

Pyramids and Prejudice: A Study of Cultural Discrimination in Laretta Ngcobo's *And they didn't die*

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Abstract

A South African classic, Laretta Ngcobo's novel, *And they didn't die*, explores the nexus of hegemony, culture, and transformation under apartheid rule. Edward Said's thesis on the hierarchy of culture provides the conceptual framework for an analysis of politico-cultural agency in Ngcobo's novel. Three characters in the narrative—Siyalo, Jezile, and Lungu—are used to comment on the cultural dynamics inherent in three different but interlocking sites: the nine-to-five working environment, rural Bantu culture, and the ambiguous location of "African Whiteness." The paper establishes that the life of each character betrays culture's negative discriminating power and the amplification of negativity by State policy.

Keywords: prejudice, culture, apartheid, industrialism, patriarchy

Jezile, the female protagonist of Laretta Ngcobo's second novel, *And they didn't die* (1991) makes a telling statement on the prolonged and agonizing war that black South Africans wage against the apartheid government. She says: "Local uprisings could only chip at the granite power of South Africa; in the long-term they knew that they would overthrow that power, but in the short-term, people suffered and whole communities made enormous sacrifices" (Ngcobo, 1991, p. 218). Revealingly, the novel abounds with instances of suffering and sacrifice on the part of the black South African populace. Racial tension simmers throughout, beginning with Jezile's hostile encounter with the white dipping officer, Mr. Pienaar, and ending with her stabbing of the white soldier who is trying to rape her daughter. The thirty years or so between these two events hold numerous

episodes of anger and bloodshed which underscore the extent to which racism poisons every form of contact between the black and the white South African, and while it is obvious that Bantu resistance is undying, it is equally clear that Boer authority is “granite.” Unfortunately, apartheid is not the sole obstacle to justice in the text. Standing in its huge shadow is another mountain which is more insidious and consequently, more difficult to tackle. When laws are issued from this particular edifice, according to Jezile, “it [is] as if God [had] spoken” (p. 226). She is referring to the inflexible power of Bantu culture. The customs of her own people contribute materially to her personal suffering and sacrifice, and the discriminations intrinsic to African patriarchy continually join hands with the relentlessness of the racist government to marginalize her. Incident upon incident in Jezile’s story demonstrate that culture can co-operate with politics in an unhealthy way, and elements of both Bantu and Boer culture are blamable for the exacerbation of an already chronic state of segregations. Few texts communicate this as vividly as Ngcobo’s. The chain of outsiders and exiles that runs through the pages testifies to the fact that where government policy is based on exclusion, the inherent tendency of culture to also exclude may have ugly repercussions.

The Palestinian-American critic, Said (1983), identifies culture unambiguously as an inherently discriminatory phenomenon. He describes it as “a system of values *saturating* downwards almost everything within its purview; yet paradoxically, culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to everything and everyone it dominates” (Said, 1983, p. 9; emphasis in the original). Said’s thesis is that cultural norms are constructed at the apex of the social pyramid and transmitted downwards in an ever-widening arc to those at the bottom, at which point culture is universally applicable but neither universally accessible nor universally beneficial. In other words, people may share a culture and yet be shut out of some of its salient aspects. They may possess a culture and at the same time be denied access to the prerequisites that will make them “cultured.” Worse still, the very culture they claim to possess might declare them out of bounds or “inferior” (p. 14).

Said expounds on his argument as follows:

Historically, one supposes that culture has always involved hierarchies; it has separated the elite from the popular, the best from the less than best, and so forth. It has also made certain styles and modes of thought prevail over others. But its tendency has always been to move downwards from the height of power and privilege in order to diffuse, disseminate, and expand itself in the widest possible range. (p. 9)

The concept of culture as a system that moves downward first and outwards only second is tenable even in the domain of popular culture, which at first glance transmits

itself horizontally across the masses rather than in a vertical descent from the elite to the plebeian. In popular culture, as in national culture, attitudes, taste, order, and other details of that culture are spread most effectively and rapidly by its icons; those who are held up as figureheads even though they have been popularly elected. Said's sketch of the cone-like shape of cultural dissemination is astute, and his argument of its "saturating" effect is incontestable since cultural norms pervade every social institution.

Bearing this in mind, one can appreciate the possible predicament of individuals living within the purview of two cultures, as it happens with the black South Africans of *And they didn't die*. The dominating and saturating tendency doubles, proceeding as it does from two authorities—the European in addition to the African. The predicament would have been difficult enough if the two authorities had been on par, but they are not. The black characters in the narrative depict in extreme terms a situation that pertained for most colonized Africans, whereby the European and the African cultures did not really co-exist as the former was superimposed on top of the latter.¹ Viewed from the perspective of a cultural pyramid, this pressure increased the burden of conformism for, and prejudice against, those at the bottom.

Farred (1993) acknowledges the burden of prejudice on the black South African characters of *And they didn't die*. Farred is attentive to Ngcobo's spotlight on rural female characters, which he deems groundbreaking in the history of black South African writing:

Black South African literature since the late 1940s is marked by three distinguishing features: a commitment to the struggle of the proletariat against the forces of apartheid, a predominantly urban setting, and a majority of male writers. Laretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* breaks with this tradition ... focusing on the political and economic struggle of rural women in Natal at the end of the 1950s. The importance of Ngcobo's narrative within black South African writing is that it explores the connections between black women's sexual and political experiences. (p. 94)

Etter-Lewis (2013) agrees. She talks about the "intersection of racism and sexism" in the text (Etter-Lewis, 2013, p. 103), and appends a third component; culture. Culture has as much to do as politics with the black woman's harrowing sexual experiences. The black woman's body is in fact a battlefield: "Jezile finds that her body is the locus of several contending forces: 1) customary practices that define women almost exclusively by their marital status and fertility; 2) political laws that restrict physical movement of the body and determine how it can be used, especially sexually; and 3) the

¹ For a pioneer analysis of the superimposition of European culture upon the African, see E. N. Obiechina (1975), *Culture, tradition and society in the West African novel*.

liberation/resistance movement that requires the ultimate sacrifice of one's life/body" (p. 10). Etter-Lewis highlights resistance and the woman's body, and it is from this angle that she approaches the connection between custom and apartheid.

In a website review, Polo (2011) investigates culture and the woman's body as contained in the "Mother Africa" trope. Polo argues that this trope is a "nationalistic myth," largely the work of canonical postcolonial writers zealous to construct the African mother as a figure of integrity. The figure has over time become pejorative because African women wish to widen their horizons:

Albeit a necessary metatextual mode to write back to Empire, such nationalist mythology represents the figure of the woman or mother as merely a vehicle or a vessel carrying African identity, easily corrupted by colonial influences. Representing 'timelessness', the figure of the woman comes to exist then outside of History too. As a result, she becomes an object existing at the periphery of nationalist discourse, rendered apolitical.

Ngcobo's representation of women in *And they didn't die* deconstructs the trope and invests women with political agency. Polo is of the opinion that Ngcobo replaces "Mother Africa" with a "Mother of the Nation" substitute that is "intimately linked to the political and historical action of nation building ... Jezile is portrayed as a subject who evolves as a result of her contact with historical events and contemporary politics." Jezile reconstructs her identity as a mother outside the stipulations of the clan, taking pride in her position as the single parent of her biracial politically vibrant son, Lungu, a symbol of the nation. Polo concludes: "The novel is correspondingly a milestone in the process of redefining the link between motherhood and nationalist discourse."

Commenting on Jezile's experience of single parenthood, Gagliano (2013) contends that in the event of Jezile's rape and the subsequent birth of Lungu, the attitude of the clan matches that of the apartheid government:

In Ngcobo's *And they didn't die*, cultural oppression occurs alongside apartheid political oppression while also binding the oppressed together in protective solidarity. The author suggests that, given the fact of apartheid's intervention, the tight customary familial rules and roles of the tribe should have offered some leeway and been compassionately relaxed; the novel depicts the family-shattering results of the terrible co-incidence of Afrikaaner dominated apartheid and customary laws for women like the protagonist at this time: an accidental, destructive 'conspiracy' of oppressive forces. (pp. 53-54)

Gagiano notices the “conspiracy” between culture and politics, the premise of this essay. Her preoccupation, however, is squarely with how Jezile illuminates the dealings between culture and socio-political institutions in a panoramic picture. Gagiano expatiates upon the nuances of cultural settings and the “tribal-modernity encounter” as reproduced by South African writers from the earliest times to date (p. 66). Ngcobo is one of seven authors² whose works demonstrate that tribal culture may be enriching, but “also necessarily caution us against the typical dangers of a tribal culture deteriorating into an inappropriate, unadaptive, socially unstable and even individually threatening set of customs” (p. 67).

Faith Njeru in an electronic publication highlights “the symbolic deviation of rural women characters,” which occurs because “the perceived normalcy is entrapping.” “Normalcy” in Ngcobo’s text is an interweaving of “the hostile climate, patriarchy and apartheid.” Njeru’s proposition is that “the hostile climate” is a political force, a detail that other critiques seem to have bypassed. She regards nature as playing a palpable role in women’s life and in the power struggle between the sexes. Her approach to the text is feminist.

In substance, a number of critics have surveyed prejudice and culture in Ngcobo’s text, either as separate entities or conjoined constructs, but not in a manner that replicates or controverts the notion of a cultural pyramid. As earlier stated, the pyramid’s architecture and the downward movement of cultural dissemination imply an increase in the burden of conformism for, and prejudice against, those at the base. The lucidity of Said’s sketch, and the continued relevance of prejudice and marginalization in the discourse of postcolonial peoples, underscores the value of applying his ideas to a work of art. As Mukherjee (2005) notes, “Marginality may have been commodified by postcolonial theory; [but] power, exclusion and gatekeeping are material realities that

² The seven authors are:

- i. Hendrik (cited in Marais, E., N. (2007). *The Rain bull and other tales from the San*. 1921. Cape Town, South Africa: Human & Rousseau. (J. Coetzee, Trans. of the *Dwaalstories*, told to Marais by Hendrik).
- ii. Mqhayi, S. E. K. (2009). *Abantu Besizwe: Historical and biographical writings, 1902-1944*, ed. and trans. Jeff Opland, Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- iii. Head, B. (1977). *The collector of treasures and Other Botswana village tales*. London, UK: Heinemann.
- iv. Ngcobo, L. (1991). *And they didn't Die*. New York, NY: Braziller.
- v. Zakes, M. (2000). *The heart of redness*. Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press.
- vi. Donald, D. (2009). *Blood's mist*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana.
- vii. Thando, M. (2009). *A man who Is not a man*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

need to be acknowledged” (p. 203). Inasmuch as postcolonial peoples are still embroiled in the reality of exclusion, Said’s theories are of import. Equally important are the lessons emanating from apartheid, a time-tested and educative specimen of exclusion and gatekeeping.

The Boers of *And they didn’t die* are at the apex of the cultural pyramid. They feel no compulsion to abide by African mores, whereas the Bantu, who are on a lower plane and the recipients of mores disseminating from the hegemonic culture above, are subject to the dual pressure of their own African value system as well as the Western one sitting on top of it. Three characters in the text—Siyalo, the husband of Jezile; Jezile, the protagonist; and Lungu, Jezile’s illegitimate son—demonstrate this. They remind the reader that culture is an agent of negative as well as positive discrimination, and that where inequality is an accepted policy the negative tendency is intensified.

Siyalo, the “Nine-to-Five” Existence

And they didn’t die portrays South Africa of the 1950s and 1960s, in which Blacks outnumber Whites by four to one but the latter dictate the pace of the society. Despite the negligible number of White characters, their strength is palpable in the form of their culture—their habits, skills, appetites, assumptions, and technology. Durban is the novel’s major urban setting whose concentrated white populace has turned it into a microcosm of the industrial West. Civilization in Durban duplicates that of capitalist Europe, having a bourgeoisie, a mercantile middleclass, and a swarming proletariat. The white citizens constitute the bourgeoisie and the mercantile middleclass. They have lands, factories, servants, and money. The bulk of the proletariat is black, recruited from the villages and reserves into the lowest ranks of the working class. The life of these workers—the group into which Siyalo falls—is structured on the nine-to-five routine. Siyalo migrates to Durban at the age of sixteen and works the routine for years in the belief that his relationship with the city is purely economic. But his distress when he attempts to return to the village bespeaks otherwise. He is a “townsman” (Ngcobo, 1991, p.123) not only in terms of location or employment, but by virtue of a culture that he has assimilated.

An article on *Wikipedia* entitled “Working Time” states, “9 to 5 [is] a phrase used to describe a conventional and possibly tedious job...a position of subordinate employment.” Due to its mundane nature, it is easy to overlook the fact that it has produced a singular culture with far-reaching social implications. Coote et al. (2012) claim that “even today...paid work remains firmly at the centre of people’s lives, providing access to benefits... and shaping how we use the rest of our time” (p. 13). The nine-to-five lifestyle is a matrix of culture in its own right, and as such it has distinctive cultural features. First, it is a European routine—a point which might seem obvious but needs to be stressed because it is so thoroughly acclimatized in contemporary Africa. “It

is a legacy of industrial capitalism” (Coote et al., p. 13) imported into Africa in the course of Westernization. Second, in its capacity as a culture it covers all within its domain, primarily the working class. In other words, it engenders customs and habits among the African workers that over-ride tribal demarcations and are practiced corporately. Third, like culture everywhere, it designates “something to which one belongs, something that one possesses” (Said, p. 8). The complications arising from “belonging” and “possessing,” and yet neither “belonging” nor “possessing,” are hard lessons that Siyalo, Jezile, and Lungu learn individually. For Siyalo, it means relocation from Durban is *dislocation* because he can never really re-trace his steps to the traditional Bantu life. The city has become his encampment and he fights alongside other Africans for a future within it. Hazel, a Colored South African city man in Alex La Guma’s novel, *In the fog of the season’s end* (1972), puts it like this:

[He] had not returned to the countryside after [the strike]. He felt that the brown eroded land, the little dwellings on the scrubby hillside held little for him. Besides, his blood had dripped onto the hard grey surface of a city sidewalk, and it was as if it had taken root and held him there. (La Guma, 1972, pp. 132-133)

The city community is controlled by the clock. This is self-evident to Siyalo, immersed as he is in urbanity before the novel opens. Jezile, however, is on her maiden visit to the metropolis, and the disparity between the city and the village strikes her immediately as a fundamental difference in rhythm. She alights from a bus and the tempo of city life hits her:

She virtually saw nothing all the way but people and more people, circumscribed by huge buildings. The city, that hotch-potch of human experience, that patchwork of human endeavour. Jezile and Siyalo pushed and zigzagged their way through the crowds—people’s faces varied in every way, black people, white people, Indian people, smartly dressed people, and people in rags, clean and dirty people; people with loads on their heads lumbering along and some swaggering with not a care in the world; but one thing in common—they all seemed in a hurry to get somewhere. (Ngcobo, 1991, p. 22)

Inhabitants of Durban are caught up in a massive time-regulated gadget that subtly harnesses other contesting systems. For the black worker, eight or nine hours (minimum) are spent in the offices or factories. Leisure time follows an agenda in consonance with work: evenings are spent in the beer parlors, Saturdays in the shopping malls or cinemas, Sundays in church, and annual leave in the village. Skills, habits, virtues, and vices have

been shaped by this blueprint. A case in point is the African value of hospitality, which has been re-modeled to create allowance for the industrial culture. Regularity and punctuality at work demand that Africans remain as close to their work zones as their bosses will tolerate, thus slums have arisen in and around Durban to house them. In these choked shanty towns, hospitality attains an urgency that the homespun rural dweller could scarcely have conceived. Multiple persons from different families share one roof, and sometimes one bed. In the bed-sharing custom, for instance, a man surrenders his bed to another for the night if the occasion warrants it, an arrangement that surprises Jezile immensely. She spends her first night in Durban courtesy of this slummy protocol, on a “borrowed” bed in a men’s dormitory. She refuses to permit Siyalo to touch her in such an arena, but her rustic delicacy is lost on the other men who bring in their women without qualms. The flimsy curtains separating the chain of cubicles are inadequate to conceal from Jezile’s horrified ears the orgy taking place on every side, demonstrative of the fact that traditional sexual modesty in Africa, as elsewhere, can hardly withstand the onslaught of urbanization. Her shock escalates the next day when Siyalo takes her to the quarters for married men. The quarters comprise dilapidated two-room buildings housing two families each, one per room. A room can shelter up to eighteen family members from three generations—children, parents, and grandparents. The squalor and lack of privacy dismay her until she comes to grips with reality. This is not her native Sigageni; it is a “profane” workaday world (Olsen, 1993, p. 66). Paid work is at the root of the world, and weekly salaries, week-ends off, and annual vacations are the offshoots. The fruit is a fully-rounded African industrial culture.

This information explains why Siyalo’s program in the city has the kind of lasting effect that is evident when he returns to the Bantustan in Sigageni. He has already “naturalized” in the metropolis. Again, the difference in lifestyles is symbolized through chronometry. Disparity in time-keeping regularly delimits African and non-African behaviors in modern African literature; there is city timing and there is village timing, and it is pertinent that Siyalo is unable to shake off one for the other. He is evicted from Durban by the government for his involvement in anti-apartheid politics, but he carries the city home with him in his bodily mechanisms. His disorientation on the reserve is expressed in his incapacity to synchronize with the rural timetable. Every season is the wrong one. He cannot tolerate “the curse...of the dusty winter” (Ngcobo, 1991, p.107), or the “malevolent” sun (p. 118), or the “stifling humidity of the rain” (p. 128). He is unable to wake before dawn, as the sterling farmers do, he lacks the stamina to drive a team of cattle for a protracted period, and he spans oxen at a slower speed than “the young boys of ten and eleven” (p. 122). The narrator summarizes his quandary with the observation that “somehow he seemed in conflict with the whole of his world...It had spat him out” (p. 111). This is an intriguing statement in view of a later one that Siyalo is “a creature of [African] custom” (p. 233). African custom is indeed dear to him but

another has taken up residence abreast of it and consequently, his heart is permanently divided. Significantly, in the heat of his lingering struggle to adjust to an arable life, the object of hope that he eventually stumbles upon is not an ancestral possession but a European artifact, an old leather handbag, “the proud possession of some rich white woman” (p. 109). Moreover, when he finally finds a job that suits him it is not in the fields but as a cook in a school for Colored children, which reinstates him in a semblance of the nine-to-five routine. Both the handbag and the job as a cook hint at his enduring affiliation to the metropolis.

Prior to his movement back to the reserve, Siyalo thinks of Sigageni as a “city variation” (p. 107), thereby confirming the fact that the city has become his norm. The years he spends on the fringes of Boer society provide ample opportunity for him to be drawn into its working culture, a culture which unfortunately has the same predisposition to discrimination as any other. In the nine-to-five pyramid, the upper middle class entrepreneurs could be said to represent the culture’s “best” (Said, 1983, p. 9), since they are the paradigms of taste, order, and efficiency. The “less than best” (p. 9), roughly delineated, are the administrative staff, followed by the skilled workers, and the unskilled. This separation, of course, predates *And they didn’t die*. The divergent benefits accruing to “the best” and “the less than best” have fueled angry debate and sparked off revolutions for centuries, but in the main the discrepancies have persisted. Charles Dickens is probably the best known English novelist to capture the best/less-than-best dichotomy of the industrial society at its genesis. He was acquainted with the manifold offspring spawned by industrialism; prostitutes, paupers, and orphans, as well as successful professionals and magnates. His portrait of Mr. Podsnap, a merchant in *Our mutual friend*, is a humorous attack on the automaton but it hits upon a situation that Siyalo and his type dream of—life near the crown of the industrial hierarchy:

Mr. Podsnap’s world was not a very large world.... The world got up at eight, shaved close at a quarter-past, breakfasted at nine, went to the City at ten, came home at half-past five, and dined at seven. Mr. Podsnap’s notions of the Arts in their integrity might have been stated thus. Literature; large print, respectively descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Painting and Sculpture; models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Music; a respectable performance (without variations) on stringed and wind instruments, sedately expressive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine,

going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven.
(as cited in Kermodé and Hollander, 1975, p. 798)

The prerogatives of Mr. Podsnap belong to the white merchants, the middle class, in Ngcobo's cosmos. There are white citizens in Durban's proletariat too, but where they make an appearance it is in the relatively cushioned position of management staff, as "superintendants" (Ngcobo, 1991, p. 23). Notwithstanding, the presence of a white management cadre does not disrupt the basic social pattern in which white South Africans alone adopt the habits of the bourgeoisie, and the blacks unchangingly fill the slot the culture labels "inferior" (Said, p. 14). Jezile comprehends this to some degree when she weighs the wretchedness of the African slums in KwaMashu against the luxury of the white suburbs. Surveying the early morning exodus of Africans from the ghetto, she gives the reader insight into a situation that would have been hell on earth for the fastidious Podsnap—life at the base of the hierarchy:

She watched Kwa Mashu empty itself from the security of those matchbox houses. The coombies screeched, passing each other at breakneck speed, loaded beyond capacity with passengers in and out of KwaMashu....[KwaMashu] grew to serve the big city next door. [It] was not part of that city—it was the human reservoir of Durban, no different from the water reservoir on Reservoir Hill that Siyalo had pointed out to her. People were in the white man's city to work—to work in the city they did not live in. (Ngcobo, 1991, p.30)

The authorities attempt to handle the pool of human beings in KwaMashu in a manner akin to the pool of water on Reservoir Hill. They push both to the borders of the city and relate to them as economic necessities, forgetting that, having appropriated elements of European culture, the Africans also aspire to be "cultured." The Bantu city-dwellers are no longer strangers from far flung rural abodes but participants in a civilization where materialistic betterment is withheld from them. The endless rioting that comes in the wake of this is impervious to beating, imprisonment, torture, or murder. The racist government stubbornly strives to brace the social distance between the Boer and the Bantu but it is a doomed endeavor because, in the cultural context, "belonging" goes hand in hand with "possessing." The African workers have moored in the city, and it is inevitable that they should reach for the loftier aspects of the culture to which they feel they belong.

Jezele, “the Barefoot Lifestyle”

The black worker is relegated to the periphery of city culture. In a parallel manner, relegation is integral to “the barefoot lifestyle” of the village (Ngcobo, 1991, p. 18). It is instructive to juxtapose cultural transactions in penurious Sigageni with those in affluent Durban. In Sigageni, as in South Africa as a whole, it is a handful of individuals who dictate the cultural norms but in this insular Bantu province, authority is determined pre-eminently by gender. The men are the unchallenged overlords. Numerous factors account for this. Some men are chiefs and elders, conventional authority figures. Others are financially strong, and their power stems from their solvency. The rest are just men, which is sufficient to catapult them into privilege. The men in the second group—the financially powerful—are noteworthy because they are mostly from the city, meaning that the same people on the bottom rung of the Euro-centric urban culture are found at the zenith of the African culture. Accordingly, in line with the concept of the pyramid, the customs of the hegemonic Western culture are dispersed downwards to the rural community through two channels—consciously through the Boer authorities at the summit of the pyramid, and perhaps not so consciously through the urbanized Bantu authorities at the middle tier. Either way, Western mores combine with those of the indigenous culture as incumbent upon those at the floor of the cultural mountain in Sigageni: the African women and children.

Bantu culture in Jezele’s province is patriarchal and rural. The land is the people’s source of sustenance, and it evolves habits and skills around it in a style commensurate to paid work in the cities. The land must be consistently cultivated, so while most of the young men are in the towns working, the women and children are assigned the responsibility of tilling the fields, tending the cattle, and ensuring the clan’s continuity. They do so admirably, preserving unique tribal traits with such exactness that tribes that are traditionally monogamous retain the practice of monogamy, whereas tribes that are traditionally polygamous retain polygamy. The traits are preserved even in cases where the two tribes occupy neighboring terrain and speak the same language. In the absence of men on the reserve, mothers-in-law keep daughters-in-law under their surveillance, and the latter have the duty of giving birth to and nurturing the children. The Bantu consider themselves proudly African, set apart from the pecuniary Boer society which seems conspicuously bereft of solidarity, compassion, or respect for fellow human beings; the very “peculiarities,” the Africans believe, that flavor their own African-ness. However, the reality of each day denies African autonomy. Life in the village is taxing, not only on account of the poverty but also by reason of the radius and resilience of the industrial culture, which spans every nook and cranny and exerts pressure on the less privileged in terms of conformism.

The industrial culture, indeed, makes existence more cumbersome for the women in Sigageni. It carves out a clique among the people—Siyalo and those like him—whose

urban habits introduce undesirable twists into the rural culture. An object lesson is the traditional onus on childbearing, which becomes nerve-wracking in the modern dispensation. It produces a custom in which the woman has only one month out of the twelve—the month her husband is on leave from the city—to get pregnant. The month of leave not only introduces an element of trauma into marital relations because of the obligation of motherhood, it also increases the burden of fidelity on the women when the month has expired. Traditionally, women were expected to be sexually restrained even when married, but the city routine maps out and chronically augments the period in which restraint is to be exercised. For the Bantu wife, the one month that her spouse comes home is for conception and sexual indulgence while the remaining eleven, when he is in the town, are for abstinence. It is not surprising that the independence of the women, another ancestral virtue, crystallizes under the pressure. An independent spirit is a legacy the women necessarily bequeath to their female successors because Bantu culture has endorsed migratory practices for the men for decades but frowns at it for the women. Jezile does not live with her husband, Siyalo, neither did Jezile’s mother live with Jezile’s father, or Jezile’s mother-in-law with Jezile’s father-in-law. The women uniformly stay back in the reserves to “preserve [their] way of life and reputation” (p. 188). As such, their organizational skills are perennially being honed as they become adept at mutually supporting one another.

“There are few men around these days,” Jezile’s friend, Nomawa, laments (p. 183). Jezile concurs, but it does not escape her notice that a man “behind...prison walls” holds greater sway in Sigageni than an independent woman (p. 216). The man Jezile has in mind is her husband, Siyalo, who is serving a ten-year prison sentence for illegally milking a white man’s cow. His imprisonment pushes her into infringing the pristine codes on migration, fidelity, and childbearing. In response to her audacity, Bantu culture in its purest and most punitive form crashes down on her like an axe.

When Siyalo is incarcerated, Jezile casts aside her concerns about reputation and migrates. She travels to the city of Bloemfontein to work for an Afrikaaner family, the Potgieters, in order to support her children. Mr. Potgieter rapes her and she gives birth to her mixed-race son, Lungu. As soon as Potgieter sets eyes on the child he disassociates himself from it and insists that Jezile depart. Apart from the risk to his marriage should Jezile remain, apartheid law looms forbiddingly in Bloemfontein, ready to indict the two of them for violating the ban on inter-racial sex. Jezile returns home. She goes first to her motherland and, after two weeks, moves on to present herself in the courts of Bantu jurisprudence in Sigageni, her husband’s clan. Siyalo’s kinsmen comprise the panel of judges sanctioned to evaluate her conduct. They are sympathetic but their verdict is harsh. They pronounce the birth of an illegitimate child, especially a white one, a misdemeanor. Siyalo’s kinsmen are without policemen, guns, or prisons, the law enforcement tools of the “granite power” of South Africa (p. 218). In spite of this, as custodians of their culture,

their ruling effectively debars Jezile from Siyalo's community for the rest of her life. There is no court of appeal. Her punishment is convoluted because her motherland, where she seeks sanctuary, is within the same cultural purview as Sigageni. The custom in both clans is that the woman ceases to be a part of the community once she gets married. Consequently, Jezile's attempts to rehabilitate herself and her children in her mother's village are highly equivocal because to all intents and purposes she is "no longer one of them" (p. 222). She exists in a type of cultural limbo for twenty-five years. In essence, the culture she possesses has discriminated against her negatively and placed her conduct outside of itself. Said explains:

Culture must be seen as much for what it is not... as for what it positively is. This means that...culture is a system of discriminations and evaluations—perhaps mainly aesthetic, as Lionel Trilling has said, but no less forceful and tyrannical for that—for a particular class in the State able to identify with it; and it also means that culture is a *system of exclusions* legislated from above but enacted throughout its polity by which such things as anarchy, disorder, irrationality, inferiority, bad taste and immorality are identified, then deposited outside the culture and kept there by the power of the State and its institutions.(Said, 1983, p. 11, emphasis added)

Lungu, "the Dilemma of 'African whiteness'"

The following excerpt conveys the tension between the Majolas, Siyalo's people, and the Mapangas, Jezile's people, when Jezile initially presents herself with Lungu:

When Jezile was a little stronger, she and Ma Sibiyi [her mother] accompanied by a group of six women travelled to the Majolas. Jezile dreaded facing her mother-in-law. But to her surprise Ma Biyela looked a shadow of her former self. She sat them all down and in a quiet voice she sent the children to call the other Majola relations. The visitors were served tea in silence. When everyone had arrived, the two families sat facing each other. Jezile's eldest aunt on her father's side began to tell the whole story...When she had finished, the stunned silence was followed by a restless shuffle. In an even voice Ma Biyela asked to see the baby. When she opened the bundle and looked at its little face, she gave one deep groan. After some moments she asked a question of Jezile, a question directed more at destiny than her.

'Why didn't you just leave this child with the white man? The child does not belong here; it does not belong anywhere. This child will bring the white law on us. Who will face them when they come? This is not a Majola nor is it a Mapanga.' (Ngcobo, 1983, p. 214)

Ma Biyela's perturbed observation is a summary of the problematic running through the narrative—the unpalatable crisscrossing of State law and cultural law. MaBiyela dreads facing the tyranny of the State: Jezile dreads facing that of the clan. Together, State and clan decree Lungu *anathema* twice over, proscribed by the Boer administration along with Bantu custom. In a more profound sense, MaBiyela's supposition that “this is not a Majola nor is it a Mapanga” (both African names) has symbolic undertones that outstep her immediate emergency and the text's temporal setting. It pre-emptly a situation that matures for the white South African *after* the apartheid government is ousted. The South African novelist, Justin Cartwright, alludes to this situation as “the white dilemma in Africa” (as cited in Simoes da Silva, 2008, p. 92). The dilemma is elaborated in the following manner: “Cartwright applies [the phrase] to the conundrum of “African Whiteness,” at once of Africa and uncannily non-African. In other words, even in the act of staking a claim to a place in Africa, White Africans are marked by the historical spectre of their Whiteness” (p. 92). The picture of the White African discomfited, staking a disputed claim to Africa, is an ironic inversion of the earlier picture of black Africans like Siyalo contending for a place in the white man's city.

Snyman (2013), commenting on the White African's situation during the Union Period (1910-48) as depicted in Stephen Black's novel, *The dorp*, notes: “Political activities in the typical South African dorp [small town] [were] small-scale barometers, even determinants, of wider political trends” (p. 102). Historically, the collapse of apartheid many years after the Union Period, and the corresponding empowerment of black Africans, saw a shift in race relations that dethroned Whiteness and its wider political muscle. The shift presumes adjustments in cultural relations as well. In the cultural framework of this study, for instance, it implies a rearrangement of the elements, leading to a reduction in the dominating and saturating effect of the erstwhile hegemonic culture. That is, the Boer culture, no longer constitutionally the State culture, ceases to indubitably tip the pyramid. In consequence, white Africans are re-allocated to a stratum where they too become vulnerable to the penetrating energy of other evaluations and judgments, an eventuality they had hitherto been spared on account of their supremacy. An interesting equivalent to this jeopardy is recorded by the Asian-African writer from Kenya, M. G. Vassanji, whose protagonist in *The in-between world of Vikram Lall* is an Indian boy, Vikram, who finds out that Kenyan independence also induces cultural adjustment and an “Asian dilemma.” Vikram, looking at his black friend, Njoroge, in light of Kenyan *Uhuru*, admits: “I do recall that his being different, in features, in status, was not far from my consciousness. I was also aware that he was more from Africa than I was’ (27)” (as cited in Omuteche, 2011, p. 94). Viewed from this angle, the dilemma of “African Whiteness” is attributable to the unprecedented circumstance in which the

Whites find themselves at the receiving end of culture's negative discriminating power—they must defend their values, their virtues, and their African-ness.

Lungu is not wholly white, but he is adequately so for the conundrum of Whiteness to act as an increment to the other trials he must surmount. There are two possibilities attached to his status as a “white African”; to belong to two worlds or to belong to neither. According to MaBiyela, the second pertains and “he belongs nowhere” (Ngcobo, 1991, p. 214). His skin color is actually only one thread in the knot. His dilemma is thickened by the injunction the elders place on his mother, which seals him tightly in the cultural vacuum where his Whiteness has already deposited him. In the Bantu scheme of things, Jezile is not officially married or single. If she had been married to Siyalo, Lungu would have been a full-fledged member of Siyalo's family, the Majolas, regardless of his illegitimacy. Alternatively, if she had been single, or divorced, he would have been a member of the matrilineal household, the Mapangas. But Siyalo has no desire to divorce Jezile and she likewise has no desire for the stigma of divorce. She is not married, single, or divorced, and the notion of “separated couple” is non-existent in the scenario of Bantu marriage. Unless Siyalo's family formally breaks the link, even if he abandons her, she is “a Majola to the grave” (p. 156).

Jezile is not legally divorced but she is definitively expelled and it rubs off on her son, further depriving him of a fixed cultural space. Theoretically, he is Siyalo's child for as long as Jezile is Siyalo's wife, but when emissaries from the Majolas come to take Lungu's two sisters, Siyalo's biological daughters, the emissaries leave Lungu behind. The gesture italicizes his lack of tenure in his fatherland. Culture has provision for his acceptance or his rejection—his father could have taken him, and probably would have if he had been black—but the veto aspect of the clan's culture aligns vigorously with the apartheid temper and he is rejected.

Lungu is raised on the soil of Sabelweni from the age of two months. Living in his motherland, however, offers him no respite from the bewilderment of being “at variance...with everything he was part of” (pp. 228-229). The name “Lungu” means “white.” It is not the name Jezile gives him at birth but it becomes his nickname and a cardinal reminder of his exclusion. He is an embodiment of the incongruities of African Whiteness. He eats Bantu food, speaks only their language, has their blood in his veins, lives an arable life, and endures their hardships, yet “his skin remained remarkably white...his eyes were grey [and] his hair...was blond” (pp. 222-223). By reason of this, he is marked as immutably “Other” whether he is in Sigageni or Sabelweni. The fact that the word “Lungu” is drawn from the Fanakalo vernacular offers him little solace. It does not tangibly envelop him in the African fold any more than the name “Annie,” for instance, envelops Jezile in the Potgieter family in Bloemfontein. On the contrary, both names breed frustration. “Annie” is the generic name that Afrikaaner women employers give their black maids. It is demonstrative of an archetypal impulse to domesticate the

alien by naming it. Mrs. Potgieter finds security behind the name and thinks it will draw Jezile close, but Jezile feels “emptied of herself” (p. 200). In some measure, the Fanakalo name “Lungu” betrays a similar impulse by the African community to simultaneously describe him in terms of Self and Other. “Lungu”, as a Fanakalo word, is a part of their culture, yet it describes something outside it. Whatever they intend by it, the name “Lungu” is for the owner “a vexing reference to his color and apartness” (p. 228).

Among white people, as among Blacks, culture has a way of producing its own “uncultured,” as proven in Lungu’s father, Potgieter, whom even Jezile can see is “ungainly” and “shabby compared to the city whites” (p. 189). Again, culture can go the extra mile and interdict absolutely, producing the outcast. It is among the quirks of cultural activity in the text that as a white-skinned African, Lungu is menaced by this stigma on two fronts. He is methodically deposited outside both circles of privilege rather than inside them. The narrator says, “He soon learned that by virtue of his birth he had been disinherited from all sources of power—the white world and his place in the African male structure” (p. 228). Wisdom demands that he leaves Sabelweni. When he is old enough, he is sent to a school for Colored children and later goes to the metropolis, returning to the environs of his home as a medical doctor. He is finally absorbed into the community as a successful city man, a figure the village culture can cope with.

Conclusion

Said’s sketch of the hierarchy of culture illuminates the coalition between culture and apartheid in fictional South Africa of the twentieth century. In a nation where prohibition is the order of the day, cultural leanings in the same direction seem to be encouraged and magnified. All the same because it is culture, something over which people have a sense of proprietorship, it does not trigger off the same antipathy from the populace as racism. At the close of the text, while the younger generation in Durban, Sigageni, Sabelweni, and across the land are poised to do battle with apartheid rule, there is no equivalent project aimed at the equally biased policies of culture. It stands inviolate while the mountain of apartheid totters.

Culture’s caprice is unending. It engenders Siyalo, a village townsman; Jezile, a husbandless wife; and Lungu, a blond Bantu. The uniformity of their distress emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the negative principle. Cultural discrimination transcends gender, age, or race. Lungu consolidates the problem, but fortunately he also points the way forward. He is emblematic of a reversal in situation which shows that culture, like the rest of society, is dynamic. In effect, nothing is immutable. Particulars within the cultural pyramid can be re-appraised, re-shuffled, or dropped. Re-appraisal would reduce the glaring anomalies in the cultural codes in the text, which presuppose “bests” that are out of step with the times—the “best” in the European market is the white entrepreneur, the “best” woman is the one that is married, the “best” African is black. It is disturbing to

think that as obsolete as these paradigms are, they refuse to be totally buried, testifying once more to the saturating power of culture. As the reader plainly deduces from the complexities emanating from cultural prejudice, if the new South Africa is to be an improvement on the old one, then there is need for an encyclopedic investigation of the models on which the past was established.

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Submitted: November 12, 2014 / **Published:** May 30, 2016