

# The Weight of Nationalism: The Female Body in a Transitioning American South and South Africa

Denise Greenfield

In 1865 the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution officially abolished slavery and involuntary servitude throughout the country, while the 1954 landmark case *Brown vs. Board of Education* put an end to de jure racial segregation. Forty years later, in 1994, South Africa held a general election that marked the end of apartheid. These events were certainly watershed moments in the complex and troubled histories of the American South and South Africa, but were they also defining moments? For many Americans, the end of segregation and the ensuing civil rights movement meant the emergence of an unrecognisable world. For South Africans, the end of apartheid meant learning to live in a changing landscape where many found it difficult to define where they belonged. The transitions from established forms of society to new orders have not been smooth in the case of either region, nor have they been fully realised.



*Three years after Brown vs. Board of Education, Elizabeth Eckford is turned away from Little Rock Central High School by the Arkansas National Guard, 4 September, 1957. Will Counts Collection/Indiana University Archives.*

These transitional moments in South Africa and the American South have been marked by the development of new myths, symbols and political structures. I am interested in the ways in which concepts of ‘woman’ or ‘womanhood’ have helped define, or redefine these structures. I will briefly consider the production of women as subjects of discourse in works of fiction from South Africa and the American South during these transitional eras and how performances of female subjectivities, in turn, both construct and trouble the nation under construction.<sup>1</sup>

The works that I will discuss both highlight and offer a fundamental challenge to nationalist uses of women’s bodies. In her book titled, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?*, Meg Samuelson states:

In search of tractable symbols with which to express their ideals of homogenous unity, national and ethnic claims commandeer women’s bodies and deny the more messy aspects of their legacies that cannot be neatly enfolded within the nationalist script. Through acts of amnesia and foreclosure, or

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<sup>1</sup> See M. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), p. 1.

‘disrememberings’, women are shaped into the ideal forms that reflect the desired national body – usually that of Mother, or simply Womb.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will focus on a close, albeit brief, reading of three texts – one set in the American South and two in South Africa – that highlight the contradictory role played by women as the site on which national unity is forged, as well as that upon which nationalism’s internal contradictions are laid bare. The texts to be discussed are Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997), J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), and Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001).

### ***Paradise* (1997)**

The American Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison’s 1997 novel, *Paradise*, recounts the triumphs and trials of the all-black town of Ruby, and the neighbouring community of women who occupy the Convent, located just outside the small Oklahoma town. Descendants of freedmen who, in the late 1880s, sought to escape the brutalities of the post-Reconstruction South by venturing westward and establishing their own town, the citizens of Ruby have inherited a distrust of anyone beyond the boundaries of their isolated community. The town is fissured by ancestral feuds and financial squabbles, not to mention the political ferment of the era (the 1960s and 70s), which has managed to pierce its pious and purist isolation. The scapegoat for Ruby’s troubles becomes the Convent, an abandoned mansion not far from town – or, more precisely, the four women who occupy it, and whose unattached and unconventional status makes them the perfect targets for patriarchal ire. ‘Before those heifers came to town’, the men complain, ‘this was a peaceable kingdom’ (*Paradise*, 276). One July morning in 1976, an armed posse sets out from Ruby to cleanse the town of these wanton women. In doing so, we quickly come to realise that what began as a project of self-emancipation has turned into a ‘cold-blooded obsession’ (*Paradise*, 14), upheld by its own set of exclusionary practices.

Ruby residents avoid the contamination of external variables by, amongst other things, an adherence to a purity-of-blood rule. The residents collectively shun the general presence of light-skinned outsiders and ‘repudiate the thinning of their ostensibly racially pure blood through marriage and child-bearing’.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to regulate and control the group’s child-bearers, the town practices a type of communal incest that involves the appropriation of single or widowed women by older Ruby men. Mary Douglas has observed that, because ‘women are the gates of entry to the caste’ (as ‘sexual behaviour is important for preserving the purity of the caste’), female purity in a stratified society is ‘carefully guarded’.<sup>4</sup> Because a woman’s choice of sexual partners in racialised societies render socially significant (and visible) consequences that may undo purist ambitions, programs of “race chastity” fall on the shoulders of women, who are then subject to constant restriction and surveillance by the community at large. Therefore, in *Paradise*, the enforcement of ‘codes of female sexual conduct’<sup>5</sup> – the circumscription of women’s freedom, sexuality, and reproduction – maintained in the name of Ruby’s self-defence, becomes the means by which ‘paradise’ is purportedly preserved and sustained. It is thus no mere coincidence when one of the townswomen observes that ‘everything that worries them must come from women’ (*Paradise*, 217), or as one of the male leaders tellingly explains in an early conversation with other Ruby men, ‘Women always the key’ (*Paradise*, 61). The importance of women to Ruby’s claims of purity explains the reverberation of disgust and terror when the armed men of Ruby realise that the Convent women ‘are not hiding. They are loose’ (*Paradise*, 287).<sup>6</sup>

In his essay on Toni Morrison and the South African writer, Zoë Wicomb, Stéphane Roblin aptly points out that the control of female bodies is also intimately tied to the question of memory. In *Paradise*, there is a significant discernable parallel between the collective control of women and the management of memory, ‘such that societies predicated on racial and ideological purity require the control of both’.<sup>7</sup> For both memory and female sexuality are perceived as vulnerable gateways to the community’s unadulterated and sacred core. In the racially stratified American South (as well as in South Africa), the suppression of errant memories mirrors the treatment of ‘loose’ women, and for precisely the same reasons: their presence threatens the established order. Hence, women figure not as agents, but rather as ‘highly-charged symbolic receptacles of history’,<sup>8</sup> thereby giving credence to Anne McClintock’s observation that, in nationalist

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<sup>2</sup> Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> S. Robolin, ‘Loose Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*’, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 52.2 (2006), p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> F. Smith, *American Body Politics: Race, Gender, and Black Literary Renaissance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), p.114.

<sup>6</sup> Robolin, *Modern Fiction Studies*, pp. 307-08.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

discourse, women 'are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of the national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity'.<sup>9</sup> Whether women figure as burdened symbols, vacuous repositories, or mere facilitators, their treatment with respect to the past reveals the gendered topography of memory. If women are 'the conservative repository of the national archaic',<sup>10</sup> they also embody the national archive – though they do so, as Robolin makes clear, provided they act 'appropriately'.<sup>11</sup>

Morrison's text also celebrates women's and memory's elusion of patriarchal control. *Paradise* compels its readers to scrutinise what function memories and narrative perform, what services they provide, and for whom. This is done via fragmented narratives that seek to undermine a 'conservative monopolisation of representation'.<sup>12</sup> The end of *Paradise* illustrates precisely the work of narrative proliferation. The novel's narrator informs us that 'two editions of the official story' of the attack at the convent exist. Each time the story is retold, its various reporters 'chang[e] it to make themselves look good' and almost all of the men involved in the attack advance a version that ultimately 'enhance[s], recast[s], [and] invent[s] misinformation' (*Paradise*, 297). In the end, this proliferation of narratives destabilises the 'public record' and we are left wondering if, in fact, much of that record contains only lies masquerading as truth.

### ***Disgrace* (1999)**

J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel, *Disgrace*, takes place in the Cape Town and Eastern Cape areas of South Africa and speaks of rape; yet the raped character, Lucy, chooses silence over disclosure. In this instance, the experience and discourse of rape is inflected by race. Lucy ('the light'), a white woman, is raped by three black men; her father, David, has been dismissed from his academic post following his sexual harassment of a coloured student, 'Meláni: the dark one' (*Disgrace*, 18). Meg Samuelson writes:

Colonialism and apartheid operated in terms grouped simultaneously around race and the reproductive female body. Fantasies of blood purity depended on the portrayal of the white female body as a racial boundary marker constantly under attack by the threat of "black peril" offensives.<sup>13</sup>

As such, the discourse of the 'black peril' operated as a regulatory regime as much as anything else; a regime by which black men were cast as rapists and white women were marked as fragile and threatened bearers of race purity, dependent on white male protection.<sup>14</sup> According to Ann Stoler, 'black peril' discourses proliferated across the British Empire with 'virtually no correlations [to] actual incidents of rape of European women by men of color'.<sup>15</sup> What these discourses did correspond with was a 'fear of insurgence, and of perceived non-acquiescence to colonial control more generally. Concern over protection of white women intensified during real and perceived crises of control.'<sup>16</sup> The myth of the 'black peril' not only served to legitimate violence against black men, it also reined in wayward white women. In much the same way that 'the myth of the Black rapist' was utilised in the American South as a post-emancipatory tactic to regain white domination over black bodies recently freed from legal bondage, at pertinent historical moments in South Africa, white men exercised their property rights over white women's bodies in order to enforce their control over black men. Similarly, contemporary sexual violence in South Africa is fuelled by narratives that are rooted in apartheid practices that legitimated violence by the dominant group against the disempowered, not only in overtly political arenas, but in social and domestic spaces. In South Africa, women continue to be regulated through rape, the most intimate form of violence.

In *Disgrace*, Lucy is victimised both by her domineering white father and by black men. A white lesbian, she is raped by three black men, a condition, the novel indicates worse than the violation of a virgin. The laws of descent construct women as vessel for the patriarchal line and the gift that may or may not be exchanged between men, or, in Dorothy Driver's words, 'the coin that establishes connection between

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<sup>9</sup> A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 359.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Robolin, *Modern Fiction Studies*, p. 310.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>13</sup> Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition*, pp. 141-42.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that black women were constructed as unrapable, and written out of this scene of sexual violence altogether.

<sup>15</sup> A. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

different groups, sometimes spent, sometimes hoarded, sometimes stolen'.<sup>17</sup> According to Samuelson, the (un)spoken response to Lucy's rape may be read as an 'attempt to negotiate the ground of a patriarchal society that names 'woman' as the fundamental unit of exchange or gift, a gift that is polarised along racial lines, and that is decidedly rape-prone.'<sup>18</sup> Significantly, her police report avoids all reference to rape and race: 'There were three men, she recites, or two men and a boy. They tricked their way in to the house, took money, clothes, a television set, a CD player, a rifle with ammunition' (*Disgrace*, 108). Her father is confounded by her refusal to tell what he calls 'the whole story' (*Disgrace*, 110). Again, we are forced to question the function narrative performs, or in this case, the function served by the silence within that narrative. By detailing only the theft of property, Lucy excises her body from the list of stolen goods, and in doing so, both highlights and refuses the construction of white women's bodies as 'property to be defended' through the ritualised panics that cast black men as rapists, white men as protectors, and white women as bounty.<sup>19</sup> In the end, she refuses to become part of a script that narrates her body as a possible object to be stolen.

### ***Bitter Fruit* (2001)**

The novel's central narrative, the silenced memory of Lydia's – a coloured woman – rape by a white policeman nineteen years earlier erupts into the post-apartheid present, forcing a confrontation with the suppressed traumatic past. Following the rape, Lydia and Silas have lived in a cold and non-communicative marriage, becoming increasingly isolated from each other as the years have gone by. The unspoken trauma overshadows their relationship and also affects their child Mikey, who is the unacknowledged product of Lydia's rape. These personal experiences of trauma take place against the backdrop of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Lydia's rape is a racially and politically located act of sexual violence that is specifically perpetrated as part of the apartheid system's endemic use of violence as a tool of terror and control. Lydia is raped as a coloured woman, and she is told that it is a punishment for being a 'terrorist' (*Bitter Fruit*, 128). She herself was not part of the underground resistance movement, but her husband, Silas, secretly was. The use of rape by repressive regimes as a tool of political power and control is, as Lydia says, 'a ritual as ancient as history itself' (*Bitter Fruit*, 119). Rape in such circumstances is used not only to torture women for being "subversive"; it is also aimed at men and at causing disintegration within families and communities. The shame and stigma associated with rape certainly make it an effective form of political torture.

Through Lydia, *Bitter Fruit* expresses scepticism about the cathartic potential of public testimony, particularly when it takes place in a national and political body like the TRC, aimed at reconciliation and drawing a line between the traumas of the past and present. Lydia does not allow her trauma to be appropriated for political ends, and she refuses to allow her deeply personal pain to be absorbed into terms of dealing with trauma that she does not trust. The TRC operated on the premise that testimony facilitates healing, reconciliation, and moving on from the past; but of course, the specific context of articulation always determines the therapeutic potential of testimony. Lydia does not want her trauma 'contained', thereby suppressing the magnitude and complexity of her experience and reducing it to a series of facts. She further resists the idea that she should forget her trauma and 'get on with life' (*Bitter Fruit*, 121).

Dangor shows how rape, when spoken by women, 'may be appropriated by a hegemonic discourse of male dishonour, or figured as a metaphor of male conquest'.<sup>20</sup> Lydia refuses to testify within the TRC – which named the violence performed on men's bodies 'torture', and that enacted on women 'rape' – and thus refuses to become part of a grand narrative of nationalism that sought to wipe the slate clean and begin again in new clothes, as it were. Her refusal to testify thus stems from her recognition that, first, to do so as a victim of rape within this forum would be to confirm its production of women (and only women) as victims of sexual violence and, second, she recognises that public confession does not necessarily equal personal catharsis. Instead, Lydia seeks for an alternate venue for self-restoration and healing.

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<sup>17</sup> D. Driver, 'Women and Nature, Women as Objects of Exchange: Towards a Feminist Analysis of South African Literature', in M. Chapman, C. Gardner & E. Mphahlele (eds.), *Perspectives on South African English Literature* (Johannesburg: AD Donker, 1992), p. 461.

<sup>18</sup> Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition*, p. 148.

<sup>19</sup> N. Etherington, 'Natal's Black Rape Scare of the 1870s', in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15.1 (1988), p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition*, p. 121.

## Conclusion

Much of the literature from the American South and South Africa (since roughly 1990) embodies the experiential, ethical, and political ambiguities of transition, and it does so through the tension between memory and amnesia. Efforts to absolve the sins of the past and evolve a new pattern of public morality – to rebuild an ethical order, as it were – are intricately tied up with notions of ‘woman’. *Paradise, Disgrace* and *Bitter Fruit* highlight the ways in which women’s bodies and sexuality are the sites of political and cultural capital whenever nationalist, religious and ethnic agendas are invoked in the process of political transformation. I think that it is safe to say that nationalism is a contradictory rather than coherent discourse. As the American South and South Africa sought to re-define themselves, control over narrative – its production and interpretation – became, and has remained, a key factor in the social and political contests of these regions. The female figure plays a contradictory role in this process; it is both the site on which identities are erected and national unity is forged, as well as the site on which nationalism’s internal contradictions are laid bare. In the end, it is often women who have had to bear the heavy weight of the scripts from which the nation (re-)defines itself.

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## Author Biography

Denise Greenfield is in the third year of her PhD in the English Department. Her research interests include the literature and culture of the contemporary United States and South Africa, constructions of race and nation and theories of trauma that incorporate narratives of space, memory and the body. The working title of her research is *Southern Spaces: Space, Memory and the Body in Literatures of the American South and South Africa*.