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PORTRAITS OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN IN LAUREN BEUKES' WRITINGS

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to study some of Lauren Beukes' feminine characters and to draw a parallel between them and some famous South African personalities presented in her non-fiction work Maverick: Extraordinary Women from South Africa's Past. To this end, I will analyse three of her novels, Moxyland (2008), Zoo City (2010) and The Shining Girls (2012), in order to draw attention to the part played by South African women in Apartheid and post-Apartheid society.*

Keywords: *Apartheid legacy, discrimination, South African women, survivors, victims*

Introduction

The new generation of South African writers have a different range of issues to present to their readers. Although they cannot abandon the past, they reconcile themselves to the history of the Apartheid period and point out other directions that need to be followed - directions originating in American and European influence.

Lauren Beukes belongs to the new generation of South African novelists whose aim is to demonstrate that South African literature is still on an ascending trend after two Nobels and numerous other literary prizes. The writer uses her experience as a journalist who has moved from Johannesburg to Cape Town to build characters who fight for recognition in a society still dominated by all types of discrimination.

In a 2015 interview, Lauren Beukes stated that:

race and gender are always going to be a big deal. There's no such thing as a postracial society, because that would be to ignore all of history and how we got to where we are today. The history is important, the context is important, being different, and showing that difference is important. We can't wipe the slate clean, but we can do better. We can write stories that better reflect the richness and diversity of the world. (Betancourt: 2015)

In Beukes' novels, characters connect strongly with their African roots and there is always a close link with their ancestors, who dominate both the individual and social groups. The reference to the Apartheid period is shown in her choice of themes and issues such as segregation within South African communities, xenophobia, racial tensions, scarce resources, hostile landscapes and environment, and last but not least gender issues. All these topics are encountered in *Moxyland* (2008), *Zoo City* (2010), *The Shining Girls* (2013), and *Broken Monsters* (2014).

Moxyland and *Zoo City* are science fiction novels set in Johannesburg, whereas her most recent works are thrillers, crime-noir novels of suspense set in Chicago and Detroit. In my view, the characters in all of them follow the same line and can be linked to real South African women.

When speaking about Beukes's writings, we must not forget her first book, published in 2005: *Maverick: Extraordinary Women from South Africa's Past*. This non-fiction volume was published after she had been working as a journalist for some years. Beukes took advantage of the opportunity to investigate South African women's lives and was able to include in her anthology writers, poets, dancers, pop stars, movie stars, cover girls, artists, activists, a cross-dressing doctor, renegades and many others. The book contains the memorable stories of women who did not follow conventions, who crossed boundaries and who chose to be visibly active on the South African social or political stage without taking into account race, gender or colour and without any fear of negative consequences. Brenda Fassie, Daisy de Melker, Sara Bartmann, Ingrid Jonker, Helen Joseph, Nongqawuse, Bessie Head, the Boer commando Sarah Raal, and the khoekhoe interpreter Krotoa-Eva are examples of women who opened up the way for a feminist discourse in South Africa. For this feminine history of South Africa Beukes was nominated for the 2006 Sunday Times Alan Paton Non-Fiction Award.

Numerous "extraordinary women from South Africa's past" are presented in Beukes' anthology, a tribute to the active and visible presence of women who fought for recognition. Although her novels fall into the category of science fiction, thrillers or suspense, they openly put forward the issue of women's rights in a society that, due to its Apartheid legacy, has one of the largest ranges of issues to resolve of any country in the world.

Lauren Beukes does not attempt to explain her choice of South African women. Although there are many other women who might have deserved to be included, there is also the new generation that is still making its mark on South African society. These women are all equally essential

background to reading beyond the plot of Beukes' novels, as they inspired her in tracing the outline of her female characters.

Women in *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*

In these two early novels, Lauren Beukes offers a dystopian view of two South African cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg, in which society discriminates on the basis of gender, race, health or even possession of technological equipment such as telephones, SIM cards or computers. *Moxyland* is set in a fictionalised Cape Town governed by an oppressive and omnipresent government and by the mass-media. Beukes agrees in the Afterword to her novel that her experience as a journalist helped her characterise the dystopian city of Cape Town, using issues such as "surveillance society, bird flu, the threat of terrorism, virtual rape" and also "the legacy of apartheid: the arbitrary and artificially applied divides between people, the pass system" (2008:373-374).

Moxyland is a desolate society governed by corporations and brands that do not respect human life. The main characters are two men and two women who fight against discrimination and corruption. Kendra is a photographer who decides that her actions can make a difference if she is able to unplug herself from the artistic community that celebrates brands. Her protest against the rest of the branded community means refusing to use modern technology in her artwork. Unfortunately, it also means that society isolates her and does not acknowledge her presence. At the conclusion of her story she walks passively to her death despite the fact that she seems aware of her tragic end. She rejects her boyfriend and art manager Jonathan when she comes to understand that she is being objectified and realises she needs to change her relationship with powerful or wealthy men. Although

Kendra is a passive individual who assumes the role of an observer rather than that of an activist, she decides to make the transition from compliant to assertive. Sadly, this firm choice comes just before her death and gives no opportunity for her character to develop completely. The second feminine character in *Moxyland* is Lerato, a computer programmer who works for one of the corporations that rule this fictional society. Lerato is Kendra's opposite: arrogant, self-reliant, cynical and contemptuous. She has hacking skills that she uses to fight against the system and to undermine the corporation form within. Her early life is also presented: she has managed to escape from a refugee camp, get a job and become an achiever who climbs high on the corporate ladder. Unlike Kendra, she has no sentimental ties; she is a cerebral character and never postpones her actions.

In order to understand the two characters in *Moxyland*, one needs to examine the history of Apartheid, as Beukes advised in a 2014 interview:

You should also look into the history of apartheid, which this book riffs off quite a lot, from the idea of askaris (double agents within the struggle) and Lerato being threatened with “falling out the window” is a direct reference to Steve Biko's death and this quite remarkable poem by Chris van Wyk, In Detention [...] about all the excuses apartheid's special branch used for why activists died in custody. (Green 2014)

Zoo City narrates the story of a young AmaZulu woman, Zinzi December, who is constantly accompanied by a sloth after accidentally killing her brother, as all criminals bear an animal that marks the fact that they are renegades. The animal gives Zinzi a special gift, that of finding things: lost objects or people, secret passages, 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 sloth is not only a constant companion that copies its owner’s personality traits but is also a social marker for criminals in this fictional Johannesburg and in the urban ghetto of Zoo City.

Beukes’ women are the inhabitants of a city in which new versions of femininity are negotiated as a consequence of the hostile, postcolonial world. In this dystopian view of South Africa, the postcolonial city is used to redefine feminism. In *Zoo City*, Johannesburg is closely related to its inhabitants, who in turn are related to magic and witchcraft. Women and femininity interconnect with witchcraft in a particular way in African societies, as these are more connected to tribal nature. For this reason witches in African communities are rarely associated with evil and do not belong to magic worlds that appear only in fairytales, as is the case in European and American cultures.

Zinzi December is a 35-year-old black woman, a former journalist specialising in lifestyle, and, above all, an ex-addict; she calls herself an ex-middle class person who has drug debts to pay. Consequently, she spends her time on her laptop generating cyber scams: she poses as a refugee from central Africa or as a child worker in a Coltan mine in order to beg for money. Zinzi challenges the notion of femininity, revealing its construction as a social expectation. She is a woman with the gift of finding lost people and objects, so she can predict where they will be located. People therefore see her as a witch who can foresee the future. Nevertheless, her gift is not related to witchcraft but rather an enhancement of her feminine intuition and of her skill in correctly drawing conclusions from given facts.

Zinzi's gift of finding lost objects and people by looking back into the past and forward into the future and her powers of persuasion recalls the story of one of the most famous Xhosa prophets – Nongquawuse. The tale of this little AmaXhosa girl has gone down in South African history. In 1856, Nongquawuse went to fetch water from a pool and upon her return she claimed that she had met the spirits of three of her ancestors, who transmitted the message that the Xhosa people should destroy their crops and kill their cattle. In return, the spirits would drive the British settlers away, new grain would be available in abundance, and their world would be pristine again. Her persuasive powers caused the leaders to make their people obey the prophecy and so they killed between 300,000 and 400,000 head of cattle. The result was that not only British people died of starvation but many of her tribe too, leading to a significant drop in the number of people in the area and providing a pretext for the British to confiscate large tracts of land. In the end, Nongquawuse was arrested and imprisoned, to be released a few years later.

The stories of Nongquawuse and of Zinzi December are similar: they both killed by accident, not on purpose, and they both have to bear the burden of guilt – living life in isolation from their communities. Both have the gift of convincing people that they can see into the future, and they can rewrite history (by bringing back what was lost, whether people or the peaceful pre-colonial atmosphere). In fact, their ability to persuade a large number of people is their most powerful trait. Beukes' character Zinzi December uses her skill to stay alive in a society that wants her behind bars or even dead, which is exactly what happened to Nongquawuse, who lived in isolation after she was released from prison, despite the fact that many of her own people wanted the so-called "prophetess of doom" dead.

In a study of witchcraft in Africa, Peter Geschiere notes that:

To many Westerners, it seems self-evident that the belief in witchcraft or sorcery is something 'traditional' that will automatically disappear with modernization. But this stereotype does not fit with actual developments in Africa today. Throughout the continent discourses on sorcery or witchcraft are intertwined, often in quite surprising ways, with modern changes. Nowadays, modern techniques and commodities, often of Western provenance, are central in rumors on the occult. (1997:2)

Prophetesses (or witches) in Africa are part of every community and many novelists have used Nongquawuse's story. Nevertheless, such women are more than "an empty vessel for the words of others - or 'faithful' translators" (Samuelson 2005:48), as they have the power to induce powerful male leaders to take action.

Shining Femininity

The novel *The Shining Girls*, published in 2013, describes a world where men exploit every freedom that women achieve. Lauren Beukes uses fantasy to portray a society that kills the glow in people, and especially in women. The story is set in Chicago and focuses more on women's rights in society than any of her other novels to date. As Beukes affirmed in an interview:

It was equally important to me that I give each of Harper's victims a voice: They aren't nameless, silent corpses, and a lot of my research focused on finding out what makes these authentic, real-to-life women 'shine' in their time. They're all exceptional in their respective eras, straining against their social or political circumstances. I took a lot of care to show that they had real lives, to present what

their lives meant and convey how tragic it is that their potential has been cut short. (Andrews 2013).

Harper Curtis is a serial killer who travels through time, searching for “shining” women and attempting to kill them. He visits his victims when they are young children and then returns to murder them when they are adults. He always gives a gift to the children as he asks them “to never stop shining” and always promises to return.

However, what stays with the reader are the female characters for which Beukes has become acclaimed. She avoids stereotypes when it comes to her female protagonists, and, in my opinion, her characters can be related to the portraits of some of the South African women presented in her anthology *Maverick: Extraordinary Women from South Africa's Past*. Moreover, it is not the plot that holds our attention, as it is obvious from the first chapters that we are dealing with a time-travelling serial killer, but rather the portrayals of the women he chooses to attack.

The first “shining girl” that Harper meets is Miss Janette Klara - the glow girl. She is a dancer who feels the need to rise “above the competitive mediocrity that confounds even the most lithe and harmonized of dancers” (Beukes 2013:74). She uses a radium powder that makes her glow in the dark during her dances and stays on her for days. Her dream is to find something different from “the legions of imitators” (Beukes 2013:74), something that will draw ever larger numbers of people to her performances.

One of the women Beukes included in *Maverick* was Glenda Kemp, a stripper from the 1960s who later became an activist, a teacher and finally a social worker. Glenda used fire and pythons in her shows in order to make them unique and attract the public. She also rose above mediocrity when she

opened a shelter for poor children and other vulnerable people, including prostitutes and drug addicts. Miss Janette resembles Glenda, since they both make their shows memorable and both find ways of “glowing” and making themselves stand out from the mediocrity that surrounds them.

The second victim the killer identifies as a shining girl is Willie Rose. She is a gay painter, a playwright and a misunderstood artist: “she’s artistic. And these days that’s bad enough. Because artists socialize with all kinds of people. Like blacks and left-wing radicals and people with opinions” (Beukes 2013:132). She is labelled a communist and lives isolated in her community, with only a few artists as her friends. She thinks about killing herself, because she could bury all the magazines that stigmatise her and she could burn her manuscripts but “how do you erase who you are?” (21013:138). The serial killer ends her fight against the prejudiced society around her.

Willie Rose resembles the South African poet Ingrid Jonker, who became famous in the 1950s and early 1960s. Although she wrote in Afrikaans, her poems have been translated into many languages. Jonker is well known in South Africa and is often called the South African Sylvia Plath, due to the passion and intensity of her verse and to the ill-fated course of her life. Her work was criticised and rejected for being too sensual, not only by the literary critics of the time but also by her father, a National Party Member of Parliament and in charge of the Censorship Committee. Jonker had to fight the prejudiced South African society but could not erase her artistic nature and the choices she had made, so she committed suicide in 1965.

The third target in Beukes’ novel is Alice, born Lucas Ziegenfeus, who moves to Chicago from a small American town where people refuse to

accept “freaks”. Alice lives inside Lucas, “resenting his physical body” (2013:217). Although she/he is a talented dancer, she/he chooses a dull job where she/he can speak on the phone all day so that men will not fall in love with a transsexual. However, she/he sometimes steps out of her/his daily routine and tries to make people acknowledge mutations or variations and accept otherness. Harper, as the representative of public opinion, ends her/his energy and determination.

The character of Alice has a counterpart in Beukes’ anthology of exceptional women. James Barry, born Margaret Ann Bulkley, was a military surgeon in the British Army in the 1830s-1850s. Barry served in India and in Cape Town and managed to become General Inspector responsible for military hospitals. In the course of his/her travels he/she improved not only conditions for wounded soldiers but also the living conditions of the native inhabitants. Among his/her accomplishments was the performing of the first documented Caesarean section in Africa in which both mother and child survived the operation (Neuhaus & Mascall -Dare 2014:2). He/She chose to live as a man so that he/she could be accepted as a university student and then pursue a career as a surgeon, with his/her gender being discovered by the public and colleagues only after his/her death. Barry is the first known British female qualified doctor or surgeon.

The fourth character sacrificed by Harper is Zora, a mother of four children, whose husband has been killed and who is a natural musician. She does not give up her dream of appearing on stage although she has to work hard to support her family, and she struggles to find a way within a society that has certain preconceptions about single mothers who are in love with a woman.

Zora reminds us of Dolly Rathebe, the South African singer and actress who appeared in the first film to portray urban Africans in a positive light, *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*. During a photo-shoot for Drum magazine, Dolly and her white photographer were arrested under the Immorality Act, which forbade interracial relationships. She was a central figure in the brief cultural renaissance of the 1940s before the Apartheid regime ended any attempt by black South Africans to appear on stage. She had to put her musical career to one side and run a shebeen, selling alcohol without a licence while, at the same time, investing her money in a community hall and a centre for less fortunate people. Her efforts were acknowledged in 2004, after her death, when the South African government bestowed a National Order on her (Rathebe 2011).

Finally, the last of Beukes' shining girls that I have chosen to present is Kirby Mazrachi, who is clearly the protagonist of the novel even before she survives Harper's attempt to kill her. Not only does she survive the attack but she also starts to investigate the murders, alongside the detectives. As Beukes builds the plot around Kirby, she paints her portrait as a journalist who writes columns about city life and about its past and present. She succeeds in understanding the killer's pattern of behaviour, his attraction to extraordinary women and his habit of taking little trinkets from one victim and leaving them on the next one. She empathises with the women who have disappeared unexpectedly in spite of their glow and their ability to break taboos, to inspire people around them to change behaviours and put aside misconceptions.

The character of Kirby recalls one of Lauren Beukes' closest friends, the journalist Nechama Brodie, who belongs to the generation that is still making its mark on South African culture and society. "Nechama has

dodged the secret police in Burma (after interviewing Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi), explored hidden tunnels underneath Johannesburg and reported on the myth of ‘white genocide’ in South Africa. She also writes about crime, security, politics and policy, and whether or not Johannesburg is the world’s largest urban forest” (Brodie 2013). Brodie is someone who manages to focus people’s attention on issues that South African society finds it difficult to assimilate and who is stirring interest in feminism in South Africa.

Conclusion

Beukes has been highly acclaimed for her female characters, who raise awareness of the issues of gender and racial discrimination. The outstanding portrayals of women in *Moxyland*, *Zoo City* and *The Shining Girls* have earned the appreciation of both readers and critics. In an interview, Beukes underlined the fact that she wanted to represent

different women’s experiences, and different racial experiences, different sexuality experiences, and how history changed individual women on a very normal level, and these women shine, they are bright sparks in the darkness but in a way that’s achievable. None of the shining girls was going to be the next president of the United States, or stop the financial crash, but they made a difference in their contexts. (Beukes 2015:7)

Her anthology *Maverick* avoids stereotypes and offers a feminine viewpoint on South African history that stays with the reader on a closer examination of her novels. Her “essential gesture” as a writer remains “the transformation of experience” (Gordimer 1984:17) both as a journalist and as a South African woman whose responsibility is to safeguard women’s

rights and to ensure that an(other) oppressive system does not annihilate the glow of exceptional human beings.

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