kill them before the disfigured Hanna can explain the true circumstances and the natives' helpfulness toward herself.

Hanna spends over three and a half years in Frauenstein. She meets her fellow sufferer Katja, with whom she begins to communicate in sign language, and eventually begins to use the same gestures in a type of monologue in front of the mirror. Towards the end of first of the novel's two parts and immediately after the gruesome depiction of her rape and mutilation, the narrator takes up this event ("I must return to the scene in front of the mirror, where the life of Hanna X first assumed, for me, the shape of a story to be patched together, piece by piece, from the threadbare facts of history"⁸) and announces Hanna's decision to leave Frauenstein as well as the fact that for him, Hanna's story has taken on contours for the first time:

She is ready to take her leave. This is not another escape. She will not be running away from something again, but *towards* something. [...] Now she must begin to re-member herself. There is something in her which has never been there before and which gives shape to all that has happened to her, and inside her. It is hate. Tongueless, she tastes the word in her mouth. Hate. It has the bitterness of a medicine that restores life.⁹

Narratologically, this passage constitutes an internal focalization, i.e., the reader is allowed an insight into the thoughts of the protagonist. The articulation of the figure's innermost thoughts in the third person singular in this way has belonged to the standard repertoire of narrative portrayal ever since the 'rise of the novel' (Ian Watt) in the 18th century. Yet things are decidedly different in Brink's novel: a difference that can in fact be traced back to the transition from the first to the second part. From the moment after the destruction of her speech organ, extremely brutal and symbolically charged as it is, Hanna does not merely have words 'put in her mouth' in the conventional way: by definition no longer capable of speaking, her words and communication(s) are palpably – more palpably than usual – *articulated by someone else on a different level* than that of the characters. This is plainly seen in the italics in which her speech is printed from then on: it is down *to the narrative* – the way the story has been arranged by its narrating agency – and *not* to the voiceless protagonist that Hanna's communications are fed into dialogues, that these are formulated the way they are (and not in any other), that Katja can understand them, and that they finally even possess an illocutionary power.

From this point onward, the reading of the novel becomes increasingly awkward. While the protagonist is, in the first part, described as violently robbed of her ability to speak, it is precisely for *this* reason that she, in the second, comes to stand under the narrative guardianship of the male storyteller: a do-gooder who pretends he must by all means go on with the story on his heroine's behalf. "And having reached this turning point in her story I have no choice but to continue. I believe more and more that as a man I owe it to

⁸ Ibid.: 148.

⁹ Ibid.: 149.

her at least to *try* to understand what makes her a person, an individual, what defines her as a woman.”¹⁰

Unlike the first half, which is after all based on factual material such as the identity of a Hanna X, the second part seems to be pure fiction up until the end, when *Hauptmann* Böhlke’s historically documented suicide in 1906 brings the story to a close. It consists of Hanna’s march on Windhoek, motivated by hate and a desire for revenge and inspired by Joan of Arc, with a motley crew of individuals who in one way or another are also victims of the barbarous practices of the colonial regime – a Herero, a rainmaker, a healer, and the wife of a missionary (the only other white besides Katja and Hanna) who can no longer stand her husband’s racism. Together they attack German patrols, force their way into a fort and kill the soldiers stationed there, but also suffer losses until only Katja and Hanna are left for the showdown with Captain Böhlke. Hanna takes the captain to task for his deeds and humiliates him publicly, but does not execute him: “To kill him, to carve him up the way he once maimed her, to make him writhe in agony, to make it last and linger – what would that mean? Only that she has become, as Katja once said, as despicable as he?”¹¹ This climax also features input from the narrator: “But having come so far, I cannot now turn back or abandon the quest. Having followed Hanna and Katja to Windhoek I have little choice but to imagine the rest. A narrative accumulates its own weight and demands its own conclusion”.¹² Once again the narrator understands his own role best: he now has to bring the story, which he has driven forward, to a nicely rounded conclusion. Thus a further six pages are devoted to the recognition that smouldering hatred, however comprehensible in view of the barbarity of the crime, is in the end fundamentally pointless and useless. The other side of Hanna’s brutally inflicted silence, the 150 page long campaign of vengeance, has now been completed.

Beyond the plot, which from a narrative point of view brings many curiosities to light, there are many traces of a well-known position among post-colonial theories in Brink’s novel: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”¹³, which has become “one of the most quoted works of the humanities” since its first publication in 1988.¹⁴ To prove this – and indeed to prove it in a particular way, namely not as the fruit or result of an interpretation of the *histoire* by means of post-colonial theory, but rather as a venture whose goal it is to identify the subaltern concept as being built into Brink’s *discours* – , that which defines ‘subaltern’ should be described briefly. The term was coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to denote “those who do not belong to a hegemonial class, who are not organised politically and who are not generally class-

¹⁰ Ibid.: 153.

¹¹ Ibid.: 305f.

¹² Ibid.: 301.

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in: Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman, (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory. A Reader*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996 (1988): 66-111.

¹⁴ María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2005: 72.

conscious".¹⁵ Spivak develops the term further in her theory by removing it from its original Marxist background, transferring it to a (post-)colonial context and adding on a gender component. In particular, she exemplifies the precarious ability to articulate of subaltern individuals – whether they have a voice, whether they can raise it, whether they ultimately go unheard in the colonial context or indeed produce a suitable, historical description of their situation as disadvantaged people – with reference to the rural population of South Asia under British colonial rule. Due to the patriarchal structures of their societies and the supremacy and superiority of the British Empire reflected in contemporary depictions of colonial conditions, this subaltern majority was denied the possibility – with and by means of ‘their voice’ – to represent themselves in these portrayals and thereby to inscribe themselves into history. Female subalterns are in fact burdened with a double disadvantage: “The ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”.¹⁶

Spivak’s essay has triggered a lively and controversial debate (to which she also replied repeatedly): arguments developed about the difference between repression and subalternity or the clearly expressed non-applicability of the concept generally to all groups that have not developed or articulated the class awareness as required by Marxism (or, for that matter, a gender awareness and awareness of having been colonised). Another strongly debated issue has been the question of how – and whether – intervention may be possible on their [the subalterns’] behalf.

Traces and echoes of the theory are not only identifiable in Brink’s novel with its particular historical background, the constellation of the figures and the developments in the plot (context of colonialism, female protagonist, a mutilation, which ethmologically can be traced back to the loss of voice [to mute] both in German and in English). An existence in the shadows of official history writing as raised by Spivak can also be heard in the input of the narrator:

Even in well-documented accounts of the men who dominated the turn of the twentieth-century in South-West Africa [...] the individuals tend to remain shadowy figures in the background of their own story, obscured by historical facts. [...] Which means that in all these cases documented history still has to be reconstructed, reimagined for a grasp of the identities caught up in it. How much more so for the life of someone like Hanna X. And yet she *was* there, that much I know.¹⁷

Hanna’s voice is not heard, which (as a tragic interim climax this is thoroughly effective) unintentionally entraps other subalterns: the Nama, for example, who she cannot clear of any wrongdoing. Even by changing to written communication Hanna still does not get her message across. “She has to tell Frau Knesebeck about her stay with the Namas. The ghastly mistake made by the soldiers cannot go uncorrected. But there is no way

¹⁵ Spivak, “Subaltern”: 69.

¹⁶ Ibid.: 82f.

¹⁷ Brink, *Other Side*: 153.

she can communicate in moans and grunts and wails [...] That is when she decides to write down her story".¹⁸ Mrs. Knesebeck, the superintendant of the Frauenstein home, reads her written account with special attention: not for what Hanna has to say, though, but for her messy handwriting.

Hanna's conclusion: "What she has written did not deserve to be told. It was not the truth, couldn't ever have been the truth, the whole, and nothing but. How could she have presumed so much? The truth cannot be told, that is why it is the truth".¹⁹ Indeed Brink's choice of a protagonist from the ranks of the colonisers (and not the colonised) is not necessarily a contradiction to the posits of the theory. The glaring lack of reaction to Hanna's voice, particularly when she raises it in the orphanage, has already been shown very clearly in the picaresque chapters. And as far as the novel as a whole goes, it is André Brink himself who points to the "universal nature of this kind of oppression" in an interview: "there was not much difference between the fate of a woman (even white) and a native African. Which is the trigger that has led to this book, and to the idea of gathering in Hanna's 'army' representatives of all the deprived and nameless colonised peoples."²⁰

With this quote, one leaves the level of the narrator and reaches that of the author who repeats in the acknowledgements at the end of the novel what the narrator has emphasised throughout: that the events surrounding Hanna as described in the story were inspired by documented sources, but that for the most part they are products of his writer's imagination – "the Frauenstein of my story exists only in my imagination, as does most of the life of Hanna X".²¹ If one considers the recounting of a story of the violent silencing of a female figure on this level – that of a male author known for his activism against the quasi-colonial power and oppressive structures of the South African apartheid state, who also works as Honorary Professor of English Literature at the University of Cape Town and thus is familiar with post-colonial theory – then one must pose "the question whether the subalterns can speak for themselves or are they damned, as it were, to being spoken for – and consequently being represented rather than representing themselves".²²

The debates which broke out over this point after Spivak's essay appeared were remarkably inconclusive, ambivalent and almost perplexed on questions such as how genuine the voice and voice-raising of the subalterns could be portrayed. With regard to the other subquestion, the representation by others or in this sense intercession, opinions are however unambiguous. Post-colonial criticism in Spivak's wake takes exception to intercession by someone who is distinguished by or who enjoys the privilege of never having belonged to the subaltern classes. Spivak too criticises such

¹⁸ Ibid.: 87.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 90.

²⁰ http://www.harcourtbooks.com/authorinterviews/bookinterview_brink.asp [17 July 2010].

²¹ Brink, *Other Side*: 308.

²² Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*: 69.

intercession as an attempt to assume the position of “token subalterns”²³ and “advises that this narcissistic temptation be resisted”, which promises advantages to both the post-colonial intellectuals as well as to readers in the ‘First World’.²⁴

Thus the inclusion and integration of the theoretical concept, its heavily symbolic embodiment in the figure of Hanna, turns definitively against those who instrumentalise it in such a way: The same school of cultural and literary criticism – the post-colonial one – which Brink seems to use within the narrative and in its formal construction to illustrate colonial violence with his protagonist as an example, can be applied to this story and its narrative process.

Schoolteacher milieus, cross-ethnic love affairs, and another unlearned lesson of ‘going native:’ Joseph Diescho’s *Troubled Waters* (1993) and Peter Orner’s *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo* (2006)

Unlike Brink’s *The Other Side of Silence*, the plot of *Troubled Waters* is not set in the period of imperial German colonial domination from 1884 to 1915, but in the Namibian people’s “second war of liberation” against the South African apartheid regime which lasted from the 1960s until the country’s independence three decades later.²⁵ Written by Joseph Diescho, the “first author to publish a Namibian novel in English”, the narrative tells of the difficult relations between the South African occupiers and the members of the South-West African independence movement SWAPO by means of a relationship between Lucia Wanagera, a teacher from Northern Namibia and supporter of *South-West African People’s Organisation*, and a white South African soldier in the occupying army called Andries Malan.²⁶

Reviewers – and there has been only very sparing literary analysis of the work in contrast to that of Brink’s novel – assume critically that in *Troubled Waters*, “authoritative discourse is at work and internal persuasion is suppressed”, pointing thus at an alleged deficit, on the author’s part, of literary-artistic *know-how*.²⁷ This seems even more alarming than the fact that it is once again, as in Brink’s case, a male writer who describes fictional events from the mid-1970s mainly through the eyes of a female protagonist. Lucia’s diaries and letters are revealed to the reader, the confidential and

²³ See Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory. A Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996: 292.

²⁴ Spivak, “Subaltern”: 67.

²⁵ Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen and Michael Bollig, “Einführung”, in: iidem, (eds.), *Namibia – Deutschland. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung*, Wolftratshausen, Edition Minerva, 2004: 18-22 (19).

²⁶ Inge Brinkman, “Ethnography and literature: *Troubled Waters* and Ebaro Lyahompa by Joseph Diescho”, in: Heike Behrend and Thomas Geider, (eds.), *Afrikaner schreiben zurück Texte und Bilder afrikanischer Ethnologen*, Köln, Köppe, 1998: 275-295 (276).

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 291.

fictional contents of which revolve around the relationship with Andries as a representative of the political enemy and later also include Lucia's pregnancy, a result of the liaison with the South African white male. The narrative construction of the novel is not as strikingly deficient, however, as Brink's heavy-handed and subliminally executed attempt to give his heroine a voice. Diescho portrays firstly a short trans-ethnic and ultimately doomed liaison during the armed conflict in order to point out the socio-political demands in the era of decolonisation and its difficulties without lapsing into a one-sided depiction at a time when this conflict was long finished and the country had achieved its independence: "the author is concerned with the theme of reconciliation; he is careful not to create characters which merely serve to justify one side of the story".²⁸ Secondly, and despite the somewhat clichéd way in which Andries' abrupt separation from Lucia and his decision to return to his parents in South Africa is described, the creation of the figure of Lucia as a liminal being living in a time of transition and thus socio-political liminality is convincing. After finishing her studies in South Africa, the teacher returns to Northern Namibia in a period of social upheaval, and soon gets confronted with a threshold situation due the forthcoming birth: "What world will this child be born into? What community? Lucia's mind races. Once community came first; children were not above the community. As the traditional order becomes obsolete, there can only be a confusing vacuum which everyone runs to fill".²⁹

Diescho's novel produces a snapshot in prose of contemporary Namibia in the specific portrayal of Lucia and her embedding in and eventual return to the social atmosphere of a Northern Namibian *community*, itself caught between tradition and modernity, which must be acknowledged as a first (albeit male) voice of weight in the now independent country. Thoroughly sensitive, Diescho's novel paints a balanced – and one may argue in response to other critics' opinion, aesthetically successful – picture of the effects of individual cross-ethnic contact in a climate of strong and unfinished debates about how to create community life and society at large in a now independent country.

A primary school milieu in the Namibia of the recent past and an atmosphere that is still strongly determined, if not haunted, by the realities of bygone struggles against colonial rule are also the constitutive parts of Peter Orner's *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo*. Much like *Troubled Waters*, the U.S. novelist's story revolves around a love affair between two of the teachers: the one a white male North American volunteer and main focalizer of the story, the other a female teacher from Ovamboland who "had arrived not long after I had" into "the general celibacy of Goas", where the community of teachers recognises her as "a genuine hero of the struggle. An ex-PLAN fighter. Not even twenty-five and this girl's shot her share of Boers".³⁰ If Diescho's narrative produces a mainly realistic and unpretentious depiction of community life in pre-independence Northern Namibia, the approximately one hundred and fifty short chapters

²⁸ Ibid.: 285.

²⁹ Joseph Diescho, *Troubled Waters*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1993: 194f.

³⁰ Peter Orner, *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo*, New York, Little, Brown, 2006: 28, 66, 28f.

of Orner's novel, set as it mainly is in the first year after independence, deliberately mingle factual elements and soberly narrated episodes about the horrors of the recent independence struggle and the daily routines in a central Namibian desert school with others that appear perplexing, unfathomably mysterious and at times even supernatural to the acting characters.

The sudden appearance and subsequent vanishing of three refugee children, heavily traumatised as they obviously are, who wish to partake in the daily lessons but refuse to integrate fully in the school community is a case in point for this mix: the episode blends the cruel reality of the resurging armed conflict in Angola with the unintrusiveness, evanescence and almost ghostliness that speaks from the girl and the two boys' behaviour during and after the school lessons.³¹ At the same time the narrative displays an ambitious and carefully crafted style that testifies to the remarkable literary talent of the author. Literary critics – so far, a few newspaper and magazine reviews have appeared while a more extensive scientific analysis is still missing – have praised Orner's ability to evoke vigorous and lively images of everyday life at the Don Bosco primary school in the Erongo district with a few "short bursts" that "merge together in a kind of mosaic".³² As far as the reasons for this intriguing mix are concerned, the novelist himself frankly acknowledges that his own experience as a volunteer in Namibia has effectively contributed to the ultimate shape of his novel: "I carried memories of the place around with me for years until the desert farm where I lived (itself a strange thing) became more mythical than actual".³³

The striving of Orner's main character, Larry Kaplanski, and presumably even Orner's own yearning when he volunteered on a Namibian farm comes close to what cultural anthropologists call 'going native' – in the end, however, both the author and his alter ego live through and reflect on the very impossibility of such an endeavour. Kaplanski "comes to teach" "and stays to learn"³⁴ last but not least from his black Namibian fellow teachers who succeed in cutting his initial aloofness back to normal size, but he finally leaves the school's precincts again, following Mavala Shikongo's example here.³⁵ By a similar token, his creator Orner concedes that he profoundly distrusts and "loathe[s]" novels and travel books that go out their way to announce 'I know this exotic place and you don't'.³⁶ The ultimately unlearnable lesson of 'going native' of Orner's remark and

³¹ Ibid.: 203-206.

³² Jack Goodstein, "A review of *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo* by Peter Orner", The Compulsive Reader, 2006, <<http://www.compulsivereader.com/html/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1243>>; cf. also Irene Binal, "Nahaufnahmen aus Namibia. In kleinen Episoden entwirft Peter Orner ein grosses Panorama", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12. November 2008: <http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/nahaufnahmen_aus_namibia_1.1251566.html>

³³ Peter Orner, "A Conversation with Peter Orner", appendix to *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo*, New York, Little Brown, 2006: 3-8 (3).

³⁴ Goodstein, "Review".

³⁵ Orner, *Second Coming*: 12f.

³⁶ Ibid.: 6.

the development which his homodiegetic narrator Kaplanski takes is reminiscent of other classics of postcolonial literature such as Uwe Timm's *Morenga*, to name a canonised narrative about Namibia's colonial past which likewise centres around the theme (and possibility) of complete cultural immersion.³⁷

If Kaplanski's problematic and in the end unsuccessful endeavour of 'going native' contributes to the distinctly postcolonial touch of the novel, the same can be diagnosed for the plot's setting – a primary school located in a country that had twice been colonised by representatives of Western power and thought – and its staff of pedagogues: a foreign volunteer, war veterans, the title-giving *femme fatale*, an ever moralising *primus inter pares* teacher, a principal who is constantly struggling to find and reclaim his position as the school's superior, and a priest. Framed as it is in the context of the teaching environment and thus hitting the key of a number of Spivak's most celebrated essays,³⁸ the constellation of figures and their opinions and attitudes related to teaching effectively refute the segregated and neatly compartmentalised cultural (including national literary) entities of 'high literature' in English, German or you-name-it studies which are conventionally promoted and transmitted to pupils and students in the former colonies and the metropolises alike. Instead, the "centre of such a study," or for that matter the didactically prepared study content for learners in a class, "would neither be the 'sovereignty' [sic] of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus of those 'freak social and cultural displacements' that [recent Nobel prize winners Toni] Morrison and [Nadine] Gordimer represent in their 'unhomely' fictions".³⁹ In Orner's novel, the displacements Bhabha mentions exemplarily come to the fore when it is of all colleagues Obadiah Horaseb, an elderly native Namibian and the moraliser among staff, who teaches the U.S. American newcomer Kaplanski, who is assigned to "teach Standard Six. English and History"⁴⁰ without actually having an idea or the didactics of teaching the grammar and structures of his native language,⁴¹ a lesson in the Westerner's own cultural tradition: "He asked me what I thought of noble Cincinnatus. – 'Who?' – ' You say you hail from Cincinnati?"

³⁷ Of the Timm scholars, Kora Baumbach has presumably most closely investigated the issue of the protagonist's (failed) attempt at 'going native' in *Morenga* (Kora Baumbach, "Literarisches going native: Zu Uwe Timms Roman 'Morenga'", in: Frank Finlay and Ingo Cornils, (eds.), „(Un-)erfüllte Wirklichkeit“. *Neue Studien zu Uwe Timms Werk*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2006: 92-112). Martin Hielscher strikes off in a similar direction, identifying the final split between the Nama woman Katharina and Timm's main character Gottschalk as "a moment of aporia and the insight in the ultimate as well as insurmountable alterity" (Martin Hielscher, "Sprechende Ochsen und die Beschreibung der Wolken. Formen der Subversion in Uwe Timms Roman *Morenga*", *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 168, 2003: 463-471 (470)). See also the most recent analysis provided by Stefan Hermes, "*Fahrten nach Südwest*". *Die Kolonialkriege gegen die Herero und Nama in der deutschen Literatur (1904-2004)*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009: 186-189.

³⁸ Cf. Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory. Context, Practices, Politics*, London, Verso, 1997: 77.

³⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 2004: 17.

⁴⁰ Orner, *Second Coming*: 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 35f.

[...] Well then, of course, I speak of its namesake, the great Roman general Cincinnatus. Surely you must – ‘ – Sorry, I – ‘ – ‘And you have come here to teach our children history?’”⁴²

On the same intradiegetic level of plot and characters, Obadiah later emphasises his superiority as far as the grasp of Western literary traditions and national philologies is concerned when he urges the pupils of his advanced class to finally borrow and work on an English classic from the school’s library: “Oh, mourn the unborrowed books. Here’s one. A fine copy of *Bleak House* published in 1957 by Black International, Hudson, New York. Last borrowed from this library in 1973. 1973!” With a grain of irony, he goes on to cite the opening words of the novel by Charles Dickens – which actually consists of nothing but the name of *the* colonial metropolis: “This book, these words, dormant? A book with the boldest first sentence ever composed! ‘London.’ That’s all. ‘London.’ Amazing conjecturement”.⁴³ Obadiah’s infatuation with the Western historical and literary canon, believable as it appears to be in this situation, is immediately commented on and subjected to irony by the same teacher when he tries to stir the imagination of his pupils:

Imagine you hold a book in your hands. Open it. ‘Goas.’ One of you boys might well be the crafter of such an evocation. A feeble example from a man of little poetic gifts [it later becomes clear that Obadiah means himself here] might go something like this: Goas. Second term finally over and His Highness, the majordomo, is sitting on his patch of grass outside his princely office. Unflinching drought. As much sand in the air as if the wind had but newly broomed up the desert itself.⁴⁴

The parody of Dickens’ famous first words or, to add another example, the mock-use of an outdated version of the country’s official language by “Obadiah’s Standard Threes, Siggie and Petrus, who were [...] practising introducing themselves in Obadiah’s King’s English” unfolds an even stronger momentum, and gains a different meaning, on the extradiegetic level where the communication between narrator and narratee (and, ultimately, the reader) is set.⁴⁵ Here, the displacement and freakish re-contextualisation of the original wording comes to stand as a courageous statement in its own right, uttered by the widely accepted person(ality) of Obadiah and his language-talented pupils, and is apt to deconstruct those orders and hierarchies that have governed national(ly organised) cultures ever since the colonial period.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid.: 12.

⁴³ Ibid.: 154.

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 154f. The original Dickens novel begins like this: “London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 120.

⁴⁶ The two young pupils’ language practice is another case in point of what Bhabha terms ‘freak cultural displacement’, one may argue, because it likewise effectively de- and recontextualises that Western system of articulation which is the basis of (former) colonial rule and authority, the English language (which has in the mean, by what seems to be just another act of displacement, been put into the rank and status of the

If the novel achieves the most vigorous effects of literary post-colonialism through the motley set of characters and their sometimes provocative, sometimes humorous or paradoxical statements, remarks and utterances, the main individuals themselves contribute relatively little to this. Kaplanski, the male first-person singular narrator from the United States of America, appears rather as a reflector figure whose role becomes effective only in connection, combination or narratively contrived confrontation with his Namibian fellow teachers who, like Obadiah Horaseb, possess an astoundingly large command of grammars, histories and cultures of 'the West.' The same is the case for the title-giving heroine. Mavala Shikongo may be "beautiful, distant and mysterious – a powerful vision of self-assured femininity in her high heel shoes";⁴⁷ her delineation is too much reduced to these attributes, however, to be called a 'round character' that undergoes a change, lives through a process or development, or at least reveals the true reasons and motivations for showing up at Goas one day with her small boy Tomo only to disappear again a few months later.

In this regard, Orner's Mavala Shikongo differs from the heroine in *Troubled Waters*, the 1993 novel in which Joseph Diescho skilfully lays bare the contours of the individually felt or collectively perceived ambivalence resulting from the socialisation Lucia Wanagera had undergone in two diametrically opposed cultural milieus. Diescho's female teacher from Rundu becomes an apparition which changes and glides back and forth almost ghost-like between the cultures of the Ovambo and white South Africans: in fact, she unites both within herself. She becomes a *go-between*, as defined in textbooks: that invisible translational medium which, without assuming its own contours, interprets for the female Ovambo *chief* and the white management of the boarding school during a dispute. "'Could we ask Miss Lucia to translate,' the principal intervenes. The Chief guesses rightly that an interpreter is being sought. She herself signals Lucia to step forward. She further speaks through Lucia".⁴⁸ The unusual and thoroughly uncanny aspect to this scene and its description – the articulation of one's own matters "through Lucia" as a translational medium – recalls another template in post-colonial theory: the ghostliness of colonial subjects (who in this colonial past died a violent, though apparently not final death because they persistently turn up in post-colonial times and contexts), which is taken up in particular by Homi K. Bhabha. Especially the uncanny

postcolonial independent nation's official language) as well as the British culture, by ridiculing it: „I should be honored, kind sir, if you would favor me with your name.' – 'I was christened Siegfried, but please, I insist, call me Siggy. Dare I inquire of yours, friend of my youth?' – ‚Ah, kindred spirit! I'm known as Petrus.' They smoked pencils like pipes. They tipped imaginary hats. From their faces they both seemed to be in great pain. English was often associated with constipation" (Orner, 2006a, 120). Again, the subversively freakish use of the former colonizers' sign system and cultural peculiarities inherent in this scene comes to bear only on the extradiegetic level, i.e., in the eyes and minds of the careful reader, whereas on the level of plot and characters, it is Mavala who understands the pupils' parody of the English language indeed as a deplorable continuation of old subordination practices, and not as a both playful and sovereign act of emancipation: "‚What do you call that?' – ‚At least he's teaching them some English. Better than I [Kaplanski] can do.' – ‚What about teaching them to know who they are? Is that who they are?'" (121).

⁴⁷ Goodstein, "Review".

⁴⁸ Diescho, *Troubled Waters*: 130.

effects of *doppelgängers*, originally theorised by Sigmund Freud before Bhabha adapted it to the field of postcolonial studies, figure as a key element in Brian Harlech-Jones' story *A Small Space*.

Visitations of the *doppelgänger*: Brian Harlech-Jones' *A Small Space* (1999)

"Cornelia came to Julienne in the early hours of the morning," the novel begins under the entry "23 March 1989: What could be the connection?"⁴⁹ Cornelia is a companion and niece of the Nama captain Jan Jonker Afrikaner who, according to her fictional biography, was born in 1843, had a gift for languages and at some stage worked for a German missionary before she joined joining her uncle's troops in their pre-colonial territorial battles. Pregnant by a young British trader named James and thus reminding the reader of Andries and Lucia in Diescho's novel, she died in Windhoek in 1864 during an attack by a rival trader.⁵⁰ One and a quarter centuries later, the ghost of this Cornelia encounters the young Julienne in her sleep and shows her a place "only five or six kilometres away from where Julienne lay in her own bed, but in the Klein Windhoek valley in Cornelia's time".⁵¹ The novel is planned in such a way that the ominous "connection" between the ghostly Cornelia and the Julienne of the present, who introduces herself as a descendent of the same Jan Jonker Afrikaner and thus a relative of Cornelia, is only fully revealed at the end when the designated place and circumstances of the final showdown of the whole story are communicated to Julienne by Cornelia via the paranormal channel of dreams.

At the beginning, Cornelia's appearance disconcerts Julienne, who at times loses the ability to tell the reality of 1989 from imagined pictures of the past that come to her through the ghostly visitations of her ancestor ("Julienne's mind was often so filled with the images that Cornelia had given her, that her present existence [...] seemed almost a dream, and the images in her mind seemed to be the reality"⁵²). For an informed reader, the paranormal visitations and appearances that occur in a both pre- and postcolonial context between two subaltern young women are reminiscent of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: a 1987 novel whose plot is set in the 19th century. In that book, the title-giving protagonist and child of an Afro-American mother dies as a result of an act of violence (infanticide) only to come back two decades and an American Civil War later to haunt the house and thoughts of her nearest relatives. Taking his cue from Morrison's novel, Homi K. Bhabha claims that it is the "[t]ime-lag" between the events in the 19th century and their late repercussion(s) in the United States of, first, the postbellum era at the end of the century and, second, the time of the novel's publication

⁴⁹ Brian Harlech-Jones, *A Small Space*, London and Bordeaux, Online Originals, 1999: 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 68.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 71.

in the late 1980s which “keeps alive the making of the past.” a lagging, he goes on to explain, which “*impels* the ‘past’, *projects* it, gives its ‘dead’ symbols the circulatory life of the ‘sign’ of the present [...].Where these temporalities touch contingently, their spatial boundaries metonymically overlapping, at that moment their margins are lagged, sutured, by the indeterminate articulation of the ‘disjunctive’ present”.⁵³ Postcolonial life and circumstances today are time and again, incessantly, informed and interrupted by uncanny reminiscences from the past of the slavery or, for that matter, colonial era, Bhabha seems to say, and literature figures as a privileged arena for the uneasy memories from the past to be communicated to the audience of the present.

Beloved, the novel, is a case in point – and very obviously, parallels exist in the construction of Morrison’s narrative and *A Small Space*, even though there are also a few considerable differences. For one, Cornelia does not encounter Julianne “inflamed with anger”⁵⁴ via the aforementioned channels (as *Beloved* does), but approaches her descendant benevolently and brings her gently back both to her own *time* in her ghostly appearances as well as to those *places* near Otjimbingwe where the climactic closing scene of the story takes place after 200 pages of narrative plotting and preparation. Second, the issue of slavery plays practically no role whatsoever in Harlech-Jones novel while it is pivotal in Morrison’s, motivating among other things the infanticide as “an act against the [white] master’s property – against his surplus profits” as well as the murdered child’s later appearance as a ghost.⁵⁵ Instead, it is Namibia’s colonial past that looms large in *A Small Space*: a theme which recurs frequently in the passages set in the 19th century past or, to name an outstanding example of its notoriously “time-lagging” quality, in Julianne’s conversations with her great-aunt, an old-age eyewitness to the events in the imperial German colonies. Invoking hence the country’s baleful colonial past, it is the 85-year-old Margrieta van Wyk who points to the growing conflicts between the Nama, Herero and Ovambo at the beginning of the novel, and who identifies the claim on the predominant position in Namibia after independence of one of these ethnic groups as the most urgent problem of the present: “In the old days, the red people [the Nama] had the whole of central and southern South West for themselves, from Okahandja and Windhoek southwards, to make their own laws, to live their own ways. [...] But then the Germans came, and then the South Africans [...]. And now it’s the Ovambos”, she alludes to the numerical majority of these ethnic groups and the resulting influence in SWAPO: “No place for us. You mark my words”.⁵⁶

⁵³ Bhabha, *Location*: 364.

⁵⁴ “And when the ancestor rises from the dead in the guise of the murdered daughter, *Beloved*, then we see the furious emergence of the projective past. *Beloved* is not the ancestor as the ‘elder’ whom Morrison describes as benevolent, instructive and protective. Her presence, which is profoundly time-lagged, moves forward while continually encircling that moment of the ‘not-there’ which Morrison sees as the stressed, dislocatory absence that is crucial for the remembrance of the narrative of slavery” (Bhabha, *Location*: 364).

⁵⁵ Bhabha, *Location*: 364..

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 76.

The fear of the old Nama woman that there would be no place for her people in the new Namibia is both a commentary on further events and a variation of the leitmotif contained in the novel's title. *A Small Space* contrasts the "terrain of unlimited space, of boundless possibilities"⁵⁷ of pre-colonial times with the loss of residual space which had begun as early as in pre-colonial times and continued in the colonial period due to imperial German land-grabbing and the greed of white traders as well as during South African rule later, and which has contributed to the uneven distribution of land ever since and the corresponding uneven distribution of opportunities for personal or social advancement. Under different circumstances and in an entirely new political context, this problem threatens to continue in the future, independent Namibia: "What if once SWAPO gets into power – and that will happen – what if then they revert to type, and things are no better, maybe worse, than they are under the South Africans? What if only the skin colour of the rulers changes, and nothing else?"⁵⁸ Julienne's expectations are different by a nuance, yet by no means more optimistic – according to her musings, the transformation of Namibia into an independent country may be a rigged game: "I know a number of people who think the whole thing is just a plot", she declares to her white suitor Simon Freis, "to create a new black elite, existing side by side with the old white elite".⁵⁹

The way Harlech-Jones approaches the issue of land distribution and free or restricted spaces is arguably the most masterfully achieved element of his novel. The novelist arranges his plot in such a way that the looming realities and political intrigues in the future Namibia correspond right down to the smallest details with those of pre-colonial times when white settlers and traders allied themselves with indigenous tribes against the Nama: the Herero of Central Namibia because they wanted to annex Nama ancestral lands to extend their own pasturelands, and the Europeans because they were driven by the economic promise that the open, unchartered and not clearly demarcated land offered ("It was vast, little mapped, and variously demarcated"⁶⁰). "The Hereros now have guns", Cornelia declares in 1864 in a burst of outrage three months before her death in one of the violent clashes, "and the traders and missionaries are more determined than ever to destroy us".⁶¹ As it shows, even Julienne and her white lover Simon are in a curious and strangely belated manner affected by these intrigues from the past: Cornelia, Julienne's ancestor, fell in love with that young Briton named James Neave of whom the reader at some stage learns that he "was one of Simon's ancestors".⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 82.

⁵⁸ Ibid.: 186.

⁵⁹ Ibid.: 117.

⁶⁰ Ibid.: 14.

⁶¹ Ibid.: 39.

⁶² Ibid.: 151.

Thus a constellation of pairs of *doppelgängers* is presented to the readers – Julienne and Simon in the narrative present, Cornelia van Wyk and James Neave in the past, which could be regarded from a Freudian perspective as ‘uncanny’ and as such reinforces the effect brought about by Cornelia’s repeated appearances in Julienne’s dreams: *A Small Space* stages, when thus read, “the constant recurrence of the same thing – the repetition of the same features⁶³ or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations”.⁶⁴ In the repetition the differing perceptions between James Neave and his descendant Simon Freis on the one hand, and the van Wyk women on the other, of the South-West African *locus* with its multilayered nuances of meaning remain constant: for the white figures and regardless of their respective infatuation with Cornelia and Julienne, it appears to be an area of unlimited possibilities; for the indigenous Nama characters, it is a territory in which life and living have for one and a half centuries been (too) tightly restricted. “I don’t have a lot of space for manoeuvre”, Julienne conclusively outlines the difference between herself and Simon.

‘For one thing, I can’t rely on financial support from my parents and family. They’ve got nothing but their jobs and salaries, and some mortgaged property, if they’re lucky’ – [Simon:] ‘So that’s the way you assess your space?’ – [Julienne:] ‘Yes.’ – [Simon:] ‘And your space is different to mine?’ – [Julienne:] ‘Somewhat’.⁶⁵

Up to here, a closer analysis of the phantasmagorical underpinnings of the doubled *doppelgängerism* woven into the plot is thoroughly conceivable and undoubtedly appealing: especially if one considers Bhabha’s idea of a ‘third space’ that emerges in (fantasised) encounters, set decidedly outside the ordinary time-space continuum as it would be, between the Nama women and the white male figures of James and Simon from the past and the present. The creative and innovative thrust of such a hybrid third space – ‘third’ because it transcends the common dualities of spatial arrangements such as ‘metropolis versus colony’ or the dichotomy of ‘ruler versus oppressed’ that surfaces last but not least in the connotations attributed to colonial ‘space’: free and unlimited versus restricted and cut into small lots – takes for granted that “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” and instead “can appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew”.⁶⁶ This, however, does not happen in *A Small*

⁶³ This is asserted of Simon and James Neave (ibid.: 267).

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Das Unheimliche”, in: idem, *Der Moses des Michelangelo. Schriften über Kunst und Künstler*, Frankfurt/M., Fischer, 2004: 135-72 (154).

⁶⁵ Harlech-Jones, *Small Space*: 118. This discrepancy in the perception and expression of ‘space’ is also found between James and Cornelia. Cornelia meets his enthusiastic interjection about the undreamed of and unexplored possibilities of the pre-colonial space with sarcasm when she imitates the stereotypical European view of land and the ‘resources’ of her people: “Space! Space! Cattle and land – ivory and ostrich feathers – and raw hides. And don’t forget the copper. But above all – the space! [...] Yes – we have those things – cattle and land – and the rest of it.” With a clear vision she formulates indignantly the future scenario: “our space here is whittled away, cut back, hemmed in” (ibid.: 48f.).

⁶⁶ Bhabha, *Location*: 55.

Space : no such scenario of a third space materialises in the novel. Neither in the statements of the male white characters nor in those of the female Nama protagonists is “the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force” called into question.⁶⁷ Instead, the story turns into an almost conventional thriller and proceeds to a conclusion which is set against the real backdrop of the socio-political events of the present: emphatically, it ensures that the forthcoming independence is still associated with the hope for an end to the power imbalance and for the opening of opportunities for all. Saul, Julienne’s brother, returns to his family after six years of captivity in one of the SWAPO camps in Southern Angola; the traumatic circumstances of his internment hound him as do the threats from Kamati, the corrupt SWAPO-official, who still persecutes him even after his release in advance of the imminent independence. Saul van Wyk knows too much about Kamati’s planned diamond business (“a license to look for diamonds after Namibia became independent – something about sweeping off the coast around Luderitz”⁶⁸), furthermore Kamati’s homosexuality is a factor which is still met with little sympathy but rather much antipathy, and is thus another line of continuity between the old white and the new SWAPO elite.⁶⁹ In a concerted action involving Julienne, Simon, the gay couple Jakob and Bernard, and other committed persons living and dead (Cornelia, who shows Julienne and Simon the scene of the final showdown near Otjimbingwe), Kamati is rendered harmless – which ultimately opens new perspectives for Saul and his comrades in the new Namibia and brings peace to Cornelia, the restless spirit from the past: “after all this time, Cornelia should be allowed to rest”.⁷⁰

The strategic silence of a widow: Neshani Andreas’ *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001)

A Small Space and, even earlier, *Troubled Waters* feature two prose narratives from the independent Namibia of the 1990s. Neshani Andreas’ novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* of 2001 is thus not the first literary comment in English prose; yet by appearing in the renowned Heinemann Publishers’ “African Writers Series” with its international distribution network it has been (and still is) considerably easier for her to reach a global readership than it is for Joseph Diescho or Brian Harlech-Jones, whose narrative is only available as an electronic text. As far as the plot, the choice of characters and narrative perspective are concerned, one can read Andreas’ novel in a

⁶⁷ Ibid.: 54.

⁶⁸ Harlech-Jones, *Small Space*: 201.

⁶⁹ “Here in Namibia, gay isn’t popular. Most men have this macho image of themselves” (ibid.: 161). On discrimination against homosexuals by political leaders of Southern African states cf. Christopher Saunders, “Befreiung und Demokratie: die ‘Autobiografie’ von Sam Nujoma”, in Henning Melber, (ed.), *Namibia. Grenzen nachkolonialer Emanzipation*, Frankfurt/M., Brandes & Apsel, 2003: 121-138 (121).

⁷⁰ Harlech-Jones, *Small Space*: 283.

similar way as Brink's: namely in such a way that Spival's post-colonial theory findings may be of help in examining its key message.

The Purple Violet of Oshaantu is set in the present in the north of the country in a decolonised Ovambo culture which is characterised by deeply embedded role expectations and traditional practices. The author demonstrates and mirrors these conventions in the story of Kauna, the central figure, and her violent and philandering husband, Shange. The narrator, Kauna's friend and confidant Mee Ali, reacts with bewilderment to the allegations against Kauna which are circulating in the village:

What I still do not understand was the way people in this community treated her. It was as if the failure of their marriage was her fault! They laughed and stigmatised her. It was her fault that her husband looked at other women. It was her fault that her husband beat her.⁷¹

As a result of Shange's sudden death immediately after returning late at night from his lover, the "subordinate role of women and the hypocrisy of the traditional gender ideology in Namibia" becomes clear at the funeral and in the burial rituals, as Aletta Cornelia Rhode formulates it in one of the few critical approaches to date to Andreas' novel.⁷²

At the same time Andreas' novel highlights, supported and carried by the viewpoint of female characters, the various possibilities inherent in a thoughtful and intelligent handling of the prevailing traditions in a male-dominated and patriarchal culture or society. These possibilities "include extremely modest form of counteraction inscribed in small acts of defiance and a refusal of approved forms of behaviour, even if these are made within a coercive framework like patriarchy which is itself not directly challenged, but definitely subverted".⁷³ A case in point is the practice of *okakunguru*, the tilling of the fields before the onset of the fruitful season: before Shange's death, Kauna had to manage this laborious task while he was away working as a contract labourer in the south of the country. When Shange dies her in-laws are reluctant to help with this work under her leadership, so that the narrator and close confidant Mee Ali successfully suggests an alternative and highly unusual form of assistance: "'Would you help me then,' Kauna asks – 'Of course, I will help you get all the women together and I promise you we will finish this field in one day'."⁷⁴

Although this act of female solidarity ends in success, some of the participating women do after the *okakunguru* revert to the apparently deeply ingrained views as to what is 'appropriate' behaviour for a widow – and as such do subscribe to the predominant opinion among Kauna's nearest family members. On the occasion of Shange's funeral, the relatives expect her, the widow, to behave accordingly and articulate words of praise

⁷¹ Neshani Andreas, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Oxford, Heinemann, 2001: 51.

⁷² Rhode, Aletta Cornelia, *The Subaltern ,Speaks': Agency in Neshani Andreas' The purple Violet of Oshaantu*, unpubl. MA thesis, Pretoria, University of South Africa, Faculty of Humanities, Dept. of English Studies, 2003: 45.

⁷³ Ibid.: 49.

⁷⁴ Andreas, *Purple Violet*: 109.

in honour of her deceased husband, regardless of his unfaithfulness and violent outbursts against her. Kauna herself however, with the support of Mee Ali, refuses to speak during the ceremonies or appoint someone to speak on her behalf, provoking and effecting thus a “silence which ‘speaks’ eloquently”.⁷⁵

The depiction of a protagonist whose marriage is based on violence and a social structure that traditionally allocates to her as a widow a clearly subordinate role reminds Aletta Rhode of Spivak’s discourse on the question whether or in what form subaltern subjects ‘can speak.’ Or – in view of the prevailing, thoroughly oppressive cultural conditions to which they see themselves exposed – whether they are nevertheless in a position to articulate their own situation. As mentioned above, Spivak herself leaves this question open but is inclined to answer in the negative, and in her opinion-leading essay skips abruptly to the practice of *sati* i.e. widow-burning, in India: an indigenous practice which was strongly discussed and critically viewed by the British colonial administration.⁷⁶ Looking at it from the point of view of the cultural habits of the North Namibian Ovambo society the question must be posed differently. Wives are not cremated here along with their deceased husbands, but instead the widow is expected, despite whatever might have happened, to express a positive opinion of the deceased which is appropriate to the situation: at the very least it is expected that somebody will be nominated who will represent the widow and speak in her name during the burial ritual. Kauna extracts herself from this obligation while criticising most eloquently and tellingly, *if silently*, these customs as well as the role reserved for her on informal occasions such as in discussions with the narrator.

This, in turn, highlights the effectiveness of the narrative arrangement chosen by Neshani Andreas. Unlike Brink’s novel and somewhat like in Orner’s book, the story is constantly narrated from the point of view of a character who partakes in, influences and gets herself affected by the course of events – like Kaplanski, Mee Ali acts the role of an intradiegetic narrator – without figuring as the key character. At the same time, the narrator Mee Ali accompanies and counsels that key character, Kauna, who encounters herself in a situation of existential concern and social pressure exerted by the force(s) of tradition: this is not the case between Kaplanski and Mavala Shikongo, the two main figures in Orner’s novel, nor in any other of the works discussed here. Bound by a relationship of trust and confidentiality like that, and tied to each other as empathetic counsel and person concerned, Mee Ali and Kauna are arguably the most convincing couple of literary figures that have so far entered the literary and the fictional scene of post-independence Namibia.

⁷⁵ Rhode, *Subaltern*: 51.

⁷⁶ Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*: 75. Cf. Moore-Gilbert (*Postcolonial Theorie*: 104) on Spivak’s “apparently extraordinary change of focus in the conclusion of the essay, where Spivak abruptly switches attention from her general theory of subalternity to discuss a concrete historical case of an ‘ad hoc subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide’.”

Conclusion

Unlike Spivak, Aletta Rhode answers 'yes' to the question of the subaltern's capability of speaking, whether explicitly or by actually *refusing* to speak the way Kauna does it here or Hanna X does in *The Other Side of Silence*. Kauna, according to Rhode, thus uses her voice subversively against the patriarchal society in which she lives: "She subverts the dominant ideology by speaking out when expected to remain silent and remaining silent when societal convention demands that she speak".⁷⁷ In view of the many other possibilities for staging and highlighting the strategic silence of a female protagonist as an example of a conflict with existing social habits, the theme of the sudden widowing of Kauna at least allows speculation that Neshani Andreas, unlike André Brink, is secretly referring to Spivak's theoretical subtext. The cultural and social situation in the north of Namibia which she portrays with particular attention and which is implicitly criticised in the end seems to be not quite so hopeless, and indeed may eventually be receptive terrain for intervention of this kind: or so the basic message of Andreas' novel. With its artistic quality and its subtle way of bringing up the issue of the oppression of Namibian women in general (and married or freshly widowed wives in particular), Andreas' narrative is ideally suited to appeal to readers not only in Namibia but worldwide. As such, it should soon be translated into other languages in order to receive an even broader acknowledgement by non-Namibian audiences.

Theories and models of postcolonial thought may facilitate *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu's*, as well as *Troubled Waters'* and *A Small Space's*, recognition by the critics and the reading public in the metropolises. Even though Neshani Andreas, Joseph Diescho or Brian Harlech-Jones may in the end not yet succeed in landing on the short list for the Nobel Prize, these writers persuasively demonstrate that Namibian prose literature in English does not compare unfavourably with its German-language counterparts (e.g. Giselher W. Hofmann) or with the novels in English written by non-Namibians such as André Brink and Peter Orner.

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⁷⁷ Rhode, *Subaltern*: 52.

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