

‘Shame, Seething, Basic Shame... It’s all About the Cock’: reading Nakhane Touré’s *Piggy boy’s blues* (2015) after *Inxeba*

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In the 1991 essay ‘Redefining Relevance’, Njabulo Ndebele traces South African literature as one concerned with protest. Ndebele (2006:63) argues that with the changing political atmosphere of the country, the greatest challenge facing South African artists was to find new ways of thinking (2006:63); underpinned by this political circumstance, he presents the following questions as guidelines in shaping thought about these new challenges:

[...] where do we go from here? What kind of education do we want for the future? [...] what legal system do we envisage for a new South Africa? What system of public health will adequately cater for the health needs of all citizens? What kind of cultural policy are we going to evolve? What are we going to do with ethnicity? (2006:63).

The overall significance of these questions is that they indicate the beginning of the freeing of the [...] imagination from the constraints of attempting to envision the future under the limitations of [the past] (2006:64).

To Ndebele’s questions, I would like to add two more: firstly, how should we approach and appreciate gender relations? And, secondly, what are we going to do with masculinity? These point to ways in which South African literature could transcend itself and tread the same landscape as other African Literatures.

From a South African perspective, the work of Kopano Ratele, Robert Morrell and Charlene van der Walt have spearheaded social studies approaches dealing with such concerns. Our country's variegated literatures have also seen an eruption of texts that echo the same sentiments, such as *Thirteen Cents* and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* by K Sello Duiker, *Welcome to our Hilbrow* by Phaswane Mpe, *A Man who is Not a Man* by Thando Mgqolozana, *When a Man Cries* by Sipiwo Mahala, *Men of the South* by Zukiswa Wanner and others. Among these works, one also finds Nakhane Touré's *Piggy boy's blues*.

Wonderfully rendered in past tense (with the exception of the immediacy of the last chapter), Touré's novel is a recollection and a re-membering of the distant and most immediate pasts in an attempt to try to understand oneself as both a gendered being and a product of one's own ancestry (whereby, in that ancestry, masculinity is unmistakably called upon). This recollection of the past is filled with nostalgia and melancholy, where the latter is reserved for the most immediate history – as opposed to a more distant past – and rendered as the titular 'blues'. The text tells the story of Davide, 'a city boy' who left behind an unnamed metropolis to temporarily relocate to a rural, pastoral town called Alice in the Eastern Cape. Once there, he moves into the ancestral house with his uncle Ndimphiwe, and he befriends his uncle's lover, Gray. His encounters with Gray swiftly takes precedence and become the centre of the narrative.

Gray – the little piggy upon whom the title is based – is rendered as '...pig-bodied: short and thick limbed with a fleshy face and burned yellow cheekbones. He had a wide, unsubtle behind he had no qualms exposing with belts that were too tight' (14). One of the 'blues' in the text is Gray's – rendered as the book's fourth chapter, where Gray displays a melancholic remembrance of his childhood and youth.

In one of the episodes from his youth, he refers to the greying parts of his hair as his 'Code Noir. Stigma. A Yellow Badge sewn to my head' (17). He sadly recalls a historic past of both slavery and of Jewish persecution, and parallels these to his past life as well as to his possible future: 'I am going to be butchered for the rest of my life for this. This is the end of my life' (17). However, he is able to navigate this melancholy by claiming and subsequently clinging to power by manner of a cunning domination, exhibiting an intimate and strategic knowledge of the politics of masculinities. Some of his dominated victims were 'those one's who made fun of [him]' (18):

You know those? Even their macho, male-bonding performances were ... interestingly innocent. But! I was resolute [despite their perceived innocence]. I seduced their girlfriends, fucked them unkindly, and made sure they fell in love with me. As soon as they did – which was when they

dumped their boyfriends – I cut ties with them. These boys lost weight. They begged the girls to come back to them. Who was there to comfort and console the boys? Me. They were the ones I was after. I fucked them to instil a hidden and roaring shame in them. What were they going to do? Tell their friends they got fucked in the ass by Gray? (19)

It is not enough that his victims' hearts are broken and that they lose weight. For him, the desire for a masculine predominance depends on what he calls the exposure of 'hidden and roaring shame'. Such shame reflects total domination and unflinching supremacy; for his victims, a hidden subordination to his power and will.

While the book title is based on Gray's experiences, the narrative is primarily – with the exception of the fourth chapter – told from the perspective of one Davide, who becomes one of his victims. Since the text tells the story of Davide, but refracted through the title of the novel, it is fair to argue that the novel itself becomes a blues, a melancholic rendition of one's own life provoked by a series of incidents, most especially those associated with the piggy boy on whom the title is based.

In a climactic scene, and after several episodes of flirting, Gray professes his love for Davide, a love that Davide does not reciprocate. Feeling unwanted and rejected – 'Don't say no to me' (66) – Gray violently pushes Davide to the ground and proceeds to rape him. The violence of the rape is afforded multiple meanings. Firstly, it is repudiated and the executor of that violence, Gray, is treated with scorn and disdain. Secondly, it is represented as an achieved desire because Davide portrays himself as one who sought ways in which he could be victimised. Observe that during the rape, Gray's violence is continuously interjected by Davide's imagination in which he wishes to be victimised: 'He had decided to walk to a park at night, when it was darkest, sit there and wait to be made a victim' (69). Furthermore, while Gray is busy seeing through his violence, Davide thinks; 'Amazing grace, how sweet ... the sound ... like a moth drawn to the flame ... that saved a wretch like me' (71). And lastly, this violence is treated as a product of emancipation – observe the following; 'Davide mumbled incoherently, and ceased struggling after what he felt. Hm! He closed his eyes and saw, and felt, and heard. That's it. That was it. He would do it' (67). While this violence is employed for the purposes of bringing to light a 'roaring shame', Davide welcomes it as an emancipatory process, culminating in a self-initiation into prophecy when he walks to the river to 'cleanse' himself.

In the current atmosphere, where literary works traverse the patriarchal landscape offering opportunity aplenty for deconstructing masculinities, *Piggy boy's blues* (like *A Man who is Not a Man* and the recent film *Inxeba* – a film in which Nakhane Touré leads the cast) represents traditional rites of passage through initiation into manhood.

But the scream – both in the texts and in the film – of “*Ndiyiy’ indoda!*” (*I am a man*) is soon followed by challenges, whether against individual injustices or by the imposition of “traditional” manhood(s). These texts peel open the very construct of masculinity itself and expose its intricacies – intricacies made all the more complicated by tradition and rituals. What these works therefore illuminate is a violent confrontation between, on the one hand, societal-traditional expectations of masculinities and, on the other, the navigation of a personal gendered construct within diverse sexual preferences as one of the most basic problems facing black South African masculinities today.

Furthermore, *Piggy boy’s blues* investigates this within the frame of Davide’s ancestry. He recalls his ancestors as ‘men of blood, shield and spear’ (85), beginning with his greatest ancestor, ‘M. T[he progenitor], patriarch ... A man of Blood ‘ (v) and his grand-uncle Ndoda ‘... a myth[ic man] of almost biblical proportions’ (1). It appears therefore that Davide’s ‘supposed weakness’ is in opposition to the perceived power and strength of his ancestors. However, an investigation of the text reveals that the concept of his ancestors as men of blood and spear is itself opposed by Davide’s great-grandfather Jeremiah (who, for example, preferred in his youth dancing over violence) and later his uncle Ndimphiwe (who is kind, and the one whom Davide takes after). The power of Touré’s text is that it not only flails open the construct of masculinity, but also undermines the concept of a violent ancestral masculinity – presenting it as a mythic concept.

To return to Ndebele: unlike other all too familiar texts typical of a South African[esque] style of writing – political lamentation, representation, illustration and protest – *Piggy boy’s blues* purposes to traverse questions on gendered, lived experience and offers comfort and temporary relief from the burden of reading an overwhelming kind of literature in which one suffocates under its realist depiction of a nation’s politics of lamentation and/or protest.

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