

Telling an African story as a White Man

Neil Sonnekus

An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree
Master of Creative Writing

2019

School of Language and Culture
Auckland University of Technology

Abstract

If you don't live politics, politics will live you. – Marlon James

Introduction

I didn't think when I set out to write *Babele* that it would be a story which was as much about me, a white, 62-year-old male, as about its protagonist, a black, 38-year-old female concert pianist. If I was being mischievous in terms of calling her Hari Manze - because I have created a South African private investigator called Harry Mann, a more pointed incarnation of myself - then I initially thought this was simply a story that announced itself to me, as stories do, but one that had nothing to do with me directly.

The story of *Babele* goes as follows: Hari is invited to perform at the 75th birthday celebrations of an ex-president of South Africa who has been given a square kilometre of Kgalagadi desert and lots of money as part of an amnesty deal. Hari's background on the paternal side is that her father was a Zulu, like the ex-president, who went into political exile in Zimbabwe in the early 1980s and started a one-child family there. Hari was named after the city she was conceived in, Harare, and grew up there until the age of ten. But her father was murdered by white apartheid soldiers in a cross-border raid and Hari therefore wants nothing to do with white South Africans whatsoever, especially not white Afrikaners. So much so that she won't go back to her father's country, where an Afrikaner is the only one who constantly invites her to come and perform in that country. That is about the extent of her politics, because in the rest of the world she may not be equal to whites beneath the surface, but she is important (that is, famous) and therefore treated with respect. So much so that is also known for being a bit of a prima donna and throwing the occasional tantrum, like one of her idols, Nina Simone, but unlike another, Clara Schumann. Being invited by a black man, however, persuades her to come to southern Africa, even

though it's to the somewhat surreal Babele, a tiny pseudo-principality in which the ex-president is building his very own Tower of Babel - Babele being the Zulu name for Babel, as Metotisi is the Pacific word for Methodist. This is where Hari runs into a situation that is brimming with malice. As it turns out, the apartheid police who killed her father were tipped off by the very man who lured her to Babele. That is, another Zulu, one Brilliant Kunene. But it is also at Babele where she meets people who will change her perceptions of both South Africa and herself. Her politics will deepen and she will help to rebuild the country, rather than simply avoid it.

Though I was vaguely aware that there might be issues with my writing a story about a black woman, I wasn't going to censor myself in any way, having come from a society that had taken censorship, historically, to grossly comical extremes. The only concession I was going to make was that I would write about Hari in the third person (I tend to write first person, like here) because I wouldn't arrogate to myself full knowledge of a woman or a black woman, though whether one has full knowledge of one's self, even, is moot. One of the "victims" of the aforementioned state censorship was comic writer Christopher Hope, who novelist and critic Leon de Kock described as someone who has "cast off the predictable and often sterile tones of superior intellectual humanism or impassioned but helpless outrage against apartheid. Seen against the seriousness and moral sanctimony of the liberal idiom, Hope's writing is positively liberating. His vision is black, wicked, and surreal, and his satire and humor have a measure of viciousness that seems peculiarly appropriate to South Africa."

After publishing his first novella, *A Separate Development*, which was summarily banned, he, having a British passport, was given a one-way ticket out of South Africa. One of the books he wrote later, in 1987, a

novella, was called *Black Swan* (which I, coming from a film background, optioned for a film).

It is worth giving a synopsis of *Black Swan* to illustrate the point. The story is set in 1965 Soweto, when the apartheid machine was at its grimmest (Nelson Mandela had been sentenced to life imprisonment only a few years earlier) and features a black *idiot savant*. Lucky seems beyond being taught anything, but a German teacher comes to stand “between the innocent [Africa, Lucky] and the insane [whites, apartheid] (*Hope*, p20),” and soon learns that it’s not quite that easy: “Africa” will do as it damn well pleases. At her wits’ end, Ilse shows Lucky an old Russian 35mm film of *Swan Lake* in black and white and Lucky is transformed. He wants to be a ballet dancer. He is sent to East Germany, thinking he is going to dance for “the struggle”, but he is incorporated into the revolutionary forces and is a hopeless, Chaplinesque soldier. He can’t march or shoot, so he auditions for a balletic role - in *Swan Lake*, of course - to a grumpy old communist nightwatchman! Instead, he is given a landmine to plant back in South Africa, does so and blows half his leg off in the process. Naturally he gets caught and sentenced “to hang” by the neck until he is dead, accompanied by what he sees as his “beautiful” crutches. Yet Lucky never loses sight of his vision that one day we will all dance in the streets, even if in his mind it’s on pointe shoes. Then the trapdoor falls away.

The power of this story lies in its lightness of touch concerning all the colliding contradictions of an absurd system, and its deeply hidden rage at such wasteful stupidity. So *Black Swan* more than, say, another novella set in Africa, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, was the tonal template I was using to write *Babele* (and my first novel, *Son*). Writing it, of course, forced me to look at Conrad’s powerful work again. But the one thing *Heart of Darkness* lacks is a sense of humour, which is what

Hope uses to underscore “the horror! the horror!” (Conrad’s by now iconic exclamation by way of Kurtz) and of which there is plentiful supply in a very vibrant South African civic milieu, whether before or after its first democratic elections.

The difference between *Black Swan* and *Babele* in one sense is that the former is targeting white, Western authority, from which its author implicitly benefited, if only materially. I am targeting black authority, which could raise charges of “the supreme waste of time that is racism”. (*Teju Cole, p12*). My reasoning is that corruption is corruption, no matter what hue it comes in, but that it should also be seen “constellationally”. (*Cole, p344*). That is, one should “connect the dots [to] see the patterns of power behind the isolated ‘disasters’ [of Africa]. (*Cole, p344*) The ex-president in *Babele* may be corrupt to the core, but certain historical forces, apartheid in particular, liberally contributed to that corruption.

Heart of Darkness and *Black Swan* are, of course, works by white men set in Africa and I didn’t want to fall into the trap of merely emulating and possibly perpetuating them. I also wanted to know more about black thinking, starting with Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko and Cole in the political and critical sense, and reading fictional works like *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James. Even though the latter isn’t an African novel per se (James is a black, gay Jamaican writer who lives in the US), it pointed a way forward for me, in that James writes convincingly from the point of view of heterosexual and gay, male and female, white and black people.

Does this make *Black Swan* and *Babele* African novels? According to Charles Larson, no. For example, to touch on just one theme, in both stories there is a love story, albeit a doomed one. Yet “I can think of no contemporary African novel in which the central plot or theme can be

called a ‘love story’, no African novel in which the plot line progresses because of the hero’s attempt to acquire a mate, no African novel in which seduction is the major goal, no African novel in which the fate of the lovers becomes the most significant element in the story. No African novel works this way because love as a theme in a Western literary sense is simply missing. (*Larson, p64*).

Hari and Siya’s love affair is also inspired by the one between Biko and Mamphela Ramphele, who bore two of his children before he was murdered by the apartheid police. (She later became managing director of the World Bank.)

In *Babele*, Hari’s ex-partner, Jean Azziz, a Frenchman of Algerian extraction and a Muslim, would no doubt have made her aware of the writings of Frantz Fanon, who would not have been kind to her. He would have accused her of practising a white cultural form similar to imposing a white church on the colonized, which “in the colonies is a white man’s Church, a foreigner’s Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor.” (*Fanon, p7*)

Further, he would have called her a colonized intellectual. “In its narcissistic monologue the colonialist bourgeoisie, by way of its academics, had implanted in the minds of the colonized that the essential values – meaning Western values – remain eternal despite all errors attributable to man. The colonized intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas and there in the back of his mind stood a sentinel on duty guarding the Greco-Roman pedestal. But during the struggle for liberation, when the colonized intellectual touches base again with his people, this artificial sentinel is smashed to smithereens. All the Mediterranean values, the triumph of the individual, of enlightenment and Beauty [of Hari’s classical music] turn into pale, lifeless

trinkets...Those values which seemed to ennoble the soul prove worthless because they have nothing in common with the real-life struggle in which the people are engaged.” (*Fanon, p11*)

In fact, even though she is black, she can, having grown up in London from the age of ten and being based in Paris from the age of 18 (she is 38 in *Babele*), in a sense be accused of being and echoing the same thing as Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. That is, “His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz [...]” (*Conrad, p71*) Or, to put it more colloquially, she is a coconut. That is, black on the outside, but white on the inside.

Nor can *Black Swan* and *Babele* make any claims to universality, since “The universalist myth has, according to Chinua Achebe, a pernicious effect in the kind of colonialist criticism which denigrates the post-colonialist text on the basis of an assumption that ‘European’ equals ‘universal’. But even a brief analysis of the ‘universal human condition’ finds it disappearing into an endless network of provisional and specific determinations in which even the most apparently ‘essential’ features of human life become provisional and contingent.” (*Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, p55*).

This leads to an even further complication, in that “The language [used] itself implies certain assumptions about the world, a certain history, a certain way of seeing.” (*Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, p55*). Ngugi wa Thiong’o states it uncompromisingly. “The bullet was the means of subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation. (*Wa Thiong’o, p287*)

That subjugation still continues, often in subtle, institutional ways. This is how I put it in my novel *Son*:

“What didn’t occur to [chief subeditor Robert Black], management or possibly even the journalists in question was that a completely new kind of English could have been born right there [in the newsroom], the kind I had found in [another South African novella] Njabulo Ndebele’s *Fools*. The man’s use of English to describe events was recognizably set in a uniquely South African township, though most whites would only have driven past them, at best. It was rich, inclusive and therefore, to my mind, exciting. Occasionally the odd columnist or guest writer might experiment a little, but generally if they veered too far off Bob’s idea of English, which was a kind of neutral, mid-Atlantic mess, they’d be in for the chop. In that sense the ‘ultra-left’ had a point that the paper still was a white one, for we still ‘spoke’ in a language that was directly descended from Thomas Pringle to Jan Smuts to Robert Black, who didn’t give a flying toss about any discourse on the ideological implications of linguistic tone.” (*Sonnekus, 2017*)

But, as Achebe said about writing in English: “It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.” (*Wa Thiong’o, p287*)

Another Igbo writer, a generation later, Adichie, also writes in English. And if her *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not exactly driven by a love story, it is partially driven by the relationships between two sets of lovers, and they are not working-class types either; they are two black academics, a white journalist, and a black businesswoman. It also has another non-no in it, according to Larson, and that is sex. But this is what Adichie has to say about writing in English:

“The interesting thing, of course, is that if I did write in Igbo (which I sometimes think of doing, but only for impractical, emotional reasons),

many Igbo people would not be able to read it. Many educated Igbo people I know can barely read Igbo and they mostly write it atrociously.

“I think that what is more important in this discourse is not whether African writers should or should not write in English but how African writers, and Africans in general, are educated in Africa. I do not believe in being prescriptive about art. I think African writers should write in whatever language they can. The important thing is to tell African stories. Besides, modern African stories can no longer claim anything like ‘cultural purity.’ I come from a generation of Nigerians who constantly negotiate two languages and sometimes three, if you include Pidgin. For the Igbo in particular, ours is the Engli-Igbo generation and so to somehow claim that Igbo alone can capture our experience is to limit it. Globalization has affected us in profound ways. I’d like to say something about English as well, which is simply that English is mine. Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English.”

Finally, Steve Biko and even Fanon did exactly what Hari’s father tells her to do in *Babele*. That is, “If you’re going to use the language of the oppressor [...] then do so properly. In fact, use it to subvert him completely.” Fanon did not write in Creole and Biko did not write in Xhosa. They wrote in French and English, respectively. Or, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, they were more concerned with the message than the medium.

There is a bit of irony in the fact that the person who emulates Fanon and Biko’s thinking in *Babele*, Siya Khoza, listens to a black singer,

Simphiwe Dana, who, even more radically than Wa Thiong'o, only sings in her native tongue, Xhosa, the language of Mandela. (The Xhosas are traditionally tribal enemies of the Zulus, though they come from the same Nguni root.) The song that features in *Babele* is called, just to extend the irony, "Bantu Biko Street". That is, of course, what Biko and Fanon would have wanted: artists expressing themselves in their own language and culture. The ironic price Dana pays for that, though, both in terms of universal consciousness and even amongst the mass of her own people, is virtual anonymity.

What *Half of a Yellow Sun* does achieve and what *Babele* tries to achieve is, again according to Larson: "The purpose of any piece of literature, no matter what culture it was produced in, is to show us something we were previously unaware of..." (*Larson, p65*) If we didn't know about the Biafran war from a black, specific point of view before, we can now. Hopefully if we didn't know just how arrogant and corrupt South African politicians of all races are, *Babele* will help change that.

But what to do if, "After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings."? (*Conrad, p23*), those "high and just proceedings" being the colonial quest "[t]o tear treasure out of the bowels of the land...with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" from which I benefited (*Conrad, p44*)? I think I found the answer in Cole writing, "How, for example, could a well-meaning [white] American 'help' a place like Uganda today? It begins, I believe, with some *humility* [my italics] with regards to the people in those places. It begins with some *respect* [my italics] for the agency of the people of Uganda in their own lives. A great deal of work had been done, and continues to be done, by Ugandans to improve their own country, and ignorant comments...about

how “we have to save them because they can’t save themselves” can’t change that fact. (*Cole, p346*)

Also, I think having lived in South Africa for 52 years gives me *some* right to write about its people. And, Cole again, “Bach, so profoundly human, is my heritage. I am not an interloper when I look at a Rembrandt portrait. I care for them more than white people do, just as some white people care more for aspects of African art than I do. I can oppose white supremacy and still rejoice in Gothic architecture.” (*Cole, p11*) By the same token, I find more pleasure and meaning in a lot of African music (Thomas Mapfumo, Salif Keita, Youssou N’Dour etc) even if I often don’t understand what they’re saying, than in most squeaky white Western pop, which I unfortunately do.

Context

As already mentioned, I decided to write *Babele* in the third person because I couldn’t presume to know exactly how a black woman thought, no matter how European she was, or seemed. Then again, I couldn’t presume to know what a European woman thinks, either, because I’m not a European or a woman: I’m a white, African male - and a Kiwi!

In terms of history, politics and religious considerations, *Babele* was largely inspired by events around the former president of South Africa, one Jacob Zuma. Badly educated and from a tribe (Zulus) that is traditionally more nationalist than traditionally democratic (Xhosas), this man had shrewdly worked his way up the ranks (you don’t have to be educated to be cunning) of the “broad church” of the African National

Congress and was now in power – in that Xhosa intellectual Nelson Mandela’s beloved ANC!

Zuma soon surrounded himself with Zulu lackeys, whereupon the brazen pilfering of the state coffers proceeded. This was helped along by some very corrupt Indian businessmen, both from the province he came from, KwaZulu-Natal, and India itself. “Give me six months to be a dictator, things will be in order.” (*Nashira Davids, Times Live online*) As it happened, there was a resurgence of right-wing activity around the world too, including in the United States, towards the end of his reign.

Moreover, there was a religious element to Zuma’s rule. “South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma kicked off the new year by declaring that God was on the side of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). Speaking ahead of the ANC’s 105th birthday celebrations which took place at the [Orlando Stadium](#) in Soweto, he reiterated a statement he has made several times before – that the party will rule until Jesus comes.” (*Roger Southall, The Conversation online*).

This was all very disturbing, but also rich with comic potential. The man lent himself to being ridiculed by a very strong civil society, which had ironically helped the ANC get into power, and which included the Press. The “clevahs” (clevers, intellectuals) constantly lampooned him. For example, when he said in one of his many court cases that he’d taken a shower to diminish the risk of getting infected after he’d allegedly raped an HIV-positive woman (*BBC News online*) he was forever after shown with a showerhead attached to his bald pate by cartoonist Zapiro.

Things got so bad towards the end of Zuma’s reign that rumours flew he might become that other wily dictator Robert Mugabe’s neighbour in the same place that Idi Amin “retired”, Saudi Arabia. So the question arose, *what if* we do something desperate like make a deal with him, give him a

square kilometre of desert, say, along with more piles of money, as well as political immunity? Hence, again, *Babele*. (In the event, Zuma was more or less voted out by his own party in a fairly democratic way, fairly in the sense that “the people” couldn’t do so, though they wanted to.)

Of course, during his almost ten-year tenure, words like “colonialism”, “democracy” and “culture” were bandied about with heterosexual abandon (Zuma is on record as saying that, “When I was growing up, unqingili [‘homosexuals’ in Zulu] could not stand in front of me.” (*IRIN News online*)). In other words, he would have beaten them up. So *Babele* also takes a serious look at those concepts at the 75th birthday celebration of “the Big Elephant of the East, President for Life (Retired), Brother of God, Reverend Doctor Makhenkesi Jonathan Ndlovu”. The surname Ndlovu means elephant in Zulu.

Was this the colonialism that, “For those claiming legacy of colonialism was ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water,” Helen Zille, the ex-leader of the Democratic Alliance party, wrote on Twitter. (*Al Jazeera online*) Or was it the following: “The colonial world is a Manichean world...Colonised society is not merely portrayed as a society without values. The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost its values or worse never possessed any. The ‘native’ is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, absolute evil.”? (*Fanon, p6*)

Was this the democracy in the pure sense of ancient Greece or the very watered down and prone-to-corruption version we see in countries like South Africa and a Donald Trump-led US?

Was it: “If we define it as participation in the government by all citizens, then Athens was a democracy – and we must remember that the normal Greek qualification for citizenship was that at least the father, if not both parents, should have been citizens – the Greek ‘state’ being (in theory and in sentiment) a group of kinsmen, not merely the population in a certain area.”? (*Kitto, p125*)

Or was it, more realistically and contemporarily: “There are of course those who deny that Athens was a democracy at all, since women, resident aliens and slaves had no voice in the conduct of affairs. If we define democracy as participation in the government by all the adult population of a country, then Athens was no democracy – nor is any modern state: for because of its size every modern state [like South Africa and the US] must delegate government to representative and professional administrators, and this is a form of oligarchy.” (*Kitto, p124*)

The character of Siya Khoza is there to analyze the above two notions of colonialism and democracy. (I use the word “analyze” rather than “interrogate” because the latter tends to conjure up images of torture, which was rife during the apartheid era, yet the word is used liberally in arts criticism, both in South Africa and elsewhere.) Khoza also makes a case for and actually represents the Black Consciousness philosophy of Steve Biko, who was influenced by Fanon but never preached violence as Fanon so explicitly did.

As for the concept of culture, when Jacob Zuma spoke about his own (Zulu) culture in which his polygamy – he has five wives – was perfectly natural and acceptable, it also meant a rabid chauvinism, as shown in his attitude towards homosexuals above, that ran counter to the principles of Mandela’s non-sexist, non-racist democracy.

So, partially to spice and stir things up, our protagonist, Hari Manze, is an African woman – on the outside at least - who happens to be an exponent of one of the most Western cultural art forms around: classical piano music. This paradoxical idea is of course partially influenced by the abovementioned *Black Swan's* Lucky, who falls in love with ballet.

The question is: can Hari live with that apparent contradiction, or does she merely represent “[t]he colonized intellectual who returns to his people through works of art [and] behaves in fact like a foreigner...the ideas he expresses, the preoccupations that haunt him are in no way related to the daily lot of the men and women of his country. The culture with which the intellectual is preoccupied is very often nothing but an inventory of particularisms.”? (*Fanon, p160*)

Hari's journey to perform at Babele will confront these issues, whether she intended it or not – and she didn't, not consciously anyway.

The big cultural symbol or device here is classical or “serious” music, mainly of Chopin, but also Alexander Scriabin, Sergei Prokofiev and Clara Schumann. These are all Western composers, of course, played by a Shona/Zulu African, via London and Paris. However, the protégé she takes on board, a white boy, is inclined towards a traditionally black musical form: jazz.

Along with the rise of nationalism and an increasing awareness of global warming, there is also the growing realization that First People might just have the answer to a better way of living in harmony with nature, each other and themselves than communist, nationalist or neo-liberal capitalist systems (*David Suzuki, Vancouver Sun* online) In the case of South Africa, whose motto is !ke e: !xarra !ke, which means Diverse People Unite in the San/Bushman language !Xam, these people remain as marginalized under the new democratic South Africa as the old

apartheid South Africa. If all the talk now is about restitution of the land to black South Africans, very little is being said or done to accommodate the original inhabitants of the land, the Khoisan. (*Foreign Policy online*)

As James Suzman writes in *Abundance without Affluence*: “If the ultimate measure of sustainability is endurance over time, then hunting and gathering [which lasted for about two hundred thousand years] is by far the most sustainable economic approach developed in all of human history, and the Khoisan are the most accomplished exponents of this approach.” (p41)

This point of view is represented in *Babele* by the mercurial Kakkerlak (Cockroach, and kak on its own means shit in Afrikaans) Cupido, who doesn't see much difference between whites and blacks, since they're both nationalistic, whereas he comes from a culture whose “‘primitive affluence’ was neither a mind-set nor the economic expression of any particular ideology: there is no ‘manifesto of primitive communism’. Their economic perspective was anchored in, among other things, their confidence in the providence of their environment, a hunter's empathy for his prey, an immediate-return economy, an indifference to the past and the future, and reaffirmed by social relationships shaped as much by jealousy as affection. (*Suzman, p256*)

Moreover, “When they still foraged independently, Ju/'hoansi, like most other well-documented hunter-gatherers, defined gender roles very clearly. But they were adamant that gender differences were no grounds to assert the superiority of one gender over the other. Individual charisma, strength of character, persuasiveness, common sense, and humility were much more important than factors in an individual's influence in a band than his or her genitals. Both men and women could be healers and both could be *n!orekzausi*, the holders of inheritance rights to any particular territory.” (*Suzman, p225*)

Cupido's granddaughter, a cleaner at Babele, is called Saartjie after Sara "Saartjie" Baartman, who, because of her large buttocks, was taken to Conrad's "sepulchral city", London, and exhibited, virtually naked, as a physiological freak in the name of the Victorian quest for scientific truth and/or racial superiority.

Furthermore, I had attended a series of lectures on translation by George Steiner in Johannesburg in the late 1980s, when things were particularly ugly in apartheid South Africa, and became fascinated by the idea that a translation of a great work like, say, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *added* to or enriched the English it was translated into due to the Babel-paradox, as quoted in one of four epigraphs to *Babele*: "...the Babel myth is once again a case of symbolic inversion: mankind was not destroyed but on the contrary kept vital and creative by being scattered among tongues." (*Steiner, p233*) That is, no single language or culture can contain the whole, Adamistic truth – only a part of it. And, coming from a cinematic background, it had much visual promise (and as an ex-filmmaker I didn't have to worry about the financial or technical constraints of selling the idea of a costly, nonexistent, twelve-storey hotel in the Kgalagadi!)

Directly following Steiner's above quote was also a statement that prefigured the dilemma I would face as a white man writing about a black woman and a Zulu-speaking man as well as a San Bushman, whose main languages is not his !Xam but Afrikaans, not English: "But in this sense also there is in every act of translation – and specially where it succeeds – a touch of *treason* [my italic]. Hoarded dreams, patents of life are being taken across the frontier." (*Steiner, p233*) I would try to perform that act of treason as respectfully in Cole's sense as possible. Every uttered sound involves an act of translation and/or interpretation, according to Steiner, starting with the different ways

people will, for example, interpret the words “I love you”. He also points out that Ezra Pound’s famous translations of Chinese poetry (p357-360) did not come about because Pound could speak Chinese – he couldn’t - but because he could add to them as a *poet*, performing an act of “exact art”, not as a language technician. Lastly, Steiner also provides some comfort about a project like Babele by writing: “To move between languages, to translate, even within restrictions of totality, is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom.” (p473)

Visually and aurally, Babele was influenced by the numerous paintings of Babel as well as two films, *Diva*, directed by Jean-Jacques Beneix and *Echoes of a Sombre Empire*, directed by Werner Herzog. In the former, an African-American opera singer (played by Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez) refuses to have her music recorded, performs in Paris and of course has her music recorded illegally by a white (and obviously fetching) young Frenchman. The latter is a documentary which records the coronation of the dictatorial Emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic, who had all his officials dressed up as 18th century European courtiers, travelled in a golden coach and sat on an ostentatious golden throne, all to the accompaniment of Franz Schubert’s Trio opus 100 No. 1!

(I was first going to make Hari an opera singer who specializes in Schubert lieder, but it felt like a repetition of the above and might even endorse comments like “they” i.e. blacks sing so beautifully.)

Text

Babele is written as a novella because it is partially inspired by my background in film, another condensed form of storytelling – and because it is talking to two other novellas set in Africa – *Black Swan* and *Heart of Darkness* - and intended for publication along with another novella I've written, *Something In Your Eyes*, also featuring a black woman (inspired by Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's life).

Structurally, *Babele* echoes *Heart of Darkness* in that it's also set in an African country, its protagonist goes to a certain place, achieves an insight, and leaves at least physically intact. But if *Heart of Darkness* is considered a colonialist novel by, among others, Achebe, then *Babele* at least aspires to be an anti-colonial work in that its protagonist is a twenty-first century African who rejects her parents' colonisers, even if she is living a contradiction in ideologically purist terms.

Furthermore, if Conrad uses the then Congo as the setting for human depravity, then I use *Babele* as a setting for (and in) South Africa, one which is neither depraved nor ideal but merely a metaphor for “business as usual”, locally and globally, politically as well as philosophically.

That one can write about a Tower of Babel being built in the Kgalagadi desert, even though no such thing has ever been attempted, and that one can actually “see” that it's based on the design of an anthill and might soon be plated with gold, celebrates “...the receptivity of a given language to metaphor [and] is a crucial factor [in effecting a lasting grip on reality].” (*Steiner, p26*) Or: “Metaphors are at home in South Africa's strange and sad history, where many things are like many other things, but nothing is quite the same as anything else. (*Cole, p72*).

Of course, the idea did not only come from the Judeo-Christian archetype of the Tower of Babel, but also from the (Jewish) magnate Sol Kerzner's grossly kitsch and ostentatious casinos built in the so-called (poverty-stricken) homelands of apartheid South Africa, in which one could "cross the border" in order to gamble and watch pornography.

Each chapter in *Babele* is headlined from a quote by *Chopin's Letters*, which is available online. This was inspired by the film *In Search of Chopin*, whose music I used to dislike intensely before I watched that film and/or grew up. Not only did I find the haughty Pole's mostly self-deprecating writing entertaining, it was also insightful, moving, wise. The challenge I set myself in that regard was to use a single line from the letters to summarise or prefigure what was about to happen in that chapter. These 38 statements – Hari's age, serendipitously - would then also try to describe a life, an arc, a progression, a life, a sensibility – that of Chopin's and many of ours - in their own right. They would also hopefully, if only in the sense that they came from another era, the Romantic one, then form that most musical of practices, counterpoint, at which of course Chopin was a master. Perhaps it also functions as a kind of Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, to keep things cool in a hot climate - and passionate love story.

In terms of tone and style, *Babele* also has more to do with *Black Swan* than *Heart of Darkness* in that it has a lighter and more "spacious" touch than the latter, whose density and slowness of style very much mimics the slow journey of the riverboat and claustrophobic density of the African jungle enclosing Marlow and Kurtz.

The "paralyzing white heat" used in the first sentence echoes (serendipitously again) that of the Bushman //kabbo describing the origin of the moon to the linguist Lucy Lloyd in 1889: "The sun is white, because it is hot; it is white." (*Pippa Skotnes*, p317).

That Hari, whose name (more serendipity) happens to be the last four letters of the Kalahari, is being stared at at the Upington Airport was inspired by Cole: “There are glances in Zurich, where I spent the summer, and there are glances in New York City, which has been my home for fourteen years. There are glances all over Europe and in India, and anywhere I go outside Africa. The test is how long the glances last, whether they become stares, with what intent they occur, whether they contain any degree of hostility or mockery and to what extent connections, money, or mode of dress shield me in these situations. To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at especially. (p5).

Though there isn't much landscape description in *Babele*, compared with an absence of it in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, it is integral thematically to the story, whether from a biblical or indigenous point of view. In terms of the former, it is in the desert where various visions were had by various religious leaders, like Moses (the Christian name of Hari's father); in terms of the latter, where some see “wasteland” others, like Kakkerlak Cupido, a Bushmen, see home and happy hunting grounds.

So there too *Babele* doesn't qualify as an African novel, according to Larson's dictum, since “[m]y African students couldn't understand what page after page of description of the countryside had to do with the plot of the novel [*Far From the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy]...The fact that descriptive passages were virtually nonexistent in African fiction initially seemed particularly puzzling to me, since the first generation of African Anglophone novelists, at least, had been brought up almost entirely on the Victorian novel. Whereas other elements of the Victorian novel had found their way into the African novel, description had not.” (*Larson, p63*). Central to *Babele* is a less striking but more

enduring and natural indigenous image than the actual Babele and that is of an only twice-mentioned tree in the desert, persisting in a harsh environment.

The man who invited Hari to Babele (and who murdered her father and will murder her lover), Brilliant Kunene, is described as looking “a little like an owl”. The white, Western reader might think this is ironic, in that the owl is traditionally seen as a symbol of wisdom. In Zulu (and various other southern African) cultures, however, it is seen as a bad omen:

“I spent time with some of the locals of Zulu, Ndebele, Shona, and Balozzi tribes, and asked them about their local owl lore.

The answers, across all these sites and cultures, was consistent with what my co-authors and I had presented in our paper on Owls in Lore and Culture.

In general, owls are viewed as harbingers of bad luck, ill health, or death. (<https://www.owlpages.com/owls/authors.php?a=8>)

Furthermore, *Babele* also subscribes, in a certain sense, to the individual hero; in this case two; both Hari and Siya are portrayed as flawed, heroic individuals, which, according to Larson, is not African. “The hero concept – the belief in the individual who is different from the fellowmen – is [also] almost totally alien to African life; and, as an extension of this, the hero in contemporary African fiction is for the most part non-existent. The hero is almost nonexistent in contemporary Western literature too, but his descendant, the anti-hero, the isolated figure, is a force to be reckoned with. This is not true of African fiction, however. Rather, it is the group-felt experience that is all important: what happens to the village, the clan, the tribe...” (*Larson, p65*).

My argument, indeed my criticism, against this kind of thinking is that it led to a passivity in a country like Zimbabwe where the president, voted by the people and therefore representing their alleged wishes, then

abused them disgracefully en masse *as an individual*. As I wrote in my novel, *Son*: “These so-called leaders were screwing their own people more than their fascist predecessors by abusing the principle of *ubuntu* [we are who we are through others] in its most cynical guise possible. If they were what they were through others, then surely they couldn’t be held individually responsible for being caught with their fat fingers in the till, could they?” (*Sonnekus, p31*) This is what Jacob Zuma did too, and this is what the character of Siya (via Fanon and Biko) rails against.

Hari, by the same token, represents individual accomplishment, yet she is welcomed and admired by her fellow (South) Africans and made to feel a part of that community through a (hopefully charming) process, engineered mainly by the older, matchmaking Nandi Khumalo.

If Hari represents individual accomplishment, along with its pitfalls of overwork and anxiety, in a European sense, then Siya could represent what some would call a detribalized or anti-tall poppy view. But what he really represents is Biko’s political philosophy of Black Consciousness, which is an argument for a return to the best of traditional communal African values and by rejecting colonialism:

“In rejecting Western values, therefore, we are rejecting those things that are not only foreign to us but that seek to destroy the most cherished of our beliefs – that the corner-stone of society is man himself – not just his welfare, not his material wellbeing but just man himself with all his ramifications. We reject the power-based society of the Westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the

great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a human face.” (*Biko*, p51)

Both black and white political philosophies, however, run the risk of becoming extreme, kleptocratic and fascist, as did Zuma’s version of democracy, as does Donald Trump’s, respectively. To counter both, there is the mercurial Kakkerlak Cupido, with his hunter-gatherer philosophy, as explained above. All his dialogue is driven by the values – an indifference to the past and future, poaching as a substitute for hunting, a circular as opposed to linear approach to the environment etc - implicit in *Affluence without Abundance*, as described above.

The twelve businessmen who attend the festivities at Babele represent a parody of the twelve tribes of Israel, including an Israeli, Chaim Rubel, in that they are shown to be nothing but multinational economic gangsters. Rubel also refers to the latest scandal involving film producer Harvey Weinstein; Joe Butt represents the United States (and Donald Trump); Dick Death represents the United Kingdom in all its bad-taste Brexit politics; Johann Schickelburger (Hitler’s father’s surname was Schicklgruber) represents the economic “miracle” of Germany doing oil and arms deals with the Middle East, as represented by his wife; Alexandre Dreyfus is a parody of alleged French culture, who has all the correct accoutrements, like a black wife, but he is still just a common arms dealer, regardless of the famous German-Jewish surname; Romero Santoro represents every gangster in the Benito Mussolini to Silvio Berlusconi mould, along with a couple of Mafia habits; Luis Cortez-Diaz represents Spanish and Portuguese colonialism and drug dealing; Tom Brown represents Australian capitalism, which is as robust and ruthless as any other; Jan Koekemoer represents Afrikaner capital (land) still living off the fruits of apartheid; Ivan Ivanovich, a name as common as Joe Smith in Russia, represents the singular Vladimir Putin, who

nevertheless puts his money where his mouth is when it comes to a passion for music; Shiva Patel represents India's burgeoning IT business; and Ping Chen represents the new global colonist, China.

The reason why I did not name most of the personalities or at least types of the black officials awarding the tenders for Babele to the above rogue's gallery was simply because it was overload in terms of what a reader could take in, and of course to spare them the "shame" of being exposed for corruption.

That Siya's daughter Khetiwe has Down syndrome is almost incidental. The main thing is that his clear love for her attracts Hari to him.

In terms of character development, Hari arrives at Babele as a childless, 38-year-old woman who is at the peak of her career, but not entirely happy. She cannot understand the genius of a Clara Schumann, who bore eight children and continued to perform and support them well into her seventies, but at the expense of being a composer in the full, continuous sense of the word. Events at Babele, however, force Hari to re-evaluate the notion of creative genius in the traditional masculine sense, and a genius for living in the more lateral, feminine sense. If she arrived at Babele with an almost overcompensatory attitude towards fellow blacks, regardless of political persuasion, she is soon disabused of that. Seeing the level of depravity at Babele, she decides that running from it is not a solution. Instead, she will build a centre, inspired, ironically, by Babele itself, where people can put their heads together and solve problems. The catalyst for all of this is Siya, who gets murdered for standing out, thinking independently. She realizes that, "If you don't live politics, politics will live you." (*James, p31*) Falling in love at a moment when, biologically, she will either have children or not, having always put career first, she opts for the former, and feels strengthened by it.

Where does that leave *Babele* in terms of genre and other works set in and from Africa? It is clearly not an African novel in Larson's sense, but hopefully it is seen as my (white, male, previously advantaged etc) empathetic but not blinkered view of my home country.

Subtext

In the first two drafts of *Babele* I had Hari arriving at Babele in a huff. She was being a prima donna from the outset, after which she became more accommodating about "the African way" of doing things before the blinkers fell from her eyes and she realized she was in a vipers' den, regardless of race. It was only after those two drafts that I realized I was writing about myself as a migrant in the sense that, when I got to New Zealand from South Africa, I had all kinds of entitled expectations, and voiced them. (None of them, of course, was met.) So I changed her approach, mainly for artistic reasons, to one of being open to the aforementioned "way of life" to a growing anger to outright rage towards those who abuse power - and empathy for those who are its victims. Most importantly, it also made more dramatic sense, albeit in a more Western, linear sense.

This was the second bit of problematic "autobiography". Hari clearly goes to Babele looking for something. To her mind it is finding recognition amongst "her" people via her father, just as Prokofiev did by returning to Soviet Russia – with ideologically disastrous consequences. But what she's really going to Babele for is to find out what exactly she is, and wants. Is she really a "coconut", a sellout, by playing Western music? Can one really live with two such colliding ideologies? Is she betraying any feminist cause by opting to have children?

So, too, I live in two worlds, South Africa and New Zealand. Where to from here artistically? Is my writing no longer African, if it ever was? Is it postmodern? Postcolonial? Not exactly, it seems. If in the end Hari settles into all her contradictions in what Vladimir Nabokov calls “this wrought-iron world of of criss-cross cause and effect”, so do I, along with the help of the likes of Teju Cole. She will continue playing white Western music, she will promote her white protégé Anton’s black jazz, like Clara Schumann promoted Robert and Johannes Brahms, she will have children - both adopted and biologically – and she will start acting politically too, in the sense that she’ll have a cultural centre built. All of this to keep alive the flame of her father, her lover, the likes of Nandi and Vusi Khumalo, Kate Eksteen, and Kakkerlak Cupido, who represents the First People.

By the same token, I will keep writing in a Western sense (for now), I do have children, both real and fictional, and I do act politically. That is, I decided that if I stayed in South Africa I would implicitly support Jacob Zuma’s outrageous corruption by paying taxes (I stayed out of formal structures as much as I could during the apartheid years for the same reason). If I was happy that my children were born and thrived during Nelson Mandela’s reign, then Zuma forced me, happily, to show them something else. (Today my daughter practices a bourgeois Western art form for the Australian Ballet, which would not have happened had we stayed, even if I personally prefer contemporary African dance.) I can live with my contradictions of writing as a white man about Africa, from Africa, from afar, as much as I can savour the challenge of writing about New Zealand, from a different kind of distance. In both cases I’m an outsider and all I can do is harness that, or, as Gill Scott-Heron sings, “...the cards that they deal you/Are the ones you gotta play.”

What did I hope to achieve with *Babele*? Essentially, I wanted to celebrate where I come from, South Africa, showing Biko's "human face", a place that is colourful, vibrant and humane, as symbolized by Hari and all those she comes to love. I also wanted to show that it is vicious on a political level, as everyone else scrambles and scratches to become the ruling culture. It is not pretty. Secondly, I wanted to achieve a "translation" from South Africa to New Zealand, adding to the English and migrant experience here. Hopefully the reader will come away from *Babele* with a feeling of unsentimental warmth and release, much in the vein of Steiner's "bias of the human spirit towards freedom".

Bibliography:

Adichie, CN: (2006) *Half of a Yellow Sun*, New York Alfred A. Knopf

Al Jazeera (online): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/outrage-helen-zille-colonialism-tweets-170316154748367.html>)

Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G, Tiffin, H, editors: (1995) *the post-colonial reader*, London, Routledge

Azodo, AU: http://www.iun.edu/~minaua/interviews/interview_chimamanda_ngozi_adichie.pdf

BBC News (online): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4879822.stm>

Biko, S: *I Write What I Like* (2004), Johannesburg, Picador Africa

Cohodas, N: (2010) *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone*, New York, Pantheon Books

Cole, T: (2016) *Known and Strange Things*, Faber & Faber, New York

Conrad, J: *Heart of Darkness* (1973), London, Penguin

Davids, N: Times Live (online) <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2018-02-19-give-me-six-months-to-be-a-dictator-things-will-be-in-order-jacob-zuma-in-quotes/>

De Kock, L: <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4436/Hope-Christopher.html>

Fanon, F: (1961) *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, translation Richard Philcox, 2004, Grove Press

Hope, C: (1987) *Black Swan*, London, Hutchinson

IRIN News (online): <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2006/09/27/zuma-slammed-views-homosexuality-same-sex-marriage>

James, M: (2014) *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, New York, Riverhead Books

Kitto, HDF: (1951) *The Greeks*, London, Penguin Books

Larson, C: (1973) *Heroic Ethnocentrism: The Idea of Universality in Literature*, in Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G, Tiffin, H (eds) (1995) *the post-colonial studies reader*, London, Routledge

Reich, NB: (1985) *Clara Schumann, the Artist and the Woman*, New York, Cornell University Press

Robinson, H: (2002) *Sergei Prokofiev, A Biography*, New York, Northeastern

Secorun, L: *Foreign Policy* (online) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/19/south-africas-first-nations-have-been-forgotten-apartheid-khoisan-indigenous-rights-land-reform/>

Skotnes, P: (2007) *Claim to the Country: The Archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd*, Johannesburg, Jacana

Sonnekus N: *Son*, (2017) , Johannesburg, MFBooks Joburg

Southall, R: *The Conversation* (online) <https://theconversation.com/the-political-theology-of-jacob-zuma-71176>

Steiner, G: (1975) *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, London, Oxford University Press

Suzman, J: (2017) *Abundance without Affluence*, London, Bloomsbury

Suzuki, D: <http://www.vancouver.sun.com/technology/David+Suzuki+Aboriginal+people+environmentalists+best+protecting+planet/11112668/story.html>

Voynich, EL (edited): *Chopin's Letters*, (online)

Wa Thiong'o, N: (1981) *The Language of African Literature* in Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G, Tiffin, H (eds) (1995) *the post-colonial studies reader*, London, Routledge

Zamoyski, A: (1979) *Chopin*, London, Collins