21ST CENTURY SOUTH AFRICAN SCIENCE FICTION

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Abstract: The paper analyses some aspects of South African science fiction, starting with its beginnings in the 1920s and focusing on some 21st century writings. Thus Lauren Beukes' novels Moxyland (2008) and Zoo City (2010) are taken into consideration in order to present new trends in South African literature and the way science fiction has been marked by Apartheid. The second South African science fiction writer whose writings are examined is Henrietta Rose-Innes (with her novel Nineveh, published in 2011) as this consolidates women's presence in the SF world.

Keywords: Apartheid, otherness, science fiction, South Africa.

1. Introduction

The present study examines a range of South African novels which describe alternative, futuristic environments. Although science fiction is often regarded as a 'pulp' genre, in the particular case of South Africa it offers different perspectives on the sensitive issue of otherness. Both critics and

writers have agreed that SF in South Africa should be read as 'speculative fiction' rather than 'science fiction', since the texts that contain elements of the fantastic or other tropes common to the SF genre have more to do with the realities of post-Apartheid society and less with the technological and scientific discoveries of the 21st century.

Within the South African context, the contribution of science/ speculative fiction to the field of literary studies has not been fully acknowledged. Due to their country's long history of colonial and Apartheid segregation, South African writers and critics have always paid attention both to politics and to narrative representations of racial and ethnic discrimination.

South African science/ speculative fiction redefines otherness and points to futuristic landscapes, making use of the Other's point of view, that is, the point of view of the former subject. The Other that forces a redefinition upon the Self is one of the main issues that has been preserved from Apartheid literature. However, the question of otherness now poses itself in a more complex way, as blackness is no longer a distinctive feature of the Other. In this respect, contemporary representations of otherness are based on the fact that the Other is a former product of the colonized society, the result of a social reality "which is at once an Other and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 1997:71). As Dimitriu (2006:196) states, the South African asymmetrical world of "skewed power relations" is inserted into speculative fiction as a world of fragmented and insecure identities.

In fact, as Pia Brînzeu observes , the articulation of otherness is possible

in concordance with social or minority perspectives, with the on-going negotiations

that seek to authorize cultural hybridities, with the persistence and/or re-invention of tradition, the restaging of the past, and the consensual or conflictual engagements of cultural difference. (Brînzeu 2008:27)

Therefore, we will first briefly describe the science fiction movement in Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa; secondly, we will provide some examples of SF writing, focusing on recent novels by Lauren Beukes and Henrietta Rose-Innes.

2. The Beginnings of South African Science/ Speculative Fiction

The very beginning of speculative fiction in South Africa may be Sir Henry Rider Haggard's 'what-if' novel *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). Challenging issues such as racial and cultural differences, colonial relations and interracial relationships are the main topics in a novel that is seen both as an adventure story and as the starting point of the Lost World genre which forms part of the wider science/ speculative fiction genre.

The 1920s saw the publication of two relevant novels: *The Ship That Sailed to Mars* by William M. Timlin and *Loeloeraai* by C.J. Langenhoven. Although not particularly well known, these are nevertheless important landmarks in South African science fiction and both deal with a utopian future when space travel is possible. As Tanya Barben (2012) comments, in Timlin's work, the Old Man goes on an "exciting journey through space, sailing past the Pleiades, worlds without number, the Star of the Classic Myths and brushing past awesome planets inhabited by monsters. […] The ship lands on the Red Planet [where] the Martian Fairies have created a spectacular home for themselves, a remarkable zoo filled with wondrous but harmless monsters and

beasts which previously roamed the planet" (Barben 2012). Langenhoven's novel introduces a visitor from the planet Venus, the civilized Loeloeraai, who is a peace-lover and tries to teach both Coloured and white people lessons on equality, technology and spirituality. André Brink (1998:26) believes that "the outrageous, the wholly unexpected, the truly miraculous informed much of his [Langenhoven's] fiction".

The 1940s were characterized by the beginning of the Apartheid period, a time during which realist fiction became the most important weapon against a regime that attempted to hide its atrocities. Authors writing in English or Afrikaans explored the issues of living in Apartheid South Africa, with many writers having their stories, novels or even newspaper articles banned or censored. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, J. M. Coetzee published *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Life and Times of Michael K*. Deirdre Byrne considers that Coetzee's novels are "an obvious candidate" for the title of speculative fabulation (if not science fiction proper) because he uses "defamiliarization to strip the South African situation of contextual specificity (time and place) and presents the essential crisis of racial tension and a failure of liberalism" (Byrne 2004:522-523).

The same "extrapolation of South African conditions and a dystopic picture of race relations" (Byrne 2004:523) are encountered in Nadine Gordimer's novel *July's People* (1981). Gordimer explores the effects of civil war on an ordinary white family who are forced to take up the status of 'refugees' at their black servant's village. Both Coetzee's and Gordimer's novels are futuristic dystopias in which white families are forced to leave an urban environment now surrounded by rebels and to relocate to an unfamiliar

village in the middle of a black community. The two Nobel laureates focus on an imagined near future and draw attention to the potential of writing speculative fiction instead of realistic novels.

Despite the concentration on realism, in the late 1960s the magazine *Probe* entered the South African science fiction stage; it has now been publishing short stories for some decades. *Chimurenga* magazine has been in print or online since 2002 and has published notable authors such as Njabulo Ndebele, Lesego Rampolokeng and Henrietta Rose-Innes.

Thus, many critics and writers believe that speculative/ science fiction has a future in South Africa, especially since reconciliation with the pre-colonial and colonial past became a major issue.

3. South African Science Fiction in the 21st Century

The 21st century began with the appearance of a wide range of South African science/ speculative fiction that shows great potential to conquer the Western market. The fact that science plays the major role in education and training in South Africa and that technology is widely available has made science fiction a relevant issue for writers to take into consideration.

Nevertheless, when Nnedi Okorafor asks the question "Is Africa Ready for Science Fiction?" in an online post, she concludes that

> in Africa, science fiction is still perceived as not being real literature. […] I can see how science fiction can be foreign to many Africans. Technology tends to play a different role on the continent. There is a weird divide and connection between the technologically advanced and the ancient (Okorafor 2009).

Undoubtedly, technology and myths are strongly related in the novels and short stories of Lauren Beukes (winner of the 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Prize) and Henrietta Rose-Innes, two South African writers who have captured readers' attention over the last 10 years. Both concentrate on a futuristic South Africa that still preserves the heritage of Apartheid. Moreover, they focus on the relationship between the ancient and the modern and on the role played by women in post-Apartheid society.

Firstly, the connection with the past roots of African history is underlined by their use of animals or insects that dominate both the individual and social groups. Secondly, the reference to the Apartheid period is marked by themes and issues such as segregation within the African communities, xenophobia, racial tensions, scarce resources, hostile landscapes and environment, and frontier settlements. Thirdly, the technologically advanced society portrayed relates the writings to science fiction. All these topics are encountered in *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010) by Beukes and in *Nineveh* (2011) by Rose-Innes.

3.1 Postcolonial Cities and Jungles

Lauren Beukes offers a dystopian view of two South African cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg. *Moxyland* is set in a fictionalized Cape Town, governed by an oppressive and omnipresent government and by the mass-media. The city is troubled by numerous socio-economic, ecological and racial issues, and society is segregated on the basis of a number of factors: health, race, and even possession of technological equipment such as telephones, SIM cards or computers. Individuals' identity details are held on a SIM card, without

which Moxyland inhabitants are disconnected not only from any form of communication but also from any means of survival. Digital technology and biotechnology have been taken to extremes so that characters are labelled and separated from the reality of social segregation or the legacy of the Apartheid era by using online and virtual games.

Being disconnected due to being unable to possess a phone and a SIM card indicates that a character is an outcast. The on-line environment is so essential that a lack of presence in it and existence only in the off-line environment is regarded as life in prison. The fear of disconnection is reflected in characters' behaviours and actions. However, in spite of this fear, the inhabitants of this post-colonial city protest against the government and use a wide variety of methods to rebel against it.

The fact that this dystopian society is controlled through technology is one of the similarities between our civilized world and *Moxyland*. Beukes (2008:373-374) notes in an afterword to her novel that she has made use of her experience as a journalist to characterize the dystopian city of Cape Town, introducing not only issues such as "surveillance society, bird flu, the threat of terrorism, virtual rape" but also "the legacy of apartheid: the arbitrary and artificially applied divides between people, the pass system".

Segregation is not necessarily by race but also by socioeconomic status:

> I hate it when people fake being on the level, all global village-ing when they're the ones raking in fat salaries, and we're the ones living hand-to-mouth. (Beukes 2008:47)

Thus, society is divided to such an extent that rebellion is impossible to

avoid. This division leads to "spates of outbreaks all over and crack-downs, just as bad as those bad old days when the police came storming in to quarantine and deport whole neighbourhoods" (Beukes 2008:52). Although "the system's egregious failings" (2008:144) are identified by Beukes as belonging to a future dystopian community they can also be traced in present-day South Africa with its roots in the Apartheid society.

The second alternate city imagined by Lauren Beukes is Johannesburg, displayed in *Zoo City*. This is an urban area where lawbreakers are 'adorned' with common animals that are, in fact, the mark of criminals. Johannesburg is the zoological city that Beukes describes in her near-future urban fantasy. The animals attached to criminals are known as *mashavi* – the spirits of people whose descendants no longer remember their ancestors. Consequently, we read about various 'animalled' people who bear some kind of moral guilt and acquire an animal which follows them everywhere and makes them behave increasingly paranormally. *Zoo City* tells the story of a young amaZulu woman, Zinzi December, who has received a sloth after accidentally killing her brother. The animal gives Zinzi a special gift, that of finding things: lost objects or people, secret passages, storm drains or shortcuts to escape from difficult situations: "the tunnels are a scramble of pitch-black termite holes, some of them narrowing away to nothing […] the original gold diggings, maybe, when Johannesburg was still just a bunch of hairy prospectors scrabbling in the dirt" (Beukes 2010:212-213). The animal reflects personality characteristics and acts both as a companion and as a 'scarlet letter', a social marker that differentiates Zinzi from the inhabitants of Johannesburg and places her in the urban ghetto of Zoo City. Clearly, the inhabitants of alternate Johannesburg have completely

isolated the 'animalled' other: "they're so cloistered in suburbia that they don't get to see zoos (Beukes 2010:18), they build "gated communities fortified like privatized citadels" (Beukes 2010:97). The residents of suburbia are "colonial slumlords who would sit around divvying up diamond fields and deciding on the fate of empires" (Beukes 2010:42) and they refuse to see the Zoo until the moment they desperately need help. The 'animalled' human that results after the arrival of the animal is called an 'aposymbiote', a postcolonial product that lives in the ghetto and bears the characteristics both of a human being and of the spirits that created and brought the animal to life. It marks a return to nature and to the past in order to recover forgotten features and tradition:

> Apos aren't human. It's right there in the name. Zoos. Animalled. Aposymbiots. Whatever PC term is flavour of the week. As in not human. As in short for 'apocalypse'. This is part of the stealth war on good citizens disguised as apo rights. […] Hell's Undertow. Destruction of the detestable. God is merciful, but only to actual, genuine, REAL LIFE human beings. Apos are criminals They're scum. They're not even animals. They're just things […]. (Beukes 2010:76-77)

A different type of 'animalled' other is described in Henrietta Rose-Innes's novel *Nineveh,* which borrows its name from an ancient Assyrian city. It is related more closely to the South African landscape than other speculative narratives as it emphasizes the specificity of the South African city and the *vlei* at its limits.

Nineveh presents the city of Cape Town invaded by a swarm of insects that cause chaos in the luxurious suburbs. Ticks, caterpillars and beetles play a part in the novel, as Katya Grubbs, the main character, runs a pest relocation

business. In a 2012 online interview posted on 'Africa Is a Country' website, Rose-Innes states that "insects are a good metaphor for insidious, cumulative change: they are the small but numerous agents of chaos in the cracks and foundations of our solid-seeming reality, and they can eventually bring down a city" (Rose-Innes 2012). In fact, this dystopian view of the city reflects the anxieties of the white or black suburban middle class that regard the city as an unstable, insecure and unsettling environment dominated by the Other, in this case by a host of insects. Yet, the landscape offers certain individuals such as Katya freedom, anonymity and peacefulness:

> She hesitates, trying to read the landscape. The beach is a public place, relatively safe, as is the walled compound behind her, but she's not sure about the stretch of ground that lies in between. […] no litter or other signs of human habitation, no stands of alien wattle. The place seems pristine. (Rose-Innes 2011:72)

The main female character of *Nineveh* is transformed by the places she discovers, by the numerous layers of Cape Town. Thus she uncovers District Six, "alive and then in ruins", the dreary, empty "Victorian Cape Town", the Cape Town of the 1950s, with "streets populated entirely by white people – except for the picturesque flower-sellers", and the contemporary city that retains "so little of the original Cape Town" (Rose-Innes 2011:96).

Her journey through the underground marks her metamorphosis as she understands that she cannot relocate the pests that have been living in the city for aeons. In the end, she crawls like a bug to get the "pest's eye view" (Rose-Innes 2011:109) and her belief is that insects and natives are not a plague but the rightful inhabitants of an ancient territory.

In fact, all three of the science fiction novels examined in the present study propose a dystopian view of a post-Apartheid South African city (Johannesburg or Cape Town) in which we can identify three categories of inhabitants:

> the middle class or upper-middle class destroying in order to (re)construct and develop either former slums or wetlands (the vlei); the intruders - the Other, seen either as pests that have to be relocated/ exterminated or as 'animalled' Others who have to be put into confinement; and the 'in-betweener', a postcolonial human in close relation to nature, a product both of society and of the natural environment. (Caraivan 2014:125)

The fear of rebellion and of disconnection disappears when the inhabitants of these futuristic cities accept their condition, that is, their otherness and either conform to it or rebel against it.

Consequently, the postcolonial humans tend to return to nature and draw their energy from it in order to construct newer forms of communication, intersection and cohabitation with the Other, whoever these different ones may be.

4. Conclusion

In perspective, South African science fiction deserves more attention from readers, as South Africa has a rich tradition of the fantastic – both fantasy and magical realism. The latest SF literature emerging from Africa avoids "the trap of stereotyping others as immiserated, faceless, primitive masses. It neither sentimentalizes nor avoids the reality of racial and cultural differences" (Byrne 2004:525).

The issue of identity, based on the former issues of racial and social segregation, is connected both to the postcolonial human and to the city or jungle where they live. The question of identity formation is accompanied by a return to nature, ecology and environmentalism and also by an appeal to technology. Furthermore, "it has been suggested that South African speculative fiction presents a socio-historically situated, rhizomatic approach to ecology-one that is attuned to the tension between humanistic and ecological concerns" (Steenkamp 2011:189). Moreover, issues such as racism, xenophobia, the banalisation of violence due to mass-media coverage, reconciliation with the violent past, the implications of economic and cultural globalization, poverty, economic exile and migration, the struggle against illness, sexual liberation, globalization and loss of cultural and national identity, and technological development are employed in connection with the shifting notion of postcolonial human.

> Whether the human is to be renewed, even as humanism is discarded, must remain an open question in a postcolonial context: one which - for better or worse - has often expressly articulated both the centrality of human experience and a variety of humanist concerns. (Tiffin and Huggan 2010:22)

Thus, South African science fiction writing mediates between the captivating American SF style of discourse and the traditional European SF narrative while emphasizing differences that emerge from the South African context. Individualizing the 'others' and accepting diversity perpetuates national cultures and encourages multiculturalism.

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