



Liminal spaces and imaginary places in *The bone people* by Keri Hulme and *The folly* by Ivan Vladislavic

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Abstract

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This article argues that the transcendent power of the imagination represented by literature and novels in particular, has played a major role in aiding societies to confront and deal with specific social and political realities in a multicultural global society. The fact that novels represent the development of fictional characters in time and space, enables the reader to experience the lives of the protagonists in a vicarious fashion. In fact, the concept of liminality (with regard to the different stages of separation, transition and re-integration into society) is emulated in the reading process. The interstitial space provided by liminality is especially pertinent to postcolonial novels such as “The bone people” by Keri Hulme. In this novel Hulme illustrates how fictional characters, in an individual and social sense, have to experience “rites of passage” in order to come to terms with traumatic changes in their lives and cultures. In a different way and with the bigoted South African apartheid society (including the reader) as target, Vladislavic exploits the power of the imagination to launch a subtle, yet stringent critique on people who lack imagination and consequently fail to use it constructively in order to transcend their narrow-minded reality – similar to Patrick White in his condemnation of restrictive social conventions in Australian society in his novel “Voss”.

Opsomming

Liminale ruimtes en denkbeeldige plekke in *The bone people* deur Keri Hulme en *The folly* deur Ivan Vladislavic

Hierdie artikel beweer dat die transenderende mag van die verbeelding wat in letterkunde en veral romans teenwoordig is, 'n groot rol gespeel het om gemeenskappe te konfronteer met hulle spesifieke sosiale en politieke werklikhede in 'n multi-kulturele globale samelewing en om hierdie realiteite te verwerk. Die feit dat romans die ontwikkeling van fiktiewe karakters in tyd en ruimte verteenwoordig, stel die lesers in staat om die lewens van die hoofkarakters indirek te ondervind. Die konsep van liminaliteit (met betrekking tot die verskillende stadia van verwydering, oorgang en herintegrering in die samelewing) vind inderdaad plaas in die leesproses. Die tussenruimte wat liminaliteit skep is veral opmerklik in postkoloniale romans soos "The bone people" deur Keri Hulme. In hierdie roman illustreer Hulme hoe fiktiewe karakters in individuele sowel as sosiale hoedanigheid, "deurgangsrites" moet beleef, sodat hulle ten slotte in staat is om die traumatiese verandering in hulle lewens en kulture die hoof te bied. Op 'n ander wyse en met die bekrompe Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskap (insluitende die leser) as teiken, gebruik Vladislavic die mag van die verbeelding om subtiele, maar stiemende kritiek te rig op mense wat geen verbeeldingskrag besit en dus nie in staat is om hulle verbeelding konstruktief te gebruik of te projekteer om hulle eng werklikheid te probeer oorkom nie – op dieselfde wyse as Patrick White in sy veroordeling van die eng sosiale konvensies in die Australiese gemeenskap, in sy roman "Voss".

1. Literature, liminality and identity

Due to the disruptive influence of several factors, such as the Diaspora,¹ colonisation and the present reality of globalisation in large parts of the world, individuals and societies have experienced states of transition between continents, cultural communities and within family groups or relationships. They have felt and still feel the need to "connect" somewhere to something and someone in order to belong.

Literature – and Postcolonial novels² in particular – "embodies" the concept of *liminality* in the sense that it represents and expresses

1 Ashcroft *et al.* (1998:68-69) define *Diaspora* as "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions".

2 This term alludes to literature emanating from countries or territories that were previously subjected to colonisation and hegemonic practices.

the quest for an ever-elusive sense of identity.³ Ashcroft *et al.* (1998:131) underline this assumption when they suggest that

post-colonial discourse itself consistently inhabits this liminal space, for the polarities of imperial rhetoric on the one hand, and national or racial characterisation on the other, are continually questioned and problematised.

A discussion of *The bone people* by Keri Hulme and *The folly* by Ivan Vladislavic,⁴ novels published during the last two decades of the twentieth century, illustrates how fictional characters (as well as readers) pass through and experience these different phases or spaces of being and gain insight through the “world” of the imagination. In a social as well as individual sense, these spaces act as “rites of passage”, enabling characters and readers to finally come to terms with traumatic changes in their lives and cultures. Although both novels are imaginative constructs, *The bone people* emphasises how the complete cycle of life-rituals represented by social alienation, transition and integration (Van Gennep, 1960) has a healing effect on individuals and societies, while *The folly* relies on the force of the imagination to create spaces of awareness. Whereas Hulme expresses a reverential respect for myth and the past to act as guidelines for a new future, Vladislavic intimates that the past can be overcome through the imagination; that there is hope for reconciliation through tolerance and co-operation in whatever form. *The folly* graphically illustrates that, like liminality (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:130), the imagination creates a “threshold” area or subliminal experience that contributes to the development of personal identity and social relationships; it functions as an interstitial realm designating the conceptualisation of an idea and its realisation in a text or an artistic product, denoting art-in-process.

The concept of *space* as a defined place, forms an important point of reference in this discussion, as both myths and literary or imaginative spaces relate to cultural texts and contexts that in turn relate to a specific time and place. Consequently, places and homes symbolise cultural constructs that denote sites of belonging.

3 In contrast to the static identity presumed in realist literature (Benediktsson, 1992:122), the contemporary perception of identity has a protean quality in response to a changing environment and society.

4 Although Vladislavic might not be regarded as a postcolonial writer, his ironic stance and subtle expression of social and cultural discrimination in *The folly* provides a valid argument for comparison.

2. Metaphors of meaning

This article argues that art – and specifically fiction, or the novel – together with its representation of cultural constructs such as music, sculpting, painting and building, “connects” an individual with a specific period and cultural community; it shapes or gives expression to perceptions of social and individual identity. To put it differently, fiction (and the novel in particular) promotes a means of “connecting” with reality; of forming perceptions of belonging. This composite idea of identity and belonging is illustrated in the two novels mentioned above: Keri Hulme’s New Zealand novel, *The bone people*, and Ivan Vladislavic’s South African novel, *The folly*. In these novels, the different ways of belonging are explored through the metaphors of houses as cultural constructs and places that either depict isolation from society or act as defined spaces that foster human contact and personal relationships. Defined spaces that relate to “places” denoting personal relationships, conform to the general notion of “home” as a private space in which people connect with one another (family) and develop personal relationships; a space where they belong. Diana Brydon (1991:199) gives an all-encompassing definition of home, or feeling at home, as

... finding, naming and feeling comfortable with one’s sense of self, one’s voice, one’s ordering of space and conduction of community and family relations. This involves accepting responsibility and learning to choose within a world determined by the contingencies of values.

The operative words here are *self* and *responsibility*, which imply that individual identity together with social concerns are as vital components of our society, because we need to realise that “we are all responsible for the order or chaos we create” (Brydon, 1991:206). The concept of belonging constitutes a focal point in the argument of this article, as both the texts discussed grapple with this issue in different ways and on different levels.

In *The bone people*, Hulme uses fiction and the imagination to undermine static or conventional perceptions of identity. She proposes to reconcile, link or connect different cultures by means of literature and its close correlatives myth and art. In the same sense Diana Brydon (1991:211) argues that “creativity offers an alternative definition of selfhood, beyond the economic language of price and the stereotyping languages of racial, sexual or class difference”. Hulme grapples with the question of liminality in various guises: firstly, the relationship between the individual and society, including the role of the artist, her links to society and the significance of

literature as a liminal space;⁵ secondly, the question of ethnicity and hybridisation, or difference, that has been foregrounded by colonialism and consequently led to cultural and social alienation; and thirdly, finding a way to transcend difference by conjuring up the myths and beliefs of the past in order to construct a new future. This process can be traced in *The bone people* where the separation of the individual (and artist) from society occurs and the three main characters experience a liminal period each in his/her own way: through trials, tribulations and by confronting psychological dangers. However, the three people finally reunite as a prototype of a family and so stage their reintegration into society where the family unit functions as a necessary and valuable component. Whereas Kerewin's tower initially serves as a symbol of separation, her convoluted new house at the end of the novel represents and anticipates the eventual creation of a new social dynamic, thereby indicating that the present can learn from the past.

Vladislavic, in *The folly*, uses fiction to create a subtle satire focused on the concept of land and the right to its occupation as the central concepts that dominate and have always dominated South African politics since colonisation. Ironically, an unused and unoccupied plot of land, is used by Nieuwenhuizen (ironically, meaning "new house" in English) to "construct" an imaginary house. This act of appropriation is regarded as "squatting" by his respectable neighbours, the Malgas couple, next door. They observe his antics with alternating bafflement and fascination. Consequently, the unfolding account of their participation (Mr. Malgas) and non-participation (Mrs. Malgas) exposes ideological perceptions, stereotypical reactions and social hypocrisy that indirectly address the reader and his/her perceptions of South African society (during the 1980s).

In *The folly*, space has been appropriated to become "place" which, ironically, only exists in various degrees in the characters' imaginations. On the one hand, this imaginative aspect accentuates the ideological issues that colour South African society – implying that prejudice is all in the mind – while, on the other hand, the author suggests that imagination also creates the opportunity to bridge ideological gaps in the same society.

5 Turner (1974:15) mentions art and religion as "fresh new ways of describing and interpreting sociocultural experience".

3. "Authenticity": social identity and belonging

Keri Hulme can readily be associated with her protagonist, Kerewin Holmes, with whom she not only shares a similar-sounding name and surname, but also an artistic talent and bi-cultural heritage (Hulme, 1986:112). In the disparate responses elicited by the publication of her novel, *The bone people*, in the 1980s several critics commented with scepticism on Hulme's attempt to render a combination of Maori and Pakeha (European) culture. Some regarded her feat as either presumptuous and self-conscious (Stead, 1985:104), or failing to present a representative picture of reality (During, 1995 [1987]:374). From a contemporary perspective, Knudsen (2004:131) remarks on Hulme's "mediatory position from which she offers all New Zealanders a share in Maori traditions". Although Knudsen's stance seems typical of the contemporary perception of hybridity as a positive space of becoming, she rejects the term *hybridisation* that Griffiths (1994:82) uses with regard to the novel, because she argues that such an interpretation would "oversimplify" Hulme's intention;⁶ it would tend to "overwrite" her individual voice. However, in my interpretation, hybridity enables the expression of other voices by creating a space for cultural interaction as Homi Bhabha (1994:114) asserts:

Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that 'other' denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition.

Furthermore, Bhabha (1994:114) claims that "the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated".

Therefore, the academic issue of "speaking for and speaking with" that preoccupied academics in the past,⁷ seems to have lost its force in contemporary representations of cultural assimilation and perceptions of hybridity. In fact, as Griffiths (1994:71) already

6 Knudsen (2004:177) favours the terms *commensal* and *composite*, rather than *symbiotic* and *syncretic*, to express the novel's "preoccupations" which could be seen as the celebration or re-vision of Maori cultural elements and myth.

7 For instance, the criticism levelled at the South African writer, Elsa Joubert for transcribing and editing the story of the indigenous woman, Poppie Nongena (Coetzee, 1979).

commented about Australian literature twelve years ago, focusing on indigenous literature should not fetishise and mythologise “authenticity” as a key aspect of indigenous literary discourse, because it could inhibit “an effective strategy of recuperation and resistance” (Griffiths, 1994:70). Yet, it cannot be denied that the fictional character of Kerewin expresses some of the most pressing issues that affect and have affected Keri Hulme as person and artist, as well as the Maori community as a whole.

It is perhaps this “mixed” identity, similar to Hulme’s, that enables Vladislavic, from East European origins, to observe the petty ideologies of apartheid South Africa with a more objective stance in the sense of an onlooker. However, despite the hybrid identity that characterises many South Africans, most of them would probably endorse Appiah’s (1996:12)⁸ notion of such an identity as a type of “cosmopolitanism” that still allows and binds the individual to envisage “home” as an image imbued with cultural characteristics firmly rooted in South African soil. The old adage, “home is where the heart is”, would still ring true to most of our countrymen. Yet, Grossberg (1996:180) extends this idea by viewing the paradoxical relationship between the local (emphasising difference) and global (focusing on homogeneity) as a contested space linked to the ideas of “belonging (territorialisation) and identity (coding)”. From this vantage point, he argues conclusively that

It is no longer a question of globality (as homelessness) and locality (as the identification of place and identity), but of the various ways people are attached and attach themselves (affectively) into the world. It is a question of the global becoming local and the local becoming global (Grossberg, 1996:185-186).

The issue of belonging then occupies a central place in *The bone people* (symbolised in the Maori community house, or *marae*), while the main image that informs *The folley*, is the (imaginary) construction of a house as the symbol of social and personal relationships.

8 Appiah’s (1996:13) concept makes a clear distinction between the ideological constraints of nationalism and the broader, more encompassing perceptions of a liberal cosmopolitanism associated with the constant flux or migration of individuals resulting in a process of “cultural hybridisation”.

4. Fiction and imagination

4.1 The bone people

The two novelists Hulme and Vladislavic suggest that liminal spaces can either be bridged by attempting to combine (and yet differentiate between) two different cultures – or, as both Williams (1991:190) and Jones (1997:36) term it, “connect”. Whereas Hulme achieves this connection through myth, Vladislavic chooses to use the imagination as distancing device to expose stereotypical and ideological bias through the interaction of individuals across cultural spaces, places and social boundaries.

In *The bone people*, three individuals from different cultural backgrounds, genders and ages are brought together by fate or circumstance. They are Joe, the frustrated and volatile Maori man who is still mourning the death of his beloved wife; Kerewin, a mature woman of mixed Maori/Pakeha blood and an unproductive and frustrated artist who has isolated herself from society; and Simon the castaway, a small European boy (about seven years old) who has been physically abused and mentally scarred by his former deprivation and present circumstances as Joe’s ward. On the one hand they represent the prototype of a family and on the other hand, they exhibit all the components of an unproductive or fragmented family unit.

The protagonist, Kerewin Holmes, is an artist who isolates herself from all human contact (and responsibility) after a bitter confrontation with her family. She subsequently builds herself a tower where she hopes to “retreat” and apply herself only to her painting with “no need of people, because she was self-fulfilling, delighted with the pre-eminence of her art, and the future of her knowing hands” (Hulme, 1986:7). However, Kerewin comes to realise that creative art presupposes both the isolation necessary for the creative process and social interaction for human stimulus and nurture. I perceive this experience as a positive form of transition from a liminal emotional space between cultures, to a more integrated perception of two cultures, or, according to Knudsen (2004:177), to present a “composite” picture of Maori/Pakeha cultural reality.

Central to Kerry Hulme’s novel is the tower that she builds for herself. Firstly, it represents an enclosed world separate and isolated from society, and secondly, although it contains all her art treasures, it also symbolises her inability to give expression to her

emotions and artistic faculties. She expresses her initial despair in the following words: “She had debated, in the frivolity of the beginning, whether to build a hole or a tower; a hole, because she was fond of hobbits, or a tower – well, a tower for many reasons, but chiefly because she liked spiral stairways” (Hulme, 1986:7). Thus, ironically and inevitably, her conscious severance of family bonds and ties with society also cuts off her source of inspiration and life-blood. In the same sense that Gurnah (2004:27) describes the dilemma of the exiled or dislocated writer, Kerewin’s isolation could be perceived as a space to give free reign to the imagination, as a freedom from “responsibilities and intimacies that mute and dilute the truth of what needs to be said, the writer as ... truth-seer”. Yet, as Gurnah (2004:27) intimates, such a state also implies the other extreme where a writer “loses a sense of balance, loses a sense of people and of the relevance and weight of his or her perceptions of them” (Gurnah, 2004:27).

Kerewin’s physical isolation in the tower can thus be interpreted as liminal space in terms of a metaphysical and socio-cultural experience as well as a creative space. Yet, despite her resolution to remain isolated and uninvolved (Hulme, 1986:149), she is unwillingly and inexorably drawn into the vortex of abuse and violence surrounding Simon, the mute little boy who seeks “shelter” in her tower of imprisonment. He brings the outside world to her doorstep and slowly evokes emotional response in her numbed feelings and creative abilities. Kerewin’s individual and artistic revival is sketched in the novel as a gradual and unwilling process of rehabilitation and social engagement due to the respective interventions of Simon and then Joe in her life. The catalyst initiating this transition from a world of selfish isolation to the recognition of social responsibility is Simon; with him she shares an appreciation of art and learns to understand and appreciate his unique abilities to communicate and express his feelings. At a crucial stage in the novel she faces herself in the mirror and contemplates her situation:

Estranged from my family, bereft of my art, hollow of soul, I am a rock in the desert. Pointing nowhere, doing nothing, of no benefit to anything or anyone. Flaking, parched, cracked ... so why am I? (Hulme, 1986:289).

After the traumatic experience of Joe giving Simon the beating of his life for taking some of Kerewin’s prized possessions, the threesome separate. For this misdemeanours Joe is put in jail as a spiritually broken man suffering from guilt, Simon is sent away to heal from his physical wounds and broken bones, while Kerewin decides to raise

her tower – which seems to her to be “as cold and ascetical as a tombstone” (Hulme, 1986:272) – to the ground and leave the area. However, before she leaves, she sculpts a lump of clay into a tricephalos of herself, Joe and Simon, which becomes a symbol of their belonging and togetherness; a symbol of wholeness (Hulme, 1986:314-315).

Kerewin, Joe and Simon need to overcome personal demons and find their spiritual feet before they can attempt a future with any means of success. When Kerewin realises that she does not suffer from an incurable disease, she decides to forgive herself and Joe and to return to society, because as she admits to herself: “spirals make more sense than crosses, joys more than sorrows ...” (Hulme, 1986:273). Her return is symbolically depicted in the decision to restore the marae of her ancestors, an important communal meeting place that embodies “the spirit of land and people” (Knudsen, 2004:23) for the Maoris. Yet, her final re-integration is achieved when she builds a house for her and her “family”, consisting of Joe and Simon. She describes it as follows:

I decided on a shell-shape, a regular spiral of rooms expanding around the decapitated tower ... privacy, apartness, but all connected and all part of the whole (Hulme, 1986:434).

When he is released from jail where he was incarcerated for his violent and unconscionable attack on Simon, Joe needs to recoup his physical and spiritual forces. Like Kerewin, he returns to his roots, his grandmother’s home, where he meets the Kaumatua, a wise old man who reminds Joe of the debt to his ancestors and bestows on him the responsibility to take care of his cultural heritage by leaving him a piece of land (Hulme, 1986:373). The Kaumatua talks to Joe about the “dream world, and the world of the dead. About legends and myths, and nine canoes, the tatau pounamu, the possible new world, the impossible new world” (Hulme, 1986:377). Joe also learns about the dismal circumstances of Simon’s past, the shipwreck and his father’s drug addiction (Hulme, 1986:378). When he returns to his former home, Joe has a better concept of his own character and feels capable of facing the future.

As Kerewin and Joe undertake a “pilgrimage”⁹ back to their roots, they separate themselves from society because, as Turner (1974:54) points out, “to find and become himself, the individual must struggle to liberate himself from the yoke of society”. When they have gained perspective and new insights during the liminal phase, they can safely become reintegrated into society. Simon, “locked away” in a hospital, is slowly able to recuperate from the severe injuries inflicted on him by Joe. He suffers from broken bones, lack of hearing and the worst of all, a broken spirit. As a small boy, he needs affection and to feel that he belongs somewhere, but he cannot return to his former home with Joe, or rely on the companionship and compassion he sensed with Kerewin. All three these characters have to face social ostracism or exile, confront their own demons and recognise their dependence on other people – on social acceptance and companionship.

4.2 The folly

In *The folly*, Ivan Vladislavic also addresses social issues and interpersonal relationships by staging the interaction – or lack of interaction – between the Malgas couple and their idiosyncratic neighbour, Nieuwenhuizen. The actions and reactions of their new neighbour both baffle them, and offend their (lower middle class) sense of propriety. In fact, the situation seems to illustrate Robert Frost’s ironic poem entitled “Mending Wall”, where the narrator questions himself about the advisability of a wall between neighbours and queries his neighbour’s firm belief that “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost, 1972:33-34). He evaluates the ambivalence of such a divide by asking himself what he “was walling in or walling out”. This aspect becomes an interesting issue between the married couple themselves and their relationship with their neighbour in *The folly*.

In *The folly*, the lacklustre and shallow relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Malgas is exposed with the arrival of a “neighbour”, Nieuwenhuizen, who settles on an uninhabited plot of land next door. The formal mode of address used in their description, symbolises a desire to establish their claim to social respectability and display a sense of propriety and distinction from the “other” homeless people like Nieuwenhuizen. This designation also

9 Turner’s (1974:15) explanation about the cathartic role of religious pilgrimages that entail hardship, but also lead to new perspectives, would also apply in this instance.

highlights their ordinariness and restricted world views and "earthbound" lack of imagination, that André Brink (1996) wishes to rectify in the South African society by "reinventing" and "reimagining" (Brink, 1998) a new type of reader. To put it simply, Vladislavic subverts socially acceptable norms, "institutionalised values" (Gräbe, 1995:29) and ways of thinking. As Gräbe (1995:29) correctly asserts, the reader must be coerced or persuaded to "come to terms with socio-political issues he or she has, thus far, been hesitant to acknowledge or confront".

Young (2001:38) perceives the liminality in Vladislavic's work: "as both a subjective condition – to the extent that the narrator's personal sense of marginality can be symptomatically linked to the experience of political and social transition". The vacant plot apparently has no owner and appears unkept and overgrown with no shelter or form of habitation or a house. Yet, Nieuwenhuizen regards it as his "dominion" and visualises it in terms of a painting or a solidly built house: "Its contours and dimensions were just right, and so too were its colour schemes and co-ordinates, not to mention its vistas and vantagepoints" (Vladislavic, 1993:7). He also seems to view his neighbours' house in terms of human attributes: "It was of a pasty, pock-marked complexion, and there were rashes of pink shale around the windows, which were too close together and overhung by beetle-browed leaves" (Vladislavic, 1993:7). He keeps to himself and shows no curiosity about his neighbours, nor does he seem to experience any inclination to make their acquaintance. His strange and unsociable behaviour arouses their interest and elicits different reactions from the couple.

Whereas Mr. Malgas is more outgoing and inclined to venture into the unknown "domain" of Nieuwenhuizen's space "to make contact" (Vladislavic, 1993:14) and to eventually introduce himself as his neighbour, Mrs. Malgas is much more careful and reticent in her contact with strangers. She is apparently rational and attempts to "talk some sense into her husband" (Vladislavic, 1993:59); give him a "fresh perspective on events" (Vladislavic, 1993:67) and point out "the folly of his ways" (Vladislavic, 1993:54); somewhat cynical (or world weary), less capable of being disappointed and therefore rigid in her ideas. Accused by Mr. Malgas of always thinking "the worst of people" (Vladislavic, 1993:11), she represents the smug "home owner" in her small world, looking down on the homeless and classless Nieuwenhuizen. Her world consists of her small treasure trove of possessions (Vladislavic, 1993:29, 39) – similar to Kerewin's hoard of treasures in *The bone people* – and a soulless domestic routine (Vladislavic, 1993:16). She relies on the vicarious experience

for information¹⁰ and entertainment transmitted by the television – making her a potential supporter of contemporary virtual reality television. Instead of being open to life, she furtively, but constantly, watches her neighbour and her husband's part in the events next door (Vladislavic, 1993:25, 142). Consequently, her attitude is reminiscent of E.M. Forster's *Room with a View*, depicting characters that only contemplate life through a frame and from the protection of the familiar and trusted confines of a room or a house, but do not participate in the real experience outside.

Mr. Malgas, in turn, is fascinated by his new neighbour and "friend", enslaved by his ideas and personality. He is finally persuaded to believe in Nieuwenhuizen's conception of a house, whose only reality exists in the nails and string "map" or plan – mainly envisioned by Nieuwenhuizen and executed by Mr. Malgas on the soil of the plot. Ironically, the concept of a plan executed in string on the rough terrain would seem to imply the imposition of order on the "wasteland", but its planning is subject to the vagaries of Nieuwenhuizen's erratic mind. Their antics and respective roles are subtly underlined by the observation: "A jaundiced eye may have observed that Nieuwenhuizen did a great deal of pointing and waving, whereas Malgas wielded the fork and pushed the barrow" (Vladislavic, 1993:57).

The house plan proves to be a network of strings that intersect and create meaningless spaces without any sense of order (Vladislavic, 1993:98). Due to his good nature and simplicity, as well as his openness to life, Mr. Malgas exhibits an imagination of sorts, by being able to "enter" into imaginary spaces or worlds created by Nieuwenhuizen. In contrast to his wife's intransigence and hypocrisy, Mr. Malgas then shows redeeming qualities. His somewhat ineffectual attempt to "connect" with Nieuwenhuizen should be regarded as a positive character trait, and not simply be regarded as the simple and duped neighbour exploited by the squatter, Nieuwenhuizen (Gräbe, 1995:35).

The Malgas couple therefore serves to highlight or define different kinds of prejudice. Young (2001:40) refers to this aspect in Vladislavic's work as the tension created between the "ideas of 'museumising' and historicising, as opposed to representing and

10 The incident on TV – also noted by Kearney (1994:92) – graphically illustrates a woman burnt alive, to contrast with the real bonfire made by Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen on the plot next door (Vladislavic, 1993:127).

inventing". To regard Mr. Malgas as merely simplistic, would ignore the subtle irony underlying the personal relationships explored in the novel. Malgas is not "blind" to his wife and community, but he simply fails to create balance between imagination and reality. Similar to Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, he becomes enmeshed in the web of illusions that seem like reality (Vladislavic, 1993:85, 87), until he feels "sealed off from the outside world" (Vladislavic, 1993:116). This quality might underline his simplicity, but it also highlights his willingness to "suspend his disbelief", to see beyond his "fence". Jack Kearney (1994:93) remarks on the important role of fiction as opposed to reality when he suggests that Vladislavic indirectly seems to perceive a "resemblance between his own fictional enterprise and that of Nieuwenhuizen". In fact, Kearney (1994:93) identifies the main theme of the novel when he refers to Mrs. Malgas's capacity for laughter (Vladislavic, 1993:143) and Mr. Malgas's "clearer vision" that finally sees Nieuwenhuizen's "field-glasses" for what they are: "two brown beer bottles tied together with a wire" (Vladislavic, 1993:147). The conclusion then suggests that the couple will view life differently in future; perhaps they will have a better appreciation of the comical and more respect for the imagination and literature, so that Malgas, like Quijote, will not be blinded by narratives and not allow himself to become "enclosed in them" (Vladislavic, 1993:116) either.

In *The folly*, the imaginary construct/image of a house and its separation from the neighbours by a garden wall, constitute the central metaphors of connection or division. Vladislavic sketches the negative impact of walls and structures on a physical as well as spiritual level; they do not only shelter people, but represent enclosed personal spaces and serve as symbols of physical and mental isolation. The Malgas couple in their isolated and routine-bound familiar sphere of home and work, create barriers between themselves and the world. The wall separating their garden from the empty plot is a good example of this "enclosure" of emotional feelings, and also symbolises social distance, because walls prevent interaction on a personal as well as social level. Nieuwenhuizen's question about the moulded suns in Malgas's wall (Vladislavic, 1993:24-25), raises a subtle issue of perception between the two neighbours: to regard the suns as setting, would imply the Malgas couple's negative and restricted view on reality, while regarding the suns to be rising, would indicate hope for the future, even in the "recycled" version that is depicted by Nieuwenhuizen and his ramblings (Vladislavic, 1993:30).

Contrary to some critics (Kearney, 1994:92), I do not regard *The folly* as a good example of magic realism, or even believe that it adheres to the genre of magic realism as such. Although *The folly* does exhibit a duality reminiscent of magic realism in representing or projecting different ways of looking at reality, I would argue that the most important attribute of magic realism is the juxtaposition of real and surreal elements, thereby implying the “impossible” association of the ordinary with the extraordinary – as Isabel Allende and Márquez illustrate in their novels. However, I believe that such a marked juxtaposition is not evident in *The folly*. Taking my argument about “connection and belonging” into account, I would venture to regard the novel as an exercise in critique, a satirical version of the socio-political reality in South Africa. The main thrust of this novel then revolves around the scope of the imagination (or the fantastic) and its lack of boundaries, rather than around magic realist elements.

Consequently, *The folly* should be interpreted as an experiment in exposing the calcified perceptions of ordinary people and the power of the imagination in giving characters like Mr. Malgas a glimpse of other possibilities of living and viewing reality. Mrs. Malgas represents the traditional in opposition to the unconventional, while Nieuwenhuizen and his “apprentice”, Mr. Malgas, endorse the innovative and imaginative. Yet, Vladislavic retains an objective distance, by merely highlighting different stances but not taking sides, as Young (2001:41) also seems to conclude.

The above-mentioned observations coincide with my interpretation of liminal spaces in society and the significance of the imagination exemplified in literature. In view of Vladislavic’s tendency to experiment with notions of “realism” and its own embedded ideologies (Young, 2001:41), one might be inclined to view Nieuwenhuizen’s sadistic treatment of Mr. Malgas as a strategy to shock the reader from his/her complacency. This is in a similar vein to the strategies employed by Roald Dahl with his readers – which usually indicate an indirect ploy in satire.

5. Conclusion

Although art provides an ideal realm for connecting fact and fiction or idealising reality, and the imagination serves as a “tool” or channel for the creation of new ideas, the individual is still “earthed” in society and has to accept responsibility for the reconciliation or facilitation of differences. In the case of *The bone people*, the different cultures in New Zealand, represented by Joe, Kerewin and

Simon have to arrive at a solution for a future family and nation which, as the title implies, has to be constructed from the very bones of the people; or it could also refer to the skeletons of the past to be used as a basis, but not as a solution. Kerewin gives expression to this idea by creating a sculpture of herself, Joe and Simon – a tricephalos that signifies that they are the inheritors of a new society and social dispensation. The implication is clear: love and respect for oneself and others also incurs responsibility and inevitable social engagement.

The folly, in turn, illustrates how the imagination can allow free speculation and experimentation with ideas that might contribute towards a new perspective on South African reality. Although on a smaller scale and not so much involved with race as *The bone people*, *The folly* provides an interesting glimpse on stolid realism and the versatility of the imagination; it distinguishes between the idealists and the realists, but also suggests that a sensible marriage of the two points of view could perhaps contain a resolution towards the realisation of a "rainbow" nation. In both cases, the recognition of hybridity, as a concept of identity, plays a key role, as Homi Bhabha (1994:4) asserts when he claims that the

[i]nterstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

Finally, the title of the novel assumes a symbolic meaning, as the term "folly" could either indicate foolish behaviour or denote "an ornamental building, usually a tower or mock Gothic ruin" (COD, 1990:457). Consequently, "folly" can be associated with Nieuwenhuizen and Malgas's meaningless construction project, with an "ornamental building" or interpreted as an example of their foolishness. Seen within the context of this article, it could also be associated with Kerewin's tower. Interpreting the various meanings would depend on the reader and his/her creative use of the imagination: making the necessary connections to create a site for future possibilities.

Both novels describe how "in-between" worlds serve to "connect" disparate individuals and cultures through the symbolic representation of personal shelters, "homes" or houses and towers. Simultaneously, the novels also raise questions about the "family" and social responsibilities. Both authors propose the implementation of the imagination – that abstract and transcendent space – to explore and resolve cultural and individual liminalities, and to induce

and encourage hybrid or composite communities and individuals with broadened perspectives emulating Appiah's "cosmopolitanism". In conclusion, Hulme and Vladislavic intimate that it behoves each individual to "locate" a niche for herself in society and to feel comfortable in and feel "at home" with her own skin. This mental and cultural acclimatisation – or maturation – can be equated to Gurnah's (2004:27) description of writing as a dynamic "process of accumulation and accretion, of echoes and repetition" that allows writers the space to "fashion a register that enables them to write". Gurnah (2004:28) extends this image to the role of literature itself, when he claims that the attempt to reconcile disparate narratives provides a better understanding of the power of narrative and has "made the world less incomprehensible, has made it smaller". In this sense, art as a realm of the imagination, serves as the connecting link that makes seemingly impossible odds, possible.

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Key concepts:

belonging
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Kernbegrippe:

hibriditeit
identiteit
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tuishoort
verbeelding