

Danyela Demir

Reading Loss: Post-Apartheid Melancholia in Contemporary South African Novels

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The issue of memory - and in particular the question of how to remember a painful past in a healthy yet effective way - is crucial to post-apartheid South African culture. Both social sciences and literary criticism have often resorted to the concepts of mourning and nostalgia to explain South Africans' troubled engagement and unfinished negotiation of their violent past, and particularly of the institutionalized racial conflict that scarred the country for decades. Yet, if the public grieving of such wound, especially in the official version provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has been repeatedly read through the psychoanalytic lens of mourning, the other half of Freud's theory on grief, namely that of melancholia, has gone somehow under-researched in its implications for South African culture. Danyela Demir's monograph *Reading Loss: Post-Apartheid Melancholia in Contemporary South African Novels* redresses this unbalance by taking melancholic states as a central concern of a conspicuous strand of post-apartheid South African novels. Integrating Freud's original theory of individuals' melancholia with Anne Cheng's and Paul Gilroy's studies of the melancholic implications of racial conflicts and postcolonial arrangements, Demir manages to



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highlight the political potential of literary expressions of melancholia, namely the way in which refusing to let go of the (traumatic) past means fighting against the risk of historical amnesia and demanding full political consciousness for the present and the future.

The concept of melancholia, originally framed by Freud as an unhealthy and paralysing form of grieving as opposed to healthier and closure-providing mourning, is particularly useful in the South African context. Here, as Demir reminds us, the TRC headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been often characterised as a nationwide mourning process attempting to provide closure for the wrongs of apartheid, and thus to clear the way for a pacified present and a serene interracial future. Yet, by analysing six South African novels representative of various sectors of the country's society, Demir points out that South African writing is still firmly rooted in the nation's painful past and ultimately unwilling – rather than unable – to let it go. The insightful implication seems to be that for most South African authors the collective trauma of apartheid has not yet been dealt with properly, and needs to be acknowledged and understood more deeply before South African society can be seen as healed.

One of Demir's merits is to highlight the political significance of this dwelling in the past. By reframing melancholia as a powerful tool to keep the past alive, she argues that

South African novels after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) can be read as melancholic counter-narratives to the TRC's attempt to initiate a nationwide process of mourning that would provide closure from the apartheid past. (4)

Looking at melancholia as an *ethical* form of grieving as opposed to mourning thus means bringing a fresher take to the decade-long debate on the effectiveness of public memory. For Demir,

if one assumes that melancholia is a productive, though painful, engagement with daily conflicts in the form of not letting go of the past, one may state that in the context of the counter-narratives which often deal with loss, despair, and disillusionment with the present situation, the inability of the characters to forget the past leads to a melancholia which might be regarded as an endless process of remembrance, of memorialising. (25)

Another benefit of Demir's monograph is that, while drawing extensively on South African trauma studies (Eng, Kazanjian 2003; Chetty, Singh 2010; Mengel, Borzaga 2012), it integrates these with a de-pathologized understanding of melancholia, and thus manages to overcome the rigidity of "clear-cut notions of victims, perpetrators and bystanders" (29) typical of classic trauma theory. By stressing

that “melancholia manifests itself in many diverse forms, depending on which part of society one considers” (26-7), Demir ensures a complex reading of texts in which power relations are often fluid – if unbalanced – entanglements. An updated concept of melancholia thus proves to be a crucial theoretical addition to analyse issues as central in South Africa as “complicity, crises of identity, forms of resistance, and intergenerational memory” (10).

The textual analyses offered by the volume cover a meaningful range of contemporary South African novels published between 1998 and 2006 and looking at different kinds of melancholic attachments across several different racial groups. Following from the premises established by the Introduction and discussed in depth in Chapter 1, the three analytical chapters, each focusing on two novels centred on a specific sector of the local society, also invite comparisons and highlight overarching themes and narrative strategies the texts have in common. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the persisting “interstitial position” of South African ‘coloureds’ as explored in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* and Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Agaat*. Chapter 3 looks at the specific dilemmas of South African white communities. In particular, the Afrikaners’ impossibility to consciously mourn their lost privilege, now officially regarded as a crime against humanity, is brought centre stage through a reading of André Brink’s *Devil’s Valley*, while the English community’s ambiguous negotiation of their own responsibility in apartheid emerges in the analysis of Sarah Penny’s *The Beneficiaries*. Finally, Chapter 4 is devoted to K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* and Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207*, both novels pre-occupied with urban spaces as traces of the apartheid times’ racial segregation and with the persistent social marginalization of South African blacks and ‘coloureds’.

The compelling readings proposed by Demir in Chapter 2 centre specifically on the mechanisms of melancholic self-rejection and internalized racism triggered in the South African ‘coloureds’ by the in-between position assigned to them by the apartheid state. In Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, this self-rejection is both thematically and symbolically apparent in the unexpected secret discovered by Marion, a supposedly white woman whose ‘coloured’ family has managed to ‘pass as white’ in the years of apartheid. By analysing the novel’s structural fragmentation and use of symbols (such as the mermaid, hybrid creature *par excellence*), Demir highlights how the parents’ desire to be granted the whites’ privileges, while apparently successful, actually implies the loss of their families and homes without really translating into a veritable inclusion in the desired sector of society. Drawing on Hirsch’s (2008) concept of postmemory, Demir contends that the protagonist’s constant incompleteness can be read as a form of “intergenerational melancholia”, or a sort of subconscious inheritance of her predecessors’ inability to mourn

their losses. The interdependency of the dominant race's and the racialized subjects' different forms of melancholia is instead put under the spotlight in Demir's analysis of Van Niekerk's *Agaat*. In this novel, the white farm owner Milla, torn between rejection and desire, triggers both internalized racism and stubborn resistance in her coloured surrogate daughter turned servant Agaat. By stressing the two characters' psychic entanglement, one that cannot be undone in the post-apartheid present of the novel, Demir points out that they are equally unable to mourn "their mutual loss of a mother-daughter bond" (96). The most compelling aspect of Demir's reading, though, is the attention paid to Agaat's appropriation and retention of the tools originally used to control her, so that "[her] melancholic holding on to and almost ritualistically remembering the injuries inflicted upon her may certainly be regarded as a powerful method of transporting her past loss(es) into the present and the future" (100), and thus as a way to avoid any amnesty is granted to those responsible.

Chapter 3 makes use of Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia and the Mitscherlich's exploration of the inability to mourn, in connection with Ross Truscott's study of self-parody as a strategy of the Afrikaners' specific kind of melancholia. Here, Demir reads André Brink's *Devil's Valley* as an allegory of national melancholia, or a text foregrounding

the inability of an Afrikaner society to let go of nationalist beliefs of being a 'superior' and 'chosen' people in order to begin to mourn this loss of privilege within the embrace of the 'new', democratic South Africa. (109)

The regressive white community described in the novel, whose members have chosen to live secluded from the rest of the country, is made of violently melancholic subjects stuck in a racially segregated past, where the Old Testament replaces the new democratic constitution and women are subjected to intense patriarchal violence. Tracing the way in which this violence has translated into an inter-generational female melancholia that at times also manifests as a form of resistance, Demir makes clear that even the women's position remains melancholically unresolved, as their complicity in the community's violent history is left partly unacknowledged. The case of Sarah Penny's *The Beneficiaries*, on the other hand, is taken by Demir as an instance of the classic Freudian's evolution from an 'unhealthy' melancholia to a 'healthy' process of mourning. Noting the novel's extreme narrative fragmentation and peculiar temporal perspective, the scholar points out the protagonist Lally's "experience of belatedness" (135), which takes her from years of guilt-ridden ambiguity, that physically 'mark' her body through anorexia nervosa, to her reconnection with her home country when, while in London, she

finds herself involved in a TRC case. While this leads Lally to fully acknowledge her beneficiary status during the apartheid system, Demir warns us that such healthy characterization of the TRC is matched in Penny's novel to a mechanism of "refused identification" on the part of the protagonist's lover Pim, which highlights the complexity and persisting ambivalence of the English community's position in contemporary South Africa.

The impossibility to silence the echoes of the past also emerges in Demir's reading of the two 'urban novels' analysed in Chapter 4, where Cape Town and Johannesburg are characterized as "places of loss and melancholia in which South Africa's past shapes both the present and the future for the protagonists" (152). Demir's reading of K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* is remarkable for the attention to the political implications of the novel's narrative structure and use of symbols. While the thirteen-year-old protagonist Azure lives through continuous trauma and is hostage to Cape Town's violent gangs, his semi-oneiric encounters with the seagulls, emblems of freedom and resistance, and with the historical figure of Sarah Baartmann, a reminder of the century-long shaming of (especially female) South Africans blacks and 'coloureds', are seen by Demir as signs of his resilience. Azure's inability to put an end to the violence inflicted on him finally turns into anger, something that can be read, according to Demir, as a "powerful survival tool in a harsh environment" and as a melancholic yet "depathologised form of resistance" (175). Demir also applies the theoretical lens of melancholia to Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*, a novel which has been seen by some critics as "disavowing the past altogether" (Frenkel, MacKenzie 2010, 2) and that is arguably organized around the refusal to call history by its name. The fact that the characters - all young, black and male - almost never use the word 'apartheid' when referring to the segregation era but are still obsessed with the iconic image of the male freedom fighter leads Demir to qualify this text as

a deeply melancholic narrative in the Freudian sense, where memories of South Africa's past are repressed and then resurface as melancholy echoes or silences. (177)

The textual fragmentation and the narrator's unreliability and gender bias (which emerges as one aspect of a more general crisis of masculinity apparent in the text) are also examined by Demir in connection with the historical marginalization of certain (especially women's) stories during the TRC, thus pointing to a reading of Moele's novel as yet another melancholic counter-narrative to the official discourse of a serene reconciliation.

Demir's argument throughout her monograph is strengthened by a relentless attention to the novels' narrative structure, which con-

nects textual incoherence, unreliable voices and non-chronological narratives to strategies of resistance to a reconciliatory closure from the past. The strong theoretical framework, the rich textual analyses, and the up-to-date bibliography all qualify this volume as a compelling read for both scholars of South African literature and those general readers with an interest in the contemporary development of South African culture.

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