Annalisa Oboe

SOUTH AFRICAN CROSSROADS

We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today; ... the crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency; dangerous because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision.

Chimua Achebe

According to the OED definition, a crossroad is 1) a road crossing another; 2) the place where two roads cross each other; the place of intersection of two roads. Beside this literal sense, the usage of the word also registers a figurative meaning which attributes it a temporal/psychic significance; the crossroad can indicate a crucial period, a turning point, a critical juncture, a moment of (inter) change.

To see nineteenth-century South Africa as a crossroad of cultures/ethnie/races, endlessly meeting, conflicting or interacting on the vast southern tip of the continent, means to image a history of the country which is at the same time more complex and less definitive than most historians and novelists would allow.

To favour moments of convergence and exchange between tribe and tribe, race and race, requires a shift of focus from the easy singling out of binary oppositions, that characterizes both historiographical and fictional reconstructions of the South African past, to the individuation of “chiasmatic” intersections where alliances are more meaningful than wars, syntheses more momentous than antitheses.

Black South African novelists seem to have understood that, implicit in this perspective, is a revolutionary power: the power to overturn the all pervasive settler mythology operating both in literature and society, and to correct the harshness of the frontier spirit that is at the core of white mentality.

Sol Plaatje’s *Mbudi* (1930) and Bessie Head’s *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984) are both corrective historical studies undermining Eurocentric colonial myths and advancing a re-reading/writing of South African history. The two writers search the past to produce the image of a country reaching a turning point in history and wondering which direction to take; they also search literature for a kind of writing that will be able to inscribe the intersections of time,
place, and “difference” that constitute the problematic (modern) experience of the nation also in Africa.

Plaatje resorts to the “classic” historical novel only to use “white” conventions for his own “black” ends; Head mimics academic historiography to disrupt it from within. But in both their novels the structuring metaphor and the representative emblem is a chiasmatic “figure” whereby the narrative becomes the point at which the novelist and the historian intersect, and the space of the nation grows into the crossroad to a new cultural synthesis.

*Mhudi*, the first (South)African novel in English, was written about 1917 and certainly completed by 1920, but was published by the Lovedale Press only in 1930. Its author, a most significant political and literary figure in early twentieth-century South Africa, was one of the first blacks to feel the need to rediscover and redefine the African past, and did so by writing a novel which is a pioneering work in the African literary landscape. As an imaginative writer acting both as an inventor of “fictions” and a recorder of “history”, Plaatje can be seen as the predecessor of all those post-colonial writers who have endeavoured to wrench the African past away from the pages of British history books and to restore it to Africa.

By writing dramatically of historical events, Plaatje was continuing an African tradition which went well back to the days of oral tribal literature, but he was also trying to present and explain the traditions of his people to the foreign world, according to an imperative which inspired his whole life. Throughout his varied career, he

---

1 The relationship between Head’s novel and recent historiographical works on the South African past is discussed in *Desiree Lewis*, “Bewitched Crossroads: The Past, the Present and Bessie Head” (paper presented at an English Department Seminar held at the University of Cape Town, 28 May 1991; forthcoming).

2 The legacy of Plaatje’s novel to African literature ought to be made clearer than it is at the moment. In South Africa, the first non-white writer to write a historical novel after *Mhudi* was Peter Abrahams, who published his *Wild Conquest*, a work on the Great Trek, in 1951. The particular conditions of black writers under apartheid later contributed to deviate the form and concerns of the novel away from that early model. Nevertheless *Mhudi* seems to be paradigmatically linked to the historical fiction of other African countries from the late 1950s onwards. The works of Chinua Achebe, for example, mingle Western and African tradition, history and myth, much in the same way as Plaatje’s novel. The modernity and the importance of Plaatje’s literary and historical effort are confirmed by the recent publication, in South Africa, of a comic based on his novel. The SACHED Trust (an independent educational organization which seeks to contribute to the building of democratic education in South Africa) and The Storyteller Group (an educational publishing organization established to catalyse the development of popular South African literature) have co-published *Mhudi* (Johannesburg and Melville, 1990) “for pleasure reading and learning”.

170
put his education, intelligence and humanity to the service of interpreting Western life to the black man and African life to the European. Whether he succeeded in this ambitious task is debatable, but his intent, expressed in the Preface to the original edition of *Mbudi*, is clear; up to that moment South African history and literature had been almost exclusively a European monopoly, but now the time had come for undertaking “a Native venture” which would put things straight again, trying to correct and rewrite the distorted messages concerning the South African past and its culture.

From both a historical and a literary point of view it was a highly experimental venture, as it could not rely on any previously set (indigenous) model; but Plaatje, son of the Barlong with a profound knowledge of British culture, had two rich and ancient traditions to fall back on and to use to his own ends. Out of “stray scraps of tribal history” he had to construct a fiction, to create written patterns of meaning, and he chose to do so in English. Though the language of the colonizer, the choice of English as his medium gave him access to a whole world of British and more generally Western works of art which could become potential models for the writing of his novel.

*Mbudi* apparently was the outcome of a conscious and deliberate attempt on Plaatje’s part to combine African oral forms and traditions on the one hand, and the written traditions and forms of the English language and Western culture on the other. If, as Stephen Gray has observed, *Mbudi* exemplifies a transitional stage between imitation, incorporation and transformation of Western literary models, its author was nonetheless well aware of the literary possibilities that lay in the manipulation of elements (whether literary, cultural or anthropological) that had meaning in both African and Western traditions, and delighted in exploring these points of intersection, examining parallels and divergences, detecting differences and stressing similarities.

Intertextuality constitutes one of the most interesting aspects of Plaatje’s linguistic, stylistic and thematic choices in *Mbudi*, since references to Western works are embedded in a new system which, on the basis of a principle of human and cultural affinities, dis-

---


mantles the monopoly of white civilization by recurring to the universalist view of a fundamental equality of all mankind beyond and above differences and racial conflicts.

Bessie Head’s aims seem largely in keeping with Plaatje’s perspective, the fundamental reason of which she exposes in a comment she made on one of his works:

Plaatje acknowledges that black people have no power so his main aim is to present the black personality as deserving justice, humanity and dignity.

By presenting the African people as moral agents within their own landscape, both Plaatje and Head activate believable and varied human beings whose inner life is acted upon by historical events and who seek, in turn, to encounter and shape history. Like her predecessor, Head overturns one of the dominant colonial myths by proving that Africa was not a tabula rasa on which the white man could inscribe his history, but a real geographical site where cultures confronted each other, gave way or peacefully meshed; it was also a historical site with its own periods of enlightenment, like the one in which Chief Khama’s society opened to new ideas and became aware of its identity as a nation.

A Bewitched Crossroad also relies on an interweaving of Western literacy and the African oral tradition, but it differs from Mhudi, which covers some of the same historical ground, in that the latter seems explicitly to belong to the category of “historical romance”.


3 The links between Bessie Head and Sol Plaatje have never (to my knowledge) been explicitly investigated and should be perhaps looked into. Bessie Head’s reaction to Mhudi, reported on the book cover of the Heinemann edition of the novel, seems to reveal more than enthusiastic appreciation: “When I first read this beautiful book, I was absolutely in despair. I needed to copy the whole book out by hand so as to keep it with me. It is more than a classic: there is just no book on earth like it. All the stature and grandeur of the writer are in it”.

172
Plaatje himself described his novel as “a love story after the manner of romance... but based on historical facts”. Head instead offers a very accurately researched historical study of Bechuanaland/Botswana which contains a lightly fictionalized central consciousness, and which uses some of the methods of fictional narratives.

Subtitled “An African Saga” and referred to as a “novel” in the author’s introductory Note, *A Bewitched Crossroad* defies any attempt to provide a neat generic definition. It can perhaps be classified as “novelised historiography”, in that it is a kind of pseudo-academic historiographical work with an infusion of fiction which gives narrative continuity to the many threads of the story and provides an alternative reading of the past.

The history of Southern Africa, from the Mfecane in the early nineteenth century through to Botswana’s independence in 1966, is the real protagonist of the novel, and the characters are history’s own, including figures such as Mzilikazi, Shaka, Moshoeshoe, Lobengula, Cecil Rhodes and the Bamangwato ruler Khama the Great.

Head’s history is “different” mainly because it sees the dispersal of the African tribes in the Mfecane, the formation of new groupings and the interventions of Boer nationalism and British colonialism from the point of view of the eventual emergence of the Botswana nation, which is of special significance because, as stated in the novel’s last paragraph,

the land eluded the colonial era. The forces of the scramble for Africa passed through it like a huge destructive storm but a storm that passed on to other lands. It remained black man’s country. It was a bewitched crossroad. Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land.

Inside the modern narrative which is corrective of white conservative historiography, Head positions an old man, memory of the Sebina clan and witness to the birth of the Bamangwato nation, who views the intricate crossroads of nineteenth-century South

---

*Quoted in Brian Willan, Plaatje, cit., p. 349.


The author’s Note explains that the term “Bamangwato reaches out and embraces all the refugees and diverse nations absorbed into the small Bangwato clan during the era of nation building by chiefs Sekgoma I and Khama III” (p. 7). As she indicates later in the narrative (p. 65), the word *mongwato* itself means “nation”.

173
Africa from the collective perspective of myth, where events appear cyclical and inevitable. As shown below, this same technique is used in *Mbudi*, where the past is reconstructed by means of the memories of a very old Barolong.

Sebina’s life spans almost all of the nineteenth century. The history of his clan starts in 1800, when Sebina and his people split from the Barolong and set out on a period of wandering and migration that ends with their incorporation into Khama’s community in the last years of the century. The movements of the clan from one location to another in search of new land and peaceful living bring them into contact with a variety of different tribes and involve them in the great upheavals of the times, which make the land a kaleidoscope of wars and displacements. Each time they find a home they learn new ways, adopt new gods, pick up new strategies for surviving the depredations of new enemies. And each time they are forced to move on to another crossroad, a new intersection of tribal traditions, till they find a home in Bechuanaland, the territory that was to become part of independent Botswana.

There the clan’s story is confronted with another critical juncture involving the presence of the whites, their civilization, religion and politics. Luckily, the skill of Khama III (1875-1923) in negotiating both with other African tribes and with the British succeeds in mediating the impact of external forces on his fast developing community and in creating a unique spot where people can live in safety and freedom.

The enlightened diplomacy and foresight of this ruler, whom Head sees and presents as a great maker of history, is appreciated by the witness to history, Sebina. The old man witnesses innumerable changes in the material and cultural life of the Bamangwato people; having survived almost an entire century of changes, having accepted change as natural and inevitable, and detected in history a continuity deeper than change itself, he contentedly sees the new influences as instrumental to the emergence of future beauty and truth.

Throughout the novel Head emphasises, rather than the undiscerning acceptance of novelty, the willingness to explore new ideas and the openness of the mind to enquire into new means by which to read reality and improve the quality of life. Christianity, for example, gives the Bamangwato a different light by which to examine custom; it is not necessarily a “superior” truth with which custom is to be replaced. Literacy is both a form of progress and of protection against the deceitful strategies of the European exploitation of Africa.

Both the actual maker of history and the fictional witness to
history of Head’s narrative wrestle with the “multiple-headed spirits” of the crossroads and return to their people with the boon of prophetic vision: they substitute non-violence and diplomacy for war, openness for closure, flexibility for rigidity, multi-racial assimilation for separation, interchange for exclusiveness, balance and identity for chaos and bewilderment. They concoct that “compromise of tenderness” \textsuperscript{13} between African tradition and Western influence that perhaps only a coloured South African woman/novelist/historian, from her unique position of exile, could try (and would want) to reconstruct.

In so doing, as Cherry Clayton has observed, Bessie Head writes a “shadow history” of South Africa \textsuperscript{14}. Contemporary Botswana is an independent state from the Republic of South Africa; its unique history, blessed with a dispensation from colonialism, subtends at every point the shadow of the South African nightmarish colonial fate, and represents a comparative base from which to project an ideal vision of the South African future \textsuperscript{15}.

This future reflects the quality of Head’s narrative, which is culturally, artistically and linguistically “ hospitable”, being open to different genres, modes of perception, idioms, traditions \textsuperscript{16}.

In a way this tendency towards blending (which never implies unconditioned acceptance) can be seen as a twentieth-century (post-colonial/post-modern) updating of Plaatje’s experiment, which also plays with conventions, traditions and innovations. A subtle continuity between \textit{A Bewitched Crossroad} and \textit{Mbudi} may be traced also by reference to the early novel’s narrative pattern.

Tim Couzens rightly calls \textit{Mbudi} “a kind of winter’s tale of loss


\textsuperscript{14} In a 1983 interview (reported in \textit{Between the Lines}, ed. by Craig Mackenzie and Cherry Clayton, NELM, 1989) Bessie Head stressed the importance of having found in Botswana a kind of eternal and continuous history which could support her writing: “here [Botswana] there is a sort of continuity that makes sense, a history that is not as repellent as the land-grabbing wars and diamond – and gold – rushes. I looked at it but I didn’t like it. There was just nothing I could build on there” (p. 11).

\textsuperscript{15} This “ hospitability” can be seen also in the way Head looks for meaningful analogies from other cultures in order to provide the interpretive frame for the narrated events. The wandering spirit of the Sebina clan, for example, is compared to that of Ulysses, while their wanderings are connected to the quest of the Israelites (a choice which, in the light of the use made of the Jewish myth in white South African and especially Afrikaner culture, dismantles the notion of white “election” and extends it to all the migrating peoples of South Africa).
and regeneration” 17; it is upon a central nucleus of action tracing the loss of tradition, the fight for survival, and the growth of new ways that Plaatje builds his story. Head takes this minimal cell and structures her work on its repetition, thus providing the vision of nineteenth-century South Africa as a succession of dispossessions and alliances leading to the miraculous constitution of Botswana.

The plot of Mbudi can be more accurately described as follows:

a) one precipitating event within the black world causes the dispossession and dispersal of a pastoral community of the South African interior; this creates the need for a mythical reconstruction of the world that, through that event, has been lost;

b) the desire for revenge and, to some extent, the preoccupation with survival of the bereft ethnie motivate an alliance with (white) people from the outside who, needing help to further their own ends, intervene to modify the internal asset of the black world; this causes a cultural/racial confrontation and a lengthy regrouping of forces into opposing camps which results in a clash between the new allies and their common enemy on the battlefield;

c) the armed encounter ends with the victory of the allied group and the defeat of the warlike oppressors of the past; but both defeat and victory bring about a spirit of miraculous recovery, of regeneration.

The love story between Mbudi and Ra-Thaga, who are the survivors of the initial catastrophe, sees the lovers take active part in the historical action. From a period in the wilderness, where they recover from the loss of their pastoral life, they live through the precarious existence of refugees and the separation of war, to be reunited and repossessed of their past, now inevitably modified by recent experiences and by the vision of a new, unexpected future.

The same pattern, slightly altered by a stronger emphasis on the moment of revenge (which in the end clearly separates the victorious from the defeated), can be said to describe also some of the early historical romances centred upon black history 18.

In these novels, the curve through which the action is steered and history narrated always takes its move from a wrong committed by blacks against blacks, which allows the writers to indulge in a reconstruction of the black tribal past; this is followed by fantastic

18 See, for example, Bertram Mitford’s, The Indiana’s Wife (London: F.V. White, 1898), and Rider Haggard’s, Child of Storm (London: Macdonald, 1952. First published in 1913) and Nada the Lily (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907. First published in 1892).
projects of revenge in which the whites are involved as allied, inter-
locutors, or points of reference, and by the achievement of the goal
on the part of the initially wronged group.

Apart from the bare outline, however, these romances share little
with *Mhudi*. Their perspective, supposedly located on the inside of
the black world, in fact betrays a white/imperialist view; the (usually
black) narrator tells a “black” story for “white” ears, and provides a
narration in which the whites bring about the ruin of a native world
which is portrayed as self-destructive and already on the brink of
“natural” dissolution. Only one arm of the crossroads comes out
uncathed from the intersection of blacks and whites on the South
African soil.

As regards “manipulations” of history, a comparison between
Haggard’s *Nada the Lily* (1892) and Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1925),
both dealing with the story of the Zulu king Shaka, would clarify to
what extent the black past can be differently read in order to serve
the requirements of imperial romance on the one hand and, on the
other, of a moral/mythical tale (highly hybridized as far as genre and
style are concerned), from which the whites are banned and the
Zulu nation arises out of the interplay of internal good and evil.

---

19 “Mine is the song of a people that is doomed”, says old Mopo (Haggard’s
black narrator in *Nada the Lily*, cit., p. 10), to his white listener.

20 In his novel, originally written in Sotho and published in an English transla-
tion in 1931, Mofolo tells the story of Chaka, from his unlawful conception by
Senzangakona and Nandi before their marriage to his violent death at the hand of
Dingana, Mhlangana and Mbhopa. This alleged “illegitimacy” becomes Chaka’s
Achilles’ heel in Mofolo’s version, the reason for his unsurpassed ambition and his
desire to kill. Filtered through the author’s Christian perspective, the story of
the Zulu king joins the mythical-heroic tale (concerning the transgressive character of
the “transformer”), the psychological novel (exploring the deep reasons for the
hero’s behaviour in his childhood’s experiences), and the historical novel to the
classical moral tale, which provides an exemplum by means of a story of transgress-
ions and their consequences. The essential pattern of *Chaka* is organized according
to the following lines: a) born from sin, Chaka has a difficult childhood in exile
which fosters his desire for revenge and an unquenchable thirst for greatness; b) an
alliance with the forces of evil gives him accession to power and to an unlimited
greatness achieved through bloodshed; c) the hero falls and his greatness, built
upon transgression and evil deeds, is destroyed. Mofolo superimposes the fictitious
and the mythological to the historical, and history is often presented as the reali-
zation of fiction. His intention in *Chaka* is perhaps best understood from a letter he
wrote in *Lesetinyana*, 10 August 1928, in reply to a letter from one S.M. Malale who
referred to some historical error in the novel: “I believe there are very many errors
of this kind in the book about Chaka; but I did not care much about them, because
I did not write a history, I wrote a tale (*tsomo*). I may say I wrote the truth, but it
has been added to, it has been diminished a great deal, much has been left out and
Loss

The descriptive-topographical opening of *Mbudi*, structured according to a technique which is typical of Scott’s novels, is concerned with presenting a map which aims not only at fixing the geographical limits of the novel, but at establishing that ideal centre of the crossroad where the present can meet and recognize the past that is going to be reconstructed.

Two centuries ago the Bechuana tribes inhabited the extensive areas between Central Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert.

This is exactly the space where the story takes place, the delimitation of a region whose significance is not so much geographical as historical and anthropological, as illustrated by the description of Barolong society in the pages that follow.

The writer then develops the action of his characters against the historical background of South Africa in the 1830s, an unsettled period that can be brought to life again by putting on paper the oral much has been added which is not true, only to fulfil my purpose with this book. ("Ho S.M. Malale", *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 10 Phato 1928: 2). I owe the English translation to C.F. Swanepoel’s essay “Historicity and Mofolo’s Chaka”, *South African Journal of African Languages*, 1988, 8(1). Mofolo does not make his purpose fiction for all the blacks who, in times of dispossession, can look back to a past which was, for all its bloodshed, a past of greatness. While the beginning of the novel provides a detailed vision of South Africa as it was in “the days of our fathers” (i.e. before Chaka but also before the whites), with boundaries created by God which guaranteed the identity of people and land, the ending offsets the negativness of Chaka’s life in view of the future kept in store for his people. As the king is nearing his end, the style accumulates a grandeur disclosing compassion for which brings about his redemption. The vision of future ills (the coming of the whites) transforms the nightmare of Chaka’s bloody despotism into the proud memory of a national unity and greatness achieved under his rule and then (now) lost. Cf. Paolo Amalfitano, “L’esperienza di un sapere. La descrizione nell’esordio di Isambone”, in A.A.Vv., *Storie su storie* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1983) p. 31.

2 In *Mbudi*, p. 25.

21 "In Mbudi, space, time and human life are intimately interwoven from the beginning according to one of the basic requirements of the genre, for which past revealed as “necessary antecedents” of the present. Plaatje’s South Africa was just being built in the first decades of this century in a way the Natives Land Act of 1913, and it is not by chance that he chose to write of the period of the Mfecane and the Boer Trek, when the forces that shaped South confronting each other."
tale once told by a “hoary octogenarian”, Half-a-Crown, presumably the son of the two protagonists of the novel, indirect witness of the narrated events.

This is Plaatje’s device for proving the historical truth and the fictional verisimilitude of his story; he simply relies on the tale of a very old man who may or may not remember what happened correctly. And yet, that is the true, reliable source for the writer who comes from an oral culture. He could have referred to the existing books on the subject, but he (politically) decided that oral sources were more trustworthy than written historical reports which undoubtedly distorted the truth of facts concerning black people. In this sense, \textit{Mhudi} is a prototype of post-colonial rewriting of an already written text.

Through the oral narrative of Half-a-Crown, Plaatje recovers a whole world of history and romance, of social and political events, customs, linguistic peculiarities and human passions which allows him to build his written narrative on the parallel lines of the romantic and historic plots that coexist in classic historical novels.

The love story between Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, which begins after Mzilikazi’s warriors have destroyed the Barolong city of Kunana, is modelled on the essential stereotypical fable of the historical romance \textit{21}.

Young Ra-Thaga, who has luckily escaped the Matabele massacre, wanders through the African forest, totally confused about his own identity, unable to foresee his future and to decide on which of the two contending parties to lay the blame for what has happened.

At the height of despair, Mhudi appears; she has survived the same bloody destruction of her people, met almost as many lions as Ra-Thaga, and undergone the same kind of initiatory ritual in the forest; after terrible trials she manages to join, miraculously and romantically, her future husband. The two, united by a common past of loss and suffering, tie an everlasting bond of love and start building their life together.

For an idyllic span of time, marred only by the sorrowful

\textit{21} Leslie Fiedler, in his \textit{Love and Death in the American Novel} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984). First published in 1960, summarizes this plot in a way that particularly fits the story of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi: “Initially confused about his own ambitions or the true identity and character of those who surround him... the hero is forced to flee – usually in the midst of some famous historic conflict just then conveniently approaching its climax. The heroine meanwhile has been abducted or is off on some private evasion of her own... The two are kept apart as long as possible, but are finally joined... their problems resolved, their enemies discomfited, all confusions cleared up” (p. 166).
memories of the bloody events they have witnessed, they live like Adam and Eve in an a-historical world. Their successful enterprises and daily chores constitute the subject matter of a narration which is structured as a mythical tale of origins:

The forest was their home, the rustling trees their relations, the sky their guardian, and the birds, who sealed their marriage contract with their songs, the only guests...

Ra-Thaga was already beginning to regard himself as a king reigning in his own kingdom, and the animals of the valley as his wealth. To say that Mhudi was happy would really not be saying too much...

His one ambition... was to make his young and pretty wife very happy. He felt that she – his queen – should be free as the birds of the air were free, nay, even more so; she should be as a queen ruling over her own dominion, and he her protector guarding her safety and happiness.¿

They had neither cares nor worries of any kind. They had almost forgotten the horrors of their bereavement and the fact that they were apparently the only survivors of a once great race. The solitude of the wilderness had become dear to them and they craved for no other company.³⁶

Continuing their peaceful stay in the forest, Ra-Thaga and his wife “saw new moons wax and wane, and waning wax again, until one evening, when he chanced to be walking out and thought that he heard human voices.”³⁷ Through the accidental meeting with a party of Qoranna hunters, the young couple is forced to plunge back into the real world again; they proceed to join the other Barolong survivors who, together with their Chief Tauana, have found protection at Thaba Nchu, Chief Moroka’s kraal. From this moment their personal story will run parallel to and intersect with the great contrasts of the time, while the romantic myth will yield to history.

The historical plot sees the confrontation of different groups within the same race (Barolong and Matabele) and of two different races (European and African) on the same territory. Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, already caught in the first, are involved also in the second.

The panorama offered by Half-a-Crown, mythical raconteur of an African tale of origins which precedes and informs the historical encounter between blacks and whites, provides an interpretive system and a perspective on history which are totally new in relation to accepted versions of the black past. He shapes a pre-colonial Africa which is the result of the interweaving of the story of important events of the past with a careful presentation of indigenous customs, institutions, belief and religion.

³⁵ Mhudi, pp. 60-61.
³⁶ Ibidem, pp. 70-71.
³⁷ Ibidem.
This anthropological narrative line specifies the function of the historical one: to reanimate the Africans and rescue them from a century of Eurocentric historiography in which they were presented as savages. The rescue consists of showing that the Africans are both different and similar to the Europeans, and of proving, by means of a vivid portrayal of the old tribal order, that pastoral societies are all alike and share a common fund of values. The shift to an ontological perspective allows Plaatje to establish a homology of pasts which becomes the precondition for the convergence, on the South African crossroad, of two histories, two cultures, and two races. The narration of the romantic love story of the two protagonists, later involved in the relationship with the whites, is also concerned with establishing their human qualities and moral integrity, with showing their attachment to their people, and their capacity for dealing with honesty and justice.

At the very beginning of the book, the communal values of Barolong society are set against its later transformation under the impact of Matabele imperialism and of white settlement:

Strange to relate, these simple folk were perfectly happy without money and without silver watches. Abject poverty was practically unknown; they had no orphanages because there were no nameless babies. When a man had a couple of karosses to make he invited the neighbours to spend the day with him cutting, fitting in and sewing together the sixty grey jackal pelts into two rugs, and there would be intervals of feasting throughout the day. On such an occasion, someone would announce a field day at another place where there was a dwelling to thatch; here too the guests might receive an invitation from a peasant who had a stockade to erect at a third homestead on a subsequent day ... Thus a month’s job would be accomplished in a day.

But the anomaly of this community life was that, while the many seams in a rich man’s kaross carried all kinds of knittings – good, bad and indifferent – the wife of a poor man, who could not afford such a feast, was often gowned in flawless furs. It being the skilled handiwork of her own husband, the nicety of its seams seldom failed to evoke the admiration of experts.

A tradition of communal hospitality and other attractive features of Barolong society – like its wisdom and rationality, its juridical and political institutions based on consensus – are presented in a favourable light and implicitly contrasted with the closed system of the

---

28 Quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible, in the novel, are mainly used with the intention of supporting this idea; see, for example, the reference to the “Song of Songs” and the comment on the possibility of substituting “cornfields” for “vineyards” (pp. 91-92).

Matabele and the Boers, and their rigid and arbitrary idea of justice.

On the historical level, great events had taken place in South Africa, which could be compared to the famous European conflicts of the past; before the arrival of the Boers, for instance, the Barolong had had to face the great upheaval caused by the transformation of the tribes of Northern Natal into the Zulu military state. The fact that the blacks had already made history in South Africa puts the Boer Trek into perspective, and presents it as part of a greater design of origin, rise to grandeur, decline and fall of nations which, even though it had not expected the whites’ arrival, will nonetheless include them in its logic. *A Bewitched Crossroad* also decentres the Trek from its position as overriding historical and literary myth. In Head’s novel, it becomes only one of a pattern of continental tribal migrations.

**Alliance**

With the arrival of the Boers led by Sarel Cilliers at Thaba Nchu, a chapter of black history closes and a new one begins. To the whites who enquire after the country and its people, Chief Moroka replies:

“This country is all right, ... it has only one serious nuisance and that is, it is infested by Mzikazi and his ferocious impis. If you helped us to rid the country of this pest, we could make of it the happiest land under the sun...”.

“Have patience”, said Cilliers, “I will pay Mzikazi back for all the Barolong women killed by his army”.

The first encounter between blacks and whites, which fore- shadows the future alliance, has nothing mythical about it; it is rather staged as an anti-climax. The alleged superiority of the whites, already anthropologically deconstructed by means of the mythical tale of origins in the first part of the novel, can be defined as such only in technological and military terms: they travel in waggons,

---

*See the wise “Solomonic decision” concerning marriage and adultery on pp. 121-24.


* Mhudi, pp. 86-87.
mount horses, wear clothes and, above all, carry guns. But they do not by these means acquire moral superiority, only a greater contractual power and political strength.

*Mhudi* subverts one of the most powerful conventions of colonialist discourse, i.e. the trope of the unbridgeable gap between West and Africa, between white and black, by insisting on traits and qualities shared by all humanity. For example, both virtues and vices are common to all mankind, regardless of the colour of their skin. There are good men and evil men in every race: among the blacks, the Barolong are good and the Matabele evil; the whites can be good and honest, like de Villiers, or brutal and cruel like, for example, the Boers who flog their Hottentots servants.

The belief in one common origin and nature for all mankind contributes to support Plaatje’s universalist vision in *Mhudi*: Christianity, which has always been considered the dividing-line between civilized and savage, is no longer a boundary identifiable with colour. The writer sees it unproblematically as a means of black emancipation which can be easily accommodated and incorporated within the existing order and is part of the same enlightened interplay of loyalty to tradition and openness to novelty which characterizes the figure of Khama III in Head’s novel. Christianity naturally transfers to the blacks the dichotomy (white) civilized/(black) savage; in *Mhudi* the Barolong are more evolved than the Matabele who have not been evangelized by the missionaries.

So religion is no longer a precondition and a justification for the moral superiority of the whites; there exists also a black version of Christianity which endorses St. Paul’s famous doctrine: “There is neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free, male nor female, White nor Black, but all are one in Christ Jesus.” Plaatje dismantles, one by one, the barriers that separate men from one another and, finally, deconstructs the idea of difference inscribed in the trope of race.

If good and evil, right and wrong, are prerogatives of no man and no race, then stereotyped groupings are not absolute and separate, and can be transcended by individuals; “the good” are almost always those who can (or are willing to) read the Other’s system, and transform the gap between cultures and races into the intersecting ground of shared experience.

The competing forces therefore seem to meet on a basis of equality. The fictional creation of the characters’ personal relationship with members of another race, once the value of the blacks has been

"*Ibidem*, p. 184.
established, points to a potential composition of racial contrasts on
the basis of mutual respect, trust, and exchange.

Ra-Thaga, the good black, strikes up a friendship with de Villiers, the good white, and builds a relationship which moves from
total incommunicability to mutual understanding, passing through
the symbolic process of learning each other’s language:

during the Boers’ sojourn at Thaba Nchu, there sprang up a lively friendship
between de Villiers, the young Boer, and Ra-Thaga. The two were constantly
together, at the Boer settlement, at Moroka’s Hoek, and at the Barolon town of
Thaba Nchu proper. They made up their minds to learn each other’s language, so
de Villiers taught Ra-Thaga how to speak the Taal and Ra-Thaga taught the Boer
the Barolon speech. They were both very diligent and persevering and, having
ample opportunities for practice, they both made very good progress "1.

But the two young men are drawn together not only by an ideal
sense of common humanity, but also by “their mutual aversion to
the Matabele”, the practical necessity of revenging the extermination
of the Barolon and stopping their imperialistic appropriation of the
land.

Together they leave their respective societies to fight a common
enemy, thus mixing the utopian dimension of a personal encounter
beyond the barriers of racial difference with the historic reality of a
black-white political alliance subsequently erased from history books.
Apart from the political issue which Plaatje was particularly
interested in underlining, his real aim in creating the fictional narrative
of an interracial friendship was to offer an objective correlative
of a multi-racial ethics which was embedded in the ideal of a cul-
tural synthesis and human brotherhood between the peoples crossing
the South African junction.

There is no question of fusion in Plaatje’s novel, of characters
becoming totally “civilized”, of individuals mythically uniting two
cultures in one being, or even biologically levelling racial differences
through blood crossing. All of the “bridging” characters are firmly
identified with their own race and never lose their coordinates, never
even “waver” when they meet the Other at the crossroads.

By splitting the friendship of his characters from the hostility of
their people for one another, Plaatje is only concerned with advocat-
ing the possibility of communication between races, and that indi-
vidual moral change and a universal sense of justice were the key
solution of South Africa’s problems.

1 Ibidem, p. 114.
Ra-Thaga and Mhudi’s story, their adventures and relationships, embody the passage from the mythical past to the present, and inform the future with the vision of a myth to aspire to and against which to measure.

The male interracial relationship is duplicated in the novel by the female friendship shared by Mhudi and Hannekie, the young Boer girl whose disposition seems to the Barolong woman “a shining contrast to the general attitudes of the Boers”.

The women’s friendship, although weakened by their ignorance of one another’s language, is based on a common feeling of sisterhood which transcends barriers. Plaatje’s women are strong, brave and intelligent, and establish with other women ties of love and reciprocal trust which are above and beyond races and political factions, as shown by the friendships between Mhudi and Umnandi, the Matabele queen, and between the latter and her Barolong girl. Mhudi, in particular, has great courage, independence, wisdom and determination, qualities that stand in sharp contrast to those of the white heroines of historical romance.

Although both women profess entire fidelity as regards their respective people (a principle which applies to all the characters in the novel), this does not prevent them from helping each other; they are positive examples of the idea of a new womanhood propounded by early twentieth-century feminism. Plaatje’s somewhat humorous and often ironic playing around with male/female stereotypes reveals an unusual insight into the parallels between racial and sexual discrimination, and assigns women a special role in bringing a more just and equal society into existence.

Regeneration

At the end of the novel, the cycle of events reaches its happy conclusion and order is restored. Having obtained their revenge and

---


16 Olive Schreiner’s thought and writings are an essential source of inspiration in *Mhudi;* echoes of her short stories, of her novels and essays can be easily detected throughout the book. An example of the debt to the feminist/pacifist perspective of *Woman and Labour* (1911) is provided by the following passage: “How wretched”, cried Mhudi sorrowfully, “that men in whose counsels we have no share should constantly wage war, drain women’s eyes of tears and saturate the earth with God’s best creation – the blood of the sons of women. What will convince them of the worthlessness of this game, I wonder?” (p. 165).
removed the Matabele’s nightmarish presence forever. Ra-Thaga and Mhudi leave their white friends and go back home.

Their contact with the (good) whites has not been destructive: they retain an entirely African identity, and have in addition acquired deeper human experience, wider linguistic knowledge and more sophisticated technological means: now they possess a waggon to travel in and a musket to go hunting with. The old days are gone, an epoch is finished, and the future in view has the dream-like quality of romance.

Gone were the days of their primitive tramping over long distances, with loads on their heads. For them the days of the pack-ox had passed, never to return again. The carcase of a kudu or any number of blesbuck, falling to his musket by the roadside, could be carried home with ease, leaving plenty of room in the vehicle for their luggage. Was it real, or was it just an evanescent dream? 15

The Barolongs’ incredulity is far from implying a naive acceptance of the gifts and of the presence of the Boers in South Africa; it is rather accompanied by Mhudi’s distrust of them (which is a constant in the book) and by the couple’s relief at going back to their family and people again. The parting of the ways after the fruitful meeting indicates the spirit of independence with which the Africans have lived the encounter and reveals the consciousness that the allies may represent a potential danger, now that the common enemy has been removed.

The author, who enjoys the benefit of seeing past things at the remove of later insight, expresses this awareness by interweaving his narrative with a consistent apparatus of dreams and prophecies, celestial signs and premonitions (the most important of which is the appearance of Halley’s Comet every seventy-five years: 1835, 1910, 1985...), which beats out the rhythm of a history defined by the concept of cyclical time. In this way, the vision of the African past becomes a model and an interpretive metaphor for what will happen later: the narrative of the past is transformed into the ideology of the future.

In this ideology, the realistic and utopian dimensions intersect; on one hand, the illustration of the Matabele’s fate, defeated right when Halley’s Comet crosses the South African sky, allegorically extends to all would-be (white) imperialists in South Africa – a country where there is “plenty of land for all” 16, and warns them of

16 Ibidem, p. 84. In such statement one can hear the echo of the voices of all the
what their future will be like if they exaggerate; on the other, it shows that an alternative to imperialist conquest can be found in the pacific co-existence and intersection of anthropologically equal forces”.

The destiny of the Matabele king is exemplary in more than one way. Beside being a warning to the future “villains” of South African history, it is also an instance of the healthy redistribution of forces and acquisition of consciousness that comes out of the intersection of different histories and peoples. For the Matabele, the defeat is a lesson that brings renewal; they migrate to the north and in time rebuild an even greater power than they had known in the past. Mzilikazi is converted from reckless injustice through the purgation of suffering to a new wisdom and fertility; his favourite wife, the sterile Umndani, who had disappeared from home at the time of her husband’s misfortune, returns and presents him with a son soon afterwards.

And like in Mofolo’s Chaka, the villain of the story is finally redeemed by the utterance of a prophecy which mars the vision of future harmony projected by the narrative at a superficial level. Alliances work only when the involved parties are honest towards each other: the kings’ prophetic curse uncovers and anticipates the dishonesty of the “marauding wizards from the sea” and its consequences for their friends:

The Bechuana are fools to think that these unnatural Kivas (white men) will return their so-called friendship with honest friendship. Together they are laughing at my misery. Let them rejoice; they need all the laughter they can have today for when their deliverers begin to dose them with the same bitter medicine they prepared for me; when the Kivas rob them of their cattle, their children and their lands, they will weep their eyes out of their sockets and get left with only their empty throats to squeal in vain for mercy.

dispossessed blacks who, in 1913, saw themselves deprived of the right to purchase or lease land from Europeans anywhere in South Africa outside the reserves.

“ In A Bewitched Crossroad, the investigation of the practice of unlawful appropriation of land on the part of the Ndebele, of Cecil Rhodes and of the Trekboers reaches its climax in Chapter 13, which dwells on Rhodes’ attempted take-over of BechuanaLand and his collapse after the Jameson Raid. “The self-aggrandizing centre is shown to be insatiable and self-destructive. A failure to respond to the challenge of reciprocity leads to the destruction of the self-consolidating subject, to the disappearance of Rhodes after the Jameson Raid or the destruction of the Ndebele” (Desiree Lewis, “Bewitched”, cit., p. 16). As Sebina says, “The dwellings of fierce men become ruins in the ashes... Men are not meant to be beasts of prey... Life was always planned for peace because people are important”. 

187
They will despoil them of the very lands they have rendered unsafe for us; they will entice the Bechuana youth to war and the chase, only to use them as pack-oxen; yea, they will refuse to share with them the spoils of victory.

They will turn Bechuana women into beasts of burden... they shall take Bechuana women to wife and, with them, breed a race of half man and half goblin, and they will deny them their legitimate lobolo. With their cries unheeded these Bechuana will waste away in helpless fury till the gnome offspring of such miscegenation rise up against their cruel sires; by that time their mucus will blend with their tears past their chins down to their heels, then shall come our turn to laugh."

The angry power of Mzilikazi’s words dispels any false illusions concerning the untroubled nature of friendly encounters on the South African crossroads.

"Ibidem, p. 175."