

Speaking rape “like a man”: Achmat Dangor’s Bitter Fruit

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Achmat Dangor is becoming an important interpreter of the South African condition. Following the positive international reception of Kafka’s Curse, Bitter Fruit has recently been short-listed for the Man Booker Prize. In Kafka’s Curse, Dangor made forays into the fantastic – or ‘magical realist’ – mode. Bitter Fruit sees him returning to realism as he documents the years of the South African transition and its turn to the past. **As its plot engages with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bitter Fruit offers yet another set of stories to the burgeoning archive of the national collective memory.** At the same time, it grapples with questions of representation: what does it mean to speak of a traumatic past, and what constraints shape the voices of those who bear witness to it?

Bitter Fruit is set in late 1998, as the TRC’s Final Report is being drafted for presentation to then-President Nelson Mandela. Silas – husband and father in the Ali family on whom the novel is centred – is caught between calls for justice and the national prioritising of reconciliation. His job involves “liaising between the Ministry of Justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (59). In the opening pages of the first section – titled “Memory” – Silas has an “inevitable” encounter with the past when he bumps into François du Boise, the white security policeman who, nineteen years earlier had raped his wife, Lydia (7). It is through Silas’s rather than Lydia’s memory that we first return to the scene of rape. Silas recalls waking to the sound of Lydia’s voice,

“hoarse and rich, vibrating like a singer’s voice too deep to be played so loudly through a set of worn-out speakers. ‘N*** her, n*** her good!’ another voice said, [...] and then Lydia’s voice was sharp, ascending into a scream, before fading into a moan so removed it seemed to come from his dreams (14).”

Rape is described as that which robs women of speech, reducing their voices to screams and moans. The novel proceeds to show that by remaining silent about her rape, Lydia has allowed Silas to appropriate it as something that happened to him. Lydia dramatises this appropriation after Silas’s encounter with du Boise. When Silas asserts “[t]here was no need to” (16) talk about the rape, Lydia returns his words to him, scornfully repeating each platitude he offers. Finally, she draws out of him the admission that his memory of her rape is his memory of his own humiliation. Silas proceeds to displace this act of humiliation onto one that renders him as the activist rather than the passive victim of rape: “He remembered how the police had made them ‘tauza,’ squatting with their legs wide open and frog-jumping, so that anything they had concealed in their anuses would drop out or hurt them enough to make them scream out loud” (17). Lydia counters this memory with one of her own by pointing to what women have to “hide” in their vaginas: the uninvited penis, and “the recollection of them being there” (18). This recollection is hidden because, once spoken, it is appropriated by a hegemonic discourse of male dishonour or figured as a metaphor of male conquest.

Drinking Silas's beer so that she can "taste like a man" (18), Lydia begins to speak of her rape, but does so within a masculine discourse, claiming that she became her rapist's "property" and that Silas was "honour"-bound to revenge this assault upon "your woman [...] your wife" (19). "If you were a real man," she confronts Silas, "you would have killed him on the spot, right there in the mall, spatter his brains against a window, watch his blood running all over the floor" (19). **Evoking "honour," Lydia speaks within a discourse of shame: her rape is conceptualised as an affront to man's honour rather than as an assault on a woman's body.** Lydia is of course quite right: she was raped by the security police as a message of intimidation and humiliation *addressed to her husband*. As Marina Warner has pointed out, in war "women's bodies become like letter boxes" (qtd. in McWilliams 94). The message deposited in her body is pregnant with meaning as nine months later she gives birth to Mikey.

The novel's title – *Bitter Fruit* – reflects the child born from rape and the act of revenge he comes to perform in Silas's stead. It also has a more subtle referent: "bitter fruit" is the "taste" of hops that Lydia takes into her mouth as she begins to speak of rape "like a man." The language available to her with which to remember rape – a language of male honour and shame and of women as possessions and objects of exchange – does violence to the woman who speaks it. Dropping the bottle that bears this "bitter fruit," Lydia dances on the broken glass, shredding her feet on its "jagged edges" (19).

Rape is again marked as unspeakable within the TRC, the national forum for giving voice to traumatic memories. Silas urges Lydia to present her story before the TRC but she refuses, insisting that "Archbishop Tutu has [n]ever been fucked up his arse against his will" and so will "never understand what it's like to be raped, to be mocked while he's being raped, to feel inside of him the hot knife – that piece of useless flesh you call a cock – turning into a torture instrument" (18). Here Lydia breaks the gender divide that names what happens to men's bodies as torture and what happens to women's bodies as rape. **The implication is that to speak of rape within the structures of the TRC would only confirm its production of women as the victims of sexual abuse and of sexual abuse as a special category of harm pertaining only to women.** Hence her turn to the private space of the diary as the venue in which she will speak her rape and it is notable that this personal chronicle is interrupted for the duration of the TRC hearings, suggesting the incommensurability of the two forums for bearing witness to the past.

In her diary, Lydia is able to speak of that which remains unspeakable within available public discourse. She describes the rape in cold detail, Du Boise's eyes, his smell, his grunts, the flicker of fear when he reached his climax and, for a moment, was not in control. Silas's rage, his wild screaming, which did not lessen her terror but enhanced it, his fists hammering against the sides of the police van, giving rhythm to Du Boise's rapacious movements. (115)

While the novel presents itself as unable to give voice to women's experiences of rape, it does offer this telling entry from a woman's point of view. In this elliptical summary we find Lydia drawing uncomfortable parallels between her husband and the rapist. Silas's rage, which stems from his humiliation rather than Lydia's terror, only enhances her terror, giving rhythm to the rapist's thrusts. When Lydia speaks of her rape, what she articulates concerns more her husband's appropriation of the rape than the rape itself. Yet even this act is handled with some anxiety. Lydia's representation of the event

is not offered to the reader but is instead made available through the uninvited intrusion of her son into the private space of her diary.

Discovering the truth of his parentage in Lydia's diary, Mikey embarks on a search for a 'pure' identity by entering the Islamic world of his 'grandfather's' family. There he is told the story of Ali Ali (Silas's father) and his 'passage out of India.' The story goes that Ali Ali's sister was raped by a British officer during the colonial occupation of India. The rape bears fruit but the baby dies; Ali's sister is assumed to have murdered the child and is condemned to a madhouse. Ali exacts his revenge by killing the rapist-father before fleeing India and making his passage to South Africa. In Imam Ismail's rendition of the story, the 'mixed race' issue of rape are "bitter fruit" indeed:

There are certain things people do not forget, or forgive. Rape is one of them. In ancient times, conquerors destroyed the will of those whom they conquered by impregnating the women. It is an ancient form of genocide. [...] You conquer a nation by bastardising its children. (182-83).

This *mis en scène* is key to the novel's inscription of Lydia, who conceives a son by a man who "*was* the old system" (118). Unlike Ali's sister, Lydia opts to keep the child rather than abort him as an act of 'loyalty' to the struggle and become "a soldier [...], a fearless bomb planter or ruthless arms smuggler" (117). The arms smuggler is, of course, an allusion to Nadine Gordimer's Aila in *My Son's Story*. Dangor quotes from Gordimer's novel in his epigraph: "It is an old story – ours. My father's and mine." The story of rape that he tells is thus one that belongs to husband and son: he whose property has been usurped and he who, as the "bitter fruit" of rape, carries the 'shame' of 'mixed-blood.' The shame that Zoë Wicomb finds expressed in the final words of Gordimer's novel is not so much dispelled as displaced onto the figure of the rape victim-mother.¹ Carrying to term and nurturing the 'bastard' child of rape is constituted as an act of shameful complicity with white power, an acquiescence to its efforts to 'penetrate' into the womb of a people. The narrative of incest that infiltrates the plot can partially be read within this emerging frame of complicity.

Attempting to 'purify' his 'blood' and purge himself from the stink of betrayal, Mikey steals a gun and kills Du Boise, muttering to himself as he does so: "My heritage [...] unwanted, imposed, my history, my beginnings" (246), and reducing the rapacious white father to "shattered skin and exploding blood" (217). After this, he reincarnates himself as "Noor" and seeks his "passage to India" (241). Lydia's conception of Mikey in the scene of rape, which is portrayed as the bastardisation of a people, plays into a prevalent literary fascination with 'inter-racial' rape and the 'mixed race' issue of rape in South African fiction of the transition (see Samuelson, "Rainbow Womb"). **The novel's mirroring in a shameful discourse of 'blood' threatens its otherwise salutary efforts to grapple with the limited discourses available in which to speak rape.** Mikey's desire

¹ Discussing the final words of Gordimer's novel, in which the narrator declares "I am a writer and this is my first book – that I can never publish," Wicomb argues: "What cannot be represented, one suspects, [...] is not the coloured, but the coloured activist [...]. The coloured story is destined to be suppressed; the narrative of Aila's surprising contribution to the struggle is marked by silence: in the space between writing and making public lies an unacknowledged shame steeped in its originary interracial sex" ("Shame" 103-04).

for a 'pure' identity articulates this 'shameful' response. As Wicomb argues, "current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category" are a "denial of shame" ("Shame" 92). Dangor has claimed that "Identity as inherited from apartheid needs to be explored in order to be got rid of" (qtd. in de Waal 3). I would venture that though this novel is an important offering in this effort, it is a humble beginning rather than an end. Its writing of rape is both the site at which it grapples with masculine appropriations of female bodies and female pain and at which it appears unable to surmount a discourse of 'blood.'

The last occasion on which we see the Ali family together is at Silas's fiftieth birthday party. A distinction is again drawn between public and private memory. His colleagues present him with a copy of the five volume TRC report, an ironic gift. Lydia's gift is his father's diary, placed in her safekeeping by Silas's mother: "It is a piece of history, personal, extremely private in many ways, but it also belongs to all of us" (230). This private record having been bequeathed, she plans to "walk away, free of him and his burdensome past" (225). In contrast to Mikey, Lydia mimics Ali Ali's 'passage from India,' tracing his route through Mozambique to Cape Town. She makes love to the Mozambican João, "embracing his black body in her lovely olive-skin arms" (238) and thereby 'shamefully' undoing the narrative of sexual complicity with whiteness before driving through the night to Cape Town (the novel ending mid journey). If João also bears the signs of 'racial mixing,' "his eyes a bastard green, set deep within a dark face" (233), Silas is nonetheless "glad she had chosen a black man as her medium of expression" (242).

When planning the presentation of the gift, Lydia had dismissed as "macho bullshit" the notion that, "Only women, wombed beings, can carry the dumb tragedy of history around with them" (224). However, for all its claims otherwise, this novel does remain fixated on the violated womb as a site of bastardisation in ways that continue to articulate stereotypical notions of both colouredness and rape. Zimitri Erasmus suggests the importance of reading 'coloured' as 'coloured by history' rather than 'coloured by blood.' Yet the history that the novel prioritises – one inscribed Ali's diary – is one of 'bloodlines.' Retracing Ali Ali's route, which follows a discourse of male honour and blood purity, Lydia is unwittingly enmeshed in notions of roots that do discursive violence to the violated female body. Beyond the pages of the text lies a more interesting story that one hopes Dangor will return to – that of the woman whose experiences are inadequately explored in this narrative of a father and a son – and which may see him engaging more with the ways in which women's bodies are treated and less with the 'blood' that 'mingles' in their wombs.

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