
Bettina Weiss
The End of Unheard Narratives
(Critical Perspectives)

Bettina Weiss (Ed.), *The End of Unheard Narratives: Contemporary Perspectives on Southern African Literature*, Heidelberg: Kalliope 2004

In her introduction to *The End of Unheard Narratives* Bettina Weiss puts forward the proposition that the title signifies that 'former(ly) unheard narratives' have 'receive(d) a powerful expression' and have by the book publication 'cease(d) to remain in the closet.'

The intent on giving voice to the 'marginal' or minority voices achieves the congenial purpose of reappraising the philosophical and socio political imperatives which give impetus to 'silencing narratives' deemed 'unpleasant' or even 'dangerous.'

The book diligently identifies such narratives as those dwelling on themes of homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, prostitution and sexual exploitation, and all the stigmatised peoples of these categories 'who struggle for acceptance and humanity.' Consequently the essays are commendable for their promise of giving 'an enlarged and enlightening insight' although the major entries become, for the first and second parts, a consolidation of fringe and 'abject' subject matters replete with their complex intrigues and oppositions all plodding vicariously along the familiar path of gender and social conflicts inscribed by the feminist movement that has blown from across Europe and through the rest of the western world.

Annemarie van Niekerk's 'A Leaking Categories' featuring an

autobiographical work *Rachel, Woman of the Night* by a South African sex worker Rachael Lindsay who explores the inside prism of 'the oldest trade in the world' makes a befitting introduction to the hardy objective of authenticating the 'Other' particularly as the subject of prostitution had hitherto been neglected in major literary materials of the bio- and auto-biographical kinds. Niekerk's highlight of the entry of South African literature to the discourse on topic of prostitution is treated with notable objectivity and scholarship which seeks to identify with the protagonist's point of view and to commend neither censure nor opprobrium. This capacity for objectification of the literary material in critical studies as against intensely opinionated and dominantly theoretical prejudice is a much needed approach to African literature particularly with the fad of 'talking back' and 'writing back' which has engaged many a theorist of postcolonial literatures, and which, in Berveley Dube's review 'Re-Imagining the Prostitute in Society: A Critique of the Male Writer's Perspective in Zimbabwean Literature,' shows a pattern where early prejudices against minority opinions seem to be giving way to a less subjective, more sympathetic attitude on the part of writers of fiction.

Lizzy Attree's paper on 'Reshaping Communities: The Representation of HIV/AIDS in Literature from South Africa and Zimbabwe' surveys different perspectives on the AIDS pandemic that has ravaged Southern African nations, dutifully ferreting out attempts at the re-inscriptions of Africa as a dark continent with the spread and devastation (not excluding the myths and ignorance surrounding it) of the disease that has ravaged exploited and poverty stricken African communities. However, the study ignores to present indigenous alternatives to modern transitions in the post colonial history of Africa's exploitation, an indication of the extent of the amnesia of modern Southern African academics about the

overarching importance of the indigenous heritage, and thereby of history beyond apartheid and postcoloniality. The result is that the new South African amalgam of racial attitudes in the region might have formulated another typecast of sorts bordering on the main-other, persecutor-victim divide which is not mitigated by the shallow blaming of 'homophobic attitudes' and patriarchal power relations' for the silencing of some of the world's 'minority' sexual expressions today.

Part II 'Voicing Tough Facts and Gentle Suggestions' appears a redundant sectionalising of clearly homogenous materials as the two remarkable works of Tom Odhiambo: 'Socio Sexual Experiences of Black South African Men' and Bettina Weiss: 'Approach to Homoerotic Female Desire' may well have functioned in 'Abject Bodies.' This may also apply to Robert Mupond's 'The Eyes of a Buck: Fighting the Child in Zimbabwean Short Story in English' editorially figured in 'tough facts/ gentle suggestions' for the writer's treatment of the child figure in literature, an approach that reexamines held assumptions which the writer confronts at the beginning of his essay i.e., of children being in Leslie Fiedler's words 'symbols of offended innocence' especially in the creative writings of 'frontline' nation states as has been the histories of the Southern (and other) African nations.

Three papers by Katrin Berndt ('Eloquent Silence as a Mode of Identity'), Margie Orford ('Transition, Trauma and Triumph: Contemporary Namibian Women's Literature') and the duo of Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson ('History's Intimate Visions: Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*') form the third part of the book tagged Re(N)egotiating and Restoring Identities. Of these three, Katrin Berndt's 'Eloquent Silence' takes the arguable position that the silence of the female protagonist can be 'eloquent' and (for Berndt) provides an opening ('interstice') for expressing so called

'subaltern approaches' for truthfulness as against the lies of official historiographies on Southern African movement and progress.

Yet there is something ultimately distasteful, for its racist assumptions, of Berndt's idea (unabashedly Spivak's) of the 'lack of expressive and narrative power of inferior group.' The author's argument deliberately replete with infestations of superficial post colonial theories of 'subjective' and 'objective' approaches to truthfulness reinforces outmoded hegemonic myths and fallacies. It appropriates to itself the same language and definitions of untoward inscriptions which function to the detriment of the victims of colonialism's entrenched interests such as the Southern Africa of their study.

These give the perspectives coming from *The End of Unheard Narratives* a tendency to further recast the alienation of those 'abject' conditions and not their integration in serious literary or philosophical preoccupation. Here again one wonders at the editor's position that 'prostitutes and women voices were/are silenced...for the purposes of 'creating controversial moral values,' especially where the main historical conveyors of these morality and attitudes have been Western /Hebraic-Christian civilisation and its dubious theories of world history, human existence, racial, family or sex relations –the last of which Southern African literatures have lately been identified as 'individualising' or particularising upon. This important historical insight is lost on the contributors, excepting Odhiambo -who mentions only partially- that 'Christianity emphasised heterosexuality and condemned homoerotic practices,' thereby adding to the relevant observation that the redoubtable legacies of the west lie behind the world's most noxious sickness of bigotry, conquest and domination of the perceived other. Yet Odhiambo in his paper asserts rather lamely that 'many African societies have had alternate sex practices for

ages' without evident basis for that claim. Similarly Bettina Weiss declares that 'this so-called un-Africanness (of lesbianism and homosexuality) was/is not that un-African at all (119) all in gallant efforts to subvert the anti-homoerotic rhetoric. This is where the idea of contextual/literary frameworks of artistic interpretations clogs observations on the larger merits of creative works. It marks an inveterate academic tendency that threatens to stultify literature with a stricture complex in which many a generation of critical studies can be trapped for longer, deficient periods of the rest of its history.

One is however optimistic that, with the end of apartheid and the so-called political literature produced by its mixed black, white, and coloured populace, all that the new 'individual' themes have to offer are not entirely riveted on counteracting or propagating fringe subject matters which the first through the third parts of this study have done. Thus the last part, 'The Past a Mediator for the Present' marks the important stirrings of perception in Southern African literature as Agnes Murungi's 'The Invention of (Oral) Tradition and the Imagining of a New Nation' shows of Ellen Kuzwayi's *Sit Down and Listen* collection of short stories. Murungi harmonises the notion of tradition and modernity as separate concepts. Her ideas of a 'useable past,' drawing a relevant note from the cerebral Lewis Nkosi whose interactions with African writers of his times highlight this effort, serves, in Murungi's excellent phrase, 'to recognise a South African identity that is based on a deeper sense of cultural retrieval.'

This negotiation of a tenuous trado-modern divide witnesses a wider experimentation with the form and style of narrative involving established and popular traditions of black (and other non-black) culture(s). Agnes Murungi's study and Jessica Henry's "How All Life Is Lived in Patches": Quilting Metaphors in the

Fiction of Yvonne Vera' are therefore the watershed in Contemporary Perspectives on Southern African literary aesthetics mainly for their departure from the preoccupation with aesthetically stymied symptoms of adolescent psychosis, sex/gender violence replete in the celebrated literatures of the Southern African region.

As a work which in the editor's promise 'hold(s) the potential to subvert and destabilise rigid conceptions' this objective, it must be conceded, has been swiftly and effectively executed with just twelve critical submissions for which editor Weiss is to be commended and encouraged. It is a step in the right direction as it contributes eloquently to the discourse towards the elimination of all manners of prejudice, violence and discrimination that have tainted the human race through its slow, tortuous civilisations. But sustaining of this burden of self and collective redemption from past and present entrapments certainly involves concentrated, deeper, and more original insights on the part of Southern African scholars and writers.