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# Ominous Inevitabilities: Reflecting on South Africa's Post-Transition Aporia in Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*

Aghogho Akpome

**Abstract:** Achmat Dangor's novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001), nominated for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2004, is one of several important works of fiction that comment on the imperfections of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), offering a polemical critique of South Africa's on-going transition. In this article, I examine two significant ways in which Dangor's novel questions the work of the TRC. First, I posit that the story represents the TRC's model of transitional justice as being too determined by a "forgive and forget" approach that is inadequate as a means of providing reconciliation and thus fundamentally flawed. Second, I argue that, overall, the novel depicts the national reconciliation project as a mission that has in a way resulted in the appropriation of justice from – instead of its delivery to – some victims of Apartheid-era crimes. The aim of this article is not to present Dangor's fictional text as a one-dimensional reflection of complex social realities, but rather to foreground the practical and imaginative means that his inspired realist narrative offers for dealing with the aftermath of the massive social injustices perpetrated in South Africa during the Apartheid era.

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**Keywords:** South Africa, transitional justice, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, coming to terms with the past, literature

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The euphoria that initially greeted South Africa's negotiated transition from Apartheid to multiparty democracy in 1994 has since abated and been replaced by increasing anxiety over the uncertainties of the country's unfolding future and increasingly dystopian present. One of the most graphic illustrations of the current situation is the "Marikana Massacre" of 16 August 2012, which saw thirty-four miners shot and killed by police during the latter's attempt to bring six days of deadly protests over wages under control (see *BBC News Africa* 2012). This incident follows a spate of recent negative socio-political trends, including huge economic inequalities, deadly xenophobic attacks and "service delivery" protests – as well as bitterly divisive local and national politics.<sup>1</sup> These contradictions pose a significant challenge to the idea of the "rainbow nation", a term coined by Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Tutu's creative term is ordinarily considered a reference to the country's racial and ethnic diversity. More significantly, however, it is seen by some to symbolise the utopian view that the country has finally managed to resolve its tempestuous past through negotiated political reconciliation.

From the outset, though, scholars and commentators warned against such unbridled optimism. Writing in 1996, South African-born American scholar Rob Nixon (1996: 64) compared the prospects of the new South Africa to those of the countries of the former Communist bloc, which had undergone a similar process of change after the fall of the Berlin Wall:

In many of these countries, expanded social freedoms have done little to ease poverty; in some of them it has worsened, as has joblessness. And, as in South Africa, the advance of democracy has typically been accompanied by surging lawlessness and the rise of syndicated crime.

Likewise, Brandon Hamber (1998: n.p.) cautioned that:

It is true that South African society has changed. Power has been ushered correctly into the hands of the majority, overt racism has been outlawed, human rights policies entrenched, a constitutional system that can rival any liberal democracy in the world established and there

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1 Figures from South Africa's 2011 census confirm that the country has one of the highest levels of income inequality of anywhere in the world. This reality is widely believed to be at the heart of the various different forms of ongoing social and political disturbances, including violent crime and, since 2008, a series of deadly xenophobic attacks on poor immigrants. The national political scene has also seen heated exchanges along the lines of race and class, especially since the controversial Julius Malema assumed leadership of the Youth League of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in 2008 (see Bauer 2012; Patel 2012).

has been limited socio-economic development. [...] Despite these successes, the long-term impact of the agreements made to ensure peace and reconciliation remain uncertain. A highly politicised population remains trapped in a society of staggering wealth differentials. Those brutally victimised by the security forces have witnessed ruthless killers and their governmental accomplices walk free in exchange for often-meagre confessions. For some victims and survivors of apartheid, the price of peace has been high.

The challenges of the post-Apartheid era continue to dominate the themes of the plethora of literature emerging from South Africa since 1994. Through a wide array of literary formulations (e.g. life writing and political commentary), writers have engaged with the complex issues of transitional justice, economic inequality, identity construction, trauma, racial prejudice, memory and (re-)historicisation, violent crime and disease, among other topics. Although some commentators view the TRC as a success merely because of its attempt to confront the country's dark recent past (see Jardine 2008), there have also been many strong criticisms made of its juridical and procedural inadequacies. For example, Mahmood Mamdani (2002) and the Khulumani Support Group (2011) both interrogate the TRC's peculiar mechanisms of transitional justice and demonstrate some of the ways in which the avowed objectives – for example to rehabilitate and compensate the violated, reveal the “truth”, bring offenders to justice and resolve historical, social and political differences – became seriously compromised.

Yet there is no doubt that the TRC occupies one of the most significant moments in the post-Apartheid period, specifically for the months between April 1996 (when its hearings began) and the end of October 1998 (when its final report was handed to then president Nelson Mandela). This remains a major topos of current South African literary production and has spawned a litany of polemic responses about its perceived failures and successes. In an oft-cited study, Shane Graham (2003: 11-30) notes how the commission has foregrounded the power of narrative in the (re)negotiation of social orders and typologies. Writing about journalist and poet Antjie Krog's part memoir and part reportage *Country of My Skull* (1998), Mark Sanders (2000: 16) also demonstrates how fictional and semi-fictional narratives “supplement the account of truth” that was offered by the TRC report and help in the construction of a new national social vision.

It must be noted, however, that the central role of narratives (and of their criticism) in gauging the extent of post-Apartheid social development in South Africa is limited by obvious historiographical and representational constraints. In recognising this shortcoming, Graham notes that the evils of the Apartheid past “elude all attempts at representation” (2003: 12). Simi-

larly, Njabulo Ndebele (1998: 20–21) has remarked that these stories may indeed “have less and less to do with facts themselves and with their recall than with the revelation of meaning through the imaginative combination of those facts”. Furthermore, Frederic Jameson (1981: 82) argues that history is:

fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational [...]. The brute fact of history, the raw force that it enacts, the actuality of what happened, cannot be represented but is, nonetheless, only accessible through the mediation of textual form, that is, through historiography as the writing-of-history, and literature as an engagement with the historical past.

The ensuing analysis of Dangor’s realist novel and the evaluation of its imaginative exploration of post-Apartheid social disjunctions in South Africa are thus grounded in an appreciation of the largely symbolic functions of narrative.

Set in 1998, and thus towards the end of Nelson Mandela’s presidency, *Bitter Fruit* (2001) tells the story of how Silas Ali’s family gradually falls apart when Silas (a high-ranking official of the Justice Ministry who works closely with the TRC), his wife Lydia, and their teenage son Mikey are all forced to confront a particularly violent episode that occurred during the Apartheid years. Nominated for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2004, this novel remains one of the better received and more referenced works of fiction that comment on the imperfections of the TRC; it also offers a polemical critique of South Africa’s negotiations in the aftermath of the massive social injustices perpetrated. Other significant novels with similar thematic premises include *Disgrace* (1999) by the Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee, *David’s Story* (2000) by Zoë Wicomb and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswane Mpe.

Analyses of *Bitter Fruit* have so far tended to focus on its critique of such issues as identity and cultural (re)construction, historicisation, gender and the juridical inadequacies of the TRC (see Chapman 2003; Samuelson 2004; Miller 2008; Frenkel 2008). Less attention has been paid to one of its more unique contributions to South Africa’s growing “literature of passage, passing and the past” (Geertsema 2007: 2-3): its articulation of what Luca Prono (2010: n.p.) calls “a permanent sense of transition”. This is particularly important as South Africa approaches twenty years of democracy with current socio-political trends gesturing towards an apparent negation of some of the TRC’s key objectives.

In this article, I examine two specific ways in which *Bitter Fruit* questions the work of the TRC, specifically the former’s resistance to closure and its problematisation of national reconciliation. First, I posit that the story casts the Commission’s model of transitional justice (which incorporates victim-offender mediation) as being overly characterised by a “forgive and

forget" approach that is doomed to failure in the long run. Second, I argue that, overall, the novel depicts the national reconciliation project as a mission that has in a way resulted in the appropriation of justice from – instead of its delivery to – some of the most vulnerable victims of Apartheid-era crimes against humanity. In this regard, the book's narrative represents the official processes of reconciliation and democratisation as impediments to the private efforts of the many ordinary victims who are still struggling to cope with violent memories, trauma and an uncertain future in the new South Africa.

I aim to demonstrate, therefore, how these contradictions – as they are depicted in the story – tend to undermine the credibility of the overarching objectives of socio-political national (re)construction. I begin by examining how Silas' and Lydia's failed attempts to "forget" her rape might be understood as a critique of the TRC's approach to dealing with the country's past. Next, I demonstrate how the contradictions between public projects and personal concerns (typified by the divide between Silas' official and private circumstances) illustrate the power dynamics that lead to the genuine restorative needs of actual victims becoming smothered and displaced in the post-conflict dispensation by spurious political imperatives. Thus, the ultimate purpose of this article is not to present Dangor's fictional text as a simplistic reflection of complex social realities. Rather, my objective is to foreground the practical, imaginative and revelatory ways that his inspired realist narrative offers as means of dealing with the aftermath of the massive social injustice experienced in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

## Ominous Inevitabilities in the Post-Transition Era

The tragedy in *Bitter Fruit* is foreshadowed in the ominous pronouncement that opens the story: "It was inevitable" (2001: 7). During the struggle against Apartheid, Silas had been an operative of the military wing of the ANC, known as Umkhonto we Sizwe or MK. This made him a particularly important target of the security forces of the Apartheid government. When his wife, Lydia, is raped in a police van by Du Boise, a white police officer, almost two decades earlier, Silas is made to stand outside the van and listen helplessly to her screams of torment. This becomes a haunting memory that he carries for almost two decades. For her part, Lydia is also burdened with the trauma of the event, not discussing with Silas or anyone else her dread that the son she bears, Mikey, is actually Du Boise's. All the while, the cou-

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2 This article has benefited from the valuable comments of Markus Höhne and the anonymous reviewers of *Africa Spectrum* on earlier drafts.

ple pretend that they have “learned to live” with this traumatic experience, which they do not even discuss (8, 16). This illusion is, however, shattered when Silas – now a high-ranking government official working with the TRC – bumps into an ageing Du Boise while both are out shopping on a Sunday afternoon. Initially Silas does not know how to respond, but his “unspoken trauma” (9) becomes reawakened – especially when he learns that Du Boise has applied for amnesty from the TRC for some sexual offences perpetrated, of which Lydia’s rape is probably one.

To Silas and Lydia, the sudden recall of suppressed trauma is like the violent opening of a long-festering wound, triggering bouts of depression in each individual. The lingering tensions within their sexless marriage become exacerbated as each tries unsuccessfully to express and come to terms with his or her personal confusion, disappointment and loss. Both commence, as does their son Mikey, an emotional rollercoaster ride that culminates in the collapse of the family. After a tense discussion with Silas at the beginning of the story, Lydia deliberately steps on broken glass and cuts herself, as a result of which she is hospitalised for a few weeks. Once Lydia recovers, she and Silas grow increasingly apart. At Silas’ extravagant fiftieth birthday party, she has a sexual affair (witnessed by both her son and husband) with a young male dancer and afterwards decides to leave Silas. Mikey discovers the secret of his birth after stealing and reading Lydia’s diary and then tries to reconnect with the Muslim members of his extended family. He then murders two men, the incestuous father of a friend as well as Du Boise, Lydia’s rapist. Afterwards he tries to flee to India.<sup>3</sup>

In this story, the fate of Silas and his family can be understood as a comment on the perceived ineffectiveness of one crucial aspect of how the TRC sought to deal with the lasting memories of the brutal human rights violations that characterised the Apartheid era. The TRC’s approach was multi-pronged, but its key components involved mass public hearings as well as a unique and controversial amnesty programme. This model was – on the face of it – predicated on the principles undergirding victim-offender mediation, a feature of modern restorative justice practices rooted in precepts of reparation, retribution and communal approaches to justice in primeval acephalous societies (see Michalowski 1985; Bright 1997). Through its hearings and disputed amnesty programme, the TRC sought a creative and idiosyncratic method by which to unearth the “truth” of gross human rights

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3 Mikey’s interest in his Islamic and Indian roots registers Dangor’s interest in the hybrid nature of modern South African identity. It (as well as the novel’s title) may also be a subtle allusion to the Indian Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto, whose collection of works was published posthumously in 2008 under the title of *Bitter Fruit: The Very Best of Saadat Hasan Manto*.

abuses enacted during a key period (1960 to early 1994) of institutionalised Apartheid and during the time just before democracy was established.<sup>4</sup> It was envisaged that this restorative – rather than retributive – approach would represent the best means, in the circumstances, of fostering the healing of victims and rehabilitation of perpetrators so as to guarantee the forging of a path to national reconciliation. Bronwyn Leebaw (2003: 25) provides a concise summary of the historical, juridical and philosophical foundations of the TRC:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission began to take shape in 1993, when [...] South Africa's liberation movements reached an agreement with state representatives to end apartheid and hold democratic elections. The interim constitution outlined the principles that were to guide the process of dealing with the past: "[T]here is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not victimization". [...] The call for understanding and *ubuntu*, which is translated roughly as "humaneness", summarized the decision to forego punitive measures, such as lustration and prosecution. The institutional design of the commission was outlined in a parliamentary act passed in 1995, soon after South Africa's transition. [...] The TRC granted amnesty to individual applicants, but only on the condition that they would confess publicly to the details of their involvement in human rights violations. The threat of prosecution would remain for those who did not cooperate with the TRC, while the offer of amnesty would serve a dual role: as a gesture toward reconciliation and as an incentive to disclose information. Members of liberation movements, as well as former state officials, were required to submit amnesty applications. Despite the TRC's origins in political compromise and its offers of amnesty, South African leaders have argued that the commission advanced a "different kind of justice," restorative justice, and suggested that restorative principles were uniquely suited to addressing the tensions of the transitional context. [...] South Africa's restorative approach has been controversial among transitional justice scholars and advocates. Some argue that it might serve as a model for other countries seeking to overcome legacies of violent conflict. Others contend that it confuses justice with therapy.

In his personal memoir of the TRC, Archbishop Tutu defends its philosophical biases, arguing that the aim was to guarantee the achievement of "the greatest good":

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4 See South African Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 2009.

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the summum bonum – the greatest good. Anything that subverts, that undermines, this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good. To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. (1999: 31)

Furthermore, the foreword to the TRC's report expressly declares: "Having looked the beast of the past in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let us *shut the door on the past* [...]"<sup>5</sup> It is this prescribed closure, the "demand" for "a forgetful silence" – resulting in or amounting to the muzzling of utterance – which Lydia resists in *Bitter Fruit*. Moreover, the TRC demonstrated a clear bias towards public goals at the expense of the private concerns of the majority of victims. Little wonder, then, that many commentators express the view that "the compromises made in the name of 'national unity' and 'reconciliation' [...] allowed so many to walk free while the conditions they had perpetrated under Apartheid and that had reduced so many to poverty and powerlessness remained intact" (Coombes 2004: 8). This runs counter to a key tenet of victim-offender mediation – namely, the emphasis on the needs and sensitivities of victims (see Umbreit and Greenwood 2000: 1). Perhaps due in large part to this disjunction, the TRC's ostensible attempt to balance confession and forgiveness with remembering and obligatory silence is revealed to be aporetic in the story discussed here.

In the tragedy of Silas' family, *Bitter Fruit* thus dramatises some of the strongest criticisms made of the broad principles of restorative justice – especially those articulated by Levrant, Cullen, Fulton and Wozniak (1999), who argue that the expectations of restorative justice are founded more on "humanistic sentiments" than on its actual effectiveness. A more robust exploration of the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of truth, reconciliation and healing as well as their socio-political implications in contemporary South Africa would be worthwhile in this respect – however, this is not the direct concern of this paper. What is evident is that Silas' and Lydia's inability to experience healing – along with Mikey's vengeful killing of Du Boise – all suggest that the TRC's particular model for realising victim restoration is flawed. In this regard, the fact that Silas works for the TRC in a very senior capacity is particularly significant. It is important, then, to understand his dual role in the narrative as both victim and mediator in the reconciliation and healing process. For the specific purposes of this article, it

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5 South African Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 2009: 22, emphasis added.

is also critical to examine (i) the ways in which Silas functions in the story as a representative of the TRC (and what it stood for) and (ii) what his portrayal reveals about the plausibility of the TRC's approaches and goals.

In the novel's aforementioned opening lines, Silas contemplates, upon meeting his Apartheid-era tormentor, the ominous yet inevitable prospect of unplanned encounters between perpetrators and victims in a post-TRC setting. Naturally, his own chance meeting lodges into his mind the thorny issue of perpetrator accountability, which is one of the key issues lying at the heart of the concept of transitional/restorative justice (see Zehr and Mika 1998). Silas thus reflects on:

run[ning] into someone from the past, someone who had been in a position of power and had abused it. Someone who had affected his life, not in the vague, rather grand way in which everybody had been affected, as people said, because power corrupts even the best of men, but directly and brutally. Good men had done all kinds of things they could not help doing, because they had been corrupted by all the power someone or something had given them.

"Bullshit", Silas thought. It's always something or someone else who's responsible, a "larger scheme of things" that exonerates people from taking responsibility for the things they do. (7)

Silas' thoughts here can be read as a categorical rejection of one of the TRC's cornerstone mechanisms of enacting transitional justice. In one celebrated example, confessed torturer Jeffery Benzien was granted amnesty on the basis that responsibility for his crimes was not deemed to be strictly personal, but instead part of a broad system for which the individual could not be held accountable (see Leebaw 2003: 23-24). Silas' rejection of this controversial logic also illuminates why he is unable to deal with his own hurt and painful memories. Yet, the text does not offer any conclusive explanations for Silas' unease, as his subsequent reflection indicates:

What Du Boise had done, he had done a long time ago. Nineteen years. And Silas had learned to live with what Du Boise had done, had absorbed that moment's horror into the flow of his life, a faded moon of a memory that only occasionally intruded into his everyday consciousness. Why did it matter now, when the situation was reversed, and Silas could use the power of his own position to make the old bastard's life hell? (8)

What does matter is that, contrary to what he had previously led himself to believe, he has never actually reached the point psychologically where he, as a victim, is able to reconcile himself with the event. This becomes increas-

ingly apparent as the novel unfolds, made explicit in his confusion upon meeting Du Boise and the strong emotions that accompany the encounter:

Silas watched Du Boise disappear into the bright sunlight, watched the security guard watching him, and then turned away. The rage he felt was in his stomach, an acidity that made him fart sourly, out loud, oblivious to the head-shaking group of shoppers who had gathered to witness a potential scene. The guard spoke into his radio, the café owner pointedly dragged the chair back to its neat place beneath the table. Silas' rage moved disconsolately into his heart. (8–9)

Moreover, when he gets home and reports the incident to his wife Lydia, Silas is forced to confront the inadequacy of his handling hitherto of the nineteen-year-old traumatic memory:

“All these years, we never spoke about it.”

“There was no need to.”

She looked up at him, her eyes scornful. “‘No need to?’ What do you mean, no need to?”

“It was a time when, well, we had to learn to put up with those things.”

“What did you have to put up with? He raped me, not you.”

“It hurt me too.”

“So that’s it. Your hurt. You remembered your hurt.”

“Shit, Lydia. I didn’t mean it that way. I was there, helpless, fucken chained in a police van, screaming like a madman.”

“So you didn’t hear me scream?”

“Of course I did, how do you think I knew?”

[...]

She stood up, her angry reaction slowed by the coldness in her body.

“You don’t know about the pain. It’s a memory to you, a wound to your ego, a theory.” She thrust her face into his. “You can’t even begin to imagine the pain.” (16)

In this revealing conversation – in which Lydia questions the nature and genuineness of Silas’ concern over her rape – Dangor seems to be, among other things, problematising the notion of victimhood. And while this contestation does not invalidate Silas’ status as a co-victim, it does serve to assert Lydia’s position as the primary victim of the crime – as such, the one whose pain should be at the centre of considerations. This is certainly a gendering gesture on Dangor’s part; it is a narrative manoeuvre by which the female voice – so often kept at the margins of the collective memory and the liberation narrative – is given due recognition. In this regard, Dangor joins other prominent South African writers like Zoë Wicomb in the drive

to reconfigure the country's archive of the Apartheid experience (see Frenkel 2008). Lydia also effectively points out that Silas may not have really empathised with *her* suffering, but had rather been concerned all the while with his own hurt male pride. And although Silas tries to reassure her that he had shared the experience with her, she remains unimpressed:

“Lydia, we have to deal with this.”

“With what?”

“With what we went through, both of us.” He saw the smirk on her face. “Yes, for fuck’s sake, I went through it as much as you.”

“You are screaming at me, you know how I don’t like being screamed at.”

“I’m sorry.” (17)

Later in the narrative, we learn more about Lydia’s reticence as well as her distrust of the apparent empathy that others (potentially including both Silas and her own parents as well) profess to offer. Three days after the rape, she makes the following entry in her private journal:

“I cannot speak to Silas, he makes my pain his tragedy. In any case, I know that he doesn’t want to speak about my being raped, he wants to suffer silently, wants me to be his accomplice in this act of denial. I also cannot speak to my mother or father. They too will want to take on my pain, make it theirs. If they suffer on my behalf, that will be penance enough, they believe. They will also demand of me a *forgetful* silence. Speaking about something heightens its reality, makes it unavoidable. This is not human nature, but the nature of “confession” that the Church has taught them. Confess your sins, even those committed against you – and is rape not a sin committed by both victim and perpetrator, at least according to man’s gospel? – but confess it once only. There true salvation is to be found. In saying the unsayable, *and then holding your peace for ever.*” (115, emphases added)

Here, as in other parts of the narrative, Dangor problematises issues of voice and representation in a way that resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) notion of the subaltern, whose right to self-expression is perpetually usurped by different socio-political agents. Lydia is, in essence, questioning the philosophical legitimacy – as well as the practicality – of the presumed right of the TRC (and of Silas, or even of members of her family for that matter) to speak on her behalf, when in actual fact each has in doing so only a selfish objective in mind. Thus, when she turns down an opportunity to testify before the TRC, she becomes conscious of Silas’ disappointment at missing “the opportunity to play the brave stoical husband. He would have been able to demonstrate his objectivity, remaining calm and dignified, in spite of being close to the

victim.” (140). Indeed, it is the same Silas who explains to her later in the story how the TRC’s work was almost scuttled because of similar ironies existing in the ranks of its operatives and among government officials:

He described the tension, the intrigue, told her which of those who pontificated in public about truth and justice actually believed in “the principle of the thing”, and which were the expedient ones. “They’d sell their mothers for a Cabinet post ...” (144)

The earlier-cited discussion between Lydia and Silas also draws attention to the significance of Silas’ dual role in the narrative and in Dangor’s comment on the mechanisms of post-Apartheid restoration. In a more metaphorical sense, Silas (like Lydia and Mikey) is representative of different types of victims – including those whose victimhood is indirect and thus mainly experienced as a knock-on effect. Significantly, Silas also functions in a metonymic capacity as a representative of the TRC and its official mechanisms and processes of restoration and reconciliation. It is important to consider, therefore, what his dealings with Lydia reveal about some of the ways in which victims may perceive the TRC, on the one hand, and about the operations of the TRC itself, on the other. Thus, when Lydia states that the pain of her rape represents nothing more than a “theory” to Silas, Dangor can be understood as hinting that the TRC and its avowed mechanisms of victim rehabilitation have failed to genuinely connect to the material pains of actual victims. Indeed, Lydia takes the point further, rejecting Silas’ suggestion that she testifies before the TRC and expressing an almost total lack of confidence in its ability to be sensitive to her situation:

“We have to do something about this.”

“What, talk to the Truth Commission?”

“Why not?”

“You think Archbishop Tutu has ever been fucked up his arse against his will?”

“What difference does that make?”

“The difference is *he’ll never understand* what it’s like to be raped, to be mocked while he’s being raped, to feel inside of him the hot knife – that piece of useless flesh you call a cock – turning into a torture instrument.” (18, emphasis added)

She goes on to graphically and obscenely relay, much to Silas’ shock, some of the vulgarities of the rape in what possibly represents an attempt to reclaim the story of the incident as a personal – rather than collective – memory or narrative. Thereafter, in a freak display of emotion, she cuts her feet by deliberately dancing on pieces of broken glass. The deterioration of the couple’s stale relationship is fast-tracked from this point on, after she confirms that she

had been lonely all along in her pain, and, furthermore, that Silas' apparent empathy is disingenuous and nothing but a cloak for his own selfish and tententious male chauvinism. Hers is thus a triple tragedy: the brutality of the rape, the trauma of silence, and the frustration of having the memory of her experience being hijacked for someone else's personal "ego" project. Lydia can be taken, then, as a visible representative of the faceless survivors of Apartheid-era crimes whose dramatic stories drive the spectacle of the national political project of reconciliation. These stories are, in some ways, appropriated by social and political actors who purport to speak for the victims, but who are, in actual fact, exploiting their positions of public trust for some form of personal gain – be it political, economic or otherwise.

Another way in which Dangor critiques the TRC project is the novel's portrayal of the performative and histrionic nature of aspects of the TRC's work. This is represented in *Bitter Fruit* in a way that casts the government's project as being in apparent tension with the individual efforts of ordinary victims of Apartheid as they strive to come to terms with their unsettling memories and trauma. This makes the distinction between interpersonal and national reconciliation a salient issue as well, especially given Eirin Mobekkk's (2005: 263) observation that the one may be achieved without – or even at the expense of – the other. There is, in *Bitter Fruit*, the depiction of a conflict between the public and the personal (typified by Silas' official and private circumstances respectively) that simultaneously undermines trust and bedevils the objectives of restorative transitional justice and sustainable post-conflict reconciliation. Writing about post-genocide Rwanda (and making reference to the research of American journalist Phillip Gourevitch), Ingelaere (2010: 44) describes how certain ordinary citizens see the reconciliation process:

[T]he narratives [Gourevitch] hears are clearly rife with fear, distrust, and a lack of empathy for others. What he subsequently describes related to the Gacaca process and the perception of ordinary life is what everybody who has spent a significant amount of time in the rural areas of Rwanda has to conclude: that nobody likes Gacaca, it is not working very well, and it is bringing neither reconciliation nor justice. Survivors hear about reconciliation on the radio, but such talk will not bring back their family. A former killer named Girumuhatse explains that reconciliation and confession are "a program of the state". A survivor named Mariane dismisses requests for pardon as theater, a performance in the interest of the government. Another survivor questioned about how he manages to live alongside neighbors released from prison who had been the killers of his family members says that, in fact, he is not managing at all, he just pretends to get along. Gourevitch's friend

in Kigali confirms that “they talk about reconciliation, but that it is the reverse”.<sup>6</sup>

What this suggests is that official processes (e.g. public hearings, media pronouncements, official functions) become perceived as cosmetic and lacking in substance and as having hijacked and displaced the legitimate concerns of actual victims for the disingenuous political and economic purposes of highly placed political actors. While the historical and socio-political contexts of Rwanda and South Africa are markedly different, in *Bitter Fruit* similar – even if not exactly identical – sentiments about the reconciliation process are identifiable in the subtext of various aspects of the narrative. One example (Lydia’s rejection of Silas’ “appropriation” of the story of her rape) has already been addressed in the preceding section of this article. Further examples include the despair and confusion that characterises Silas’ experience of the official TRC process, his personal failure to come to terms with his own trauma, and his consequent inability to save his marriage and family from dissolution.

Returning to the novel’s opening paragraph (focalised through Silas’ consciousness), one readily observes this underlying tension between the private and the public. This contradiction inevitably results in the kind of disorientation experienced not only by Lydia but also by Silas – a situation that is clearly inauspicious for the project of social reconstruction. Silas reflects on how his life had been affected “directly”, as opposed to the “the *vague*, rather *grand way* in which everybody had been affected” (1, emphases added) – thereby allowing the author to highlight the ways in which the dominant post-conflict discourses and gestures are paradoxically implicated in stifling and marginalising the personal narratives of the very survivors they are supposed to be representative of in the first place. Through Silas’ musings, the narrator suggests that in mediating and representing the national memory of Apartheid, the TRC and its officers deliberately avoided – partly due to incapacity – dealing with the “hidden pain” of sufferers:

He was *not capable* of such an ordeal, he acknowledged. It would require an immersion in words *he was not familiar* with, words that did not seek to blur memory, to lessen pain, but to sharpen all of these things. He was trained to find consensus, even if it meant not to acknowledge the “truth” in all its unflattering nakedness.

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6 Gacaca is a traditional Rwandan community-based system of restorative justice that was adopted to try many genocide suspects between 2001 and 2012. The efficacy or otherwise of the system continues to generate mixed reactions from commentators worldwide (see Saugman 2012).

Hell, he had an important job, liaising between the Ministry of Justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was his task to ensure that everyone concerned remained objective, the TRC's supporters and its opponents, that they considered the law above all, and did not allow their emotions to sway them. What would happen if he broke his own golden rule and *delved into the turmoil of memories* that the events of those days would undoubtedly unleash? (59, emphases added)

This passage highlights a significant paradox in the political dimension of reconciliation and nation-building. In the introduction to a special issue of *Polity* on restorative justice, Nicholas Xenos (2003: 1-2) invokes Ernest Renan's (1990: 1) much-cited observation that collective amnesia is a key feature of national consciousness. Xenos goes on to show that mass injustice and violence is invariably part of what needs to be forgotten in a process that is often "a contest of narratives that recall some things and ignore others" (2003: 1). In *Bitter Fruit*, Dangor dramatises some of the discursive ways in which certain stories were ignored or silenced in the TRC's anxiety to foster a political compromise through the articulation of a common national narrative for South Africa. Ostensibly for this purpose, it thus became necessary for Silas to discourage the expression of certain emotions and to avoid recuperating problematical memories that could compromise official political imperatives. In Lydia's words, his job entails "helping the country to forget and therefore to forgive, a convenient amnesia" (110); on another occasion, he is described as having a "fixer" role in the "TRC process" (153).

The irony is, of course, that such convenient amnesia has to include not only the deliberate denial of truth, but also the promotion of blatant falsehood – practices that are in direct contrast to the TRC's most fundamental principles and objectives. In different manners, and at alternate points in the story, the novel's key characters all demonstrate their disorientation upon observing the ways in which "truth" becomes warped in the convoluted processes of official reconciliation. The teenaged Mikey reflects on the "grown-up tendency to bury uncomfortable thoughts in 'constructions'" (29) and "the compulsion to confess, even if falsely, in order obtain absolution" (41). For her part, Lydia considers Silas' unwillingness to have her speak of the rape an "act of denial" (115); Silas, meanwhile, muses about his "miserable job" (133) and "the empty peace of having left things undisturbed" (60).

The narrative thus represents the core features of the TRC, and indeed the entire transition process, as lacking in true substance – a critique that is reinforced in the author's depictions of the performative and theatrical nature of some of its different activities. In one such portrayal of this inadequacy, Mikey deliberates on the phrase "the new South Africa" that has

dominated the discourse of transition ever since the end of Apartheid. He observes how:

[p]oliticians of all persuasions use it whenever they feel the need to sound idealistic, whether to celebrate or to lament the way the country has changed. Michael is always amazed by the sudden drama in their voices, the way even the dullest orator takes on the tone of an actor in one of those science-fiction films about distant galaxies, and exotic hybrid beings. (163)

Another account relates to the conflict between the ruling party, the ANC, and the TRC over the latter's position that the former still had – despite its championing of the liberation struggle – to answer to accusations of human rights violations. On this occasion, Silas contemplates having to “find the right kind of words” for an official TRC pronouncement: it was a statement that would involve “spin[ning] even more elaborate webs, words and meanings that turned in on themselves, full of ‘nuance and context’” and that would “keep the media occupied with trying to figure out what we’re up to” (99). On yet another occasion (Silas’ fiftieth birthday party), which was taking place as the TRC neared the end of its mandate, the country is described as “[a] nation superficially well, as convention demanded. The Archbishop’s assistant dared not betray his anguish and say: ‘The poor Archbishop has cancer’” (229).

As a rhetorical device, Dangor draws instructive parallels between the state of the nation and Silas’ own personal circumstances. In this regard, the superficiality described above is mirrored very graphically in the circumstances of Silas’ family, which at this stage of the story is on the brink of total collapse. Standing before his many august friends and guests, he gives a vote of thanks to them:

“... and of course [to] my dear wife Lydia.”

He drew her close and kissed her on the lips. Then, with his arm around her waist, he looked about and asked: “Is Michael here?” Lydia stiffened as he searched the crowd. “I saw him a moment ago.”

Michael raised his arm somewhat shyly. He had been standing in the shadow of an awning by the pool. People urged him to join his parents, and he made his way to the front. They stood with their arms around each other, celebrating father, proud son, lovely mother, for a moment. Then Silas said in a hoarse voice: “Enough of this. I need a drink!”

Amidst applause, they split up, each trying to find some corner to escape into, where they could recover their own separate equilibriums. (231)

It is noteworthy that almost two decades after the watershed of 1994, Dangor's insightful portrayal still holds largely true for contemporary South Africa. In a recent comment on the country's progress (or lack thereof) towards social integration, Achille Mbembe (2012: n.p.) argues that "what was hailed in the 1990s as 'the South African miracle' may now be properly characterised as a stalemate". Indeed, the prevailing economic inequalities and their negative social consequences outlined at the beginning of this article – notably violent labour unrest, un-abating xenophobic sentiments and bitterly divisive political rhetoric – all provide compelling support for Mbembe's damning assessment. They may also be rightly understood as some of the ominous inevitabilities that *Bitter Fruit* gestures towards. These all illustrate the fact that, contrary to official appearances and narratives, national reconciliation is far from being a done deal in South Africa. More significantly, these indicators of social disharmony emphasise the important need for an ongoing re-evaluation of the purported gains of the negotiated settlement, as Dangor imaginatively proposes in *Bitter Fruit*.

## Conclusion

*Bitter Fruit* remains one of the most significant contributions thus far to the ever-growing wealth of letters that comment on the imperfections of the TRC and offer polemical suggestions about how South Africa may successfully negotiate its way out of its current socio-political paradoxes and tensions. In the preceding pages, I have elaborated on two major ways in which Dangor's novel questions the work of the TRC. I have approached the fictional narrative not as a simplistic mirror of a complex reality, but as an inspired narrative offering alternative and imaginative, yet valid, insights into the country's ongoing social transformation. By interrogating the story's depiction of the inability of its key protagonists to unburden their pains of victimhood, I have demonstrated how Dangor represents the TRC's mechanisms of restorative justice as ultimately inadequate.

Furthermore, I have argued that, overall, the novel portrays the national reconciliation project as a mission that has in some ways resulted in the appropriation of justice from – instead of its delivery to – some of the most vulnerable victims of Apartheid-era crimes against humanity. In this regard, I illustrated how the tensions and contradictions between public projects and personal concerns – as represented by the push and pull between Silas's official and private circumstances – illustrate the power dynamics that have

resulted in the genuine restorative needs of actual victims becoming marginalised by tendentious political objectives.

This is not to conclude, however, that the TRC was an exercise in futility. Scholars have rightly noted that it made valuable contributions to the international juridical effort to deal with the history of massive social injustice in Apartheid South Africa and has since inspired similar commissions in many other countries around the world (see Moon 2008). Furthermore, and in spite of its significant shortcomings, Sanders (2000), Graham (2003) and Jardine (2008) have all eloquently demonstrated that the TRC succeeded in foregrounding the powerful roles that narrative (both imaginative and “factual”) can play in supplementing the public archive and in shaping a country’s social imagination in ways conducive to greater collective unity.

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### **Das bedrohlich Unausweichliche: Reflexionen zur Ausweglosigkeit im neuen Südafrika und ihrem Ausdruck in Achmat Dangors Roman *Bitter Fruit***

**Zusammenfassung:** Achmat Dangor's Roman *Bitter Fruit* (2001) – im Jahr 2004 für den prestigeträchtigen Man-Booker-Preis nominiert – ist eines von mehreren wichtigen literarischen Werken, die sich mit den Unzulänglichkei-

ten der südafrikanischen Wahrheits- und Versöhnungskommission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC) befassen und den noch nicht abgeschlossenen Wandlungsprozess Südafrikas heftig kritisieren. Der Autor dieses Beitrags zeigt an zwei wesentlichen inhaltlichen Strängen, wie der Roman Dangors die Arbeit der TRC infrage stellt: Erstens greift schon die Handlung des Romans die Konfliktverarbeitungsstrategie der Kommission auf, die zu eindeutig auf den Ansatz des “Vergebens und Vergessens” gesetzt hat, der als Mittel zur Versöhnung ungeeignet ist und von daher grundsätzlich falsch war. Zweitens stellt der Roman das Projekt der nationalen Versöhnung insgesamt als Mission dar, die nicht Gerechtigkeit geschaffen, sondern vielmehr etlichen Opfern von Verbrechen der Apartheid Gerechtigkeit verweigert hat. Der Autor präsentiert den literarischen Text Dangors nicht als eindimensionalen Ausdruck einer komplexen sozialen Realität, sondern rückt die konkreten und vorstellbaren Möglichkeiten in den Vordergrund, die in dieser wirklichkeitsnahen Erzählung angeboten werden, um mit den Nachwirkungen des massiven sozialen Unrechts der Apartheid umzugehen.

**Schlagwörter:** Südafrikanische Republik, *Transitional Justice*, Kommission für Wahrheit und Versöhnung, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, Literatur