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**The evolution of critical responses to Fugard's work, culminating in a feminist reading of *The Road to Mecca***

**Abstract**

An ongoing debate in South Africa today concerns the response of white writers, such as Athol Fugard, to the African/South African socio-historical context. As a major focus of this debate there is a relationship between history and literature, and selected critical responses to Fugard's work of the past three decades are investigated in terms of their position regarding this relationship. All these responses, regardless of their political and/or literary affiliations were found to imply that some kind of truth, *their truth* can be represented in a fictional text. In response to this implied truth claim and in particular to certain critics' demand for a "concrete" history, the founding insight of poststructuralism about the inability of language to reflect an already existing reality is used to justify the following approach to Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*: history is merely one discourse among many without any privileged claim to primacy; Fugard's texts, read as history, is therefore approached in the context of South African discourses competing in the game of power relations, thus justifying the feminist reading resulting from an analysis of the competing discourses in the text.

**1. Introduction**

As an introduction to Fugard we can select some significant 1960s, 1970s and 1980s responses to his work, in order to highlight some of the issues raised by them. This in turn will enable us to situate Fugard and his work in some of the relevant, current theoretical debates in South Africa, a necessary preliminary step for an appraisal of *The Road to Mecca* from a feminist perspective.

**Responses to Fugard's work: 1960s, 1970s, 1980s**

After the first production of 1960s plays such as *The Blood Knot* (1961), *Hello and Goodbye* (1965), *People are Living There* (1969) and *Boesman and Lena*

(1969) literary traditionalists, not used to the social and political situatedness of Fugard's plays, complained that they could not identify with his characters because they were the dregs and outcasts of society.<sup>1</sup> In their expectations of some kind of universal tragic hero and their concomitant lack of concern with social and political history, these traditionalists in effect marginalized the relationship between literature and history. This marginalization led to the demand for a tragic hero who is representative of all humanity in embodying some fundamental, persistent aspect of man's nature, and to succeed in this he could not be an average man, contaminated by history, let alone one of the dregs of society. In order to represent the furthest reach of human possibility, to exhibit the heights and depths of human experience, the extremes of suffering and knowledge, this mythical tragic hero had to be exceedingly unlike common humanity.

Fugard's direct concern with political events became more marked in the 1970s with his preoccupation with the effects of apartheid legislation in plays such as *Statement after an arrest under the Immorality Act* (1972), *Sizwe Banzi is dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973).<sup>2</sup> Ironically, however, political events in South Africa produced an unappreciative response from the very people who were the victims of apartheid: the hardening of an already unresponsive attitude on the part of the South African government led to a corresponding intensification of black resentment towards whites. The authority of experience became the criterion for any kind of participation in the black struggle and as no whites were able to participate fully in blacks' living conditions, they were debarred from the struggle.<sup>3</sup> Fugard did not accept this as the final word, however, and made a further contribution to the debate in his 1978 play, *A Lesson from Aloes*, in which he shows that blacks are not the only victims of apartheid in South Africa: in the world depicted in this play all three characters, a white husband and wife and the husband's coloured friend and political comrade experience a sense of isolation and futility because of apartheid. Only the coloured man, Steve, opts to leave the country, however, as he would not be allowed to live there with any degree of dignity, because he is not white.

Despite this end of the 1970s response to his critics from the black left, which seemed to indicate that Fugard, through his plays, would still be directly concerned with the political history of his country, there was a change during the 1980s in the relationship between his work and history. His next three

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1. See for example Woodrow (1972) who considers Fugard's socio-political concern limiting and compares his work unfavourably with the more "poetic" texts of H.W.D. Manson.
  2. The degree of Fugard's concern with political events is of course debatable – as Combrink (1986) points out –; one's own discourse will determine which political events one has in mind and how one assesses Fugard's concern with these events.
  3. Nadine Gordimer describes the confusing and problematic situation which arises for both black and white writers when they have to submit to "the authority of the experience itself, not the way (they perceive and transform) it into words" (1988:230). Gordimer herself finds "it difficult to accept (this situation), and even for the cause of black liberation for which (she is) committed as a white South African citizen" (1988:230).

plays *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982) – about a young boy and his relationship with his cripple, alcoholic father and his surrogate father who is a black man – *The Road to Mecca* (1985) – about an ageing, female folk artist who is about to be sent to an old-age home, because she apparently cannot look after herself anymore – and *A Place with the Pigs* (1988) – about a World War II Russian deserter who hides in his farm's pig sty for 40 years before he gives himself up – foreground the personal experience of characters, linking them far less directly with political events and their effects than the 1970s plays had done. During this time South Africa was either in a state of unrest (consumer boycotts, necklacing, etc.) or in a state of emergency (declared in 1985, lifted briefly and re-imposed with greater severity on 12 June 1986). By the 1980s the fervour of black resentment of the 1970s had abated somewhat (the Black Consciousness Movements had been banned in October 1977) and there was a certain conditional acceptance of white writers by blacks.<sup>4</sup> Fugard's apparent retreat from politics was unacceptable to both the white and black left who felt that his imaginative response in, for instance, *A Place with the Pigs*, was inappropriate and irrelevant in such an overwhelming social context as that of the 1980s in South Africa (Chapman, 1988:34–35).

These responses described above have been selected for the issues which they raise and are, of course, not the only ones to Fugard's work. Two further significant responses with which he has become familiar during the past few decades are those from the white right and those from the so-called liberal (or moralist) humanists. The former is perhaps best represented by various government actions in response to Fugard's concern with racial issues, such as the prohibition on mixed theatre groups and audiences at public performances (1965); the seizure of his passport (1966); and the repeated interrogation of Fugard in his home and the search through his papers for proof of subversion. The humanist response is articulated by critics such as Lionel Abrahams whose contextual demands of literature do not take priority over the textual demands. He believes that

art in a state of emergency should by its continuing abilities to offer insight into a range of human pursuits keep alive a liberating imagination, . . . which, in its 'defamiliarizing' tendencies and skills of formal representation, should touch the temper of the times in all kinds of ways while distinguishing itself from the language of the political platform (Chapman, 1988:27).

## 2. Literature and history

Each of these responses makes certain demands on the text; the critics have

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4. According to Nadine Gordimer (1988:245) "in the 1980s many black writers of quality (such as Njabulo Ndebele, Ahmed Essop and Es'kia Mphahlele) have come into conflict with the (1970s "authority of the experience") demand from without – responsibility as orthodoxy, and have begun to negotiate the right to their own, inner interpretation of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle". This in turn has given the white writer a little more space: "The white writer who has declared himself answerable to the oppressed people is not expected by them to be 'more than a writer', since his historical position is not seen as allowing him to be central to the black struggle" (Gordimer, 1988:246).

certain expectations about how reality should be reflected or represented and these expectations, in turn, reflect the critics' concern, or lack of it, with the relationship between literature and history. The literary traditionalist has an ahistorical approach to literature, being concerned with certain universal human experiences and values; the humanist demands what can be termed an aesthetic distance between the text and its historical context – the “temper of the times” should be “touched” but the language of the text must remain “literary” and not become “political”; for critics on the left the historical context is of such major importance that, depending on both individual and historical circumstances, the authority of the experience could outweigh its transformation into an art-object; critics from the right are interested in the relationship between literature and history only to the extent that this affects the *status quo* – they will accept texts which either confirm the *status quo* or do not pose too much of a threat to it.

### 3. Language and reality

Each of these historical responses whether from the right or from the left or from humanists somewhere in between, seem to imply that some kind of truth, *their* truth, can be represented in a fictional text. This implied claim needs to be investigated in the light of the founding insight of poststructuralism that language, far from reflecting an already given reality, constitutes reality for us. According to this theory, there is therefore no pre-existing reality or history against which to measure what is represented as, for example, social reality or history, in a text. The most we can say of history, poststructurally, is that it is a discourse, it is a certain construction commonly known as reality. In this sense discourse is a certain way of using language and in it is inscribed the ideology of the user. According to Belsey (1980:5)

ideology is *inscribed* in discourse in the sense that it is literally written or spoken *in it*; it is not a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of ‘ideas’ and is subsequently embodied in words, but a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing.

In other words human action is unavoidably ideologically structured, a fact which also reveals the link between discourse and power: the way a person uses language, instead of being an “innocent” representation of reality, is an act of constructing reality. Belsey (1980:5) points out that “discourse involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulations that characterize it”. These shared assumptions – for example in the discourse of patriarchy – exercise powerful imperatives with regard to social practice, as an aspect of discourse.

All attempts at representing reality can therefore be seen as separate, competing discourses none of which has any privileged claim to primacy, i.e. as a foundational discourse. This view presents problems to critics who maintain that in South Africa today, with its state of emergency, a “concrete”

history of bannings, detentions, etc., should take precedence over the notion of competing discourses. These critics who object to Fugard's play *A Place with the Pigs* as an inappropriate response to the present historical reality in South Africa, would probably at best find his *The Road to Mecca* marginal in relation to the ideology inscribed in their discourse. *Mecca's* preoccupations do not correspond sufficiently with their central concern with "the struggle" in South Africa today.

The critic in South Africa today therefore has to face the demands of an overwhelming social context, while at the same time being aware of a poststructuralist critical situation in which no particular discourse has a privileged claim to primacy. The dilemma for the critic is that on the one hand there are attempts by critics such as Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) to argue for particular foundational discourses; on the other hand critics such as Howard Felperin in *Beyond Deconstruction* (1985:2) see no possibility of such foundational discourses:

The search for a theoretical metadiscourse has so far yielded only a proliferation of sub-discourses that shows no sign of consolidating into a common language and methodology . . . (It is) increasingly unlikely that any single meta- or master-discourse will achieve the desired condition of institutional domination. This the present study argues, is . . . the unavoidable destiny of textual study within a pluralist culture . . .

Felperin goes on to argue for

a practice, now inevitably a theoretical practice . . . (in the) sense of an interpretive practice that thinks, in the terms available to it, what it is doing with the texts it takes up, even as it goes on taking them up.

In considering the above conclusion and weighing it up against the demands of an overwhelming social context, this study argues that the most any critic (as critic and not as political activist) can do,<sup>5</sup> is to come out into the open and participate with extreme self-consciousness in the power-play of competing discourses.

#### **4. Competing discourses and the analysis of dialogue units (Schmid's drama theory)**

It is therefore in this spirit of openness that I approach Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*. My aim is to investigate the powerplay of competing discourses within the text and how these textual features are used in the construction of a contextual (socio-political) reality. In an analysis of the structure of the dialogue units of *The Road to Mecca* and the way in which this structure

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5. The critic in South Africa today faces the same kind of dilemma which the writer faces. In her reflections on the writer's dual commitments, to society and to writing itself, Nadine Gordimer (1988:239–250) describes this dilemma as shaving to make a "distinction between the tasks of underground activity and writing a story or poem" (1988:246); for the critic the choice is between underground activity and writing *about* a story or a poem.

contributes to the build-up of the represented world of the text, I hope to indicate the feminist perspective of this play, without claiming to offer any kind of comprehensive feminist reading. Bearing in mind the following definition of feminism, as well as the fact that one of the ongoing socio-political debates in South Africa today considers women's rights an integral part of the democratic process,<sup>6</sup> it will also become clear why I do not consider *The Road to Mecca* an inappropriate response in South Africa today.

Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become. (Weedon, 1987:1)

I make use of certain aspects only of Herta Schmid's structuralist drama theory (1973). The basic unit used in Schmid's structuralist approach is the dramatic dialogue unit of rejoinder and counter-rejoinder about the same object. This principle of segmentation is useful for the purposes of this study as the basic units correspond to those found in communication in everyday language and also have the *I-you* form of discourse. An analysis of these dialogue units should thus reveal whether characters have competing discourses, and if they do, what ideologies are inscribed in them. The dramatic structure has three constant components: the representation of two speakers and the relationship between them, a common dialogue topic and a common spatio-temporal situation. Depending on which of these three is emphasised in a play, the characters' discourses will become more or less central and in possible competition with each other. To investigate the characters' discourses a brief analysis is presented of the following three basic aspects of the dialogue units: the designatory patterns in the play – *who* addresses *whom* in *what manner* and *with what designation*; the way in which the rejoinders and counter-rejoinders of the dialogue units are structured – whether characters contribute actively or passively to the unit – and the discourse emphasis – whether the discourses of character A or B or both are emphasised.

## **5. *The Road to Mecca*: introduction to structure, character, action, setting**

The play has only two acts. Throughout the first act there are only two female characters, Elsa and Helen, on stage except for a brief appearance at the end of the act of the only male character, Marius Byleveld. In view of the fact that

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6. *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (Oct./Nov. 1989) reports on the culminating August 1989 meeting of various women's organizations – arranged by IDASA – which focused specifically on matters relating to women in the drafting of a constitution for a future South Africa. The diversity of women's groups which attended (such as the MDM affiliated United Women's Congress, the Federation for South African Women, the Cosatu affiliated South African Domestic Workers Union, Women 2000 and Women for Peace) and the kind of contributions they made, bear testimony to the importance and relevance not only of this kind of debate in South Africa today, but also of texts such as Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*.

Fugard tells us in the notes preceding his play that in having two women together he was responding to a challenge thrown at him four years previously by an actress who had done both *Boesman and Lena* (two male/one female character) and *A Lesson from Aloes* (two male/one female character), the dominating presence, for the first time in a Fugard play of two female characters, should already alert the reader/audience to the possibility of women's ideologies being highlighted.

Elsa, a strong young woman in her late twenties who teaches at a coloured school in Cape Town, has undertaken the twelve hour drive to the small, isolated Karoo town of New Bethesda to visit her friend Miss Helen, a frail bird-like little woman in her late sixties. Elsa had undertaken the journey because she had been very disturbed by a letter from Miss Helen in which she talks about "the darkest night of (her) soul" and that she is losing everything (Elsa), the house, (her) work, (her) Mecca" (38–39). Miss Helen is an eccentric folk artist who makes strange statues and sculptures from mostly ready-to-hand material such as crushed beer bottles, cement, motor-car lamps, etc. She makes mostly owls, but also strange mannikins and animals, all facing east to Mecca.

## 6. Elsa's dominating discourse (Act 1)

In the first act the designatory pattern is briefly as follows: at the beginning both Miss Helen as hostess and Elsa as visitor contribute equally to the dialogue topic which is related mainly to this situation. Elsa becomes irritated by Miss Helen's offer to arrange for Katrina, the coloured maid to do Elsa's washing. This sets the pattern for Elsa's aggressive designation of topics aimed mainly at what she terms making people "think for themselves" (28). There are breaks in this pattern when the hostess/visitor situation determines the dialogue topic and controls the structuring of the dialogue unit as when first Elsa asks for local gossip from Miss Helen and then Miss Helen asks Elsa about news from Cape Town. The overriding pattern, however, is that whenever Elsa has the opportunity she introduces dialogue topics related directly or indirectly to feminist issues, which by the end of Act II culminate in a coherent feminist discourse. The following examples (in a way one extended example) from Act I should give some indication of the emerging pattern.

*Example 1 (19–22):* A short time has elapsed since Elsa's arrival. Miss Helen has just commented on how cross Elsa had been when she arrived.

ELSA: But you're right. I hadn't really arrived until now.

HELEN: Where were you, Elsie?

ELSA: (*She thinks about the question before answering*) Way back at the turn-off to the village from the National Road . . . or maybe a few miles further along it now . . . walking to Cradock.

HELEN: I don't understand.

ELSA: (*Shrugging with apparent indifference*) An African woman.

HELEN: Cradock! That's a long walk.

ELSA: I know.

HELEN: It's about another eighty miles from the turn-off. (*She waits for Elsa to say more*)

ELSA: I nearly didn't stop for her. She didn't signal that she wanted a lift or anything like that. Didn't even look up when I passed . . . I was watching her in the rear-view mirror. Maybe that's what told me there was a long walk ahead of her . . . the way she had her head down and just kept on walking. And then the baby on her back. It was hot out there, Miss Helen, hot and dry, and a lot of empty space . . . There wasn't a farmhouse in sight. She looked very small and unimportant in the middle of all that. Anyway, I stopped and reversed and offered her a lift. Not very graciously. I'd already been driving for ten hours and all I wanted was to get here as fast as I could. She got in and after a few miles she started talking. Her English wasn't very good, but when I finally got around to understanding what she was trying to tell me it added up to a good old South African story. Her husband, a farm labourer, had died recently, and no sooner had they buried him when the *Baas* told her to pack up and leave the farm. So there she was . . . on her way to the Cradock district, where she hoped to find a few distant relatives and a place to live.

(*Trying to remember the woman as clearly as possible*)

About my age. The baby couldn't have been more than a few months old. All she had with her was one of those plastic shopping bags they put your groceries in at supermarkets. I saw a pair of old slippers. She was barefoot.

In this example Elsa has introduced the topic of the "good old South African story", the black as victim of racism in South Africa, with the related topic of the black woman as most exploited victim. The black woman is expendable in this context – without her husband, whose labour is no longer available to the farmer, the black woman is of no economic use and is therefore not even considered human.

*Example 2 (21–22):* Elsa "too easily" (21) moves on from talking about the black woman to whom she had given a lift and comments on the desolation of the Karoo. However, she merely uses this comment as a stepping-stone to attack the Afrikaners, their ideas, their religion and finally Miss Helen for still being too much of an Afrikaner.

ELSA: It's so obvious where you Afrikaners get your ideas of God from. Beats me how you've put up with it so long, Miss Helen. Nearly seventy years? My God, you deserve a medal. I would have packed up and left it (the Karoo) at the first opportunity . . . and let's face it, you've had plenty of those.

HELEN: I was born here, Elsa.

ELSA: I sympathize, Miss Helen. Believe me, I truly sympathize.

HELEN: It's not really as bad as you make it sound. The few times I've been away, I've always ended up missing it and longing to be back.

ELSA: Because you wanted to get back to your work.

HELEN: (*Shaking her head*) No. Even before all that started. It grows on you Elsa.

ELSA: Which is just about the only growing it seems to allow. For the rest, it's as merciless as the religion they preach around here. Looking out of the car window this afternoon I



think I finally understood a few things about you Afrikaners . . . and it left me feeling just a little uneasy.

HELEN: You include me in all you're saying.

ELSA: Yes. You might not go to church any more, but you're still an Afrikaner, Miss Helen. You were in there with them, singing hymns every Sunday, for a long, long time. Bit of a renegade now, I admit, but you're still one at heart.

In this example Elsa has skilfully placed Miss Helen in the context of the patriarchal, establishment discourse of the Afrikaner tradition, thus setting her up as the potential victim of that discourse. At the same time Elsa's description of Miss Helen as a "bit of a renegade" has a prospective function in clearing a space for Miss Helen's own competing discourse.

*Example 3 (22–23):* After Elsa's attack on the Afrikaners and on Miss Helen herself, Miss Helen observes that Elsa is still very cross and that there is a new sound in her voice. It sounded as if Elsa had not cared for the black woman on the road, which Miss Helen knew was not true. Elsa protests that she did care, but that the lift was just a sop to her conscience and that she had not offered a real contribution to the black woman's life. She then quickly changes the subject and asks for news of the village. When Miss Helen talks about Marius, Elsa again changes the subject, however, and asks about Katrina.

ELSA: So let's change the subject. Tell me about Katrina. What has she been up to?

HELEN: She's fine. And so is the baby. As prettily dressed these days as any white baby, thanks to the clothes you sent her. She's been very good to me, Elsa. Never passes my front door without dropping in for a little chat. Is always asking about you. I don't know what I would do without her. But I'm afraid Koos has started drinking again. And making all sorts of terrible threats about her and the baby. He still doesn't believe it's his child.

ELSA: Is he beating her?

HELEN: No. The warning you gave him last time seems to have put a stop to that.

ELSA: God it makes me sick. Why doesn't she leave him?

HELEN: And then do what?

ELSA: Find somebody else! Somebody who will value her as a human being and take care of her and the child.

HELEN: She can't do that, Elsie. They're married.

ELSA: Oh, for God's sake, Helen. There's the Afrikaner in you speaking. There is nothing sacred about a marriage that abuses the woman! I'll have to talk to her tomorrow. Let's make sure we get a message to her to come around.

HELEN: Don't make things more difficult for her, Elsa.

ELSA: How much more difficult can 'things' be than being married to a drunken bully? She *has* got a few rights, Miss Helen, and I just want to make sure she knows what they are. How old is she now?

HELEN: Seventeen, I think.

ELSA: At that age I was still at school dreaming about my future, and here she is with a baby and bruises. Quick, tell me something else.

Once again Elsa has focused on a situation in which a woman, this time coloured, is the victim of existing power relations between men and women. As was the case when Elsa spoke about the black woman on the road, we find in this example that Elsa gets touchy when a possible connection between the woman (and mother) and herself is suggested.

## 7. Miss Helen's competing discourse (Act I)

This analysis of the designatory pattern in Act I thus reveals Elsa as the dominant speech partner, whose designations, although most of them are taken from the outer situation (both the immediate and less immediate), are directed at the revealing of her inner situation. The question therefore now arises about how this affects Miss Helen's responses and whether her voice is heard sufficiently and sufficiently independently for a separate, competing discourse to arise to balance that of Elsa. From the examples referred to above it is obvious that, although Miss Helen is not the dominant speech partner, she is not a passive one. She actively responds from within her own character context, with her rejoinders contributing to the further build-up of that context. She defends her love of the Karoo and does not deny her Afrikaner affinities; in fact in the dialogue unit where she and Elsa are talking about Katrina, hers is the voice which presents the Afrikaner values. She is indeed offering a competing discourse, even when Elsa's is being presented in such a forceful manner.

Furthermore, Helen's competing discourse is in two instances built up in a speech situation in which Elsa starts off as the more active partner, but gives up this position to Miss Helen. In these two dialogue units two sides of Miss Helen, the artist, are revealed: Miss Helen, the vindicated artist at the height of her creativity, surrounded by lit candles and Miss Helen unable to light candles, about to lose her work, her home, her friend.

*Example 1 (33–35):* Elsa is reminiscing about the past, about the time she had met Miss Helen and encourages her to talk about that time.

ELSA: That is precisely what I mean. Who would ever believe it? That you found yourself being asked to point out the direction to Mecca – not London, or New York, or Paris, but Mecca – in the middle of the Karoo by a little lady no bigger than a bird, surrounded by camels and owls . . . and mermaids! . . . made of cement? Who in their right mind is going to believe that? And then this (*the room*), your little miracle of light and colour. (*Miss Helen is smiling with suppressed pride and pleasure*) You were proud of yourself, weren't you? Come on, admit it.

HELEN: (*Trying hard to contain her emotion*) Yes, I admit I was a little proud.

ELSA: Miss Helen, just a little?

HELEN: (*She can't hold back any longer*) All right, then, no! Not just a little. Oh, most definitely not. I was prouder of myself that day than I had ever been in my life. Nobody

before you or since, has done that to me. I was tingling all over with excitement as we walked around the yard looking at the statues. All those years of working on my Mecca had at last been vindicated. . . .

She goes on telling Elsa about how she had felt “revealing” her true self to somebody else for the first time ever, and then talks about her identity as follows:

Nothing, not even my name or my face, is me as much as those Wise Men and their camels travelling to the East, or the light and glitter in this room. The mermaids, the wise old owls, the gorgeous peacocks . . . all of them are me. And I had delighted you!

Miss Helen tells Elsa how much courage and faith in her work she had given her, that she had “revived (her) life”. She ends this revealing rejoinder by talking about the burst of creativity which had resulted from that meeting with Elsa.

HELEN: I've never been so impatient with darkness all my life. I sat up in bed all night waiting for the dawn to come so that I could start working again, and then just go on working and working.

*Example 2 (45–46):* Elsa has been trying to goad Helen into taking care of her own life, not to let Marius Byleveld and the establishment persuade her to give up her life in New Bethesda and with it her art. Elsa uses the despairing letter Helen had sent her to motivate Helen.

ELSA: Do you want me to read it again?

HELEN: (*Ignoring the interruption*) You're treating that letter like a shopping list. That isn't what I was writing about.

ELSA: Then what was it?

HELEN: Darkness, Elsa! Darkness!

(*She speaks with an emotional intensity and authority which forces Elsa to listen in silence*) The Darkness that nearly smothered my life in here one night fifteen years ago. The same Darkness that used to come pouring down the chimney and into the room at night when I was a little girl and frighten me. If you still don't know what I'm talking about, blow out the candles.

But those were easy Darknesses to deal with. The one I'm talking about now is much worse. It's inside me, Elsa . . . it's got inside me at last and I can't light candles there.

She ends this rejoinder by confiding in Elsa about her fear.

I'm frightened, Elsie, more frightened than that little girl ever was. There's no 'getting big' left to wait for, no prayers to say until that happens . . . and the candles don't help any more. That is what I was trying to tell you. I'm frightened. And Marius can see it. He's no fool, Elsa. He knows that his moment has finally come.

To summarize then, in Act I two competing discourses are emphasized: Elsa's discourse is that of a crusader whose calling is to make the voiceless think for themselves and to help create the space in which they can think. Helen's is

that of the artist who, after having experienced the light of final vindication, experiences the dark night of the soul.

## 8. Competing discourses (Act II)

A brief description of the designatory patterns, the dialogue unit structuring and the discourse emphasis of Act II follows to indicate how the pattern of competing discourses, as set up and prepared for in Act I is developed, and finally how a coherent feminist discourse emerges.

In Act II the designatory pattern reveals that both Marius and Elsa bully Helen, in the dialogue situation, from their respective ideological bases. Marius Byleveld is the local Dutch Reformed Minister, who on behalf of the village is trying to look after Miss Helen as they consider that she is no longer able to care for herself. His is a pastoral voice backed by a patriarchal, establishment discourse; in an orderly, rational, kind manner he tries to force his discourse onto Miss Helen.

HELEN: I don't harm or bother anyone, Marius!

MARIUS: And does anyone harm or bother you?

HELEN: Yes! Everybody is trying to force me to leave my home.

MARIUS: Nobody is *forcing* you, Helen. Has something happened to upset you? You were so reasonable about everything the last time we talked. You seemed to understand that the only motive on your side is to try and do what is best for you. And even then it's only in the way of advice. We can't *tell* you what to do. But if you want us to stop caring about what happens to you, we can try . . . though I don't know how our Christian consciences would allow us to do that. (60)

Elsa's bullying is an extension of her bullying of Helen in Act I – she wants to help Helen to think and stand up for herself, in this case against Marius and the establishment. In the following example referred to it is interesting to note, however, that there has been a development from Act I. This time Miss Helen initiates the speech action and appeals to Elsa to bully her, as it were. Miss Helen's appeal to Elsa follows soon after the previous example in which Marius is bullying her in a reasonable, kind, patriarchal manner.

HELEN: Why don't you stop me, Elsa! I'm going to sign it!

ELSA: (*Abandoning all pretence of being absorbed in her work*) Then go ahead and do it! Sign that fucking form. If that's what you want to do with your life, just get it over and done with, for God's sake.

MARIUS: Miss Barlow!

ELSA: (*Ignoring him*) What are you waiting for, Helen? You're wasting our time. It's late and we want to go to bed.

HELEN: But you said I mustn't sign it.

ELSA: (*Brutally*) I've changed my mind. Do it. Hurry up and dispose of your life so that we can get on with ours.

HELEN: Stop it, Elsa. Help me. Please help me.

ELSA: Sorry, Helen. I've had more woman-battering today than I can cope with. You can at least say no. The woman on the road couldn't. But if you haven't got the guts to do that, then too bad. I'm not going to do it for you. (62)

The dialogue units from Act I, in which Elsa was the dominant partner and in which she presented women as the victims of existing power relations between men and women in society, are related to this dialogue unit by Elsa's reference to "woman-battering", and the way is thus prepared for a confrontation of Marius's patriarchal, establishment discourse and Elsa's feminist discourse. Marius interrupts the above dialogue between Elsa and Miss Helen and tries to calm Elsa down. He wants her to be considerate of Miss Helen's state and not to shout at her "as if she were a child" (62).

This presents Elsa with the opportunity to attack him because of his paternalistic attitude to Miss Helen.

ELSA: Me, treating her like a child? Oh my God! You can stand there and accuse me of that after what I've just seen and heard from you?

MARIUS: I don't know what you're talking about.

ELSA: Then I'll tell you. You were doing everything in your power to bully and blackmail her into signing that. You were taking the grossest advantage of what you call her confusion and helplessness. I've been trying to tell her she's neither confused nor helpless.

Elsa's discourse finally triumphs over that of Marius, not in a direct confrontation, which would have been impossible as both Elsa and Marius are too convinced of the rightness of their own ideologies, but indirectly through Helen's discourse. Elsa provides Miss Helen with terms from her own discourse which eventually enable Miss Helen to "(affirm her) right, as a woman" (75) and to have this affirmation accepted by Marius. Elsa tells Marius:

She challenges me, Dominee. She challenges me into an awareness of myself and my life, of my responsibilities to both that I have never had until I met her. There's a hell of a lot of talk about freedom, and all sorts of it, in the world where I come from. But it's mostly talk. Dominee, easy talk and nothing else. Not with Helen. She's lived it. One dusty afternoon five years ago, when I came walking down that road hoping for nothing more than to get away from the flies that were driving me mad, I met the first truly free spirit I have ever known. (67)

A little while later Elsa tells Helen:

They're not only frightened of you, Helen; they're also jealous. It's not just the statues that have frightened them. They were throwing stones at something much bigger than that – you. Your life, your beautiful light-filled, glittering life. And they can't leave it alone, Helen, because they are so, so jealous of it.

With these terms at her disposal Miss Helen is able to explain to Marius how she had journeyed to Mecca (70–73) in her mind the night after her husband's funeral fifteen years before and how all that still kept her sane were her efforts, through her art, to get "as near as (she) could to the real Mecca" (73). She therefore "can't reduce her world to a few ornaments in a small

room in an old-age home" (73). Marius accepts that he is too old to make Miss Helen's journey and that she will never come back, so he takes his leave, at least now understanding her for the first time.

## 9. The emergence of a coherent feminist discourse (Act II)

Elsa's provision of terms from her own discourse not only enables Miss Helen to stand up against Marius and the establishment for her right to stay on in her home in New Bethesda and so to continue practising her art, but also has the effect of merging the separate discourses of Miss Helen the artist and Elsa the feminist crusader.

ELSA: And you did more than just say no to him. You affirmed your right as a woman  
(75)

Elsa and Helen's discourses are finally subsumed under a coherent feminist discourse when, near the end of the play, Elsa designates the topic of her abortion. Miss Helen's active participation in those dialogue units in Act I in which Elsa, as dominant partner had focused on situations in which women were the victims of power-relations between men and women in society, had prepared the way for this integration: not only had her rejoinders and the way they contributed to the structuring of the dialogue units set up her own discourse in opposition to Elsa's, but had also cleared a space for their final merger. The "new sound" Miss Helen had heard in Elsa's voice (22) is there again when Marius leaves and Elsa asks about his and Helen's relationship.

HELEN: Are you all right, Elsa?

ELSA: No.

HELEN: What's wrong?

ELSA: It's my turn to be jealous.

HELEN: Of what?

ELSA: (*With a helpless gesture*) Everything. You and him . . . and, stupid as it may sound, I feel fucking lonely as well.

HELEN: You are jealous? Of us . . . Marius and me? With your whole life still ahead of you?

ELSA: Even that woman on the road has at least got a baby in her arms at this moment.  
(75–76)

The new note in Elsa's voice becomes even more strident when she comments about the black woman that "there's no Mecca waiting for her at the end of the road, Helen" (76) and when Miss Helen tells her to "think about the baby" (76), the real reason for the new note in Elsa's voice becomes apparent.

ELSA: What the hell do you think I've been doing? Do you think I don't care? That baby could have been mine, Helen! (*Pause. Then a decision:*)  
I may as well vomit it all out tonight. Two weeks after David left me I discovered I was pregnant. I had an abortion.  
(76)

After the upsetting episode with the black woman (whose English name turned out to be Patience) Elsa had stopped her car and “screamed louder and longer than (she) had ever done in (her) life” (77). It is in her relating of the “screaming” episode and in what follows that the coherent feminist discourse of this play is finally consolidated; that the title of the play, *The Road to Mecca*, presents itself for a reappraisal.

ELSA: I hated her, I hated the baby, I hated you for dragging me all the way up here . . . and most of all I hated myself. That baby is mine, Helen. Patience is my sister, you are our mother . . . and I still feel fucking lonely.

HELEN: Then don't be so cruel to us. There were times tonight when I hardly recognized you. Why were you doing it?

ELSA: I wanted to punish us.

HELEN: For what? What have we done to deserve that?

ELSA: I've already told you. For being old, for being black, for being born . . . for being twenty-eight years old and trusting enough to jump. For our stupid helplessness.

HELEN: You don't punish people for that, Elsa. I only felt helpless tonight when I thought I had lost you.

ELSA: So what do you want me to do, Helen?

HELEN: Stop screaming.

ELSA: And cry instead?

HELEN: What is wrong with that? Is it something to be ashamed of? I wish I still could . . . not for myself . . . for you, Patience, her little baby. (77)

The victims of existing power relations referred to above are described in terms of a family (“my sister . . . our mother”) and although only tentatively at this stage “crying” for them and not “screaming” about their situation, suggests the possibility of support from among the family. One member of this “family”, Elsa, has provided another, Miss Helen, with the liberating discourse necessary for her not to allow her “road to Mecca” to be taken away from her, even if it means accepting that her “Mecca is finished” (78) and the time has come to “blow (the candles) out” (78). Miss Helen, in turn, has helped Elsa from “screaming” to “crying”. What is tentatively suggested by “crying” for one's fellow victims is more positively reiterated at the end of the play when Miss Helen rates *trust* higher than *love* in her relationship with Elsa (79). Because trust between them has finally been established, each is able to accept the help given by the other.

This, then, is not only the story of Miss Helen's road to Mecca; no matter how tentatively, because of the support of “family”, the possibility is presented of a road to Mecca for each of the victims of existing power relations. In the context of the play what precedes the journey on that road is qualified in terms of these relations: “They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become” (Weedon, 1987:1).

## 10. Conclusion

An investigation of the power-play of competing discourses within this text leads one to a consideration of the relationship between what is found in the text and the so-called contextual (socio-political) reality outside the text. The constructed world of the play alerts the reader/audience to the fact that what is ordinarily, outside of the play, taken to be an independent reality, is no less of a construct than the world of the play. To take the play seriously, then, in the spirit of openness with which this study approached *The Road to Mecca* (cf. p.6) entails taking up the challenge of reconstructing the latter construct (of existing power relations) in such a way that the feminist voice does not function hegemonically, but remains deconstructively aware of its ongoing political task, namely to help create the space in which all people can give shape to their own road to Mecca.

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