NOTES & REVIEWS

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Francesca Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation*

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In *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation*, Francesca Mussi explores the ways and extent to which contemporary South African literature has been affected by the procedures and spirit of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This non-judicial body was created "to provide for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed" in South Africa from 1960 to 1994 (Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995), and it played a crucial role in the process of political transition towards democracy in the country after the demise of apartheid.

As Mussi asserts, her study is less involved in determining whether the Truth and Reconciliation Commission failed or succeeded in coping with the atrocities of the past, than in discussing how literary works written in the post-apartheid period have emerged as interlaced with the history of the Commission and with concepts like trauma, truth, and reconciliation, which closely revolve around the TRC's mandate and proceedings. In order to better investigate how literature has initiated a discussion on the TRC, the book is divided into four chapters, namely "Introduction: The South African TRC and Its Narrative Legacies", "Trauma: Conflictual Interplay Between Voice and Silence", "Truth-Telling: Hybridity, Authorship and Ethics", and "Fictional Journeys Towards Reconciliation". The Conclusion section summarises the results of the huge research carried out by the author in the previous chapters.

In the first chapter, Mussi provides the reader with paramount information about the historical context in which the TRC was established, together with an account of its aims, successes and shortcomings. The focus then shifts to literature. While underlining that her main interest is in the novel genre and in the strategies adopted by novelists to examine the role of the TRC, Mussi does not totally neglect other literary genres. At first, she draws attention to theatre, as one of the most prominent fields engaging in dialogue with issues raised by the TRC. Secondly, she investigates the influence of the Commission's agency in the sphere of poetic themes and stylistic choices, dedicating space to the *oeuvre* of South African poet Ingrid de Kok, especially her collection *Terrestrial Things* (2002). Finally, she tackles Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, a well-known landmark in contemporary South African literature in which Krog, a dissident Afrikaner writer, excels at providing touching, crucial insights into the Commission's sessions and hearings. In her acclaimed as well as controversial 1998 book, Krog blends episodes from

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the official history of the country in the transition period with her personal memories, fictional strategies and, of course, her direct experience as a South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio journalist committed to reporting on the work of the TRC.

After dealing with the production mentioned above, Mussi concentrates on the novel genre, which she sees as particularly suited to posing questions connected with the agenda and goals of the TRC, such as the achievability of the ideals of truth and reconciliation, the ethics of confession and the very possibility of coping with apartheid's deep-rooted legacy of traumatic memories. Mussi looks at Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998), a fictionalised account of the dynamics of Amy Biehl's murder in 1993. A white American student and anti-apartheid activist, Amy was stabbed and stoned to death by a mob of blacks in the township of Guguletu, while she was taking one of her friends home. The four boys convicted of her murder were eventually granted amnesty on the grounds of the Commission's policies. Magona's reconstruction, taking on the form of a diary and poignant first-person letter from the mother of one of the killers to Amy's mother, induces one to reflect on the complexity of the notions of 'innocence' and 'guilt' and on the tragic blurring of the boundary between the predator/prey, perpetrator/victim identities, if considering that the assailants' "environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity" (p. 24). Also, we could argue that

> [by] withholding Mrs Biehl's response, *Mother to Mother* refuses to underwrite the TRC's narrative of unity and reconciliation, but rather opens up questions as to the real efficacy of the Commission's work and the meaning of "closure", thus alluding to the long road that remains to be travelled to achieve real reconciliation in South Africa. (p. 26)

The focus then turns to Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust* (2000), a novel which elaborates on the 1990s' encounter, during the TRC's proceedings, between MK activist Alex Mpondo ('victim') and policeman Dirk Hendricks ('perpetrator'), sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment for the death of a detainee and now applying for amnesty. Mussi evidences how, by capitalising on the epiphenomenal ramifications, shocking revelations and collateral effects of such a confrontation, Slovo manages to shed light on the ambiguities and eerie overturnings at the root of the process of truth-seeking and hidden behind the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'.

Chapter 2 brings to the fore the topic of trauma. Mussi lays emphasis on the TRC's gendered approach to trauma by examining the role and behaviour of women in the course of the Commission's hearings. Although women hugely suffered from violence on both a physical and psychological level during the apartheid years, they often showed reluctance to dwell on their tragic stories before the Commission. By reformulating Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's remarkable question in her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" into "Can the Subaltern Be Heard?", Mussi wonders whether the TRC was actually able to provide women with a safe place to speak, especially as far as sexual violence was concerned. In this regard, she mentions the novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001) by Achmat Dangor, in which the author expresses his perplexity towards the TRC's capability to either cope with female traumas or grant women a secure location from which to have their say, especially when it came to sexual assault and rape. The chapter then passes on to Njabulo Ndebele's

The Cry of Winnie Mandela (2003, 2013), a novel made up of two different discursive pathways. On the one hand, the text points out the difficulties and worries that harass the lives of a small group of "Penelope's descendants", four non-white women waiting in vain for their husbands to come back either from the liberation struggle or from their far-off workplaces and commitments during the apartheid years. Hence the depiction of the miserable condition of 'ordinary' South African women faced with the combined impact of the racist regime's oppression and the constraints of patriarchal subordination. On the other hand, as suggested by its title, the book revolves around the 'extraordinary', charismatic presence of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (1936-2018), Nelson Mandela's second wife and Mother of the Nation, whom the four abandoned women address while sharing their testimonies. Ndebele shows the extent to which such a proud and controversial public icon endured, but also reacted to, humiliations and discredit throughout the decades of segregationism. As a result, Madikizela-Mandela found it very difficult to "express regret" when appearing before the TRC and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. By interlacing these survival stories of forced separations, Ndebele problematises the TRC's notion of '*gross* human rights violations', inviting the reader to reflect on 'ordinary' traumas too, on how the everyday tragedies of wounded persons sadly risked to go unheard.

After exploring gender realities with reference to novelistic discourse and the TRC's objectives, the volume's second chapter takes up the vexed notion of race and its huge social implications. A major point in Mussi's discussion is that, besides women suffering from everyday violence, the TRC's proceedings failed to encompass all the implications linked to racism and systemic discrimination. In this case, too, the primacy given to the concept of 'gross violation' inevitably overshadowed the statements and testimonies of those who experienced ordinary traumas due to the racial laws (i.e., through the Population Registration Act and racial classification, the pass laws, the forced removals, the loss of land with the associated system of migrant labour, and so forth). In dealing with race, Mussi also devotes particular attention to the complexities embedded in the life of Coloured people in the new South Africa. Her analysis of Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) shows how, after the demise of apartheid, Coloureds were still bound to cope with several hardships in order to tell their stories of trauma and have them heard.

Chapter 3 provides context for a consideration of the TRC's interpretation of 'truth'. The very banner of that restorative-justice body's public hearings – "Truth: the Road to Reconciliation" – extolled the role assigned to truth as a highway to forgiveness and peace via confession, chronicles of suffering, apologies, expressions of regret and the healing of the wounds of the past. In the face of such a magnification of truth, Mussi concentrates on the tangled process which should have led to its discovery and reflects upon the possibilities as well as limits of truth-telling and truth-seeking with regard to the Commission's mandate of uncovering past abuse.

The third chapter explores this topic by examining three novels. The first is *The House Gun* by Nadine Gordimer. Published in 1998 and receptive to the overwhelming winds of change of post-apartheid/post-racial South Africa, this 'courtroom drama' interrogates any neat definition of truth by showcasing a different kind of crime: the murder of an upper-middle-class white man by another upper-middle-class white man, namely Duncan Lindgard, a young architect who becomes enmeshed in promiscuous

sexual relationships. As the narrative unfolds, with its bewildering Dostoevskyian echoes, moments of conscience-probing and sense of guilt, the reader is teased into wondering about the nature of crime and the burden of accountability, against a backdrop where Duncan's light sentence – seven years in prison, with extenuating circumstances – would not have been possible without a black lawyer's support, a black friend's testimony and the new South Africa's changing legal system (the death penalty now being banned by the Constitutional Court). By employing a complex, multi-layered narrative structure, Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) can similarly be shown to dig deep and ultimately call into question the epistemological foundations of truth-telling. The third chapter's final focus is on Patrick Flanery's *Absolution* (2012), which, penned by an American writer and academic, records the enormous impact that the TRC has had on literature from all over the world. By foregrounding the encounter between Sam Leroux, a young academic charged with the task of writing a biography of acclaimed author Clare Wald, and Wald herself, Flanery builds up a story of lies, unspoken truths and gaps, thus exposing the deceitfulness of any narrative purporting to fix a unique and universal truth.

The last chapter is devoted to reconciliation, which is, for Mussi, the toughest concept to grasp because of its dynamic, multi-dimensional nature and utopian urge. Her discussion of the literary refractions of the TRC's approach to reconciliation starts with J.M. Coetzee's remarkable novel *Disgrace*. This 1999 work articulates a critique of the TRC's policy by depicting a post-apartheid South Africa still affected by endemic violence and widespread hatred between whites and non-whites. Meanwhile, Coetzee discloses the inadequacy of the TRC's striving to invite women to publicly go through their shattering experiences of sexual violence, thus counterposing silence as a possible alternative to come to terms with sorrowful memories. At this juncture, Mussi briefly turns her attention to the theme of domestic violence against women, a crucial topic in Thando Mgqolozana's *Un-importance* (2014). Through a stream-of-consciousness narration, Mgqolozana's novel tells the story of Zizi's journey towards reconciliation, after he decides to confess the violence he perpetrated against his girlfriend. As Mussi carefully notes, the novel calls to mind the ambiance of the TRC's public hearings and the confessions made by perpetrators in order to atone for their guilt and be granted amnesty. By engaging with the TRC's tenets of truth-telling, accountability and reconciliation, along with a main focus on gender inequality, *Un-importance* awakens us to the necessity of dealing with issues not yet fully tackled by the Commission.

The notion of reconciliation is further probed in Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* (2016), defined as "a raw, uncompromising and intensely emotional account of a young woman's struggle to find her own place in contemporary South Africa" (p. 210). When discussing this novel, Mussi gives a great deal of thought to relevant issues in post-apartheid South Africa such as widespread xenophobia, a flawed healthcare system and significant cases of 'corrective rape', thus prompting one to wonder whether freedom, peace and equality have really been achieved in the 'Rainbow Nation'. Xenophobic violence is also at the core of *Call It Dog* (2013), Marli Roode's debut novel and the last literary work analysed here. By telling the story of Jo Hartslief, a South African-born, London-based journalist, and of her visit to her home country to collect information and give a full account of the xenophobic riots in Alexandra, *Call It Dog*

expands on real events, namely the anti-immigrant riots that took place in Alexandra in 2008 and that quickly extended to other cities like Durban. Through an analysis of this work, Mussi invites the reader to reflect on how reconciliation is still a long way from being achieved. Meanwhile, she underlines the novel's capability to pose questions about the status of truth-finding and truth-telling, again with an eye to assessing the TRC's assumptions and proceedings.

In conclusion, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation* brings to the fore the considerable extent to which post-apartheid literature has engaged with a critical discourse on the TRC. Through her perceptive analysis, Francesca Mussi has shown how literature, and particularly novels, have succeeded in looking into the TRC's policy and key notions such as trauma and guilt, violations and repentance, truth and reconciliation. In doing so, she has contributed to shedding light on literature's capability to become a site for a compelling investigation of historical and collective phenomena of great relevance.