

Imprints of memories, shadows and silences: shaping the Jewish South African story

Phyllis Celia Sakinofsky BA MA (Comms)

Department of Media, Music, and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University

20 February 2009

*This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy.*

Abstract

This is a non-traditional thesis which comprises a work of fiction and a dissertation.

The novel is set in South Africa and provides an account of events that took place among three families, Jewish, Coloured and Afrikaans, over three generations.

The dissertation is constructed in three sections. The first section describes the settlement of South Africa's Jewish community, its divergent responses to apartheid and how this is mirrored in its literary output.

In the second section, the relationship between history and fiction since the advent of postmodernism is discussed, how there has been a demand for historical truthfulness through multiple points of view and how consequently there has been an upsurge in memories and memorials for those previously denigrated as the defeated or victims.

Fiction has been re-valued because it is through the novel that these once-submerged stories are being told. The novel has the capacity to explore uncomfortable or silenced episodes in our history, tell important truths and record stories and losses in a meaningful and relevant way. A novel might be shaped by history but it is through the writer's insights and interpretations that messages or meanings can reach many.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report is an example of how the written word can expose the relationship between the re-telling of history and finding an alternate truth. By recording the many conflicting stories of its peoples, it has linked truth and literature, ensuring an indelible imprint on the country's future writing. The past cannot be changed, but how the nation deals with it in the future will be determined by language and narrative.

The final section is self-reflexive and illustrates the symbiotic bond between the research and creative components, citing examples from the dissertation of how the two streams influenced one another.

Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled “**Imprints of memories, shadows and silences: shaping the Jewish South African story**” has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

[total word count 99,829 excluding glossary]

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Phyllis Sakinofsky".

Phyllis Sakinofsky (40535789)

20 February 2009

Part One

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction		1
 SECTION ONE		
Chapter One	Early history	3
Chapter Two	The apartheid years – two realities	21
Chapter Three	Post-apartheid South Africa	37
Chapter Four	The creative response of Jews to apartheid	51
 SECTION TWO		
Chapter Five	Our relationship with the past: placing narrative in the context of history	67
Chapter Six	Rememory and representation	82
Chapter Seven	Telling the truth through stories	98
 SECTION THREE		
Chapter Eight	Imprints of memories, shadows and silences: shaping the Jewish South African story	116
 References		 128

Introduction

The creative component of the thesis is a novel set in South Africa, a few hours north of Cape Town, and recounts events that took place among and between three families – Jewish, Coloured and Afrikaans – over three generations. It is a story about how their lives became knowingly and unwittingly intertwined.

The protagonist returns to her grandparents' homestead, after many years' absence, to be confronted by an unresolved traumatic event from her past. She realises she cannot put it behind her unless and until she acknowledges her complicity.

The accompanying dissertation is not an analysis of the novel but examines the relationship between history and narrative, located within the context of the Jewish South African community. Strong underlying links between the dissertation and the fiction are revealed, highlighting practical applications of the theory.

The dissertation is divided into three sections: **Section One** explores the unique nature of the Jewish community, 70 per cent of whom arrived from Lithuania between the 1880s and 1930s. The South African Jewish community is an interesting one to observe because of three triggers – antisemitism, the holocaust and apartheid – which had major ramifications on its identity and behaviour.

Ironically, the new migrants believed that in their quest for economic stability they had left antisemitism, marginalisation and poverty behind, but instead they found themselves enmeshed in legitimised racism, but on the side of the oppressor.

The section shows how these factors influenced the community and caused a geological split in its response to apartheid. The complicit majority felt a sense of entitlement, believing their significant achievements were based on hard work and enterprise, and not merely as a consequence of government policies. While many Jews opposed the system from within, a small number actively engaged in the armed struggle. The radicals were labelled “non-Jewish Jews” because although their ethics were based on Jewish values and they came from the same homogenous group, they did not share the identity of the mainstream community, resulting in mutual resentment and hostility.

Jewish writing in South Africa has mirrored the psyche of the community. A chapter in this section contains a brief review of some major Jewish writers and looks

at how the new socio-political culture and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) may influence writing in the future. It also points to the works of animated filmmaker William Kentridge as an artistic response to apartheid.

The TRC was commissioned to assist the state in reconciling its peoples and facilitating the healing process. An unanticipated outcome of the final report was how it recorded for the first time the untold version of the country's history, by uncovering lost voices and exposing different truths. It opened up the society to reveal previously hidden stories, thereby granting all groups permission to explore their pasts and identities.

The relationship between history, memory and narrative is examined in **Section Two**, within the context of postmodernism, the search for historic truthfulness and the inclusion of memory.

Hayden White's view of history is that it is a story which re-presents and interprets the past, whereby history is transferred from the hands of the historians to those who were there. With the overthrow of the idea of a single master narrative there is now space for post-colonial versions that acknowledge the groups that were almost lost from history. Using existing historic records, survivors' accounts, collective memory and stories, these hidden stories, or alternate truths, can now be told. It is especially valid that the historic record includes the silenced voices and the victims of war and trauma, having finally been granted legitimacy and the right to be heard.

Another premise of White's is that these re-presentations of history actually repeated the processes of fiction, legitimising narrative as a form for sharing meaning. According to White, history, memory, and language intersect so precisely as to be almost indistinguishable.

The thesis thus argues that literary fiction is a legitimate way of re-writing history, because it allows the reader to gain insight into, and understanding of, events, and at the same time allows the writer and the group to work through their trauma. This is what Ashraf Rushdy calls palimpsest narrative: through fiction, submerged traces and shadows can be explored, and hidden and transmitted memories exposed, brought to the surface and made conscious.

This section also examines memorials and James Young's concept of counter-memorials as a way to record the past, which can be extrapolated to include

literature. It has also been argued that the TRC report is a counter-memorial because it provides a voice for the victims and perpetrators. Although literature was not discussed within the report, it became almost a literary work in itself because it captured personal, or narrative, truth.

Writing the novel and accompanying dissertation was personally enriching and enlightening. **Section Three** deals with the difficulty in producing two very different pieces of work simultaneously – telling a story and analysing story-telling. On review it was evident that cross-fertilisation had taken place between the creative and academic processes. A number of examples are proffered to illustrate how the reading and research stimulated memories and stories, thereby enhancing the creative writing. The thesis shows how scholarly ideas may be endorsed and re-inforced by personal experience.