



# Translating cultural transition in Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*

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## Abstract

### Translating cultural transition in Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*

*This article deals with the issue of cultural translation in a postapartheid text through the analysis of language, setting and discourse to highlight cultural transition in a society where socio-political mutations elicit new literary codes and symbols. The discussion is developed around concepts such as gender and ethnic identity or citizenship in a geographical environment where multi- and transcultural identities are endlessly being contested. The concept of translation is explored to show how Moele's text represents cultural transition within a postapartheid urban context by analysing the authorial transposition of everyday experience into the textual fabric. The article also examines how the narrative voice negotiates across the current multicultural divide in order to highlight cultural change both in South African literature and in society as a whole. This article addresses in the discussion the controversial debate raised by Michael Titlestad's (2007) review of the book published in the "Sunday times" on 25 March in which the critic evinces a negative reception of the book. This is used as a point of departure in order to explore a wide range of possibilities that fiction can offer by means of textual representation of the daily experience of black people in a postapartheid urban context.*

## Opsomming

### Die vertaling van kulturele oorgang in Kgebetli Moele se *Room 207*

*Hierdie artikel bespreek die kwessie van kulturele vertaling in 'n postapartheidstek deur middel van die analise van taalgebruik,*

*ruimte en diskoers om sodoende die kollig te laat val op kulturele oorgang in 'n samelewing waarin sosio-politieke aanpassings nuwe literêre kodes en simbole laat ontwikkel. Die diskussie ontwikkel rondom konsepte soos gender- en etniese identiteit of burgerskap, in 'n geografiese omgewing waarbinne multi- en transkulturele identiteite eindeloos betwis word. Die konsep van vertaling word ondersoek ten einde aan te toon hoe Moele se teks kulturele oorgang binne 'n postapartheid stedelike omgewing uitbeeld deur middel van 'n analise van die skrywer se omsetting van alledaagse ondervindings in die weefsel van sy teks. Die artikel ondersoek verder hoe die narratiewe stem die huidige multikulturele verdelings oorbrug ten einde kulturele verandering in sowel die Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur as die samelewing as geheel te belig. Die artikel bespreek die debat wat begin het met 'n artikel van Michael Titlestad (2007) wat in die "Sunday times" van 25 Maart verskyn het. In die artikel spreek hierdie kritikus ernstige bedenkinge oor die teks uit. Sy kritiek word as vertrekpunt gebruik om die wye reeks moontlikhede wat fiksie bied te ondersoek by wyse van die tekstuele uitbeelding van die daaglikse ervaring van swart mense binne 'n postapartheid stedelike milieu.*

## 1. Theoretical argument

The end of apartheid has opened doors for new imaginings in South African literature as well as for novel perspectives in its literary criticism in order to claim a place in the global imaginary. This stylistic aspect of literature has been a preoccupation among South African critics both during and after apartheid. In the apartheid era the aesthetic dimension of the work of art was said to have been neglected by black writers in favour of what the South African critic and novelist Njabulo Ndebele called the spectacle of protest writing (1988:205). A question one can pose is to what extent the demise of apartheid has produced change in the new South African writing, and what the new features of post-1994 literary texts are. In his article, *The pitfalls of the literary debut*, published in the *Sunday times* of 25 March 2007, Michael Titlestad assesses the aesthetic validity of Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* by stating that the novel is an "unfinished work" (2007:2), because "[i]t eschews the niceties of novelistic prose and the formal criteria of plot and character development in favour of immediacy. Structurally it sprawls, comprising as it does seemingly random encounters and loosely related narrative lines" (Titlestad, 2007:1). According to Titlestad (2007:3), the unpolished shape of the novel "leaves only the impression of haste", even though the critic admits that

[t]here is probably a good novel lurking somewhere within this rather shapeless textual pastiche, but it is not presently realized. In its current form the text traffics rather tediously in the aura of authenticity as it meanders from one seemingly unmotivated encounter to the next. (Titlestad, 2007:2.)

Titlestad's criticism seems to identify the weakness of the text as a failure to represent the emergence of new mode of postapartheid writing. He suggests a few literary guiding principles which he believes are relevant to the new ways of writing in the postapartheid context.

The only way to remedy the crisis in the readership of South African fiction is to ensure that novels are as interesting, as cogent and compelling, and as readable as possible. Works that are finely wrought, consistently imagined and meticulously characterized and plotted are more likely to win over new readers, to maintain public interest and to outlast the first flush of public evaluation. Producing novels of this quality is the actual duty of both writers and publishers. (Titlestad, 2007:3.)

In Titlestad's view, postapartheid literary production requires more meticulous work from both writers and publishers with a view to publishing masterpiece texts which will not easily disappear in the course of time. In other words, Titlestad suggests that this project cannot be successful if literary texts are produced in "haste" simply for the sake of publication. On the one hand, the critic finds the narrative structure "fundamentally unsatisfying" (Titlestad, 2007:2); on the other hand, he condemns the lack of editorial rigour; an aspect which he summarises as follows:

And yet, like 'Room 207', Kraak's novel doesn't seem to be finished. First, the text is poorly edited at the level of basic stylistic features. While one might be tempted to defend its stylistic characteristics on the basis that this is a first-person narrative, that the habits of perception and expression are those of the characters, the repeated descriptions of cigarette smoke, the iconic use of rembetika (urban Greek folk music) and the purple descriptions of Greek landscape and culture, among other things, are laboured and stereotyped. There is also an irritating smattering of typographical and proofreading errors. (Titlestad, 2007:3.)

Here Titlestad illustrates his criticism of linguistic errors and narrative inconsistency in Moele's text as evidence of editorial laxness. The criticism of the aesthetic dimension of the novel revives the kind of reproach directed against black writing during the apartheid era,

because of its unsophisticated delineation of social events as dictated by the political conditions of the time. Prominent writers such as Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Ezekiel Mphahlele justified this trend in black writing as a useful response to the urgent call to tell the truth about the political atrocities in South Africa to the rest of the world. Tiltstad's comment seems indirectly to corroborate what many critics such as Lewis Nkosi and Njabulo Ndebele have suggested, namely that the new South African literature should not only explore a wide range of contemporary South African issues, but also capture "the ordinary" through imaginative stylistic innovation. According to Ndebele (1988:218), South African writers should relinquish old habits that prevailed during the apartheid era, the overdetermination of politics and the sensational reproduction of reality, and explore the emotional terrain of human existence.

This article uses Michael Titlestad's reception of the book as a point of departure to discuss the emergence of new literary features of postapartheid writing, using the concept of translation to analyse literary representations of the South African cultural transition. This concept is deployed to assess the degree of change in literary representation of the postapartheid context by exploring the literary, linguistic and cultural aspects of translation.

## **2. The concept of translation**

Moele's *Room 207* is set in a postapartheid urban environment where socio-political change tends towards the creation of a transnational and transcultural society. The novel encapsulates elements of the South African cultural transition. Like Mpe's (2001) *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Moele's *Room 207* is set in Hillbrow, a densely populated, high-rise quarter of Johannesburg. These two narratives provide vivid descriptions of this notorious area of sexual promiscuity, poverty, violence and xenophobia. Moele's text provides a representation of Hillbrow that tends to focus on its negative aspects, exposing its social dynamics within a fraught postapartheid context. Formerly a whites only residential area during the apartheid era, today's Hillbrow, as presented in the novel, has become a multiracial, multi-ethnic, multinational space reflecting the new socio-political environment. While the narrator sees Hillbrow as "our little mother earth in Africa because here you'll find all races and tribes of the world. Here you find Europeans and Asians that by fate have become proud South Africans" (Moele, 2006:19). The description of the new multiracial and multicultural texture of Hillbrow is representative of cultural diversity in postapartheid urban settings which, like

Hillbrow, have not yet achieved cosmopolitan status because of people's resistance to cultural change. Rather than presenting a celebration of diversity, as might be expected in a postapartheid novel, the text depicts the unfinished project of mutual tolerance, notwithstanding the narrator's invocation of the diversity of Hillbrow's people.

In "[t]he city beyond the border: the urban worlds of Duiker, Mpe and Vera" Meg Samuelson shows that Mpe's depiction of Hillbrow can be seen as an illustration of cultural change in postapartheid Johannesburg, because of its transnational and transcultural composition resulting from national migration and international immigration. Samuelson (2007:250) argues:

Such restless movement characterizes also Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which centres itself in Johannesburg's polyglot inner city, from where it tracks cross border and transnational movements. Mpe's attraction to Hillbrow as literary foci is explicated elsewhere as a fascination with its rapid capacity for change, noting how during the 1980s Hillbrow moved from being an exclusively white to a predominantly black neighborhood (cf. Mpe, 2003:184-185). Such shape-shifting (represented also in Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket*) continues to characterize Hillbrow in the following decade, in which its make-up is reconfigured by an influx of continental immigrants.

Samuelson pinpoints the representation of Hillbrow and Johannesburg that is used as settings in Mpe's and Vladislavic's texts as giving evidence of change in postapartheid society. In similar vein, Raditlhalo (2008:94) suggests that the city of Johannesburg described in *Room 207* is

... an edgy, energetic city, which draws new arrivals across the continent ... In the wake of apartheid's collapse, the collage of various fragments of the former city is opening up a space for the experiences of displacements, substitution and condensation, none of which are purely and simply repetitions of a repressed past, but rather a manifestation of traumatic amnesia and in some cases, nostalgia or even mourning.

Raditlhalo shows that Moele's *Room 207* exposes elements of cultural transition as the effects of the past still linger in the transforming society.

The concept of translation is used to analyse the transposition of everyday experience of cultural transition into the textual fabric of

Moele's novel, examining in the process how the narrative voice negotiates the multicultural divide. I also focus my argument on Wicomb's perception of "translation as concept-metaphor for the post-apartheid condition" (Wicomb, 2002:210). Wicomb considers the passage from the old cultural space to the new as a type of translation because, according to her, there is a "relationship between translation and what has been called the period of transition in South Africa" (Wicomb, 2002:210). Furthermore, the analysis of "cultural transition as translation" in the text will use Wicomb's perspective as she conflates transition and translation by "explor[ing] the relationship between the original and the translated, between transition and translation, and how this is underpinned by temporality and the role of the perfective in the text" (Wicomb, 2002:215).

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the verb *to translate* has three definitions: firstly, it means the action of "changing words into a different language"; secondly, it is the fact of "changing something into a new form, especially to turn a plan into reality"; thirdly, the fact of "deciding that words, behaviour or actions mean a particular thing." Although translation is primarily a linguistic concept, the last two definitions also fit the theoretical approach of this article, because they draw attention to the problematics of finding equivalent terms when representing cultural identity in a society grappling with socio-political transformation. The last category of translation mentioned above can be assimilated to the metaphorical aspect of post-colonial writing illustrated in Bandia's (2008) recent book, *Translation as reparation: writing and translation in post-colonial Africa* in which he writes:

Translation is understood here in a metaphorical sense, as postcolonial writing often involves a carrying across linguistic and cultural boundaries, a transportation or relocation of marginalized language cultures, onto a more central and powerful domain. The writing practice of postcolonial authors, and novelists from other subaltern cultures for that matter, evoke in many ways the practice of interlingual translation. The post-colonial writer is, by virtue of the very nature of his life-world, a bicultural or bilingual subject with the uncanny ability to negotiate the boundaries between a minor and a major language culture. An unwitting nomad, moving freely between these two worlds, the postcolonial writer seeks to build bridges to facilitate the transfer of a more local reality onto an international space where it can take root and find new life. Translation as a metaphor for postcolonial writing takes on the particular significance in the case of writing that is inspired by orally-based language culture, as it involves transposing an oral

discourse into a written one, as well as confronting two radically different language and cultural systems brought together by historical circumstances characterized by unequal power relation. (Bandia, 2008:31.)

Through this quotation, Bandia wants to highlight the postcolonial writer's use of home cultures and customs, which she/he reimagines by employing literary strategies such as metaphorical language in order to connect and confront cultural systems. Furthermore, Bandia points out that the postcolonial writer transposes cultural elements into the textual fabric in order to suggest new meanings.

Since translation involves the transfer of diction, semantics and style into a target language, which is in this case the literary one, the article interrogates the validity of aesthetic norms in a society where some South African literary commentators still argue that political liberation has not totally elicited literary liberation (Nkosi, 1998:75-90). The linguistic, cultural and literary (as genre) aspects of translation are examined to explore a wide range of possibilities that fiction can offer by means of textual interpretation. The article also addresses the question of whether it is worthwhile setting up certain aesthetic standards which fit cultural representation of the postapartheid context and thereby running the risk of perpetuating repressive canons.

### **3. Narrative voice**

In the first place, the linguistic aspect of translation is explored to analyse the narrative voice in the text in order to identify the type of language used, since it appears as a translated version of idioms from a particular social milieu. Through this socio-linguistic approach the reader is exposed to a particular way of speaking and thinking. Many postapartheid critics suggest a promotion of new aesthetics in the postliberation literary context (Attridge & Jolly, 1998). Moele's text shows a thematic shift from centralising politics to addressing issues of contemporary Hillbrow.

The originality of this text lies in its orientation towards dealing with problems of modernity and the peculiarity of the linguistic form used in the narrative. Moele's style opens up new ways of writing that might inspire post-1994 South African writers. By appropriating colloquial language, which is referred to as *tsotsitaal* (meaning street language) in South Africa, Moele seems to identify the language with his characters without attempting to alter it. In fact, the triviality and vulgarity of the language translates the mindset of those inhabit-

ing the represented space, as illustrated by the narrator: "Excuse the language, that's how these people talk" (Moele, 2006:118). Moele deconstructs the normative language imposed by political and artistic conventions to expose a proletarian space by literally transposing his characters' sexist and violent language. The author does not graciously support violence and sexism, but instead he wants to acknowledge the predominance of patriarchy, violence and moral decay in his own society. His attempt to present the predicaments and inconstancies of the inhabitants of the inner-city milieu may be read as a sign of literary liberation allowing marginalised voices to be heard in the postliberation context, even if these voices do not conform to the value systems of the readers of the novel.

Like Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Moele's narrative resorts to what Mpe calls "linguistic honesty" (Mpe, 2001:56-57) in order to transgress linguistic taboos of both African traditions and conventional literary expression. In an interview Mpe (2001:56-57) explains his use of this particular stylistic device as follows:

Now for fifty years, the system of apartheid had been confusing writers in this way. Trying to make them believe that euphemism equals good morals. That if you said shit, you were immoral and an unsuitable writer for school children, with their impressionable minds.

Although these two texts are not written in polite English, Mpe and Moele genuinely attempt to represent the South African cultural transition by creating new codes of writing. In *Post-colonial writing and literary translation* Tymoczko argues that postcolonial writers translate linguistic, cognitive and artistic elements from their cultures by introducing "innovative formalism", which is totally unfamiliar to the mainstream narrative genre. This critic maintains the following:

Post-colonial and minority literatures are literary domains in which challenges to dominant standards of language, poetics and culture are frequently advanced, where literature is expanded through new mythic paradigms and archetypal representations, new formal resources and paradigm, and revitalized language, including new mythopoeic imaginery (sic). As with translations, innovative formalism often reflects the literary system of the post-colonial or minority culture itself, and the writer may introduce various forms of indigenous formalism to the dominant culture. (Tymoczko, 1999:34.)

Tymoczko argues that the postcolonial writer introduces innovative styles inspired by his/her cultural milieu. In *Room 207* Moele adopts



a distinctive linguistic register which departs from the standard form by appropriating street language. Radithalo refutes Titlestad's criticism about Moele's style by arguing that

... *Room 207* is a proletarian novel and it sticks to the linguistic registers of South Africa's city streets. Words and phrases such as 'ntepa', 'seven-fifty lengolongolo', 'floor-shift people' and others may trouble a reader not steeped in the linguistic registers of South African cities and ghettos (however, a glossary is provided at the book's end). Its strong language extends to carnal relations and includes contemporary jargon for xenophobic characters. (Radithalo, 2008:94.)

This quotation shows that despite the linguistic incorrectness with regard to Western traditions of stylistic conventions and their portrayal of reality, *Room 207* can make a valuable literary contribution to the representation of the cultural transition of the new South African society because of its linguistic originality.

#### **4. Cultural representation**

In addition to narrative voice representing postapartheid conditions, the author also makes use of cultural representation as the second aspect of translation in order to decipher meanings of cultural elements inherent in the represented space. Tymoczko argues that, unlike translators who deal with textual transposition, postcolonial writers transpose one or multiple cultures in their imaginary works. In Tymoczko's view, culture is used by postcolonial writers:

As background to their literary works, they are transposing a culture – to be understood as a language, a cognitive system, a literature (comprised of a system of texts, genres, tale types, and so on), a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history, and so forth. In the case of many former colonies, there may even be more than one culture, one language that stand behind a writer's work. (Tymoczko, 1999:20.)

Tymoczko wants to suggest that the postcolonial writer tends to translate his/her social and cultural realities into literary texts. In other words, their cultures, customs and history are used as backgrounds for their fictions.

Similarly, Moele's narrative addresses current issues affecting people's everyday lives. It abundantly depicts scenes displaying circumstances of poverty, violence or AIDS-related effects such as one can identify in any postapartheid urban community. The narrator

reveals historical and sociological facts concerning the milieu as he points out that "the British had their time here and it passed. The Afrikaners had their time; they enjoyed it and then it too passed by. Now Johannesburg is under the control of the black man" (Moele, 2006:69). Here the narrator wants to remind the reader of historical facts related to the demography of the place, referring not only to the political power each group has wielded, but also to the numerical representativeness of each group during the three different historical stages.

The themes developed in the narrative also familiarise the reader with the setting. In fact, Moele's work deals with topical issues such as violence and AIDS, as illustrated in this evocative image of Johannesburg as

the land where the weak, the poor, the rich and the powerful – powerful enough that they can rob you of your own life – mingle and mend ... you never know in Johannesburg ... walk carefully and think fast; this Johannesburg, you are either fast or dead (Moele, 2006:69).

The author pinpoints the unpredictability of social violence in the city at the same time as he highlights the point that victims and actors of violence are no longer classified in terms of their gender, race or class. This passage illustrates that violence is not performed only by one category of people, because in reality even top police officials are involved in criminal acts (as revealed in the case of the former National Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi).

Furthermore, through the delineation of ethnicity, gender and class identities, the novelist uses irony to highlight the predominance of prejudices in postapartheid society, where cultural difference is still viewed through stereotypes. Although the novel deals with social problems in Hillbrow, *Room 207* is a metaphorical representation of the whole new South African context, where contemporary social issues have an impact on the whole society irrespective of gender, race and class. There is no longer a privileged space which is not affected by violence, sexism or any other type of social evil. Through his literary representation of Hillbrow the author weaves his story around fictionalised characters whose ideas and deeds translate the current cultural trends. The narrative is evocative of an identity crisis in society, since the project for the construction of a national identity is still challenged by tribalism, sexism and racism inherited from the apartheid system. The representation of ethnicity in the text unveils the prevalence of a xenophobic, ethnocentric and racist as well as

profoundly sexist culture in the new South Africa. “Zulu-boy”, one of the protagonists, epitomises the negative image of cultural misconception of the other. His insular mindset is described as follows:

Though he didn't like makwerekwere [a derogatory term for foreign black Africans in South Africa], he hated the Pedis even more. He associated every individual with their tribe or the land that they were from. For him, the Zulus were the supreme race and after that everybody was subhuman, 'lamaPedi'. Don't blame him, he inherited that from somewhere in our past. No matter what you were, if you were black, he liked to know what tribe you were from. To him, every man had the mentality of his tribe. (Moele, 2006:65.)

The text vividly exposes the current cultural tendency based on a judgmental gaze at the other. This quotation can be an illustration of the emerging xenophobic sentiments which led to the recent attacks on foreign black Africans across the country. “Zulu boy” is himself caught in the claws of xenophobia, since the reader is informed that this character carries his ID book with him on the grounds that police officers often suspect him on the basis of his features of being a Zimbabwean citizen. In real life it is common to read a story in the national newspapers featuring a tragic murder of a South African citizen who was mistakenly identified as a foreigner. The tendency to predict a person's nationality on the basis of his/her physical appearance reinforces the identity crisis in this society.

Furthermore, the story unveils some cultural stereotypes across the racial binary. The narrator uses irony to express a scathing criticism of black people's stereotyping and drinking habits by arguing the following:

Honestly, we are a drinking nation. We don't go during the holidays on tours of this lovely country of ours, from the Klein Karoo to Skukuza, via Borakalalo National Park ... Because we don't care. That's for white people. I don't blame them. Don't blame us, we drink, grill meat and cook some hard porridge, then quarrel and maybe end up fighting or trying to stop one fight from getting way out of hand. (Moele, 2006:33.)

This excerpt from the text can be an interpellation to break racial misconceptions across cultural differences. This seems to suggest that South Africans should get rid of stereotyping traditions in order to adopt genuine democratic values which exclude any kind of discriminatory practices and attitudes. The portrayal of Matome, one of the most powerful male protagonists, displays the prototype of a

humanist character because he embodies *ubuntu* principles. He is non-sexist and "in his world the term 'stranger' [is] nonexistent" (Moele, 2006:25), because to him people's backgrounds are not more important than their human dimension, which is transparent in "the eyes, the soul, the human being, the face" (Moele, 2006:25).

## 5. Gender relationships

Similarly, gender relations feature in Moele's depiction of postapartheid cultural context. This section of the article analyses the aspect of cultural transition by focusing on fictional translations of gender relationships in post-1994 South Africa. The narrative exposes a strong presence of patriarchy in the new society despite the political shift from a discriminatory system towards democracy. In "On men and masculinity in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* and Sello Duiker's *The quiet violence of dreams*", Crous explores the question of masculinity in the novels of two black writers and observes the predominance of sexist attitudes towards women among black male characters.

In the modern patriarchy of South African society, where African men have acquired political power, African women are faced with new difficulties, in particular assumptions relating to the maleness of African power. Rape is on the increase and this could be an effect of the mindset that was predominant during the struggle years, namely that women were considered to be fair game. (Crous, 2007:17-18.)

Crous's quotation is applicable to the types of gender relations evident in Moele's text. In fact, Crous uses fictions by Mpe and Duiker to explain the current gender identity crisis by showing how gender relations are still dictated by an inherited patriarchal culture which sees women as mere sexual objects. *Room 207* translates the mindset of a geographic space where women are derogatorily viewed as the "female species" "whores", "gold-diggers" and "bitches", and one "can call them heavenly bodies" (Moele, 2006:52). The objectification of the woman's body is translated through sexist language and acts as illustrated in this passage: "I can give you someone, a real woman, one you can abuse as you want and they [she] can abuse you back" (Moele, 2006:59). Female identity seems to be solely constructed on a woman's sexual identity, since her human identity is acknowledged only when she is seen as an object for sexual abuse.

In his novel Moele's female characters are portrayed as passive victims of male sexism. The author seems to expose all the cultural clichés which still linger in this contemporary democratic society where power relations across gender, for instance, are still dictated by old habits. He successfully illustrates how masculinity, for instance, is still associated with physical strength, while emotions are regarded as determining factors of female identity. This hardhearted attitude of male characters displayed in the scene where Modishi is saddened by the revelation concerning his girlfriend Lerato's abortion, underscores the predominance of patriarchal ideology in South African society. The narrator asks:

How do you comfort a man? It's not there in komeng, there is no lesson for comforting darkie brothers. Real men don't need comforting. Their heart and soul comfort them, they never cry and if they do, no one sees their tears. (Moele, 2006:57.)

This statement reveals the perpetuation of patriarchal and colonial discourses, which maintain that a real black man never cries and has no emotions. From a patriarchal point of view the act of crying is rather seen as feminine, as illustrated through the narrator's recollection of his father's demise when his uncle tells him to "stop crying and be a man" (Moele, 2006:57), and he believes he became one by doing so. This response exemplifies the cultural inheritance of societal misconceptions of gender attributes.

The author's negative depiction of images of male characters shows his determination to stigmatise the abuse of women and children in his community. The references in the novel show that the pervasive presence of rape in the contemporary post-1994 society reveals men's savagery and cruelty. The author seems to argue that some men have lost their rationality, because it is inexplicable that "a grown-up man can rape a three-month-old baby" (Moele, 2006:91). Through the fictional narrative the author tries to translate the loss of ethical values in a society which desperately and urgently needs to be healed. Matome, one of the few black men to value a cultural revision of gender relations, expresses his indignation at the prevalence of sexual violence meted out to women and children. This male character epitomises a transformed image of the new black man who wants to redefine gender identity. Unlike his friends who believe that their womanising and misogynistic attitudes determine their masculinity, Matome has true love and respect for women. The narrator tells us that Matome "loved them [women], but not the way you and I will tenderly love those members of the female species ... from Matome all they got was love and no sex" (Moele, 2006:27).

This male character tries to suggest a new version of the concept of love across gender relations where women are no longer viewed as sexual objects, but as equal and fellow human beings. Matome deplores the fact that as a society "we just don't have any respect for ourselves as individuals, as people and as a nation. Even if we have all the money in the world, we will never be happy people" (Moele, 2006:91). Matome seems to suggest that love and self-respect should be cherished as fundamental values in order to achieve the kind of society people had always dreamed of during the struggle against apartheid, that is to say striving for the construction of a human rights culture.

## **6. Fictionalising the material world**

After using the concept of translation to analyse Moele's delineation of postapartheid cultural transition, this literary text is dealt with as a product of the transposition of the material world into a world of fiction which, despite being purely imaginary, reflects some elements of reality. Similarly, in *Approaching literature: the realist novel*, Walder defines the realist novel not in terms of any reference to the reproduction of reality. Walder (1995:18) maintains that "unlike a film ... it cannot imitate reality directly. It uses words to give the illusion of reality". A literary definition of realism explains to what extent the narrative techniques used to represent contemporary Johannesburg life in Moele's text can be identified with realism as a literary genre. In *Realism* Morris (2003:9) provides interesting comments on the definition of the term *realism*.

Realism ... is a notoriously tricky term to define. Even when limited to the realm of literary writing it has an aesthetic and cognitive dimension neither of which can be wholly separated one from the other. Aesthetically, realism refers to certain modes and conventions of verbal and visual representation that can occur at any historical time. Yet, realism is associated particularly with the secular and rational forms of knowledge that constitutes the tradition of the Enlightenment, stemming from the growth of scientific understanding in the eighteenth century.

In other words, Morris seems to suggest that a literary text is said to be realist when narrative techniques through characterisation, setting and plot provide an objective account of a specific geographic space and its people's mindset, history and culture with an aesthetic language distinct from journalistic reports of reality. Morris (2003:4)

insists on “a distinction between realist writing and actual every day reality beyond the text”:

Literary realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents ... words function completely differently from mirrors ... writing has to select and order, something has to come first and that selection and ordering will always, in some way, entail the values and perception of the describer.

With regard to the definition of realism provided above, I examine Moele’s novel to investigate whether this text respects key principles of realism. In other words, does the writer or narrator present facts as they really are without trying to recreate the represented milieu by, for instance, rephrasing his characters’ words and scrutinising their psychology in order to give a more comprehensive representation of human existence? In fact, the mimetic depiction of daily lives can be assimilated to the transcription of facts when the text is devoid of an aesthetic dimension because facts are literally reproduced in the text. Realism as style rather provides the translation of the material world into a work of fiction by means of translation techniques such as transposition and assimilation as well as adaptation to the literary genre to meet aesthetic requirements. In the history of the realist movement two main currents can be identified. The first is psychological realism, which uses the Freudian theory to explore characters’ unconscious in order to look for what Shipley (1970:266) calls “new subject-matter for literature, especially situations and language that have previously been excluded by religious or sexual taboos”. The second trend is called social realism or proletarian realism and is characterised by the depiction of ordinary people’s living conditions in their social milieus as in the classic works of French realist authors such as Zola and Flaubert.

Through his criticism of the narrative incoherence of the book *Titlestad* deems Moele’s text an “unfinished work” that perpetuates the sensational features of black writing during apartheid. Titlestad wants to show that Moele’s text could perhaps be classified as proletarian or social realism, but it is “unfinished” because it fails to abide by certain guiding principles of social realism. In other words, Titlestad seems to suggest that in order to successfully translate reality into fiction, the writer should not literally delineate facts as they are in reality, but he/she has to use the stylistic principles of a specific literary genre to project a different vision of life. Similarly, Shipley argues that the prime mission of art is to explore people’s feelings and he quotes Cabell’s *Beyond life*, who posits that

[t]he serious artist will not attempt to present the facts about his contemporaries as these facts really are, since that is precisely the one indiscretion life never perpetrates ... in living, no fact or happening reveals itself directly to man's intelligence, but is apprehended as an emotion (Cabell quoted in Shipley, 1970: 268).

However, despite Titlestad's negative view of the novel, he admits that "*Room 207* stages itself as authentic; as a seemingly unmediated vision of a gritty post-apartheid reality" (Titlestad, 2007:1). Titlestad wants to point out that the novel may be considered unsatisfactory in terms of its narrative structure, but it has value because of its originality. He also argues that "various ethnicities are also misrepresented. The narrator asserts at one point that there is a 'Jewish' channel on television, at another that all Zulu men are violent, and so on" (Titlestad, 2007:2). Conversely, this can rather be perceived as a literary strategy to show the persistent presence of prejudice in this society.

## **7. Conclusion**

The third definition of translation (as a process of recreating something which is being conveyed by the author to which she/he adds or from which she/he removes information in order to create new meanings) is the most suitable to underscore the otherness or estrangement of art by examining how a literary text can represent reality and at the same time distort actual facts in order to produce a new material world. This is what Shklovsky calls "defamiliarization". In *Studying literary theory: an introduction* Webster (1990:38) explains Shklovsky's concept as follows:

His thesis was that in most activities perception becomes a habitual, automatic process where we are often unaware of, or take for granted, our view of things and the relations between them. Poetic, or literary, language could disturb this 'habitualization' and makes us see things differently and anew. This is achieved by the ability of poetic or literary language to 'make strange' or defamiliarize the familiar world; what changed in fact was not the world or object in question but the way of perceiving it: the mode of perception.

The quotation pinpoints the autonomous aspect of literary representation of reality as the writer or the narrator, through the use of literary devices, gives shape to an imaginative world that problematizes the notion of a fixed reality. The estrangement resulting from the literary conjures up different perspectives of interpreting reality.



The analysis of cultural translation in Moele's text attempts to grasp the intricate double function of art as a range of subversive and reflexive forms of reality. In other words, this literary text is analysed by looking at the relationship between literary representation and cultural truth as well as the way the narrative challenges systemic conventions.

Through the analysis of *Room 207* the role of literature, as a means of recording and exposing the cultural dynamics of the represented space, has been pointed out to highlight that through narrative devices such as realism, literary texts transpose elements of the material world into fiction. Thus, the thematic choice for the plot can be dependent on the socio-political environment used as setting. The translation of cultural identity in the literary field cannot be approached solely in terms of translating an indigenous (African) language into a European language such as English, but must also be viewed as a process of adapting aspects of cultural transition into narratives. The passage from an old socio-political system to a new one can influence literary production, as pointed out by Kunene in a conference panel on South African oral literature. Kunene (1985:7) argues:

Now the relationship between the organization of society and its literature is so strong, so close that if you change the society the literature itself follows in that direction. It interprets. It doesn't merely report what the society is doing; it interprets, focuses and analyses the past as well as the present and then creates a perspective for the future.

In fact, the end of apartheid has brought about new social phenomena which constitute a new imaginary for many South African writers such as Moele, whose narrative tries to deal with contemporary postapartheid issues. Although *Room 207* is not written in a style to meet the new aesthetic norms formulated by many postliberation literary critics, Moele's use of colloquial language in his text pinpoints the emergence of new literary modes of representation in a democratic cultural imaginary. By adopting *tsotsitaal* as a poetic language in the narrative, Moele seems to translate the language of ordinary people into a new literary language. Literature or "literariness", as Webster (1990:39) tells us, is:

... a linguistic effect produced in a particular context in relation to other kinds of knowledge or discourse. It also moves towards the view that literature or a literary text is not ultimately unified and organic in nature but rather composed of various kinds of

writings, techniques or devices which can be assembled and interpreted in various ways.

Webster shows that a literary text can, through its poetic use of language, offer many possibilities of understanding and interpretation of both real and fictionalised worlds.

In conclusion, Titlestad judges Moele's novel to be "fundamentally unsatisfying" (Titlestad, 2007:2), because of its lack of narrative coherence as well as the editorial laxness which "leave only the impression of haste" (Titlestad, 2007:3). However, through the analysis of different aspects of translation in textual narrative, laudable literary features have been identified in Moele's novel to illustrate cultural transition in Hillbrow. The most dominant feature in the text is the indeterminacy of the narrator's subject position. In fact, the narrative voice does not adopt an active position to suggest an alternative image of a better society. This can account for the author's disenchantment with political ideologies. The represented image of Hillbrow in the text seems to translate, to some extent, a state of uncertainty reflecting cultural transition in this particular setting.

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**Key concepts:**

cultural transition  
cultural translation  
translation

**Kernbegrippe:**

kulturele oorgang  
kulturele vertaling  
vertaling

