



"The Travelling Salesman"¹ A tribute to K. Sello Duiker: 1974 – 2005²

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K. Sello Duiker took his own life on 19 January 2005, a little over a month after another gifted young South African writer, Phaswane Mpe, had died, and at whose funeral he had read the eulogy. Duiker, who suffered from bipolar affective disorder, committed suicide in a state of depression he attributed to his mood-stabilising medication, which he felt was "taking too great a toll on his artistic creativity and *joie de vivre*" (Van der Merwe, 2005). He may have died by his own hand, but there is no doubt that what killed him was a potentially lethal illness that is stigmatised, little understood and often poorly managed.

The reverberations of these tragic deaths – Duiker's and Mpe's, on 10 December 2004 – are still with us. The rare talent each possessed was a hope that we shall not realise. They left behind priceless delineations of a post-apartheid South Africa awakening to its infinite, if uncertain, futures.

The eldest of three brothers, Duiker was born in Soweto, where he spent most of his formative years. He was, however, partly educated in England and spent time working in France immediately after high school. He went on to do a BA degree in journalism at Rhodes University in South Africa, and also attended the University of Cape Town for a short spell. His subsequent jobs included advertising copywriting, scriptwriting for television and finally working as a commissioning editor at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) (Van der Merwe, 2005).

Duiker published two novels in his short but oh so brilliant career. *Thirteen Cents* (David Philips, 2000) won the 2001 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in the Africa Region, while *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (Kwela, 2001), garnered the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for 2001. Such an impressive beginning placed much onus on the writer's subsequent offerings. A humorous short story, "Truth or Dare", was published in the *Mail & Guardian* (January 28 – February 3, 2005). A posthumous novel is anticipated,

and short pieces in the text *Words Gone Two Soon* (Mzamane, 2005) complete his oeuvre. It is the themes that Duiker pursued with a relentless scrutiny, sparing neither the reader nor himself, which cement his place in the pantheon of a new generation of South African writers.

South African literary reticence on sexuality during the apartheid era is well documented. Not that sex per se was not written about, but apart from the brilliant, acid depiction of aberrant sexuality by Es'kia Mphahlele in the novella "Mrs Plum" (published in the collection *The Unbroken Song*, 1981 [1967]), Andre Brink's arguably misogynist novel, *A Chain of Voices* (1982), Njabulo Ndebele's novella, "Fools", Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds* (1987), Zoe Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and Achmat Dangor's explicit *Z-Town Trilogy* (1990), most of those writing in English avoided depicting the sexual act in fiction, choosing rather to reflect on the absurdities brought on by its results. This had to do either with the Calvinistic leanings of the self-proclaimed Christian state, or with decorum. In itself, it was not a negative form of self-censorship. But this remains a highly charged, ultra-sensitive and violent country, in which the avoidance of such explosive themes is unfortunate, at best.

However, the liberalisation of the political impasse has allowed all sorts of impulses to flourish. When the floodgates to this sensitive territory did open, Mark Behr led the way with a kind of autopsy literature in *The Smell of Apples* (1995), with its child-sex exploitation theme. Later, writers such as JM Coetzee (*Disgrace*, 1999) and Achmat Dangor (*Bitter Fruit*, 2001) would come to the fore with disturbing representations. Both Coetzee and Dangor depict rape, the brazenness of which poses anxious questions concerning the allegorical use of the female body as text for racist subjugation and its reversal, now shown by land expropriations in the guise of (violent) "nation-building."³ Rape is also a central trope in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). A text that explores issues of homosexuality within white communities is WPB Botha's *A Duty of Memory* (2002).

Such works are complex explorations of the transition, the new democracy and the legacy of apartheid. We may not always agree with these literary impulses, but we are drawn to the vision of the various writers in much the same way as we are drawn to a daily scrutiny of a nation in the making, with its attendant and improbable contradictions.

Duiker's first novel, *Thirteen Cents*, goes to the core of what has been a clear subject of avoidance for writers: the astonishing rate at which children are





now victims of a (violent) society intent on turning a blind eye to the plight of its weakest members.⁴ Unlike Marnus, the child-narrator in *The Smell of Apples*, who knowingly engages in homosexual acts as a way of coming out in his sequestered middle-class boarding school, Duiker's child-narrator, Azure (named for his blue eyes, a play on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*) is a survivalist on the streets of Cape Town, the tourist destination of the famous and glamorous, and the city with some of the worst statistics of child abuse, disappearances and deaths in the country. In a very, very discomfoting read, we are drawn to a world of rampant sexuality involving Azure and others like him, a world in which violence is perpetrated by gangland thugs and the vulnerable are exploited. Azure has a clear-eyed understanding of himself as a commodity – a thing to be used by the powerful – and of his ruthless exploitation by pimps and gangsters. His life is testimony to the rampant exploitation of the city's so-called “surplus inhabitants”, in which children grow up way before their time and are used to satisfy adult lusts and perversions. Stripped of its enabling mythologies of “nation-building”, “reconciliation” and “economic revival”, Cape Town is allegorical of what those at the fringes of a self-satisfied society undergo in this land of sun and surf.

The following extract illustrates Azure's predicament as he scours the city not only for food, but also for money with which to pay off Gerald the gangster:

I walk further along the beach to the *moffie* part of the beach. I sit on a bench and wait for a trick. I sit a long while before I hear someone whistling.... I know the routine.... We go in and I begin to take off my clothes at the kitchen door (2000: 8).

At thirteen, Azure already knows the drill, and can force us to witness our ignorance of what children undergo in a “prosperous” South Africa. His brutalisation by Gerald/T-Rex and his cohorts, who force him to engage in anal and oral sex, is indescribably sad, allowing Duiker to recast sanctimonious pontificating vis-à-vis human and children's rights. His intent is to show that South Africa continues to breed paedophiles, including the T-Rex variant species. Indeed, by choosing Cape Town as the location for this narrative, the irony for the readers lies in discerning those “blue-helmeted UN Rights” contesting with “ordinary rights.”⁵

In his story of Azure, Duiker demonstrates a society with an atrophied conscience. *Thirteen Cents* is a remarkable first novel in which the author asks us to consider what makes Cape Town different from Rio de Janeiro in its treatment of its street children – both cities with pronounced economic stratifications and social temptations. Its apocalyptic ending, which suggests Azure's

post-traumatic stress syndrome, points to the unresolved matters at the heart of society bent on relentless modernity. It remains a disturbing but timely read.

Duiker surpassed his brilliant debut in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (translated into Dutch in 2004). In a novel of maturity, the themes centre on male violence and the (mostly brutalised) sexual life of the central character, Tshepo (Sotho for “Hope”), and the coterie of other characters with whom he interacts. Through the interweaving of ten narrative voices, Duiker broadens and expands on the themes left underdeveloped in *Thirteen Cents*. Tshepo, a graduate of Rhodes University, attends college in Cape Town and leads a listless life peculiar to the evanescent student years. Beneath his nonchalant and naïve exterior, he is the prisoner of a psychosis which started in childhood, when his mother was brutally raped and killed, an act in which his father was complicit. This childhood trauma, which included his being sodomised, triggers a process that cauterises his sense of manhood and engagement with life. His seemingly pointless life (“washed-up at twenty three”, he says at one point), circumscribed by drug use, sees him drawn to the underbelly of life in the city, and routine commitment to Valkenberg Mental Hospital, itself a continuation of earlier periods at Sterkfontein and Tara Mental Hospitals after the death of his mother. After his stint at Valkenberg, he finds work at a Waterfront restaurant and accommodation in Sea Point.

The urbane atmosphere of Cape Town allows for an exploration of the issues that confront young adults, as they struggle with questions of identity and finding their ways as (gendered) individuals within the racial liberalisation of all manner of previously prohibited spaces – educational, social, racial, sexual and psychic. Tshepo’s one wish is to exorcise the demons that torment him, and in his own explorations he finds his sexual orientation puzzling, as he is physically drawn to his flatmate Chris, an ex-inmate of Pollsmoor Prison. Although Tshepo’s heterosexual leanings are indicated by references to a girlfriend, Subashnee, who meant a lot to him at Rhodes, at the time of the story, he is at a loose end, and thus ripe for sexual experimentation. His story is interspersed with that of Mmabatho (Sotho for “Mother of People”), a female friend who almost always comes to his rescue, playing the role of a big sister, caring for him while she explores love across the colour line with Arne, her German boyfriend.

It is Chris, however, who sets in motion the rupture of a seemingly uneventful life, by beginning to brutalise the sensitive and caring Tshepo. First he beats him, then he locks him up for the night in their shared bathroom, ostensibly because he is “untidy” and does not clean after himself. When Tshepo is





incarcerated for being in possession of marijuana, Chris makes his move, rattling on him at work, getting his job and setting the scene for Tshepo's second sexual violation, an act that threatens to unhinge his already tenuous hold on reality. In a shockingly graphic scene, Chris and his two jailbird mates, Brendan and Virgil, brutally rape Tshepo, rob him and contemptuously toss him out. As he contemplates his violated, bruised self, his ruptured sphincter making the seemingly simple act of sitting down excruciatingly painful, a tearful Tshepo expresses his feelings in relation to his violated mother: "I feel as though my mother died again" (214).

In this act of reflection, Tshepo does not present the usual, expected bravado of masculinity, but expresses close identification with the violated womanhood of his mother, blurring the boundaries of sexual violation and orientation. Chris meanwhile justifies his actions in misogynist terms, seeing Tshepo as a "*poes*" (crude Cape patois for vagina), which points to the way genitalia take on a metonymic representation for both the strong (read: men) and the weak (read: women). Duiker discounts notions that physical violence against women (rape, sexual assault, physical abuse) is carried out with a uniform degree of consensus among men. Past novels in African literature in particular have tended to depict women as victims of male control – the sexually oppressed. Although it is true that the male potential for violence against women significantly circumscribes and elucidates their social position, defining women as archetypal victims freezes them as objects who defend themselves, men into subjects who perpetrate violence, and (every) society into powerless and powerful groups of people.

Duiker challenges these notions, showing that the rape and abuse of males in South Africa is a phenomenon that is largely undetected and definitely under-reported. We must grasp how male violence is theorised and interpreted *within* specific societies, both in order to understand it better, and to effectively organise to change it.⁶ Chris and his cohorts, like Gerald and his gangsters in *Thirteen Cents*, know that Tshepo is hardly likely to report his violation, given the derisive socially-held view that "real men cannot be raped." Tellingly, Tshepo observes: "I have lived through this once. I can survive it again, I tell myself, my throat aching" (217). He is adamant that he will not suffer another breakdown: "I will survive. I'm not going back to a mental hospital" (221).

While he seeks refuge with Mmabatho and Arne, Tshepo is very reticent about what happened, the silent victim representing the vast majority. By depicting his manhandling, rough treatment and violation, Duiker substitutes the female victim with a male one, inverting the accepted picture of gender violence and

showing how violation knows no boundaries, as Tshepo is *(wo)manised* – the ultimate and quintessential fear of the heterosexual (African?) male.

It is interesting that Tshepo decides to join the world of male prostitution so soon after the rape. Without skills or work experience, and reduced to foraging, this vocation allows him to maintain both body and soul, while offering him a chance to explore his own sexuality at leisure, in a world that accepts his orientation. In a society in which certain sectors view homosexual orientation as “un-African”, Duiker, by interspersing other characters’ narratives to substantiate and elaborate on Tshepo’s, allows for a fuller exploration of the gay community and its concerns. We meet Sebastian, Kalahari West, Cole, Storm and others who affirm one another, while Tshepo metamorphoses into his alter ego, Angelo. As Angelo, he gradually realises the pleasures of homosexuality across the colour line, even as his naïve view of his new environment is rudely overturned when he confronts embedded racism. He notes that:

I feel depressed and disillusioned, naïve for ever fooling myself that gay people are different. They are white people before they are gay, I tell myself bitterly.... Someone just tore a beautiful image I had in my mind. It is offensive, even ludicrous, to imagine that a gay person can be prejudiced when we live with so much fear and prejudice. It is a rude awakening. You are black. You will always be black (343).

Duiker’s observations of Cape Town and its inhabitants are certainly meant to please and displease in equal measure. For Tshepo, the “Grape Curtain” (a satiric reference to the apparent cocooning of the Western Cape from the rest of the country and its troubles) seems to be firmly in place. As he compares the two cities, Johannesburg and Cape Town, he realises the limitations under which he operates, and opts for the former.

As he bids farewell to Mmabatho, she is astounded that he has managed to grow without her noticing any changes: “Now you seem to be something that you have been hiding all along.” To which Tshepo nonchalantly replies: “I wasn’t hiding anything. Just waiting for the right time to be me” (451). In violence and in such despairing circumstances, Tshepo finds himself, much as the nation-state, born of violence, violation and male-directed brutality.

In an interview with Dutch journalist Fred de Vries, Duiker expanded on this:

I want to show that violence has a deeper meaning.... Without wanting to trivialise [its] seriousness ... one can say that violence is a culture that communicates a certain message.... I wanted to explore how violence is not only a way of dominating people, but ... to show that violence is used



by people to communicate with each other and to convey a message. The way in which this happens is deplorable. But we are part of a violent culture, and we never knew a period of rest, not did we receive help to enter into a process of healing after apartheid....

It will take some time still, before violence neutralises itself. I look behind it: where does it come from, is it hate, anger or communication? In any case, it's a kind of language" (2004).

To the Dutch publishers of *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Duiker wrote openly of his broader intentions:

In a South African context I was writing for people between 23 and 30 years of age – people in my age group, because our generation is confronted with different changes happening around us, and I wanted to communicate something of the pressures and contradictions around us. I think the book is not politically correct although it is a sensitive account of what I think is happening in South Africa right now. It's a young black man's view of what is happening – it explores youth culture and what it means to be young. It is also an overt exploration of current suburban culture. It explores a lot of social geography, from the obscenely rich to the poorest parts of Cape Town. Essentially it's a rite of passage novel. It represents young Africans, not exclusively black, but just as complex as anyone else, and [will make Dutch readers] realise that young people in South Africa have to deal with the same challenges that people in the North do.

We in Africa are not at all that different (cited in van der Merwe, 2005).

A sombre memorial service for Duiker was held at the SABC on 26 January 2005. For this service, the critically-acclaimed South African writer Zakes Mda wrote a moving eulogy. What Duiker's loss means to South African literature is all too painfully conveyed in his words:

I live in the USA where I work as a writer and a professor of creative writing. I was devastated to hear of the death of K. Sello Duiker. Sello and I were very close. We travelled the European literary festival circuit together and spent wonderful moments in, for instance, the Netherlands. We shared great moments on panels, talking about writing in South Africa and reading from our works. We laughed together. Oh, how we laughed. He was like a son to me. What a beautiful human being! What a great writer of the post-apartheid era! I cannot pretend that I am not angry as well. At what? At whom? I don't know. I am just angry. Many critics said Sello was treading on my footsteps: but I say he was going to be much greater. He had achieved



greater things than I at his age. I genuinely admired him. We all know that when someone has passed on we always gush out praise for him even if he was the worst scoundrel. What I am saying about his writing now, and about him as a human being, is what I said when he was still alive. It is on record.

I am glad I didn't wait for his death to eulogise him (Seakhoa, 2005).

Adding to the above, novelist, poet, essayist and scholar Professor Mbulelo Mzamane challenged the SABC to honour the deceased's legacy by establishing a K. Sello Duiker Literary Award for first-time publishing writers aged 30 and under. The special advisor to Pallo Jordan (current South African Minister of Arts and Culture), Willie Kgositsile, added that we can honour the memory of K. Sello Duiker by doing only two things: reading, and writing (Seakhoa, 2005).

For Annari van der Merwe, who published Duiker's novels, Duiker was her "most favourite writer." She sums him up as follows: "Fun-loving and enormously talented and perceptive, he was blessed with equal measures of gentleness and kind-heartedness on one hand, and unflinching honesty and a fearless pursuit of what he saw as essential human experience on the other. If he had one shortcoming, it was an inability to protect himself from life" (2005).

A fitting and moving tribute to the prodigious talent that was.



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Footnotes

- 1 Asked to describe himself in a sentence, Duiker once said: "I'm a travelling salesman." Interview with Victor Lakay, www.q.co.za/2001/2002/04/17-duiker.html.
- 2 *Feminist Africa* and the author are grateful to Annari van der Merwe, Duiker's publisher, for reading and advising on this piece.
- 3 Phaswane Mpe, in his doctoral proposal, observed that: "The most controversial reception of the engagement of sexuality ... has been that of *Disgrace*. The African National Congress ... accused the novel of racism, mainly because one of the ... central narrative points in *Disgrace* involves the rape of a white woman by a black man" (6). Mpe goes on to cite Athol Fugard, one of South Africa's most well-known writers, commenting on this: "...we've got to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all of the evil that we did in the past. That's a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus. It's an expression of a very morbid phenomenon...." (in Attridge 2000: 99).
- 4 The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's Gareth Newham opines that in South Africa there are 20 000 murders a year with more than 50% of these unsolved (2005). Such statistics do not take into account child disappearances in what is suspected to be thriving child-trafficking networks. Helen Moffett summarises findings from the Medical Research Council and Human Rights Watch that indicate that in South Africa, 40% of rapes are perpetrated on minors; that in one-third of cases where girls were raped, a teacher was responsible; and that one in three girls, and one in five boys, are likely to be sexually abused (2003).
- 5 A chilling account comes from Jo Wright: "Last month Brazil's juvenile justice law, the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent, celebrated its 15th anniversary. On paper it is a model law, exceeding international legislation. Yet a recent Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on conditions in Rio's five youth detention centres concluded that for the city's 900 incarcerated youth aged 13 to 21, the statute was a hollow promise" (2005).
- 6 Adapted from Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes", 339.

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