

## RE-ASSEMBLING THE CITY IN IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ'S NOVELS

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the various aspects of the city as described by the South African writer Ivan Vladislavić in the novel Portrait with Keys. Hunters, gatherers and urban poachers are the inhabitants of the South African city bordering the veld, a city whose economic centre has been moved to the suburbs due to high rates of crime.*

**Key words:** *identity, Johannesburg, labyrinth, violence*

### 1. Introduction

Replacing Apartheid themes and subject matters in the post-Apartheid South African literature has been a demanding task. Some of the literary topics preferred by the 'old guard', the influential "white quartet" (Kellas 2004) formed of J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach have been replaced with issues connected to multiculturalism, the status of the writer, the banalisation of violence due to mass-media coverage, the reconciliation with the violent past, the implications of economic and cultural globalization, the struggle against illness, globalization and loss of cultural and national identity, displacement, economic exile and migration. Due to the fact that the grand Apartheid narrative belongs to the history of literature, many different narratives are constructing the present South African literature. A new generation of writers has to maintain South Africa on the map of universal literature as it is their duty to identify contemporary and original topics that should connect the 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa to the trend imposed by the globalization process and, at the same time, emphasize the diversity, multiculturalism multiracialism and other particularities of this "jagged end of a continent" (Gordimer 1998:278).

One of the main representatives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century South African literature is Ivan Vladislavić, born in Pretoria in 1957. His first short stories were published in the volumes *Missing Persons* and *Propaganda by Monuments*, after 1990. The volume *Portrait with Keys. The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* was published in 2006 and it is a collection of reflections on post-Apartheid South Africa and on some sensitive issues such as: random acts of violence, the (im)possibility of defining the concept of 'home' and finding a place to match the definition, racism, displacement versus relocation, the city against the veld, loss of memories versus preserving memory by gathering objects. The reflections are guidelines on how to travel through the city of Johannesburg (Joburg) and they form a map of itineraries which are listed in an index that "traces the order of the [...] published cycles and suggests some other thematic pathways through the book. The routes are classified as [...] long, moderate and short" (Vladislavić 2007:195).

## 2. Mapping the City: Memory and Identity

Ivan Vladislavić's identity as a writer has been shaped by various cultures, as he declares in a 1999 interview:

The name is Croatian. My grandparents on my father's side were Croatian immigrants. My father was born in South Africa. And on my mother's side my background is Irish and English, with a dash of German. I'm second-generation South African, on both sides (Warnes 2000:273).

In the same interview with Christopher Warnes, Vladislavić also states that he has written his work under the influence of events and transformations that have been taking place all over the world, as by his own experiences and his reading of Dickens, Stevenson, T. S. Eliot, Kundera, Schulz, Barth, Vonnegut, or Elias Canetti. Thus, in *Portrait with Keys* the narrator mentions Canetti and quotes from the essay *Crowds and Power* in order to relate the city of Vienna from the nineteen-twenties to the city of Johannesburg in the year 2000. They are both cities "with secret street-names; policemen tell you where you are if they trust you" (Vladislavić 2007:126-127).

The narrator in Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* underlines the fact that Johannesburg is a city defined by crime. However, he also points out that it is similar to any city at a certain given moment and he describes a meeting with two beggars, reminding the readers of Canetti's meetings with beggars during the writer's childhood in Vienna. The event that took place in Vienna almost a century ago is used by Ivan Vladislavić, who re-assembles it in constructing the portrait of Johannesburg. In Vienna, a servant refuses to help some beggars shut the house door while they are asking for pity: „Have mercy, Madam! Poor worms are not to blame!" (Canetti 1984: 91). In Johannesburg, Vlad, the narrator, also refuses to let the beggars into the house. However, he agrees to bring them some food from the fridge and shuts the door without locking it – a gesture difficult to understand in a city where crime has increased since the end of the Apartheid. The two beggars take advantage of the unlocked door and steal what they can find in a small room near the entrance door: a box of souvenirs. The stolen box makes the narrator realize that he can no longer remember his grandfather without the souvenirs. In fact, the lack of memories is triggered by the missing box containing his grandfather's badges:

They were badges of identity, simple markers of a life story. The mere gesture of spreading them out, with a casual sweep of hand, produced the plot. My grandfather's absence during the war years, his time 'up north' was never clearer to me than in the missing chapters in the story told by the badges. (Vladislavić 2007: 80)

Vladislavić portrays the postcolonial city accentuating its resemblance to other cosmopolitan cities rather than emphasizing differences. His generation of writers is marked by the freedom of movement and is redefining identity according to the multitude of spaces that form the other world. The end of Apartheid also means that South African cities can join

the globalization process and that they can be regarded as similar to other cities from the developed countries. The centre has moved to periphery, both figuratively and literally. In post-Apartheid Johannesburg, the centre literally moved to the periphery as the town centre was occupied by poor Africans and immigrants. That is why it is easy to get lost in the new city, as it becomes impossible to identify accessible and familiar spaces:

Then, in the mid-nineties, the parkade began to shrink. The demand for parking fell, level by level, like a barometer of change in the city centre. The people with cars were clearly going elsewhere [...] I soon lost my sense of direction. Eventually I found myself in a crowded corner of the basement, where the cars were all huddled like refugees. [...] My brother told me that he couldn't face the city anymore (Vladislavić 2007: 31-32).

For the narrator and his brother the fact that they no longer recognize the city and they get lost in it equals the loss of identity. They search for familiar places and buildings in order to find their way on the new map of the city. The itineraries they trace in order to map the labyrinth of the city are meant to be used both by the readers who have never visited the city and by the inhabitants who find the changes difficult to understand. The labyrinth of demolitions and constructions, of movements from the centre toward periphery and vice versa is shaped by modern hunters, poachers and gatherers.

For Ivan Vladislavić, memories are not reliable: no one should testify about past events based on memories, without evidence. Yet, writers have the privilege to present the past to future generations, they may invent memories for the city based on the evidence preserved by buildings and other man-made constructions. In fact, the city functions as a mnemonic system. However, the moment when houses are demolished and replaced by enormous office buildings made of steel and glass, the inhabitants lose their way and their identities. The feeling that ancestors used to have when they built houses, that “you can't take it with you when you go, but you can leave something behind; this house will stand for a hundred years” (Vladislavić 2007:70) is no longer valid in the new globalized South Africa. Vlad, the narrator in *Portrait with Keys*, sells his house and comes to see it a week later: “within the week, the new owners knocked the walls flat and paved the plot for a parking area, as if the lives we lived there had no more substance than a pop song” (Vladislavić 2007:87). Memory can no longer rely on buildings or on the comfort of piles of objects. The only method to preserve memories seems to remain writing about events the moment when they take place. Thus, literature helps the readers find their identity and traces their ways through the world:

We are stories. It is a notion so simple even a child could understand it. Would that it ended there. But we are stories within stories. Stories within stories within stories. We recede endlessly, framed and reframed, until we are unreadable to ourselves (Vladislavić 2007:102).

### **2.1. The Frontier City: Crime as a Polluting Factor**

Vladislavić reinvents frontiers, traces new limits to old spaces, and marks the new South Africa by a redefinition of the individual. This process is based on the change of the

point of view on a well-known space, offering a new perspective for European travellers in a Johannesburg visited through reading its portrait. The map is compulsory and vital to survive in the urban space: the visitor has to decipher dozens of details in order to reach the destination. Nevertheless, there is no right or wrong interpretation of the city map, due to the fact that wrong directions take travelers (and readers) to surprisingly interesting destinations that eventually build the story of a lifetime:

It is also that the complexities of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint (Vladislavić 2007:16).

Unfortunately, the high rate of crime in Johannesburg is a polluting factor in the city. Although pollution of the environment is not as serious as in other parts of the world, mental pollution is a serious issue and it determines many residents to leave the city and relocate to other areas.

In *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić sees crime as primitive form of survival, a mentality of hunter - gatherer who has moved to the city: everything can be hunted or gathered: car wheels, garden furniture or plants to be re-sold on the black market. As the majority of South African writers, Vladislavić underlines the fact that crime affects all inhabitants of Johannesburg, regardless of their skin colour. Another type of hunter who lives in the modern urban area is the urban poacher, a survivor who may be admired for his courage: he spends his days walking around the town, scavenging, meeting other poachers, passing along information “sometimes teaming up to do ‘jobs’, sometimes steering each other in the wrong direction” (Vladislavić 2007:129).

Nature is constantly encountered in this portrait of the city: the former gold mines are now covered by grass, trees are growing and birds have returned to reclaim their space. However poachers do not allow nature to modify the landscape, so they build and demolish at their own will: “Nature is for other people, in other places” (Vladislavić 2007:90). City dwellers who want to live closer to nature move to the periphery: “The smell of grass is quenching after a summer day, the dusk lays a cool hand on the back of your neck” (Vladislavić 2007:98). The poetry of the veld reminds the readers that Johannesburg is also defined by its frontiers not only by its center dominated by crime:

Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries. Territory must be secured and defended or it will be lost. Today the contest is fierce and so the defenses multiply. Walls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wires and spikes. In the wealthier suburbs the pattern is to knock things flat and start all over. Around here people must make the most of what they’ve already got, and therefore the walls tend to grow by increments (Vladislavić 2007:173).

New constructions either built by multinationals or by South Africans who are searching for safety imply demolishing old, historical buildings. The South African society

seems to fight against memories and history, especially since many places remind of the Apartheid violence and crimes.

The former gold mines, which are deserted at present remind of the origins of the city. Yet, the narrator considers them abject places: the vleis, an area of low marshy ground, full of contaminated water, pollutes the suburbs that are built around the gold mines. The palimpsest city accepts both its past and its present:

Johannesburg is an elusive metropolis because of the multiplicity of registers in which it is African (or perhaps not at all, or not enough); European (or perhaps not, or no longer), or even American (by virtue of its embeddedness in commodity exchange and its culture of consumption) (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008:25).

### 3. Conclusion

In a 1969 interview, Nadine Gordimer states that

we all write one book, but we write it piecemeal and often from very different points of view throughout our lives. You move on, you change, and your writing changes with this advancement. Or sometimes you regress and the writing appears to go back too. But in the end, for a writer, your work is your life and it's a totality. (Bazin 1990:44)

This definition of writing may also be applied to Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with keys*. It is composed of fragments, of definitions of the city and its dwellers in an attempt to draw the map of a labyrinth that is continually changing. The city of Johannesburg is defined by the veld and the vleis, by urban hunters, poachers and gatherers, Vladislavić offering both general traits that are common for global cities and specific elements that are claimed by the South African city.

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