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ANDRÉ BRINK'S A DRY WHITE SEASON:  
CONSTRUCTING THE PROTAGONIST'S IDENTITY  
(IN)BETWEEN FEMALE «OTHERS»

Abstract

Susan, Melanie and Emily, though differing greatly in ethnic and socio-cultural background, have the chance to articulate their voices in a male domineering world. Their narratives, as excluded «others» by gender, class and historical background, figure among Ben Du Toit's several testimonies and contribute greatly to his mental awakening. With them the protagonist learned to problematise old / new values, certainties, a supposedly humanistic universal truth, by means of unsettling questions, descriptions, differing life experiences portraying rape, death, social exclusion, poverty, famine, atrocities of war in Africa, which provided the postmodern reader with the metaphor: living across borders, beyond the pale.

What is at stake from the opening page of the novel onwards is the quest for an identity, for a character in fact, the narrator's task to interpret Ben's psychological, sociological and political exile in a multicultural society whose colonial hierarchical foundations have been the cause for everlasting conflicts. Actually, this setting is also the writer's world, yet he wishes to avoid any political commitment with Ben or any other venturesome character by means of a shifting focalisation: internal focalisation alternates with external focalisation.

Bearing in mind the Foucauldian concept of «otherness» I shall concentrate on female «others» self-reflexive and self-empowering discourses as presented by André Brink's main narrator. In order to understand the protagonist's conflict André Brink sets up a specific context in which power relations and specific socio-political constraints undermine topic, turn-taking and participant roles.

Therefore several representative extracts shall be analysed drawing on a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework so as to account for shifters (Roman Jakobson 1950), or «embraceurs» (Dominique Maingueneau 1990) particularly naming, reference and agency as «means of resisting to» and/or cooperating with «pre-existing institutional rules» (Edward Said 1994).

With André Brink the contemporary reader perceives a novel mode of postcolonial critique since issues related to racial segregation, colonial imperialism
and feminine exclusion figure in the novel’s agenda. Brink gives vivid voice and vindicates a place to marginal / undervalued characters in the South-African society in mid-twenty century as they stand for the «silenced voices by the process of minorisation» (Homi Bhabha 1998: 46). Their stories, to corroborate Edward Said (1994: Int., xiii), «also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history». It is also striking that Brink’s literary characters, as posited by Michael Macovski (1994: 3-4), «interact not only with individual voices but also with other discourses themselves – political, religious, and historical… and the point is that they remain rhetorically differentiated and therefore capable of genuine interchange».

Consequently, *A Dry White Season* (first published in 1979) constitutes a change in the dominant literary representation, addressed to a large readership (also involving minority groups), and challenges the reader (a meaning-taker and a meaning-maker) with different perspectives, confronting narratives undoubtedly more memorable than any theoretical literature on the subject; insider’s vs outsider’s perspective by means of literary and spoken language. In this respect, it illustrates different ways of «speaking the English language» in terms of, and I borrow from lain Chambers’ statement (1995: 23), «linguistic, literary, cultural, religious, musical - of the dominator, of the master, but always with a difference. Language is appropriated, taken apart, and then put back together with a new inflection, an unexpected accent, a further twist in the tale».

Such is best achieved in the female various testimonies, dialogues, directly transcribed by Ben Du Toit, the protagonist/diariarist and equally narrator in the novel, whose writings are then reorganised, readjusted by the main and omniscient narrator, actually Ben’s former colleague, notwithstanding that this claims not to take risks as politics «ain’t [his] line» (DWS, 15). At this point Michahil Bakhtin (in Emerson & Holquist 1990: 93) can not but offer a sound counter argument in that «the topic of the speaker’s speech… does not become the object of speech in the first time in any given utterance… Various viewpoints, world views, and trends cross, converge, and diverge in it». And this is the more true for the main narrator/focaliser not only tries to make sense out of Ben’s scribblings, torn pages, diary entries or newspaper scratches but also introduces other characters’ utterances and individual words, consequently guiding their turn takings. On the whole they stand for the narrators’ peculiar way of translating the story and shaping the communicative event:

(1) A passport photo of a girl with a sweet provocative face. The other photograph. Names. Gordon Ngubane. Jonathan Ngubane. Captain Stolz. Stanley Makhaya. Melanie Bruwer. And the possibilities suggested by my often misused imagination. I have to immerse myself in it, the way he entered into it on that first fatal day. Except that he did not know, and had no way of knowing, what was lying ahead; whereas I am held back by what I already know. What was unfinished to him in a sense I own at the same time sterility patch.

The first person, alright! (1) must have attributed to the main cause emphasised by me in English by the excerpt real identity. In fact, expressed by «», the evidence in the text with own words introduced.

Also, the nuclei and Emily, though have the chance to read narratives, as exclusion ethnicity in Emily’s several testimonies are.

Female «others» commonly imposed plurality of sources’ role at different stages rules albeit her context with social, cultural, fight against inequity.

Concurrently, their from oppressive past setting in which the linguistic and social Boers at that moment, at times a reader as belief, disclosing their colonial experience. «Humanity», No integrity. «He is different set of

(DWS, 161)
The first person reference «me» and «my» in «Report me and my cause aright!» (I) must have been Ben's words, still these might be misinterpreted if attributed to the main narrator's voice. A change of both tone and topic «my cause» emphasised by the imperative form of the verb «report», unusually coupled in English by the exclamation mark, force the narrator to reflect on the speaker's real identity. In fact, as the narrative evolves a multitude of voices mostly expressed by «I», the first person singular, challenges the reader to look for evidence in the text so as to identify the narrator, the protagonist or the characters’ own words introduced by direct speech or free indirect speech at times.

Also, the nuclear female characters in the diegetic world, Susan, Melanie and Emily, though differing greatly in ethnic and socio-cultural background, have the chance to articulate their voices in a male domineering world. Their narratives, as excluded «others» by gender, class, race (particularly colour or ethnicity in Emily's case) and historical background, figure among Ben Du Tott's several testimonies and contribute greatly to his mental awakening.

Female «others» for their opposing views and resistance to the tyranny of commonly imposed globalising discourses (cf. Foucault) not only disclose a plurality of sources of resistance to the dominant power but also play a crucial role at different stages in Ben's life: (a) Susan - conformity with social, political rules albeit her contribution to Ben's upward mobility; (b) Emily - acquaintance with social, cultural, racial inequalities (visiting Soweto); (c) Melanie - personal fight against inequity.

Concurrently, the reader is invited to deconstruct the protagonist's liberation from oppressive practices, a dialectical search for identity in a multicultural setting in which the white English speaking domineering class still set the linguistic and social standards despite the unavoidable political dominance of the Boers at that moment. Moreover, the implied reader and narrator (for the latter is at times a reader as well) share a universe of values, a world of make belief, disclosing the writer's ideological pulls and dialogic interpretation of the colonial experience (under «Apartheid»):

«Humility». Normally one uses it as a synonym for compassion; charity; decency, integrity. «He is such a human person». Must one now go in search of an entirely different set of synonyms: cruelty; exploitation, unscrupulousness; or whatever?» (DWS, 161)
As a consequence, the construction of identity, also a question of free agency, involves a cross-disciplinary analysis of the protagonist, as an individual, husband and father, a teacher, a Boer, thus a privileged member of the ruling middle class in South Africa to become a transgressor: in the family circle, a social / humanitarian fighter, a political enemy to be impeded of his social role, for instance as a teacher, before being silenced. The narrator comments therefore that «his death challenged everything [he]d always thought or felt about him» and, to involve the reader in a make-belief atmosphere, he refers to a newspaper report concluding: «Survived by his wife Susan, two daughters and a young son» (DWS, 9).

In the same line, and eager to hedge commitment under unsettling risktaking political circumstances, the main narrator favours Susan from the novel’s outset with an internal focalisation whereas Emily and Melanie are presented from an external perspective having therefore to stand for and vindicate their own voice.

(2) Once I spent a fortnight with him and Susan in Johannesburg.

(3) But I really believe Susan knew how to handle him: how to let him have his way when he got one of his crazy notions; how to prod him when he had to do something constructive. (DWS, 10)

[Bold mine]

A direct reference to her first name (2) without further reference to a surname accounts for, on the one hand, the narrator’s familiarity with the character as he himself posits: «and in my efforts, at this stage, to sort out and clarify my meagre personal recollections of Ben I find it easier to explain Susan» (DWS, 21). The speaking voice introduces the present object of his narration in a privileged power-knowledge position undermined by his learning of Ben’s outcome after «that first fatal day» (3) as well as his personal acquaintance with Susan. She soon becomes the subject of the sentence, «I» coupled by dynamic verbs, «handle» or «prod», connoting her manipulative role in Ben’s external voice, social self.

On the other hand the narrator vindicates her role in Ben’s social recognition, economic stability, upward mobility. With Susan, Ben learned how to cooperate with long-established institutional roles otherwise, thus comments the internal focaliser in a sardonic tone, he «might have ended his life in some small, forgotten backveld village, quietly content to teach a bit of history and geography..., or to spend his leisure time «uplifting» the children of the poor» (DWS, 20).

As the narrative unfolds the reader learns about Susan’s «outside voice» (cf. Bakhtin), representing her external «other», and depicting her active role as a dutiful wife, mother, teacher, daughter, a distinctive member of an educated and economically privileged («they», the first social exception since she became a stranger to Ben.

(4) «Is it really so? She stared at me startled. I wasn’t. «The wild, I had thought met Ben» (DWS, 22).

(5) «After twelve I knew me... I’ve lost touch...» (DWS, 26).

(6) «If I’d been a dabbler. A bit of things. Do your daughters marry?» (DWS, 26).

In the previous «other»: Macovski, the sentence. Once longer statements, a fall from free direct to free unanswerable by the unexpected cry for help.

Equally control, Ben, on the contrary, transgressor (so far pedagogy) within the time to keep up appearing moment, though so had to come to tell» institutional role of social help.
to a question of free will. As an individual, an artist, a member of the ruling class, a husband in the family circle, a student or worker, the child of his class, or comments therefore come `You thought of or felt about him' and `he refers to a newspaper he has been reading, a woman he knows, a young son' (4)

... author... unsettling risktaking (on the novel's outset or in the text that... are presented to an audience of readers... create their own voice.

[Shrug...

how to let him have his way and not let him when he had to do...

Further reference to a family's familiarity with the events of the war, to sort out and explain, is easier to explain Susan's role in the setting of the narrative in a new light. Susan's learning of Ben's normal acquaintance with girls and his coupled by dynamic role in Ben's external
dolecule in Ben's social life. Susan, Ben learned how to be a dabbler. A bit of music, playreading for the radio, all sorts of unimportant things. Do you think I should resign myself to the thought that one day my daughters may achieve something on my behalf? (DWS, 25)

In the previous passages the narrator introduces Susan's own voice (microvoice: Macavski, or second voice: Bakhtin), and she becomes the subject of the sentence. Once again the narrator hedges commitment and lets her utter longer statements, a free expression of thoughts, pinpointed by shifting speech, from free direct to free indirect speech. She culminates with an interrogative left unanswered by the interlocutor (you) who does not seem to cope with Susan's unexpected cry for identity.

Equally controlled by the same elitist tradition, often referred to by Susan, Ben, on the contrary, undoubtedly attempted to act as a cultural translator and a transgressor (so refers Maria Koundoura to Henry Giroux's concept of border pedagogy) within the private/public sphere of his History classes because he had no opportunity to keep up appearances and his behavior should accord with the historical moment, though socio-political and cultural bias had to guide his practice. He had to come in terms with different realities: home, family relations and institutional role opposed to the private world of his study, teaching practice, social help.

(4) «Is it really so bad, Susan?»
She stared past me as if she were not really talking to me - and perhaps she wasn't. «They always kept me on a tight leash when I was small. Said I was too wild, I had to control myself. «Girls don't do this. Girls don't do that. What will people think of you?» I thought, once I'm grown up it will be different. Then I met Ben.» (DWS, 24)

(5) «After twelve years I still don't know him,» she went on... «Neither does he know me»... «The worst of all, I suppose, is that I don't even know myself yet. I've lost touch with myself.»

(6) «If I'd been able to play really well it might have been different. But I'm a dabbler. A bit of music, playreading for the radio, all sorts of unimportant things. Do you think I should resign myself to the thought that one day my daughters may achieve something on my behalf?» (DWS, 25)
In fact, Ben’s metalinguistics of truth, the ideal course of justice (be it within the personal, social or political domain), has always guided his existence and gradually contributed to his becoming a stranger in his own concocted family circle, a suspicious subject shortly after his determination to rehabilitate undervalued non-white citizens, a subversive teacher of History and Geography to the senior lectures, in short a political enemy to the mainstream ideological policy. Only later did he realise that his own major failure was that he was too naive to believe that he could be neutral, neither a “Boer”, nor English, and unlike Stanley (a subversive character in the novel), he could not “have contacts on both sides of the fence, among the blackjacks as well as in the deeper recesses of the underworld” (DWS, 41).

Melanie who is a journalist and key character for Ben’s mental awakening once reminded him that:

(7) You’re an Afrikaner, you’re one of them. In their eyes that’s just about the worst kind of treason imaginable. (DWS, 195)

(8) My mother was a foreigner, don’t forget. I’m working for an English newspaper. They’ve written me off long ago. They simply don’t expect the same sort of loyalty from me that they demand from you... I only want to make quite sure you have no illusions about anything. (DWS, 195) [Bold mine]

These social pulls between «I», «us» and «them/they» were definitely cleared out in Ben’s mind when Melanie made him realise that he had to rethink difference/identity in such a multiethnic society crashed by a white dominant ideology equally at odds with British legacy and Dutch supremacy. Henceforth, the protagonist sees his «historical present strange to himself, estranged from the sources of its authority, harrowed in its very presence» to use Homi Bhabha’s concept of «Culture’s in Between» (in David Bennett 1998: 45). Before his tragic end, Ben comes to the conclusion that his fight was useless at that period, in that particular setting.

(9) I thought that to reach out and touch hands across the gulf would be sufficient in itself: as if good intentions from my side could solve it all... In an ordinary world, in a natural one I might have succeeded. But not in this deranged, divided age. (DWS, 161) [Bold mine]

His speech is punctuated by: verbs of perception («thinks»); deixis and coreference to reinforce the opposition between his reality and an ideal ordinary world («the/ amy/this» opposed to «am/wen»); modality («might») and probability («as if») to be understood in a specific situation, «this age», subjectively described by the modifiers «deranged, divided».
A similar inference could be drawn on the use of deixis by the external focaliser when introducing Melanie to the reader. Her ideas and behaviour strike the readers’ attention, and the narrator is no exception, in a «consciousness-raising» style (Liz Goodman 1996: Int. x) as suggested by her inquisitive look and question-posing which is also to be seen with Emily (undoubtedly agency features).

(10) «A passport photo of a girl with a sweet provocative face. The other photograph.»

(11) «It wasn’t until the following day, working through the cuttings and notes again, that I recognised the same face on some of the newspaper photographs. Of course: Melanie Bruwer. The recent rumour in the press.» (DWS, 15)

«Melanie Bruwer»: the character’s particular naming embodying both a universality, reference to first name and surname, and singularity in the fictional world: educational background, striking personality, writing from a contemporary western perspective, acting anonymously, thus silenced by the ruling power and excluded from the African society. Her physical appearance, «a girl» (10), contrasting with her maturity, determination, and self-assertiveness, makes her stand on her own in the world of discourse.

(12) Look at me if you wish, you won’t find anything I haven’t discovered for myself and come to terms with. I’ve probed my depths: you’re free to try too if you want to. Provided you do not expect it to give you any claim on me. «It was something along these lines I found in the photograph, used as I was to constructing characters.» (DWS, 15)

She is introduced by the main narrator’s male biased perspective. At first the narrator finds it difficult to relate her to Ben’s universe, should there be no physical evidence of their relationship «the other photograph» and «newspaper photographs» (11) marking their struggle to restore Gordon’s search for truth, their opposition to political, social and racial discrimination. Restore his confidence, share the responsibility with her, posits Melanie, would stand for the metaphor:

(13) «It’s like the river I landed in when I was in Zaire. You’ve got to believe you’ll reach the other side. I’m not even sure it matters who or what you have faith in. It’s the experience itself that’s important.» (DWS, 195).
From her words, Ben learns that he can go on questioning the ethics of power relations in society, exert his power of thinking autonomously but his struggle should focus on "practices of everyday life ... rather than in terms of an appeal to a transcendent and invariant set of values" (Usher & Edwards 1996: 27).

Similarly, Emily's plight is illustrative of another focus for resistance in as much as Melanie's political and professional engagement: more than a quest for identity and survival she vindicates her husband's dignity and restoring of truth. Gordon Ngubene could have never committed suicide and given in his hope for justice no matter the physical and psychological punishments inflicted upon him. Hence, the reader is presented with a character who has to cope not only with her status as a female living in a predominantly "male" world, but also with her position as a black woman living in Soweto.

Unlike Susan, devoted to a lifelong psychological exile and victimised by her "inconveniently daring" husband, Emily reinforces her agency in a white male world despite becoming a victim of cultural exclusion after her husband's death: she willingly accepts her role as a widow to be dispossessed of her former shelter and move to a shabby place. Yet, her misery offers no impediment to defy the white hegemonic system so as to restore her husband's truth, honour, strong wish to uncover their son's murder.

(14) "What's the matter, Emily? What brought you here?"

"It's Gordon, my Baas."

The moment she said it, he knew. But almost perversely, he wanted to hear it from her before he would believe it.

"Last night. I don't know the time. I was too scared to look at the alarm clock."
Fiddling with the black fringe of her shawl she looked up at him helplessly, a large shapeless woman with a face aged before its time; but very erect, and without tears.

"We were asleep," she continued after a while, still preoccupied with the fringe. "They knocked so loud we were stiff with fright. Before they kicked down the door. And then the whole house was filled with police."

"What did they say?"

"They said: 'Kaffir, you Gordon Ngubene?' The children woke up from the noise and the little one began to cry. They mustn't do that in front of the children, Baas," she said in a smothered voice, "When they went away my son Richard was very bad. He's my eldest now that Jonathan is dead. I tell him to be quiet, but he won't listen to me. He's too angry. Baas, a child who saw the police take away his father, he don't forget it." (DWS, 52-3)

[Bold mine]
In this realistic passage Emily appears in object position emphasised by the personal reference, *you*, term of address, *Emily*, the paradox arising from her large figure «looking up» at Ben «helplessly» (dominator, dominated). Moreover, and also seen through the eyes of a male biased narrator (external focalisation), her strong character does not make her different from any other woman because the reference *woman* is preceded by the deictic *a*, instead of *this*, a determiner pointing to proximity and singularity worthy of Emily's distressed situation.

Puzzlement and deceit take over this female character and her speech becomes determined, straightforward. The vindication of her own identity, singularity and agency is undermined by her courage, human dignity and language choice despite being illiterate. At this point she is neither concerned with language accuracy, nor with raising her language standards, switch her code and register towards a more educated interlocutor - Ben- albeit her respect for him and addressing him by means of *my Baas*. This intentional term of address, under the circumstances, is imbedded of ambivalent feelings, namely respect intertwined with social exclusion: «very erect, and without tears» (14). She realised that she had the necessary language tools to make herself understood and make the interlocutor feel «another», an hopeless stranger both to himself and to the ones of his kind - the white empowered subjects: «They said: «Kaffir, you Gordon Ngubene?» The children woke up from the noise and the little one began to cry. They munstn't do that in front of the children, Baas».

In the narrative instance immediately following the aforementioned one (15), Emily unexpectedly, still intentionally, changes the verb tense, from simple past forms of both irregular and regular verbs - *washed, woke up, saw, kicked* - to simple present forms of dynamic verbs denoting violence equally emphasised by anaphora (*they*) and enumeration. Simple nuclear sentences alternate with elliptical ones in slow motion as if it were a scene played back by a camera:

(15) «They turn over the whole house, Baas.» Emily persisted. «The table, the chairs, the beds. They roll up the carpet, they tear open the mattress, they throw out the drawers of the cupboard. They look in the Bible. Everywhere, everywhere. And then they start to beat Gordon and to push him around and they ask him where he hide his things. But What can he hide, I ask you, my Baas? Then they push him outside and they say: «You come with us, Kaffir!»

«Was that all they said?»

«That was all, Baas. I went outside with him, with the two smallest children in my arms. And when we get to the car one man he say to me: «Ja, better say good-bye to him. You not going to see him again.»

[Bold mine]
This time she uses free indirect speech owing to Gordon’s probable silence, negative answer. And her narrative is suddenly interrupted by a rhetorical question, drawing on the interlocutor’s attention so as to make him aware of the oppressors’ cruelty, inequity towards disempowered innocent people. Apart from manipulating the language to get her critical and reproaching tone across, it might be also inferred that she can neither forget nor wishes the others to forget such outrageous arrest carried out by the Special Branch. Credibility and reliability of the narrative might be at stake unless Emily introduces the policeman’s own words skilfully shifting the register into Afrikaans, also the language of the Boers. It is Stanley Makhaya (the taxi driver), as the dialogue proceeds, who sarcastically explains Emily’s use of the simple past tense: «Lanie, with us, when a man gets picked up by the Special Branch, you just start talking about him in the past tense, that’s all.» (DWS, 56). Consequently, their intentional use of broken English make part of their language choice and connotes a social marker of their own individuality even among other countrymen living in the same community: Soweto.

Language choice ends up emphasising Black Afrikaners’ «otherness» (Poucalt 1966), distinctiveness or increase social distance. By means of a simple language, abbreviations featuring spoken register, slang, non-standard features of spoken language, highly contrasting with the narrator’s formal register, André Brink manages to pass on to the reader what it means to be a foreigner and at home: feeling «another», or as Paul White (1995: Preface xvi) advances «to live simultaneously inside and outside one’s immediate situation, to be permanently on the run».

Only after visiting Soweto did Ben realise that he had been a foreigner in his own country, South Africa, and a privileged subject «as if you now exist in another time and another dimensions», writes the diarist in a confessional tone and he adds, «You can still see the other people, you exchange sounds, but it is all coincidence, and deceptive. You’re on the other side. And how can I explain it in the words of this side?» (DWS, 158). In his quest for authenticity, justice, individuality, Ben invites the reader to problematise a whole historical period, a culture, the ruling institutional power at his time, «but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive or evaluate in the context of culture of their epoch», to borrow from Bakhtin’s claim (1990: 4), and Ben himself adds:

(17) «Everything used to take for granted ... now turns out to be illusion. Your certainties are proven lies. And what happens if you start probing? Must you learn a whole language first?» (DWS, 161)

... Alone. Alone to the very end. I. Stanley. Melanie. Every one of us. But to have been granted the grace of meeting and touching so fleetingly: is that not the most awesome and wonderful thing one can hope for in this world? (DWS, 161)
Before coming to a major conclusion, I believe that I should refer once again to Bakhtin’s postulates (1990: 7) that «a dialogic encounter of cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched». In so doing, overlapping languages and cultures should not be leading to a common ground, and differences should be seen in context rather than overlooked so that individual values whatever their nature should be preserved. If Emily’s identification with black African culture and her language choice undermines her peculiar agency, Melanie looks for the recollection of self in another which, in turn, leads Ben to envision his identity in self-defining other’s: Emily, Susan, Gordon, Stanley.

Similarly, from a postmodern perspective, as advanced by Usher and Edwards (1994: 16), «the centred subject does not exist naturally and pre-formed but is rather a cultural construct, inscribed in the meaning system that is language and by discourses, particular and systematic uses of language». Besides Ben’s search for truth transcends the educational setting and his involvement with the outside reality, including undervalued communities, constitutes a new site for effective learning, transcending the limited boundaries of both home (family life) and History classrooms. Thus in confessing, the protagonist asserts his identity by means of continual self-questioning, transgression (cf. Foucault) even though he is still subject to the power-knowledge formations that shape subjectivity as an entity that confesses», Usher and Edwards (1994: 95) put forth.

Bearing in mind the female characters’ interacting in the diachronic world one should come to the point that «there are no universal marks in the feminine rather different voices expressing their agency» (cf. Foucault). This is particularly relevant in the female voices presented hitherto, their conversation, turning and question posing which throw off male/female power relations to the extent that these appear «in an unplanned way» (Mary Bucholtz 1996: 276).

To conclude I shall borrow Macovski’s words (1994: 145), to which I fully subscribe:

Establishing self in the novel is essentially a linguistic act, since only through language can the other both manifest itself and provide recognition ... In either case both emotional and inscriptive outness are necessary to enact the self.