

THE ALLEGORY OF THE APPLE IN MARK BEHR'S  
*THE SMELL OF APPLES*:  
THE BURDEN OF THE PAST AND THE SENSE OF GUILT

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RESUMEN

La elección de *The Smell of Apples*, la primera novela de Mark Behr, como objeto empírico de este estudio puede parecer poco convencional. *The Smell of Apples* se puede considerar como una obra muy compleja que nos hace entrar en la mentalidad Afrikaner, una mentalidad también compleja, con sus puntos débiles y sus contradicciones. Es un libro sobre la pérdida de la inocencia y la importancia de la memoria, sobre la indoctrinación comunista y las abominaciones racistas. Mark Behr concibió su historia al principio de los años 90, una época cuando el país hacía frente a cambios radicales. Después de cincuenta años de supremacía blanca, el país se estaba transformando, poco a poco, en una democracia, pero la mayoría de los escritores, al igual que Mark Behr, quisieron enseñar a sus lectores los horrores del pasado Afrikaner.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sudáfrica, narrativa contemporánea, apartheid, culpabilidad.

ABSTRACT

Mark Behr, the author of *The Smell of Apples* (1993), epitomises a new generation of writers in the post-apartheid literary landscape of South Africa. These writers, in a reconciled nation still in limbo, refer to the excruciating past to explore it and search for answers and keys to the present. Prior to 1990, most of the Afrikaners relied on what they had been taught both at home and at school to justify the colour bar. The acceptance of democracy, however, implied re-evaluation of the past and of Afrikaner dogmas. The feeling of guilt made Mark Behr unveil the Afrikaner myths through the symbolical and allegorical portrayal of Marnus' family, revealing the destructive power of the past and its effect on the present.

KEY WORDS: South Africa, contemporary fiction, apartheid, guilt.

The choice of *The Smell of Apples* —Mark Behr's first novel— as a field of research may appear rather unconventional. Not that South African literature has hitherto remained beyond the academic path. On the contrary, since the demise of apartheid, it has caught the world's attention as never before. Yet, in the light of the latest studies on the state of literature in South Africa such as *Writing South Africa, Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, *The Smell of Apples* despite its immediate popularity and its positive reception when it was published in 1995, seems to have, strangely, become forgotten.

The book was first written in Afrikaans in 1993 and re-published in English in 1995. It soon became a best-seller in South Africa and received the approval of numerous literary authorities. Among the handful of prizes it was awarded, we can mention the prestigious CNA Literary Debut Award, the Eugène Marais Prize, and the Betty Trask Award for the best first novel published in England in 1995. It was also shortlisted for the 1996 Guardian Fiction Prize. The reader of Behr's first novel is usually enthralled by its originality and depth. The prose is so different from what one usually experiences that it mesmerises its reader and haunts him long after the last page. The latter is carried into the complexity of the Afrikaner mentality and the dark abyss of the human mind with its weaknesses and contradictions.

In this analysis, we have referred to the English version of Behr's novel which was published by Abacus in 1995. Quotations from the book are put in italics; references to pages are either inserted in the course of the text or put in parenthesis at the end of the quote.

Mark Behr drafted his story at the beginning of the 1990s, at a time when the country was swept by tremendous change. After fifty years of white supremacy, the country was slowly moving towards democracy. In this reconciled nation still in limbo, Mark Behr epitomises a new generation of writers in the post-apartheid literary landscape of South Africa. These writers refer to the excruciating past to explore it and search for answers and keys to the present.

The result is a book about the Afrikaners by an Afrikaner. Mark Behr has kept his exploration within the boundaries of what he knows best —his own culture—. The other important aspect of his undertaking is the refusal to disown his roots. His novel is neither an indictment of nor an apology for the Afrikaner mode of thought. In this respect, the choice of Afrikaans as the language of the first publication is revealing of the author's intention. He chose to write in the vernacular that had been termed in English as «the language of the oppressor». Though aware of the inhumanity of segregation, Mark Behr makes a distinction between the ideology and the idiom. It is not in banishing Afrikaans literature that one erases the errors committed in the past. Once the language of resistance to British imperialism, there is no reason why it should once more become the language of liberty; liberty to recount openly what happened during the apartheid era.

This account is carried out through the story of a young boy's childhood in Cape Town in the year 1973. Marnus, the eleven-year-old narrator, chronicles the everyday events that happen to his secure Afrikaner family. It can mean fishing and bathing with his father (Johan Erasmus) —a General in the South African army—, lovingly watching his mother (Leonore Erasmus) dressing for a party, or quarrelling with his supercilious elder sister (Ilse) or else riding bicycles with his best friend (Frikkie Delpont). Superficially it is an ordinary image of boyhood. But —as the saying goes— all that glitters is not gold. And the visit in the summer of that year of a General from Chile (Mr Smith) marks a watershed in Marnus' formative years by revealing the hypocrisy and perversion that lurked behind his parents' apparently idyllic life.

With Marnus' story, Mark Behr goes beyond a mere contribution to the retrospection undertaken in the field of literature and politics. His recent



condemnation by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission crystallises a peculiar dimension of his novel. Interwoven with the voice of Marnus as the child is the mature yet disillusioned voice of the adult he has become. The year is 1988, the setting Angola. Marnus, aged twenty-six, is an officer in the South African army engaged in a guerrilla war against the communists. Whilst fighting against external forces, the young man desperately tries to come to terms with his life and aspirations. Or is it Behr trying to come to terms with his own life and aspirations? The character of Marnus may be Behr's response to his own evil spirit. The hero and its creator are related to one another to the point that the former can arguably be viewed as the reflection of the latter. Although details of the author's life are sparse, Marnus' story is probably partly autobiographical.

The purpose of this article is to widen our interpretation of Marnus' story to the History of the Afrikaners, to explain why this ethnic group which stands for the oppressors, eventually appears to be oppressed, bound to fear, isolation and to some extent, alienation.

*The Smell of Apples.* It is maybe in this title —enigmatic at first— that the ultimate truth lies, the answer to Marnus' impossible escape, to his parents' sacrilegious deeds. Indeed why should Behr have chosen this title if not to emphasize the symbolism of the apples in the story?

In the course of the narrative, Marnus makes several references to the apples. Sometimes these references are anecdotal (once, we are told that the dessert ending the diner with Mr Smith is an apple-tart. Another time the fruit is linked with a drink, «Appletise»). As these details add nothing to the plot, we may conclude that Behr has tried to draw our attention to the fruit before disclosing the full irony and horror of the book's title on page 179.

The first time Marnus really hints at the title, the smell of apples is associated with white supremacy. When the young boy and his father return from visiting Uncle Samuel's farm, they stop to admire the sunset over False Bay and Johan Erasmus says:

This country was empty before our people arrived. *Everything, everything* you see, we built up from nothing. This is our place, given to us by God and we will look after it. Whatever the cost. (124)

Back in the car, Marnus remarks, '*Dad, do you smell the apples?*' and his father replies, '*Even the apples we brought to this country*' (124). The father's answer is fraught with symbolism. Indeed the apple allegorically represents white, European civilisation as opposed to native, primitive culture. Johan claims that when his forefathers settled in Southern Africa, they did not colonise a country. They actually brought their knowledge, their culture and scientific achievements.

The conviction that the Afrikaners alone have brought South Africa to its present stage is not Behr's fictional fantasy. As an echo to his character's words we can quote a passage from Briley's book about friendship between Steven Biko and John Woods. Steve Biko was at the origin of the Black Consciousness Movement in 1973 and his aim was to restore Black race and roots which had been badly tarnished



by white propaganda. Woods comes to plead Biko's cause before Kruger, the Ministry of Police. Kruger stops in his hall to show his English counterpart some pictures:

We Afrikaners came here in 1652, [...] he pointed to the old photo of Conestaga wagon—the Trek across the wilderness, the homesteading, the concentration camps the English put our wives and children in during the Boer War. [...] Let me assure you [...] any Afrikaner family could show you the same thing. We didn't colonize this country, Mr Woods. We built it.' (Briley 1987: 95-96)

One of the Afrikaner rooted myths and the one that justified in their eyes their undivided power is indeed that the Southern part of the African continent was an untrodden territory when the Dutch settlers arrived. Until recently, even the official *South African Yearbook* used to record this assertion although historian had for long proved, in consulting logbooks and other documents, that the first colonists did encounter Khoisan and Bushmen when they first landed on the South African coast (Louvel: 42). Some Afrikaner also used to deny the fact that Blacks had ever been able to build monuments in former Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe) despite the evidence unanimously provided by the archaeologists and notably carbon dating which situates the buildings in Zimbabwe back to the fifth or sixth century AD (Ferro: 193). We can add that not only did some Afrikaners refuse to recognise the Africans' contribution to the progress of their country but they also asserted that Africans «blindly resisted to the spread of civilisation» (Thomson: 29). Civilisation was indeed regarded as «an exclusively 'white' and 'Christian' achievement» (Thomson: 29).

Actually it is an all-time tradition that in non-democratic nations, the oppressors rewrite the past as it suits them. Did not George Orwell write that «who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past» (Orwell: 37)? History is for ever made by the winners. In that manner, the end of apartheid for black students also meant the rediscovery of the nation's past. Indeed, for years, curricula had been drawn by white authorities. In schools, the scope of history taught to the natives was strictly limited to the period contained between the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652 and the establishment of apartheid in 1984. Thus the natives were stripped of their history, of a possible glorious lineage so that the whites could claim unilateral rights to govern the country.

It is true that in conquering the South African continent the whites brought their model of civilisation with its Christian values, its economic achievements and cultural heritage. But in doing so, they also destroyed the formal pattern of tribal societies and replaced it by a system infected by corruption, moral degeneracy, hatred and fear. That is why the smell of apples—which is at first linked with white superiority—is eventually associated with rot:

'These apples are rotten or something', says Frikkie, and he turns his apple around in his hand after sniffing at it.

'They stink. Smell this', and he holds the apple to my nose. I smell the apple in his hand. It smells sour. (179)

It is not the apple that smells sour but Frikkie's hand which is still covered with Johan Erasmus' semen. When Frikkie touches the apple, he transfers the mark of the rape onto the fruit. The apple bears the stain of sin and as such its smell is allegorically associated with Johan's semen —the «contaminated seed of militarist patriarchy» (McMurtry, 1995: 103). To put it plainly we may venture to say that Behr assimilates the conquest of South Africa by his forefathers to a rape.

The Eden —the Africa of primeval times— epitomised by the apple had been desecrated by the arrival of European settlers. To lend weight to this interpretation, we can quote Paul Rich who developed the idea in a conference held at New York in 1981. In his address Rich refers to three major literary works in which colonisation is seen as a vivid episode of South African history. His first example is taken out of Haggard's novel *Jess* in which, at one point, Captain Niel's love for Bessie (Jess' sister) is likened to the 'corrupt Eden' of the surrounding African terrain (Rich: 123).

The second example refers to a passage of Alan Paton's *Cry Oh Beloved Country* which is still regarded as the masterpiece of South African literature (Paton, 1987: 23-28). When Mismangu, the priest, undertakes his quest for his lost son, he is forced to leave his small village for the city. On the train, he describes the South African landscape passing before his eyes. Paul Rich remarks that the tenor of the character's language fluctuates from one paragraph to another in a symbolical manner. Whereas the hero uses a rich, metaphorical prose to depict his rural Natal, his style suddenly hardens as the countryside recedes before the industrialised surroundings of the town. The imagery style «evokes 'the idyllic world' of the pastoral», when African society was formerly governed by a cohesive set of social structures, before the advent of the white man. Then, as the «descent into hell commences», Mismangu turns to a dry rhetoric stripped of any emotion or beauty that is at the time when the destructive mark of white civilisation appears on the terrain (Rich: 131).

The third example is found in *The Conservationist*. In the course of her narrative (pp. 128-130), Gordimer inserts a very sensual and suggestive scene between the hero, Mehring, and a young Portuguese girl next to who he is sitting. The episode takes place in a plane. During the flight over South African territory, Mehring fondles the girl's body with her resisting. The symbolism lies in the simultaneity of Mehring touching intimate parts of the girl's body and the jet passing across the African interior, «the corrupt Eden lying far below as the 'golden reclining nudes of the desert'» (Gordimer: 134).

The Boers, in bringing the apples, that is in 'civilising' the Southern part of Africa, were in fact contaminating a sacred soil and turning the Eden into a Lost Paradise. In the novel this desecration is epitomised in the recurrent image of the 'railway line' which crosses the Cape of Good Hope and disfigures the landscape. It is a scar caused by the white man's advance on the African earth. The line runs along the shore and separates Marnus' house from the beach and by extension the sea. In the narrator's mind, the railway line seems to represent an imaginary but ever-present frontier between his childhood world and the infinite surface of the Atlantic. The Ocean is always referred to as being «on the other side». On the other side of the tracks, naturally.



Main Road was quiet and you don't hear anything except the waves breaking on the other side of the railway line. (17)

I can feel asleep at night with the sound of waves and the smell of salt water and sea bamboo coming from the other side of the railway line. (27)

With the moon falling through the window and with the sound of waves on the other side of the tracks, I fall asleep. (199)

This is symbolical on another level. The sea being usually associated with freedom, the line is also here as an obstacle preventing Marnus from enjoying liberty. He is condemned to hear the sound of waves coming from the other side of the line. He is doomed to hear the sound of liberty whilst remaining manacled to the sound of his parents' ideology.

Just as South African terrain bears the mark of European colonisation —epitomised in the railway line— the Afrikaner's conscience bears the mark of this act of their ancestors. In the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament, we are told that the wrongdoing of a generation reverberates upon its successor:

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord Your God am a jealous God punishing the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. (The Ten Commandments, v. 20)

Therefore, in *The Smell of Apples*, the characters appear to labour under a layer of history which weighs heavy on their shoulders. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the biblical principle, as quoted above, is precisely the one to which the narrator alludes:

I know that it's one of the greatest commandments, never to take the name of the Lord in vain. It's one of those sins where the punishment gets carried from one generation to the next. Even if you don't take the name of the Lord in vain yourself, but your great-grandfather did, you'll still be punished for it. (10)

This remark ironically foreshadows the boy's epic race in the bush of Southern Angola. There, he desperately tried to escape from God's punishment (from death) but instead embraced it. In his soul-searching, he was forced to contemplate his past and that of his forefathers. He realised that he had refused to acknowledge their wrongdoing as well as his own. Had he chosen, he might have freed himself from this burden. Facing death, he attempted to make a closing expiatory confession, «I try to speak to him, to tell him that I well knew all along, just like all the others.» But it was already too late. He was «dumb» (198). Marnus surrendered to death as his parents surrendered to deceit because they were uncomprehending of omnipresent yet concealed guilt.



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