

# **“A Poetics of Disruption”: Farida Karodia’s *A Shattering of Silence* and the Exiled Writer’s *Dihiliz* Position**

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*Bearing in mind Edwidge Danticat’s ideas about writing being a dangerous affair, this paper reflects on authorial matters regarding Farida Karodia’s A Shattering of Silence (1993). Like other novels set in times of conflict, A Shattering of Silence can be seen to deploy what the researcher chooses to call a “poetics of disruption”. This is a poetics heavily at the service of politics, intended to disrupt and destabilise the blunt binaries lying at the heart of any armed conflict. In this sense, the main character in the story, Faith, embodies a poetics of disruption in so much as she problematises the binary dimension of the political situation in the Mozambique of the period, being a white woman who sympathises with the anti-colonial struggle. This article claims that, reproducing the dynamics of the poetics of disruption in a process which can be said to replicate that of her character, Farida Karodia herself makes the most of her strategic location in a liminal terrain across nations. Her position as an exilic author can be defined as dihiliz, that is, as a threshold vantage point which enables her to be both inside and outside the situation she reflects about. Karodia’s liminality is here more pointed than is usually the case with the exilic writer, since she chooses to write about Mozambique, in many senses close to her country of origin yet not her birth-place.*

## **Keywords**

Poetics of disruption; *Dihiliz*; exile; war novel; Mozambique

## **Introduction**

In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Edwidge Danticat ascertains relevant connections between literature and risk. Under rough political regimes, the risk entailed by writing is that, like Adam and Eve, the artist who refuses to obey and decides instead to bite the apple, may end up being “banished from Eden” (Danticat 5), if not something tragically worse. In such times of conflict or dictatorship, also reading can mean death. Danticat

therefore suggests that writers “create dangerously, for people who read dangerously [...] knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them” (10). In these contexts, the immigrant artist has particular responsibilities. Importantly, she writes from a safe place. And she has a sense of moral duty, as she is aware that she could be one of thousands in her place of origin who did not have a chance to become literate. Immigrant artists are, after all, well aware that they “are the children of people who have lived in the shadows for too long” (Danticat 19). In ancient Egypt, Danticat recalls, sculptors were often described as “one who keeps things alive” (20). For these reasons such is, eventually, the role of the immigrant artist: keeping hope alive and, therefore, saving lives, notwithstanding the fact that her writing may also, at the same time, put lives in danger – either now or sometime in the future, or in some other place.

This article reflects on authorial matters regarding Farida Karodia’s *A Shattering of Silence* (1993). This novel is set at the time of one of the many armed conflicts that have caused immense havoc and suffering and which yet have been largely forgotten: the Mozambican War of Independence, waged between 1964 and 1975. The novel has the implicit agenda exposing the absurdity of using violence as a means of solving conflicts, or settling inequalities in the power distribution among different collectives. *A Shattering of Silence* can be seen to deploy what in this article shall be termed a *poetics of disruption*. This poetics consists on the elaborating of various types of formal and narrative strategies which, each in its way, manage to deconstruct or undermine binary structures or dichotomies. This deconstruction responds to the fact that any armed conflict is governed by the confrontation of two contending forces; in other words: war always features two parties set against each other, in territories, real or imaginary, divided by a clear-cut dividing demarcation. In this dynamics, the poetics of disruption would always intervene as an upsetting principle, capable of subverting this precarious (im)balance. Furthermore, besides denouncing the barbarity of war through destabilising its ontologically binary nature, a subsidiary effect of the poetics of disruption is the contribution towards the creation of imaginary spaces which may enable, in the short or long run, pacific solutions towards the coexistence of parties with different interests. Thus the poetics of disruption is paired with a strong pedagogical purpose also in this regard.

Discussing Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost*, which has several points of connection with *A Shattering of Silence*<sup>1</sup>, Chelva Kanaganayakam sustains

that, when writing it, "to argue for peace was what [the author] considered important" (2003, 47). And he quotes Ondaatje's Booker Prize speech, when the novelist stated: "'Pacifism', 'Reconciliation', 'Forgiveness' are easily mocked and dismissed words. But those words will save us" (Kanaganayakam 2003, 47). These concepts, especially pacifism, feature as well in Farida Karodia's novel. Eventually, in *A Shattering of Silence* Karodia uses fiction as an arena which not only recreates aspects of the reality of an actual world conflict (a reality which in some aspects can be extrapolated to other conflicts), but which can also act as a fictive ground out of which realities can improve. Thus understood, the genre of the novel turns into a potential site of rehearsal for healing possibilities, a terrain in which alternative future prospects can be built.

The story in *A Shattering of Silence* opens with the return of Faith to her country of birth. Faith is a Mozambican woman who at this point begins recalling her experiences before she left for London two decades before. These experiences, she tells us, have been recorded in several notebooks during her exile. After narrating the arrival in the Prologue, the novel begins by revisiting Faith's traumatic experience as a six-year-old girl, when her parents, two Canadian missionaries, were murdered in a village mass killing by the mercenary army of a vengeful landlord. Faith was one of the few survivors of this slaughter, where she lost not only her family, but also her voice and her memory of the events. As she puts it, she was robbed of "my voice, my history and much of my life" (Karodia xix) which she will only recover much later, already an adult. From there on, the novel revises Faith's desolate childhood and adolescence, which she spends at several Catholic institutions and foster homes; the gradual development of her political consciousness; and her early adult life, full of uncertainties regarding her own sense of identity, until the rarefied circumstances of the conflict which involves the country force her into exile.

The character of Faith embodies a poetics of disruption in so much as she problematises the binary dimension of the political situation in the Mozambique of the period, where a deep political and economic gulf drew a distance between the black and white population. Faith is a white Mozambican, and as such she is *in excess* of both the majority of the colonised black population and the minority of white colonisers. She does not belong completely with either yet she relates to both groups, befriending and establishing deep personal relationships with both black and white people, thus unsettling identity categories often delineated across racial lines in colonial and postcolonial

contexts, particularly in Africa (see, for example, Govinden 26). Faith feels deeply Mozambican, and close to the black population in spite of a colour difference which she is not aware of until quite late in her life, as her close attachment to Rita or her friendship with Rhonica, both black women, show. However, her whiteness also connects her to the white colonial elite, represented in the figures of Dona Maria, her benefactor, and Juan, her lover. An added degree of complexity to reading the novel through the lens of a poetics of disruption lies in Faith's political views, sympathetic to the liberation movement. The novel might seem to condone violence as a means of getting rid of political oppression, since the anti-colonial struggle could be seen as somehow necessary for the well-being of the Mozambican people. Yet Karodia's authorial introductory note sets the tone and the politics of the novel when, in an emphatically pacifist call, it declares that the characters are "representative of the reality of thousands of children, all over the world, who are brutalised by war, hunger and political corruption". Indeed, Faith's witnessing of the carnage which results from war in her daily toil as a nurse emphasises Karodia's anti-war agenda. Inasmuch as she cannot fully belong to either side of the conflict, Faith's existence as a character reminds readers of the unviability of discourses which only present two radically different positions as possible options, and poetically suggests a third way as an alternative to stifling dichotomies. In other words, Faith would embody the necessity to find peaceful solutions to conflicts and situations of power abuse, such as, in this case, the colonial situation challenged through the anti-colonial struggle.

In what follows, this article explores some options of the exiled author as regards the choice of topics and locations for her work, responding to the thesis that the authorial choice of subject matter and story location echo and fully correspond with the topics developed in the novel, and can be productively read as another form of the poetics of disruption. They are discussed bearing in mind Edwidge Danticat's understanding of writing, all the more so exile writing, as an activity necessarily verging on danger. The claim is that, reproducing the dynamics of the poetics of disruption, and in a way emulating the character she creates, the writer makes the most of her strategic location in a liminal terrain beyond antagonistic power economies.

A word about the distinction between the terms "diaspora" and "exile" might be in order here. While they can sometimes be used as synonyms, as it is the case in this article for practical purposes, they are not fully equivalent (see Alonso-Breto 126). As John D. Barbour recalls when considering the seminal intervention of Edward Said in the conceptualisation of exile,

the original meaning of exile is banishment, the political action that forces a person to depart from his country. Exile resembles but is not the same as being a refugee, expatriot or member of a diaspora. In practice, however, these terms are now often used interchangeably to refer to people displaced from their original home, even when they leave it willingly. (293)

Barbour makes yet another distinction between the categories of diaspora and exile, namely, that the exiled person “is oriented to a distant place and feels that he does not belong where he lives” (293). Both Farida Karodia and her character Faith can be rightly considered diasporic subjects, yet it is preferable to refer to them as exiles in the sense that both were forced to abandon their place of origin by the political conditions there. Furthermore, Karodia and Faith have both kept a continuous commitment to that place, Karodia through writing nearly always about it (as it is mentioned elsewhere in this article), and Faith through her life-long political activism against children’s involvement in war. Indeed, both women choose to return once the political situation allows them to do so. All in all, it seems fairer to use the term exile that that of diaspora when referring to subjects who were literally forced to flee situations as harsh as the South African Apartheid or the protracted anti-colonial struggle in Mozambique.

## Exile as *dihiliz*

When talking about exiled (or, for that matter, diasporic) writers, invoking tropes of liminality becomes mandatory. Bonaventura de Sousa Santos praises Ebrahim Moosa’s recuperation of the figure of Ghazali, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Persian intellectual. As Moosa contends, Ghazali

saw himself in a threshold position, in the *dihiliz*, a word that designates the in-between space between the street and the inside of the house. When seen from the street, the *dihiliz* is an inside and, when viewed from inside the house, it is an outside. This explains why, in such a space, Ghazali could feel simultaneously to be in exile and to be inside his own home. (Moosa 45, qtd. in Santos 24)

An exilic South African writer, like Ghazali Farida Karodia uses her advantageous position as both insider and outsider to a complex political

situation in order to effectively advance her political goal of vilifying armed conflict. Chelva Kanaganayakam has remarked on the relative freedom the exiled writer enjoys with regard to entangled political situations:

The notion of the writer being an outsider is a commonplace in postcolonial writing. In [places] where there has been a history of violence and unrest, state-sponsored or otherwise, censorship has been a major factor. Inevitably, writers have responded by creating texts that circumvent state control. [By contrast] writers who located themselves in diasporic contexts have been relatively free to write without inhibitions. (Kanaganayakam 2003, 45)

However, a greater degree of freedom does not mean that the enterprise of writing lacks complexity. Discussing Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost*, Maryse Jayasuriya claims that through this novel, Ondaatje himself "suggests [...] that diasporics have a responsibility when it comes to representing the homeland" (Jayasuriya 143). This does not mean to say that exiled writers should necessarily write about their birthplace (although so many of them do), but that when they choose to do so, they must be very self-conscious. Not least because, as Pavithra Narayanam (5) among other scholars reminds us, in the current context of production and distribution of fiction, the image of Third World countries which circulates more widely in the West is that produced by diasporic writers. Consequently, readers would expect that diasporic writers, and all the more so exilic writers, do not shun their responsibility.

One key aspect of fiction writing (as of reading, for that matter) is that it allows the possibility of stepping into other human beings' shoes, and getting to see what the other sees. Because of the wide range of possibilities that fiction can illuminate regarding human actions and ideologies, whatever their final options, in times of armed conflict, which frequently are governed by complex ideological designs, writers see themselves forced to negotiate their sense of political allegiance more subtly than usual. This need is especially complicated in the case of exilic writers, since they start off from an already compromised geopolitical position. To quote Chelva Kanaganayakam again, "the dilemma of being bound to the world-view that one is born into but also being able to transcend its constraints is the perspective afforded by the cusp of exile" (1996, 210). And the complexity inherent to the situation of the migrant or exiled writer is further composed when she or he decides to write about a war torn country, whether or not she or he feels politically involved

in the conflict. Which side should she take? Is it imperative that she should take a position?

These reflections might be seen as somewhat lateral to an approach to Karodia's novel, because, while in the case of *Anil's Ghost* Michael Ondaatje writes about his country of birth, Karodia was not born in Mozambique, where the novel is set, but in South Africa. Therefore, although she writes about a territory in conflict, it is not her own country of birth. However, the sense of responsibility remains, in so much as Karodia writes from the distance about concerns closely related to, if altogether different from, those of South Africa. From the perspective of the writer, the choice of writing about a country which is not her own evinces a sense of concern for problems which do not affect exclusively one nation or another, such as, in the novel, colonialism or armed conflict. Actually, while the novel focuses on the Mozambican situation, it often expresses concern for the whole African continent, as the following passage, chosen among many which expand the scope of reflection from Mozambique to the whole of Africa, illustrates:

I just hoped that [Mozambique] would not go the way of other independent black nations, which had allowed their resources to be plundered by large foreign multinational companies and leaders hungry for wealth and power.

Black Mozambicans, oppressed for far too long, and for too long deprived of education and jobs, would not benefit from the lure of investment. In no other part of Africa had it uplifted the poor and the illiterate. The only ones who benefited were the members of the government, their families and the privileged. This had happened too often in other African countries, and I prayed that Mozambique would be an exception. (Karodia 281)

This reflection of Faith, by the end of the novel, expresses a sense of Pan-Africanism which needs not be unduly generalising. It is also worth quoting because it encapsulates the denunciative stand of the novel as regards capitalism, world politics and the rampant corruption of politicians, as well as the harsh consequences their combination has had in Africa. Also, besides a concern for the fate of the African continent, Karodia's choice of broadening her scope beyond her country of birth affiliates her with the growing list of transnational writers who are engaging more and more frequently in global concerns. An exiled South African writer's choice of Mozambique as subject

matter reads as evidence of the debilitation of the role of the nation-state as the major political embodiment of modernity, and possibly as a sign of the waning of its power as pervasive identity marker for world citizens. One can celebrate that it also allows the critic to perform a criticism ideologically detached from “methodological nationalism”, i.e., “scholarly research which takes the nation-state as a ‘natural’ container for understanding “the social and political form of the modern world ... [considering instead the nation-state as] ... merely one agent in a more complex variety of global actors” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 302, qtd. in Quayson and Daswani 5), and choosing to adopt a transnational, boundary-blurring outlook which, paradoxically, is not at odds with the anti-colonialist stance permeating the novel. When speaking of transnational concerns, we need to be wary of generalisations about African countries and the African continent at large, something unfortunately all too frequent. But it is important to foreground what Bhikhu Parekh refers to as our common “human identity” (Parekh 27), and also the common trajectories of many African post-colonial nations, particularly as regards the moment of anti-colonial struggle and liberation.

When considering *A Shattering of Silence*, the idea that the diasporic writer may productively use her safe position in the distance in order to write about dangerous matters becomes obvious. Furthermore, in writing about Mozambique, Karodia follows a trend which has been remarked by critics, namely that “writers who went into exile from South Africa or who lived outside the country invariably command a wider geographical canvas in their writings” (Govinden 260). On the other hand, writing about somewhere else than her country of birth can be seen to release some pressure for the migrant or exilic author. When he decided to write about the protracted armed conflict in Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje had to ponder the position he would write from: “You have someone who is a part of the country, and in a way, has to betray it. It’s an odd state to be in, blowing the whistle on your own home country” (Ondaatje in Weich). And, eventually, in the same interview Ondaatje goes back to the same concern as Danticat’s discussed above, that of accountability: “What is your responsibility to the place you come from?” Notwithstanding Ondaatje’s caution and his deep self-awareness, after publishing *Anil’s Ghost*, he was widely attacked, in some cases for an alleged lack of involvement (see Derrickson 131), and in others, paradoxically, by alleged partisanship (as discussed in Kanaganayakam 2006).

The inexhaustible discussion about migrant and exilic writers can be also punctuated by reference to Chelva Kanaganayakam’s reflection in the cited



article "The Anxiety of Being Postcolonial: Ideology and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel", where he explores the anxieties of the postcolonial writer with regard to politically compromised places such as Sri Lanka or South Africa, and suggests that new literary strategies are evolving out of the diasporic writers' necessity to write about those places yet remaining ideologically and politically safe. In other words, those writers need to satisfy the double "impulse to distance and to remain subjectively involved" (Kanaganayakam 2003, 50). Karodia's choice to write about Mozambique, so near her country of birth yet not her birth-country, could be seen to respond to such desire of emphasising her in-between, *Dihiliz* position. This idea is reinforced by the fact that *A Shattering of Silence* was Karodia's second novel and was published seven years after her first one, *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986), set in South Africa. As is often the case, Karodia's first novel has strong autobiographical echoes, and the thematic and formal jump of the second novel is always difficult for a writer, one where she has to make very conscious choices. Writing about the anti-colonial struggle in Mozambique as experienced by a South African exiled woman seems to be sufficiently close to her own experience while allowing a degree of distance. Furthermore, this location would facilitate her tackling delicate issues concerning human rights which could, in spite of the remarkable singularity of South African political history, be connected in different ways to this country, the one place which avowedly remains Karodia's creative and existential focus. The writer recalls in an interview that she began writing because she was an exile: "I was so homesick. ...It took me about ten years to get over my despair with living abroad and living away from South Africa. You need strong feelings for writing. If I hadn't been homesick, I am sure that I would not have been able to write" (Chetty 144-145). Distance, in her case, created the need to write. And the fact remains that she seldom writes about Canada, which has been home to her for about forty years. Her whole oeuvre is set in South Africa, with the exception of *A Shattering of Silence*, set in Mozambique, and a few others: one in her novel *Boundaries* (2003), where the narrative flows to Vancouver at some point, and some short stories set elsewhere. As much as it is for Faith, it appears that writing is for this author a strategy of survival, the means to achieve some sense of identity: "When I'm in South Africa I find ideas about other places. When I'm, there, in those other places then I want to write about South Africa. It's almost as though I miss those places. I have to connect to them" (Debros).

In the light of the previous considerations, we could also conclude that the

sense of responsibility of the exiled writer towards her country of birth expands to a sense of general responsibility and concern for humanity – in tune with Danticat’s thoughts on the matter. Again, this suggestion frames Karodia’s achievement in this novel, as well as this article’s intent, in a very contemporary paradigm of wide concern with global affairs and with the general well-being of humans. If we add this to the novel’s thematic concerns, our whole enterprise comes close to the ideological principles of “decoloniality” developed by the group known as the “Decolonial Group” (see Mignolo, Delgado and Romero, Grosfoguel 2007). Importantly, for these scholars the usage of the term “decolonial” does not refer to colonialism understood strictly or exclusively in a historical sense. Rather, it is seen more amply as referring to the idea of coloniality in the power and oppression-related terms described by Ramon Grosfoguel in his article “The Epistemic decolonial Turn”, where he states:

I use [the term] “coloniality” to address “colonial situations” in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system. By “colonial situations” I mean the cultural, political, sexual and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialised/ethnic groups by dominant racial/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations. (Grosfoguel 2008)

Finally, because of the complexity of the author’s positionality with regard to Mozambique, *A Shattering of Silence* could be read as a form of what Marianne Hirsch has termed “post-memory writing”. As Hirsch writes, “in post-memory the memoried invocations of place do not necessarily involve direct experience of the place that has been left behind ... rather ... it often involves the affective investment in attempts to re-create a place that can never be known materially” (Hirsch 419–23, qtd. in Quayson 132). While the place thus designed by Hirsch responds specifically to the Nazi concentration camps, either completely destroyed or, at least, certainly impossible to know in their historical enormity, it is possible to translate the trauma and the sense of uncanniness that they embody for the second generation of Holocaust survivors to the relationship between Farida Karodia and the colonial war in Mozambique, given the spatial and temporal distance mediating between the two at the time of the writing of the novel.

In conclusion, it is the complex *dihiliz* position of the exiled writer which enables Karodia to develop a poetics of disruption more safely than writers actually based in the place of conflict. Taking advantage of her *dihiliz* position,

that is, of the relative safety provided by exile and by her factual lack of involvement in the narrated events and situations Karodia nonetheless chooses to write about dangerous matters.

## Conclusions

I have called a *poetics of disruption* any strategy devised by the literary author which intends to destabilise binarisms of whatever kind in her writing, and manages to do so even if this happens merely at a symbolic level. In the novel referred to in this paper, *A Shattering of Silence*, which is set in times of conflict, the poetics of disruption efficiently reads as an anti-war statement, armed conflict being necessarily grounded in the antagonistic relationship of two different parties. The critical voice can also participate in such political investment, tracing and putting the light on different aspects of the same poetics which undo constraining dichotomies. Thus, focusing on the poetics of disruption and emphasising the multiple forms it can take, this article has discussed the complexity of the Karodia's ascriptions as metaphorical of the necessary disruption which her work operates upon the material reality of conflict – a metaphor based on the erosion, the exilic writer operates on the concept of the nation-state in her living in-between borders. Farida Karodia's relationship to the socio-political location that her present work explores is complex inasmuch as Mozambique is not her birth place, South Africa – which remains the locus informing her writing impulse – yet it is geographically and historically close. Karodia's liminality in this regard is more pointed than is usually the case with the exilic writer, this position allowing her to write with a very specific degree of implication.

*A Shattering of Silence* is both a novel about danger and a dangerous one. For danger hovers in the novel, as the lives of its characters are irredeemably endangered by both the colonial situation and by the anti-colonial war. In this sense, the novel alternates climatic moments of danger, such as the main character's secret incursion onto a pirate ship loaded with abducted children, or her hiding at her own apartment for several days her wounded friend Rita, wanted by the police, with the more sustained yet equally insidious tension which arises from the constant stalking by the same police that the characters suffer, or the scenes where risking her life Faith escapes into exile with her lover through the steep Mozambican landscape, finding their way across strongholds obstinately defended by the rebel FRELIMO forces, areas where the armed

confrontation is heated. But this is also a dangerous novel in a different sense. Writing from her relatively safe exilic position, Karodia chooses to run the risk of writing about a place which is not her own, and to tell a tantalising story. Further, in her role as artist, and to return to Danticat's connections between danger, art and history introduced at the onset of this paper, Karodia chooses not to eschew responsibilities. Like the ancient Egyptian sculptor, she decides to portray a reality which keeps alive the memory of the Mozambican war, but also, importantly, the consciousness of the terrible danger any war entails for our human identity. And in spite of the poignancy of her subject matter, she does not leave hope out. Karodia fulfils this fruitful task from her particular *dihiliz* vantage point, productively enacting one the multiple forms of the *poetics of disruption*.

### Notes

1. Both novels are set in a period of war, and in both novels the action is triggered by the return of an exiled character to her country of birth. Furthermore, both texts explore experiences of medical staff in war time, and both denounce the abduction of innocent people. Finally, the two novels are authored by exiled writers.

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