

Octogenarian Diary VI



Muthal Naidoo

LIFE

*one-off
opportunity
to be
gift unique
spark
miraculous
to nurture
for today
here, now
not
a fictitious
tomorrow
empty promise
of immortality*

Octogenarian

Diary VI

October – December 2019

Muthal Naidoo

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RETIREMENT

out of the essence
of standardized existence
systematic conditioning
ersatz living –
into a new beginning
individual striving
to the very last breath
no waiting for death
no 'going gentle'
into that goodnight:
genuine opportunity
at last
to be

Unlike those who find wisdom mainly in religious beliefs, I am free to roam the universe of intelligent thought. Not being closeted in one set of beliefs, I look at all and see how different minds interpret the nature of existence. And I am enriched by the variety of insights that I gather from not being closed to or enclosed in any system.

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1 October 2019

*Dit is die maand Oktober
Die mooiste, mooiste maand*
[C. Louis Leipoldt]

[It is the month October
The loveliest, loveliest month]

October in South Africa is spring and spring represents rebirth. The world comes out of winter into spring, out of the end into a new beginning, annually. But human beings go through only one set of seasons in our personal lives and our winter does not lead to physical renewal.

It leads to what is more valuable – intellectual consolidation.

Though ‘octo’ indicates eight, October is the tenth month of the year. October was the eighth month of the ten month ancient Roman calendar and when January and February were added to it, October became the tenth month but retained its name. The same anomaly applies to September, November and December as well.

This little irregularity made me wonder, as October is my birth month, whether, in some magical way, it has led to my understanding of existence as anomalous.

4 October

Yesterday, Tom came to visit, once more bearing gifts, more DVDs and another very beautiful jigsaw puzzle. The puzzle is an early birthday present. My birthday is about three weeks away. As I am about to turn 84, which means I shall be at the beginning of my 85th year, we got

to discussing old age. And this morning I sent him the following quotes from an episode of the TV series *Numbers* that I watched last night:

“While being young is an accident of time,
youth is a permanent state of mind.”

(Frank Lloyd Wright)

“To make a difference you have to move
beyond your ego and open yourself to
the vast intelligence that surrounds us.”

(Grayson)



David Krumholtz and Rob Morrow
The brothers, Charlie and Don Eppes, in *Numbers*

5 October 2019

I watched two more episodes of *Numbers* in which the main character is presented as a man reluctant to commit to an intimate relationship, and his father, as one who exemplifies the two quotes on the previous page. The father actually asks his second son, a mathematics genius, to teach him.

Numbers is interesting as it presents unusual situations; but what I do find somewhat ridiculous is seeing the FBI men and women moving about arms outstretched, guns in hands, ready to shoot.

Jigsaw Puzzles

Working on one of the jigsaw puzzles that Tom brought me, I could see how jigsaw puzzles actually attune you to subtle variations in shape and colour. So you become a detective looking for clues to fit pieces together.

And watching my DVDs of *Numbers*, I see that solving crimes is like putting jigsaw puzzles together. Detectives investigating a crime, the frame of the puzzle, set about looking for the pieces that fit together to fill it. Jigsaw puzzles, like the murder mysteries in TV shows, depend on the logic that informs our understanding of the human situation. Logic simply implies the formulae that we have imposed on the mystery of being and existence. We follow the logic of fitting things into the frameworks that we have created and that makes it possible to work out problems.

In our own individual ways, we are all detectives.

6 October

Today being Sunday, I was off to the launderette, at what I thought was just before 8 a.m., but when I got there the launderette was already open and its owner and her assistants were busy at work. Later, I discovered that my cellphone clock was off by ten minutes.

I put my laundry into a washing machine and went to sit in my car in the parking lot where I pulled out my book, *Living in the End Times* by Slavoj Žižek. I read and reread this book as it is endlessly informative about matters that interest me.

8 October

I spent the whole of yesterday and a couple of hours this morning editing, *Looking Back Over 80 Years*, the autobiography of the late Gowrie Naidoo (née Pather) that was sent to me by her daughter, Dr Seshini Paruk.

Gowrie and I were in school together, and after we matriculated, trained as teachers at Springfield College of Education. Then we lost touch for over fifty years and met up again when we were both in our late seventies. Reading Gowrie's story, I was filled with admiration for her and all her achievements.

She was such a positive person. She believed in herself, made the most of her life and helped to build the lives of those around her.

9 October

This morning, I drove down to Minuteman Press in Midrand to pick up my twenty copies of *Octogenarian Diary V*.

It seems that in South Africa, we are no longer

entitled to Spring – suddenly it is Summer. The drive to Minuteman Press was long and hot and I missed the turn off to Gallagher Estate, drove a long way past and only when I got to Sandton realised that I had to turn back. I eventually got to the printers, picked up my books and returned home.

After my long hot ride, I decided to relax with a DVD. I watched an episode from the Fifth Season of *Numbers* and was pleased to find the hero, Don, wanting more from life than sex and romance. He goes to the synagogue to talk to a rabbi. Here follows his conversation with Larry on his return home.

Larry: At a very precise level, cosmological quantum physics suggests that if this universe is as real as we believe that it is, it must have been cast into reality by an external observer.

Don: A God?

Larry: Yet paradoxically, how can there be anything external in an all-inclusive universe? So you see – my own quest for God has always been inextricably intertwined with my work.

Don: Does that help you sleep?

Larry: No, it keeps me awake.

Don: All right, so what's the point?

Larry: The point is to keep looking for the point?

Don: That's what the Rabbi said.

I asked myself, whether there is such a point, a point beyond what you make of life for yourself? As human beings, we have created our existence on earth and, in

general, are defined by the ways in which we express ourselves within the circumstances that we have created. we live by rules and regulations that we devise to give meaning to our lives, we similarly expect to find given, defined meanings of the universe and that necessitates the search for a creator. The idea that life on earth is simply an unexpected and strange phenomenon; that we are simply a kind of fungus, is unacceptable to us.

Why? Why can we not accept that our existence is a strange, unique phenomenon beyond our understanding and as such, has given us the freedom to define ourselves and the opportunity to make our own personal meanings of living in this open-ended universe; that it is not necessary to seek a preordained meaning?

Are we not the point as we create our individual destinies within the confines of human contexts in an ever evolving existence and an ever evolving universe? Is human existence paradoxical as it is definition within the undefined? If that is so, it means we have each to take responsibility for ourselves and the way in which we develop. Great freedom entails great responsibility.

Is that a frightening thought? Is that why we seek an all-powerful Father, “God, the all terrible, King who ordainest”, who is ultimately responsible?

In the conversation between Larry and Don quoted above, Larry makes the connection between his work and God; “... my own quest for God has always been inextricably intertwined with my work.” As I see it, Larry has no need to “keep looking for the point.” He has found it; he and his work are the point.

Life on Earth is a miracle; an open-ended, undefined opportunity that provides us with the freedom to create

our destinies. Each one of us is thus a creator.

Perfection

The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus defines the word “perfect” as follows: 1.complete; not deficient; 2a. faultless; b. blameless in morals or behaviour; 3a.very satisfactory; b. most appropriate, suitable; 4.Exact; precise; 5. Entire; unqualified.

For me, therefore, “perfect” and “perfection”, translate as death. Like a jigsaw puzzle, putting it together is exciting; once you have completed it, it is no longer of interest.

A living human being is one going through processes, continuously learning, changing and adapting to new ways. As we live in evolving circumstances, there is no such thing as perfection. Perfection means stasis and we achieve stasis only in death.

God represents perfection and according to most religions, you go to God when you die. There is also the opposite, the Devil and Hell. Like Heaven, Hell is also a place of perfection – a place of perfect evil.

Heaven and Hell are both places for the dead.

Human beings are alive, living, experimenting, changing and learning all the time from new insights and from the mistakes that we make. We are not in stasis and therefore cannot be perfect – we are alive not dead.

Perfection is a form of death.

So if you are a person making mistakes, it means you are alive, kicking and evolving.

10 October

Another quote from *Numbers* explains entropy:

Charlie: “Entropy: a measure of randomness, a parameter of disorder; energy broken down, an irretrievable heat. What might appear to be chaos, even decay, is really a system’s way of smoothing out differences; its search for equilibrium.

Where language might fail us, the poetries of truth and physics bring clarity, observing spontaneous changes in isolated systems.

Entropy is our yardstick, measuring progress, defining the boundaries of a story, a beginning and an end. Entropy has the unique ability to choose a particular direction of time – the arrow of time.

Uncorrelated parts interact and find their connections in an evolving system. So from one perspective, entropy is a clock charting the irreversible.”

According to the web dictionary:

“In communication: (entropy is) a measure of the random errors, noise occurring in the transmission of signals, and from this a measure of the efficiency of transmission systems.”

According to the Oxford Dictionary:

“Entropy in Physics is:

1. A measure of the unavailability of a system's thermal energy
2. A measure of the disorganization or degradation of the universe
3. A measure of the rate of transfer of information in a message, etc."

What I understand from all of this is that entropy is an analysis of the properties of a system that allows one to evaluate and make the changes necessary for development and progress.

11 October

This morning I went to visit a friend to give her my latest book, *Octogenarian Diary V*. If there is such an instrument as an entropic meter, it would have measured complete incompatibility in the visit. I am not even sure that my friend will know how my book got there when she finds it. This friend is the kind of person who will explain to a cat how to meow and how to catch a mouse.

At the beginning of the year, I undertook to lay out her autobiography for publication. I have laid out what I was given and am waiting for the final chapters that she said she still had to write. I have been waiting for these chapters since April and have not been able to complete the work.

When I got to her house, I was subjected to more than three hours of non-stop verbal communication about odd scraps of information for her autobiography in speeches, hand written documents and lots of newspaper articles about the struggle for freedom and the people driving it – accompanied by instructions on how to write it all up.

I will have to sort out all this desultory material while I wait for the chapters that still have to be written.

I eventually made my escape, got home and collapsed on my sofa. There are people in the world, so wrapped up in themselves that the only form of communication they engage in is a one-way torrent of information about themselves.

12 October: The Past in the Present

When you are a child you look for approval from adults and the extent to which you receive or do not receive it, is a factor in the way you develop.

If you are plump and unattractive, as I have always been, you have to put up with general contempt and that can either make or break you. In my case, it turned me into an independent, self-reliant person. That probably accounts for my having become a self-published writer in my old age – self-published as I am not dependent on external approval.

My visit yesterday to a heroine of the struggle against apartheid, made me aware of how external acclaim can lock you into that period of your life when your activities achieved wide recognition – so you see yourself only in terms of the past. Consequently, you stop growing and your life becomes a reliving of the past. And as the world is continuously evolving, you are moving backwards, further and further back in time.

Moving backwards is, in general, what happens to old people who live mainly in memories of times gone by. Retirement becomes regression.

22 October: The TV Series *Numbers*

In *Numbers*, Alan Eppes, father of Charlie, the genius, realizes he is regressing and asks his son to teach him. And I realised that in educating children, parents prepare them for a future that will eventually lead to a reversal of the process when it becomes necessary for children to educate parents stuck in the past.



Jud Hirsch
plays Alan
Eppes,
father of
the Eppes
brothers,
in *Numbers*

As a single person, I have to be my own teacher so I need to keep up with technological advancements. Being content with what I already know means committing intellectual suicide.

I have also learned this from working on people's autobiographies. One cannot *live* in the past; one only exists there. And understanding *that* – is my 84th birthday gift to myself.

My Printer

Yesterday, I was forced to recognize my own regression as a human being. When my printer stopped printing, I realized that the cartridges had run out of ink. So I set off to buy new ones. I spent several hours in vain pursuit of new cartridges. Though my printer is old, it works perfectly but cartridges for it are no longer available.

Newer models have replaced my printer which has been retired and declared defunct. So what do I do with a perfectly functioning printer for which cartridges are no longer available? The idea of relegating her to the scrap heap because she is old and has been left behind in an evolving world is abhorrent to me. But she made me see that standing still in a progressive world is equivalent to moving backwards and my own disregard of the latest technological advances means that I am regressing.

So today, I will go out and get a new printer.

I am, however, also aware that innovation has become a capitalistic ploy to increase need, and consequently, profits.

Belief and Non-Belief

As an atheist, I am subject to strong disapproval from most believers. I, however, have no prejudice against them; I see them simply as people with a different view of existence. One's understanding of existence is very personal. I have never been able to accept religious explanations, but I do not disparage those who do. We have each to find for ourselves, a personal understanding in order to make meaning of our individual paths through life.

When I received birthday wishes from someone who

is a believer and a good friend but who may not associate with me as this person's spouse regards non-believers as evil, it made me ponder about religion. And I saw that religion, like political affiliation, leads to division and enmity and becomes an instrument of apartheid, not confined to South Africa, but manifest all over the world.

The record of religious conflict goes back to the beginning of time. How can religious beliefs that lead to "holy" wars, division and destruction of life and property, be regarded as sacred and treated with respect?

In the modern world, people of different faiths have learned to tolerate one another, but they remain in separate enclaves. People who attempt to bridge the religious gap, through marriage, for example, must either convert or give up the relationship.

Religious apartheid was manifest long before the term apartheid was coined and it led to discrimination all over the world, and to its concomitant – missionary efforts of conversion. Religion, whatever form it takes – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, African Religion, Shintoism, Hinduism, etc. – despite claims of love and brotherhood, by its exclusivity teaches intolerance.

The desire of missionaries to unite all under one belief system is totalitarian, reveals an inability to appreciate the wonderful variety of the human condition and, despite claims to the contrary, is denial of the "brotherhood of man." As brotherhood requires conformity, it becomes a stultifying concept that leads to discrimination.

26 October

I have recently discovered that I am losing my short-term

memory. Yesterday was positive proof of it when I decided to visit Reggie, my brother, and his wife, Suzie, who live in a Johannesburg suburb. I live in Centurion, a suburb of Pretoria and have not visited them for a few years.



Reggie and Suzie

In the old days, one had the freedom of the M1 highway on which to travel, so I did not have to learn to negotiate the roads and streets of intervening developed and undeveloped areas. But once the M1 became a toll highway, I had to learn how to get to my brother's home via byways.

In the last few years, however, I have become somewhat of a hermit, and that has affected my memory of routes to places outside Centurion. So now I have to study my maps very carefully to work out my way.

When I set out on my visit yesterday, I was confident of getting to my destination. Maps indicate routes quite clearly with names of roads and streets properly marked but when you are on the road you do not find signs as clearly marked, especially on the smaller roads. So I got lost, was forced to give up and returned home.

It was only when I sent an SMS to apologise for not showing up, that I realized I had spent three hours trying to find my way and discovered that my failure to arrive had raised alarms and caused great concern. I had, inadvertently, been quite inconsiderate.

Last night, my nephew, Ash, arrived after I had gone to bed. I am one of those ‘early to bed early to rise people’. Ash had come to see whether the old woman was a wreck – but losing one’s way is not life threatening, just a big nuisance.

Ash put me on his phone to his parents and I was scolded, told to stay put and to depend on Ash, who has been appointed my minder.

I gave Ash the books I had set out to deliver when I got lost.

I am always giving away books that I write but the only people who actually read them are Tom, Lionel and friends in the States.

27 October

Yesterday I watched Baz Luhrmann’s exciting modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* and was amazed at how perfectly it fit into today. Even Shakespeare’s poetry seemed like everyday speech. How could this play have been written in the late sixteenth century?

Do we not change?

30 October: Photos in Books

I have spent several days laying out the autobiography of my friend, the late Gowrie Naidoo. Now I want to get photos to include in the book. I should have asked for them earlier.

I change colour photos to black and white and place them relevant to text. If one retains them as colour photos, they have to be printed separately and are placed all together to form little picture galleries inside books. As such they lack immediacy. Being placed in the text, black and white photos make recognition immediate.

31 October: Weather

Tired of the monotony of consistency, and seeking to become a creative artist, the weatherman is devising new ways of presenting the seasons. After a few scorching days of summer at the beginning of spring, we are now into early winter with cool, almost cold temperatures and the promise of rain. I sincerely hope it will rain. It seems to me, it has not rained for several years and rainy weather has become a dream of the past.

This morning, the sky is overcast and it is cool. I hope it will rain so I can see it as a reality.

1 November

Yesterday, I sent off some of my diaries to my niece, Ragini, in Missouri, and to friends I had made at Appalachian State U.

Interest in writing seems to run in the family. My brother, Seeni, was a writer, so was my sister, Seetha Ray, so is

her daughter, Sunita, and so is Sharmini, my brother Reggie's daughter.



**Ragini Salomon and Sunita Watson,
daughters of Seetha Ray**

At Post Net, the courier service that I now use instead of the unreliable Post Office, Mary, the person who sent off my books, became interested in the fact that I write. So I have given her two books of children's stories and a couple of my diaries. I am not sure that she will find what I write interesting as I do not write stories for adults and very few people are interested in my ruminations.

2 November

I have decided to reread Milan Kundera's, *Immortality*. I read it over a decade ago, and do not remember it as a novel, only as a treatise of his understanding of existence.

So it will be a new adventure.

3 November

Today I found the following article in the *Pretoria News* of 23 October. I missed it on the day I bought the paper.

SA Post in City Clear of Irregularities

The SA Post Office in Pretoria came out clear of any irregularities and was seen to be in tip-top shape by the parliamentary portfolio committee on public enterprises and communication following an oversight visit yesterday.

Well, well, well! Obviously, I do not live in the same Pretoria that the portfolio committee visited. The Post Office, being a government enterprise, reflects its ethos.

Numbers

I watched the final episode of *Numbers* last night. The series ended like a fairy tale with the wedding of one brother and the engagement of the other.

A very conventional ending to a fairly unconventional show. Disappointing.

6 November: MJ Naidoo

I woke up this morning thinking of the late M.J. Naidoo, my father's youngest brother. He was popularly known as

MJ, but in the family, we called him Jay. He was our uncle, but being the last of thirteen children, he was about the same age as my brother, Reggie, and that is how we took him, as a brother. Jay, a frequent visitor in our home, was a warm, loving, kind and generous person with a great sense of fun. Seetha, my sister, wrote a poem about him, *Mad Uncle Jay*. I wish I still had it.



M.J. Naidoo

When Jay became a leader in the struggle against apartheid, he was incarcerated many times. He was one of the six men who, in 1984, took refuge in the British Consulate in Durban to bring international attention to the inhumanity of apartheid.

I would have liked to have seen Jay in high office. He was a man of integrity and would have been a leader one could trust. I do not believe he would have succumbed to the corruption that goes with power.

7 November: *Immortality*

I began rereading Milan Kundera's *Immortality* a few days ago and do not recognize it as the book I read over a decade ago. I do not remember it as a novel but as a treatise on the randomness of existence. I wonder if there are two versions of the book. Perhaps, I am confusing it with *The Art of the Novel*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and other books by Kundera.

8 November

Yesterday I received an email from my niece, Diricilla (Dris), who with her sisters, Sharmini and Quereshini, will be visiting me tomorrow, Saturday. They had planned to come on Sunday but then I got this email. from Dris:

I cannot make Sunday, I just realised that I have an appointment from 9.30 to 11 and then we're off to the Jewish Board of Deputies Conference.

10 November

My nieces, Dris, Quereshini and Sharmini are vital, confident women, bubbling over with energy and enthusiasm for the enterprises in which they are involved. They arrived today in Dris's new Subaru SUV that stands high off the ground. These modern women, living in a capitalistic world, have made choices for themselves and have found themselves through their talents – not through the traditional roles of wife and motherhood.

Marriage is for the more conventional woman



Quereshini

Sharmini

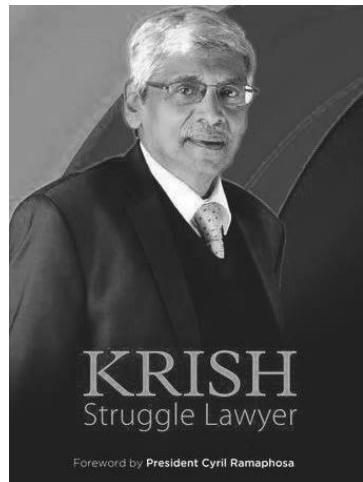




Dris

Dris lent me her signed copy of *Krish: Struggle Lawyer*.

It is the autobiography Krish Naidoo, a lawyer and anti-apartheid activist, who reflects on his life in the struggle for freedom in South Africa. The foreword is by the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa.



I was surprised to find colour pictures inserted into the text of the book as I was under the impression that colour pictures had to be in separate sections. This is another reminder that I am not moving with the times.

13 November: Rain

I woke up this morning to find that it was raining; what a blessing. And tonight it is still raining. Next Monday, our water will be shut off for the whole day. Hopefully, it will keep raining, so we will not have too many shutdowns.

14 November: Human destiny

All our conventions, traditions, cultures and beliefs are our ways of coping with the mystery of human existence on a tiny planet revolving around a sun in the vast expanse of an ever expanding universe. The Earth is like a drop of water in an ocean. So the means we develop to give ourselves meaning and identity, though they are expedients, are, nevertheless, miraculous. Though “nothing is, but what is not”, we have made and continue to make something of nothing.

15 November

When Tom came to visit, yesterday, he explained how it is possible to insert colour pictures into the text of a book. In the printing, the whole book is set up for colour and the text simply retains its blackness in the process.

As colour costs a good deal more to print, I will stick to black and white.

Tom brought me a novel, *The Son of the House* by Cheluchi Onyemelukwe Onuobia, a Nigerian lawyer, involved in improving conditions for women in society. I

will read it after I have read *Krish: Struggle Lawyer*

Today I went to pick up the additional copies of *Octogenarian Diary* (III) that I had ordered for Marsha Cann in New York. It was a long, hot drive to Minuteman Press in Midrand, Johannesburg. I am considering changing printers and using the Minuteman Press that has now been established here in Centurion where I live. I am reluctant to do so as I have a good relationship with Johan Botha of the Midrand company. Though both companies have the same name they are not connected.

16 November

I have started reading *Krish: Struggle Lawyer*. Krish Naidoo was deeply involved in the defence of anti-apartheid activists brought to trial during the apartheid years. In his book, he describes his relationships with Winnie and Nelson Mandela and other prominent figures in the struggle against apartheid.

As with the holocaust, when we think of apartheid, what immediately springs to mind are atrocities and we become focused on man's inhumanity to man; on horrors that treat human life as trivial.

Our empathy is with victims, and we see perpetrators as monsters – Hitler, for example – so we do not look beyond our outrage to find the cause of such uncivilized, inhumane treatment of human beings. We simply dismiss it as evil.

But evil is a metaphysical concept. If we wish to prevent the occurrence of atrocities, we need to identify the human factors that give rise to them. In asking what

turns human beings into monsters, I have come to the conclusion that it is fear of difference – the primitive fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar. Think of how life on other planets is portrayed in science fiction – generally as strange-looking, aggressive invaders whom we call aliens. The term ‘alien’ sums up our fear.

We do not realize it but fear is probably the primary emotion that rules our lives.

FEAR

foundation
of civilization:
community;
laws of society;
honour, duty ;
routine, ritual;
rule, regulation;
religion, tradition;;
contractual obligation –
to ensure
CONFORMITY:
fence against
existential volatility –
FEAR
of DIFFERENCE,
spear
in the glove
of compassion
and love

Fear of difference, of the unfamiliar, the unknown, is fear

of subjugation and contamination – paranoia – the most destructive of our emotions. It leads to conflict, and in the extreme, to holocausts, war, apartheid.

18 November: *The Son of the House*

Four days ago when Tom came to visit, he brought me the novel, *The Son of the House* by the Nigerian writer, Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia. I started reading it today. As it is the story of two women, the title presents us with an enigma, a mystery that we have to solve.

The novel opens with a riveting prologue that introduces the theme of the abuse of women and it occurred to me that the more traditional a society, the greater the abuse of women.



Dr Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia

Dr Onyemelukwe-Onuobia is a woman of the 21st century, with the freedom to be. Did she have to escape

the societal limitations placed on women that she describes in her novel? Or is she a woman who simply refused to acknowledge such limitations?

Born in 1978 in Nigeria, Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia is a lawyer and academic who has done much advocacy work on issues such as violence against women and girls, and health. She holds a doctorate in law from Dalhousie University in Canada and often advises international organisations. An earlier draft of *The Son of the House* was longlisted in Mslexia's novel writing competition.

She currently lives in Lagos.

(<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.co.za/author/cheluchi-onyemelukwe-onuobia-0>)

The Son of the House, set in Nigeria, is the story of two women, Nwabulu and Julie, brought together as victims of a kidnapping. As they are being held in the same room, they share the stories of their lives and in the final chapters discover that they are linked.

The novel, combines mystery and romance, but its main theme is the abuse of women.

We looked at each other – two women ... who had ... covered the grounds of a woman's life in twentieth-century Africa together. Fought through disappointments, managed the lives of willful and yet fragile children, survived the infidelities and idiosyncrasies of husbands, the abuses of life, mistakes and failures that came

in different shades. We knew each other well,
better than the men in our lives did or had
cared to know. (*The Son of the House*, p.187)

The kidnapping that introduces the book, is symbolic of women's captivity in a male chauvinistic society.

19 November: Discrimination

The word, discrimination, like everything human, is ambivalent, and is used both positively and negatively.

Positive Discrimination

Positive discrimination, the ability to distinguish between high and low quality, is an indication of superior judgment and sophistication. It demonstrates the refinement of the evaluator.

Negative Discrimination

Discrimination based on *group* differences – skin colour, nationality, culture – is prejudice that arises out of the fear of difference. It is applied to an individual not as an individual but as a representative of a group, and as such is blind to the qualities of the individual. It sees only an alien; a strange being, a threat that gives rise to the fear of contamination and conquest and evokes the urge to destroy. It is similar to the attitude one adopts when one sees a mosquito – out comes the insecticide.

Judgment of an individual should be in terms of individual qualities, not in terms of membership of a group. As racial discrimination does not recognize the

individual and sees only the group, its assumptions of superiority and inferiority, are false, and, ironically, reveal the inability to discriminate, i.e., to judge on the basis of what is perceived rather than on the basis of preconceived notions.

‘Race’ and class discrimination are simply prejudices based on unrecognized, deep-seated fear of difference.

Colonization, conquest and travel have changed and are changing the peoples of the world and are bringing them closer together. The development of communication and other technologies continues the process and is gradually turning the people of the world into one nation. We are slowly becoming people of a common culture with minor differences in the way we conduct our lives.

Consequently, we have begun to lose the irrational fear of human difference; and nationality is beginning to replace ethnicity as a means of identification.

Technology is slowly bringing to an end racial and class discrimination, the most obvious forms of negative discrimination.

But many other forms of discrimination still remain..

21 November

Today I received the following email from Marsha Cann in New York:

I was happy to receive the 8 copies of *Diary V*, they arrived last night. Thank you so much! I will be thrilled to share your work.

I was shocked. I thought I had checked the books after I had brought them home from the printers. Obviously I had not. I had ordered copies of *Octogenarian Diary* not copies of *Octogenarian Diary V*. I will have to order again and this time will send Johan Botha the pdfs and not rely on his ability to differentiate between my diaries.

23 November: Cataracts

Following generally accepted wisdom, I had cataracts removed from my eyes a couple of years ago – and now live in regret. With cataracts, my vision was 20-20 and I had discarded the glasses I had had to wear from the time I was a teenager. Submitting to the general view that cataracts lead to blindness, I had them removed. Since then I have been losing my perfect sight. Now it seems, I may have to start wearing glasses again as I am experiencing difficulty reading.

What a fool I am! I am often made to regret my conformity to generally accepted wisdom, which is general but not necessarily wisdom.

I really must become more discriminating.

Immortality

Today I return to my rereading of Milan Kundera's *Immortality*, which I had interrupted in order to read the books loaned me by Dris and Tom. I thought I knew the book well, but what I am reading is a novel and I do not remember it as a novel.

25 November: *Jailbirds*

I opened my email to find this message from Tom in which he asks about my nomination for the Caine

Prize for African Writing in 2005:

I found your name in the Caine Prize website in the Shortlist for the Kenya workshop in 2006. But it does not say for *what* short stories you were nominated. Can you tell me which?

I had forgotten all about the Caine Prize, my trip to London in 2005 and to Kenya in 2006. The trips were sponsored by the Caine Prize Organisation.

Caine Prize for African Writing: 2005 Nominees



Ike Okonta (Nigeria), Muthal Naidoo (South Africa),
Segun Afolabi (Nigeria), Doreen Baingana (Uganda)
Jamal Majoub (Sudan)

Segun Afolabi was the winner in 2005.

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The story for which I was nominated is *Jailbirds*. It is the story of my twenty-eight day detention in Haenertsburg Prison from the 24th of March to the 20th of April 1990.

I was arrested by Apartheid's Special Branch for organising festivities at Giyani College of Education to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela on the 11th of February, 1990, after twenty-seven years of imprisonment.

At the time, apartheid was in its death throes and in the final frenzy of a dying system, people were being arrested for trivial reasons.

The story, *Jailbirds*, is based on the notes I secretly kept during my imprisonment. I had smuggled in a ballpoint pen in my shoe and blank foolscap sheets in a shirt in my bag.

Tom was Vice-Rector of Giyani College of Education at the time of my arrest. As he has reminded me of the story, I have edited it and include it here.

Jailbirds

Elizabeth is busy mopping and cleaning the cell for a new prisoner, one of these political detainees.

They release Mandela and jail full up with teacher, student. They got nothing to do, they make trouble. Each one get cell, like in hotel.

Elizabeth looks around the gloomy cell painted dark grey, with a drinking fountain and next to a low wall, a toilet.

Now I look after this one, first woman here. Hau, extra work for me! Why these people want to fight gov'ment? They must keep quiet, mind own business. Hai, Hai, Hai! I must watch, make her clean cell, make bed, not do funny thing. Watch in shower; see if she hide anything in bum.

Simon, one of the warders, calls Elizabeth and she goes into the charge office. Two white security policemen bring in a white-haired woman.

Elizabeth wants to laugh. *What this old koelie doing here? How she get involve in all this politics nonsense – there in bantustan? Hau, hau, hau! So old, wearing shorts! She sit very quiet but she not look frighten.*

One of the security policemen shouts to Elizabeth, “Search her bag. Look for papers and bring them to me.”

Elizabeth looks at the cheap suitcase on the bench near the door, opens it and begins to look through it. She sees a box of tissues and goes through the tissues very carefully. She looks up and sees the woman watching her. She turns over the clothes, looks through a book and blank foolscap sheets that are inside one of the shirts;

looks through the rest of the clothes, finds no papers and closes the bag. There is nothing here.

The woman hides her smile.

The security policemen, who have been talking with Mrs Van Zyl, supervisor of the female section, see that Elizabeth has finished checking the bag and one of them orders the warder, Simon, to lock the detainee up. Mrs Van Zyl, Elizabeth and Simon take her to her cell.

Elizabeth wants to laugh again. *How this small gogo¹ so dangerous? I can kill her like cockroach.*

Mrs Van Zyl, orders Simon to bring in a bed. This prisoner will not have to sleep on the built-in concrete block that usually serves as a bed.

At five o' clock, when Elizabeth returns with the woman's supper, she sees that the bed is in, the old koelie is sitting on it and her bag is on the concrete block.

Elizabeth gives the woman a mug of coffee and a plate with six thick slices of brown bread, two big fat sausages and half a tomato.

About a half hour later, Elizabeth comes back to collect the plate and mug. She sees that the coffee mug is empty, half a slice of bread and the tomato have been eaten, but the sausages have not been touched. She is shocked.

What is wrong with this old woman? Simon tell me security pick her up early morning, she not eat whole day. Why she leave so much food? She think she too good? Right, she can starve.

Elizabeth takes the food back to the kitchen and the

¹ granny

supervisor becomes quite concerned. “Why didn’t she eat?”

Elizabeth shrugs. She can’t understand why her supervisor is making a fuss.

So what if stupid woman not eat? Mrs Van Zyl talking hunger strike, rubbish like that. Next time, I quietly put food in bag and take home.

After her chores, Elizabeth goes out to hitch a lift back to the village. She gets home just after 7 pm, and has to cook for the following day. She has a family to feed.

She’s up by four the next morning, and by five is out on the road hitch-hiking again. It takes at least two hours to get to work.

When she arrives at the prison, she goes to the woman’s cell, wakes her up and orders her to make her bed. She loses patience when she sees how the woman is doing it and shows her the right way. At first the woman resists, then she laughs and gives in.

Elizabeth doesn’t think it’s funny.

When Elizabeth brings a broom, the woman stands to one side so Elizabeth can sweep.

Who she think she is? She in jail, not me. Elizabeth pushes the broom at her. “You sweep!”

The woman gives her a startled look, then takes the broom and sweeps. Elizabeth sees that the woman knows how to handle a broom. After she has swept the cell, Elizabeth orders her into the yard to wash.

The detainee sticks out her hand and says, “My name is Lutchmee.”

Elizabeth backs away, stares at the hand and yells at the woman not to waste time.

This woman have no respect. I police officer. She frowns. Why they give us overall? They must give uniform.

She watches as Lutchmee brushes her teeth. The water is boiling hot and she can scarcely rinse her mouth. She asks for a plug for the sink and Elizabeth tells her to use the wrapping from the soap to block the hole. Then the woman washes the clothes she has been wearing. To shower, she pushes the button on the wall and the water shoots out from the built-in spout in short jets. She has to keep her hand on the button if she wants a continuous spray. But the water is boiling hot.

Elizabeth laughs to herself as she watches the woman running and jumping through the spurts.

After she has showered, Elizabeth takes her back to her cell and goes to help with the prison breakfasts.

In the kitchen, she finds Mrs Van Zyl fussing about what to feed the woman. She puts together a plate of porridge and coffee. *Like in hotel!* These troublemakers get special treatment but people like her, who work and do everything they are told, are treated like dogs. She takes the prisoner her breakfast.

When she goes back for the plate after breakfast, she finds that the woman has not eaten the porridge.

"I can't eat this porridge. The milk or something has gone off."

Elizabeth smells the plate and wrinkles her nose.

The woman offers to shake hands again and repeats her name. *Lunchy or something. Hey, these koelies got funny names.* She ignores the outstretched hand. *I police officer. She must respect.*

She gives Lutchmee a contemptuous look, collects the plate and mug and goes off to the kitchen.

Mrs Van Zyl throws up her hands; the woman is not eating! She will have to report it to the station commander.

Elizabeth can't understand the fuss. *Lunchy toyi-toyi against gov'ment, now why these Afrikaners worry 'bout her? She kill herself, they must be happy. ... Hai, not my business.*

At lunchtime, the plate comes back again almost untouched. Mrs Van Zyl sends for De Lange, the station commander, and Elizabeth hears them talking. The Kommandant complains about having to cater for people from different backgrounds. What does the woman expect? That they should start cooking curries?

Later that day, friends bring a whole lot of supplies for the woman, biscuits, chocolates, juices and a bag of wool. De Lange is so pleased, he picks up the supplies himself and marches off to Lutchmee's cell.

One of Lutchmee's friends, a tall white woman demands to see Lutchmee and even though they all tell her she is not allowed, she pushes her way through and rushes after De Lange. Elizabeth runs after her to try to stop her but the woman storms into the cell right behind De Lange. Taken aback, the Kommandant stands open mouthed, staring.

Lutchmee is glad to see her friend and gives her a big hug. It's funny to see this short black woman embracing this tall white woman. As her eyes inspect the cell, the white woman tells Lutchmee that they have brought her

embroidery and that puts a big smile on Lutchmee's face.

Elizabeth, waiting to see what De Lange will do, is afraid he is going to blame her. But he is just standing there staring at the intruder. Then he finds his voice and orders the woman to leave, but she will not so the Kommandant forces her out and leads her away.

Lutchmee is laughing. Elizabeth wants to know what is so funny and she says, "Joan is fearless. Nobody can stop her once she makes up her mind to do something."

When the Kommandant comes back, he says he is pleased that Lutchmee's friends have brought her so much food. He is trying to get her transferred to another jail where she can get her own traditional food.

Elizabeth can see that Lutchmee wants to laugh. *No respect, even for Kommandant!*

Lutchmee tells him she doesn't need special food, but they mustn't give her meat, she's a vegetarian. The Kommandant shakes his head. She will be better off somewhere else. When he leaves, Lutchmee looks through the parcels and then offers most of the food to Elizabeth.

Hau! I can't take it. They catch me, big trouble. What's wrong with this woman? She don't want even friends' food.

When Lutchmee takes the wool and a big cloth from the bag that she was so happy to receive and shows Elizabeth the embroidery that she is working on, Elizabeth tries not to laugh.

She call that embroidery. Sies! So ugly!

Lutchmee spreads the cloth on the bed and says she is going to start working on it right away.

Shaking her head and laughing, Elizabeth goes off to help prepare supper for the inmates.

The next day, when Elizabeth comes to Lutchmee's cell, she gets the shock of her life. Lutchmee has used some of the wool to make a line, has tied it to the window bars of the cell and has hung up her towel, panties, bra, shirt and shorts. Elizabeth takes one look, covers her mouth and rushes out of the cell.

She comes back with Simon who tells Lutchmee, "You can't have this line."

"Why not? I need it to hang up my washing." When Elizabeth reaches up to pull down her clothes, Lutchmee explodes. "Don't touch my things!"

Elizabeth stops in her tracks; Lutchmee suddenly seems much bigger.

"Get out of here. I put up the line; I will take it down!"

Elizabeth leaves with Simon but she is annoyed.

Stupid woman. Kommandant see line, we get big trouble. She don't take it down, I show her who boss.

When Elizabeth takes Lutchmee her lunch plate, she is relieved to see that the line has come down. But the woman is sitting there pulled up, not smiling and greeting.

Elizabeth nods. That's the way it should be and she thrusts the plate at her.

The next day Lutchmee is friendly again. She shows Elizabeth all the supplies stacked up on the concrete block. She can't eat all this food and asks if Elizabeth

knows anyone who needs it. Elizabeth looks at the block covered with plastic bags of biscuits, chocolates and juices. *Hai! So much food. I sneak all out today, tomorrow, nex' day.*

She tells Lutchmee she will see and hands over the plate of food. Mrs Van Zyl has been making a great effort to get the woman to eat and Elizabeth waits to see Lutchmee's face when sees the half tomato, some chips, a slice of avocado, vegetable pickles and bread.

Such rubbish food! No meat, no pap! She is sure Lutchmee is going to explode.

But Lutchmee looks up with a big smile and thanks her. Elizabeth is shocked.

She thank me? Me? For food like that! Hau! She think I make lunch? Stupid woman!

Lutchmee tucks in and Elizabeth goes off shaking her head.

Over the next few days, all the parcels that Lutchmee has received are cleared out and Elizabeth's children and grandchildren are very happy with the treats she brings home.

When Lutchmee asks Elizabeth about her family and her work in the prison, Elizabeth doesn't respond at first but Lutchmee persists and she begins to tell her about herself.

Lutchmee is shocked to hear that Elizabeth who has been working at the prison for ten years, earns only a hundred and fifty rands a month. She works seven days a week from seven in the morning to five in the afternoon! Elizabeth, who is fifty-nine years old, looks after women prisoners and does the washing at the prison. Her husband, who is in his sixties, works on a farm and earns

a hundred rands a month. They live in the village of Boyi with their nine children, ranging from age nine to forty.

A week after she has been detained, Lutchmee's lawyer comes to see her. Elizabeth is very surprised when Lutchmee asks her to come and meet him. He is Advocate Seth Ntai. He greets Elizabeth and shakes her hand. She makes a little curtsy as she greets him. She doesn't understand why she has been called to meet him.

Lunchy, she do funny thing.

After the visit, Elizabeth brings lunch and when Lutchmee removes the serviette, she is very pleased with what she sees and thanks Elizabeth profusely.

Oh keep quiet, woman. What you getting excited? Potato chips, tomato, slice av'cado, two fish sticks! Lunchy act like I treat her special. Me? She mad. If it was me, she get same as others.

On the second Saturday, Mrs Van Zyl gives Elizabeth a plug for the washbasin in the yard. Lutchmee gives Elizabeth a big broad smile and washes herself from the basin.

At lunch time, Elizabeth again brings avocado, tomato, fish sticks, boiled vegetables and – a cup of tea. Lutchmee starts to dance around like a mad woman singing, "Tea, tea, glorious tea."

When she tries to take Elizabeth's hand to dance with her, Elizabeth pushes her away and she falls on the bed laughing. Despite herself Elizabeth laughs too.

This woman mad. Gloria's tea? Who this Gloria?

The next day, Sunday, Elizabeth comes running in. The Kommandant wants all the wool and the embroidery. The Major from the security branch, who came last Thursday, saw Lutchmee working on the embroidery. This morning, he phoned and shouted at the Kommandant who shouted at Elizabeth and the warders, and sent them to retrieve the embroidery and search the cell. The Major thinks Lutchmee has papers and books in the cell. They don't find anything except some scraps that she uses to wrap her sanitary pads. They take the scraps, the embroidery and the wool.

Lunchy look sad. Well, she can't have.

That afternoon, Joan, that tall woman who pushed her way into the cell the week before, comes to visit and Lutchmee calls Elizabeth to meet her visitor. Elizabeth doesn't want to but this is a miesies and she feels obligated to shake hands with Joan and curtsy. Elizabeth sees that she has brought more parcels for Lutchmee.

After the visit, Elizabeth brings lunch and when Lutchmee sees the plate, she smiles; lots of vegetables – two baked potatoes, pumpkin, cabbage with cheese sauce, tomato, two fish sticks and rice.

Elizabeth frowns. *Lot of food but no meat! How people can eat like that?*

When Elizabeth comes back later to collect the plate, she sees that it is almost empty – Lutchmee hasn't eaten the rice. *Hau! But Indian people like rice.*

Then she sees that Lutchmee is reading the Bible.
The Bible! She not Christian!

Several days later, when Elizabeth goes off to the kitchen after breakfast, she leaves Lutchmee washing in the yard as usual. After a few minutes, she comes running back.

“They want everything clean-clean. Major coming.”

Lutchmee, towelling off, exclaims, “Again? That’s the third Major in the last three days!”

“Major from Security. You watch out.”

Elizabeth goes to the cell and begins mopping furiously. She can’t trust Lutchmee with the job today, not with *this* Major.

Lunchy act like she don’t care. But wait, when Major van Wyk come, she jump.

But the Major, who comes to inspect the cell, is not Major van Wyk. Like the others, he asks Lutchmee about the food.

Lunchy say it fine. Hau!

The Major stays only a few minutes and is off to the cells of other political prisoners.

At twelve, Elizabeth goes to the kitchen to fetch Lutchmee’s plate of vegetables.

How she can eat like this?

Just as Elizabeth hands Lutchmee her plate, a warder comes to tell her that the doctor is waiting to see her in the charge office.

“Why? I didn’t ask for a doctor.”

“Come. Come. The doctor’s waiting.” She follows him and Elizabeth goes with her.

First majors, now doctor. They check, check. But we not ill-treat. Only security do that. Hau, and this doctor! He don’t know how to talk. He shout only.

The doctor is unpleasant and talks very roughly to Lutchmee. She talks back and looks at him like he's a fool.

Elizabeth laughs to herself. *Hey, that doctor he get it today.*

After lunch, Elizabeth finds Lutchmee with the Bible again. She spends the rest of the day and the next day reading the Bible.

Good. Maybe now she keep out of trouble.

On Wednesday, Elizabeth is annoyed; *Lunchy want clean sheet. But it raining every day. She can't see? She ask for clean sheet Monday, Tuesday, again today.*

"What I must do? It raining."

"Don't you have washing machines?"

"No, I do washing."

Lutchmee shakes her head. "The people here are mad, and you will go mad because you work for mad people."

Hau, she have no respect. She talk to me like that!

Then Lutchmee tells the warder she wants to see the Kommandant.

Hau, hau, hau! She going to complain. I go find sheet.

Elizabeth goes off to the laundry, looks through the cupboards, eventually finds some sheets and takes them to Lutchmee.

When Lutchmee goes to wash, Elizabeth, quite disturbed by the fuss over sheets, unwittingly gives her extra time in the yard.

One of the white policemen, who has been to the cell to ask why Lutchmee wants to see the Kommandant,

finds her lounging against a wall in the yard, enjoying the sunshine. He yells at Elizabeth; says he is going to report her to the Kommandant.

But Elizabeth receives a phone call that her daughter is ill and rushes off before she is reported.

When Elizabeth comes in the next morning, she is surprised to see Lutchmee wearing a sleeveless shirt.

‘Why you dress like that? You want to get sick? It cold, raining.’

When Lutchmee says, “I get hot flushes,” Elizabeth frowns and looks about the cell. *What she talking about? I don’t see anything.*

Lutchmee asks about her daughter and Elizabeth tells her it was just an upset stomach; she is all right today.

Elizabeth’s nine children all live at home. Six of them have jobs but they make no contribution to household expenses.

Lunchy want to know why I don’t kick them out. Hau! How she can say that?

So Elizabeth retaliates, “And *your* children? Who look after them now?”

Elizabeth is shocked to hear that Lutchmee is not married and has no children. Elizabeth shakes her head.

Not married. No children. What kind of woman is this? No wonder she in jail.

“You looking for man?”

Lutchmee laughs, “What for?”

Elizabeth shakes her head. *Woman not married – hau, hau!*

After lunch, Elizabeth comes to release Lutchmee for her

afternoon wash. "You hurry up. Security Major coming. You put on nice clothes."

"Why? He's not my boyfriend?" Elizabeth laughs.
But the Major does not come.

Friday, while Lutchmee is washing, Elizabeth can no longer stand the sight of her ugly legs.

"Your legs – grey. Why you don't put lotion."

"I don't have any."

"Buy!" Lutchmee just looks at her. "Ask police to buy for you. Write note, give him."

Lutchmee is surprised. "I don't have money."

She really stupid. "They take your money when they bring you, right?"

"Oh, I forgot about that. I had twenty rands on me. You mean they will let me have it? ... Oh ... good. Bring me a pen and paper."

"Ask warder. He give paper, he give money."

A day later, Lutchmee dances up to Elizabeth and pulls her skirt above her knees to show off her legs.

"Thank you Elizabeth. Now I can enter a beauty competition."

On Sunday, while they are making the bed, Lutchmee asks Elizabeth if she is ZCC (of the Zionist Christian Church) and if she is going to Morea the next weekend.

"Easter not next week. Not for two week."

"Oh good, my brother is coming next week. I was afraid he would be caught up in the Easter pilgrimage to Morea. I was going to ask the lawyer to tell him not to come." As she is tucking blankets under the mattress she

asks, "Today is Sunday. Don't you go to church?"

Elizabeth puts her hand to her heart. "How much it hurt. I can't go church. I worship in the house . . . You too, you better pray here."

Elizabeth is shocked to hear Lutchmee say, "I don't have to; I am not a Christian."

"You not believe in Jesus?"

"No."

Elizabeth wants to go down on her knees right there and then. Instead she orders the heathen out to wash, hurries her so she can't spend time in the yard and then locks her up.

Later that day, Lutchmee asks, "Why don't you ask the station commander to give you leave to go to Morea? Isn't Easter the most important time for Christians?"

Elizabeth frowns and snaps at her, "They don't give time for church."

Lutchmee persists, "At least you have a service here then?"

Elizabeth shakes her head in frustration and walks out.

Lunchy got funny ideas. Church service in police station? Hau!

That evening, as Elizabeth is leaving to go home, Simon tells her, "That Lunchy, she send for Kommandant. She tell him you are Christian; he must let you go church on Good Friday. He not like that. He tell her you are policeman and policeman on duty twenty-four hours. Then Lunchy ask him, 'You go church on Good Friday?' De Lange go red; so angry. He tell her he Kommandant; this *his* police station. She mustn't tell him what to do. Lunchy tell him not to blame you. You don't know what

she asking. You know nothing about this. But Kommandant just turn and walk out. I think he call Major.”

“Security Major? Hau, Hau, Hau! That woman troublemaker. Why she don’t mind own business?”

The next morning, when Elizabeth comes to work, she is kept waiting. By the time a warder opens Lutchmee’s cell, she is fuming. She has been waiting since seven for them to open up. As she is going into the cell, someone calls to her to come and help with breakfast.

She shouts back, “I busy.”

She turns to Lutchmee, “They don’t treat me right. They tell me, so many time, I too old; I don’t do good work. Hau, yesterday Mrs Van Zyl, she come in yard, she take finger on floor like this, then she hold up finger and say, ‘Look at dust. You too old.’ Today, I not going to help for the breakfast. If they shout, I tell them they must pension me off. Then they keep quiet. They not want to hear that.”

“Good. We Black women must stand up for our rights.”

What she mean – “we black woman”?

For the rest of the week, Elizabeth finds the Kommandant, Mrs Van Zyl and other white personnel rather abrupt with her. She is given extra duties and has to stay on past five o’ clock.

On one occasion, Mrs Van Zyl asks, “You looking for trouble with the Security police?” Elizabeth is shocked.

They report me to Major? Hau, Hau, Hau! All that Lunchy’s fault. Stupid woman.

On Saturday, Elizabeth receives bad news and is very upset. Lutchmee wants to know what is wrong. Elizabeth doesn't want to talk to her, to the troublemaker. But Lutchmee persists and Elizabeth needs to talk to someone.

“My brother, he die. He only forty years. After he get money in bank, he give his wife and she put in pocket, then he fall down dead, there, in bank! Why she put money in pocket? She put money in pocket, she kill him.”

Lutchmee gives Elizabeth the change from her twenty rands; it's not much, not enough for her visit to her brother's family.

Elizabeth puts the nine rands in her pocket. *She mustn't think she can butter me up.*

A little later, Elizabeth comes back to tell Lutchmee that her brother is here. Lutchmee is very happy. She has been worrying about her brother. Elizabeth knows he went for a big operation. He is not so well but he has come all the way from the big city, Johannesburg, all the way here to the north, four hours by car.

Elizabeth doesn't go with Lutchmee to the front office. She is too sad. *She lucky she have her brother. My poor brother, to die so young.*

Later, when Elizabeth takes Lutchmee her supper, just a mug of coffee - that's all she wants - Lutchmee gives her some of the food her brother has brought.

Elizabeth enjoys the roti and curry; it is delicious.

On Tuesday morning when Elizabeth comes to work, Simon tells her, “Major van Wyk come last night, him

and his partner. They come to see Lunchy.”

Elizabeth can’t control her anxiety. “The Major! He ask about me?”

“I don’t know. They take Lunchy in that small office there. They talk to her long time. I hear Major talk, and Lunchy, she talk back. They coming tonight again.”

“Major, he ask about me?” Before Simon can answer, Elizabeth rushes off to Lutchmee.

She finds her sitting on the bed frowning.

“So Major Van Wyk come. What he say?” *Lunchy not talking. Must be bad.*

Then Lutchmee says. “Oh he had a lot to say. First he took out his gun and put it on the desk. Then he said, ‘I do not wish to hear any sarcastic remarks from you or I will keep you in detention for as long as I like.’ Then he said I was one of those who had organised the stay away in Gazankulu. I said I was not but he didn’t believe me. So I told him, ‘If you don’t believe me, why are you talking to me. Send me back to my cell.’ Then he said, ‘I am a Christian.’”

Elizabeth starts. “You tell him you not Christian?”

“I didn’t but I am very glad I am not. He said, ‘I go down on my knees every night and thank God that there are cowards in this world.’ So I asked him, ‘Are you calling me a coward?’ He said, ‘You are afraid and ashamed of what you have done.’ I said, ‘No I’m not, but I won’t confess to things that I have not done.’ ”

“Yes, yes, but what he say about me?” Lutchmee looks puzzled. “What he say about me?”

“Why would he ask about you?”

“He didn’t ask?...He come back tonight?” Lutchmee nods. “He maybe ask tonight?”

“Why? What have you done?”

“Me? Nothing. It’s you. You tell Kommandant I must go church.”

Lutchmee laughs. “Yes, that is a crime, isn’t it?”

Elizabeth shakes her head. *This Lunchy, she crazy.*

The next morning, when Elizabeth comes in, Simon says, ‘Hau, you should have been here last night. Major, he so angry. When they come out of office after interrogation, he look like a tomato. He shout at me to take Lunchy back to cell. Then he ask about embroidery and Lunchy smile and say, ‘Oh, you took that already.’ Then Major ask, ‘What you got to read?’ Lunchy’s smile get bigger and she say, ‘The Bible.’ The Major say nothing; he just march out. His assistant, dancing around, look like he want to box Lunchy’s ears.”

“What they say about me?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t hear what they talking inside.”

When Elizabeth goes into the cell, she finds Lutchmee happily snuggled in bed.

“Get up, get up. We make bed; then you wash.”

Lutchmee drags herself out of bed and helps Elizabeth make it.

“What happen last night? What Major say?”

Lutchmee smiles. “He asked me about you. He wanted to know if you belong to the Christian Women’s Association. He said he knows that the Christian Women are planning to blow up the police station.”

Elizabeth’s hand shoots up over her open mouth. *They fire me now. I don’t get pension.*

She stares in wide-eyed terror at Lutchmee who

quickly says, "I am joking. The Major didn't ask about you. He wanted to know about the celebration I organised when Mandela was released. He wanted to know about the Youth Group and the teachers' group and mainly he wanted me to give him names so he can go and arrest more people and put them in jail."

"He didn't ask about me?"

"No. Anyway, why should he arrest you? You're already in jail."

"What you mean? I am a police."

Lutchmee smiles, takes her towel and goes into the yard.

Elizabeth follows her. "Why he so angry? Simon tell me he very angry."

Lutchmee laughs, "He kept on calling me a liar so I jumped up and banged so hard on his desk, his gun almost fell off. I told him I'm not giving him names. He got angry because I was rude to him."

Elizabeth can't believe it! *Lunchy shout at Major! They mustn't blame me. This woman got no manners.*

On Good Friday, Elizabeth arrives late and is very cross. She has more duties as some of the other matrons haven't come to work. She tells Lutchmee she is not going to do the extra work. Lutchmee stops sweeping and leans on the broom to listen.

Elizabeth says, "Go on, sweep!"

"Yes, baas!" Lutchmee salutes and springs into action.

Elizabeth laughs, then tells Lutchmee that she called Mrs Van Zyl by her first name, Hannelie, this morning, "Mrs Van Zyl look up with big eyes and ask, 'What

happen to ‘miesies’?’ I ask if ‘miesies’ is her name. She gives me a dirty look and says, “Ja.”

Lutchmee laughs and tries to shake Elizabeth’s hand but Elizabeth doesn’t allow it.

On Sunday, when Elizabeth brings Lutchmee’s plate, she greets Lutchmee in Tsonga. Simon, who is Tsonga, has taught Elizabeth, who is of a different group, how to greet in his language. Lutchmee is pleased and tries to answer but she can’t understand anything beyond the greeting.

She laughs and tells Elizabeth, “You have learned more in one morning than I have in two years. But now I have plenty of time to learn and you can teach me.”

Lutchmee, who went to live and work in Giyani in the North two years ago, has been struggling since then to learn Tsonga, the language of the people there.

After lunch, a security police officer comes in and asks Elizabeth to take him to Lutchmee’s cell. He tells Lutchmee to pack her things; she is going home. She can’t believe it. Surprised and excited, she turns to Elizabeth who is standing to attention, a policewoman on duty; she does not look at Lutchmee.

So Lutchmee going home. That is how it is with politics prisoner. Keep them twenty-eight days then send home. Security don’t tell us nothing. They bring these people, dump on us and we must look after. You get used to one, they take him away.

Lutchmee, who is packing, keeps looking up at Elizabeth, who is looking straight ahead and ignores her attempts to communicate.

Lutchmee points to all the parcels piled up on the concrete bed that she has used as a shelf and says to the officer who is watching and waiting, "I don't want this stuff. I would like Elizabeth to have it." He shrugs and Lutchmee tells Elizabeth to take all of it and the stuff they keep for her in the fridge.

Then Lutchmee picks up her suitcase. "This is so sudden. I can't believe I'm going home. Goodbye Elizabeth. Thank you for all your kindness. I will never forget you."

Lutchmee tries to hug her but Elizabeth fends her off and she leaves with the officer.

Elizabeth sighs with relief. Now she can go back to her usual routine without having to babysit anyone.

Hau, they mustn't bring no more politics prisoner! They take too much advantage.

DEMOCRACY

“amandla awethu
demos cratos
power to the people” –
voting delusion
primary illusion

democracy
in reality
autocracy diversified
publicly authorized;
government administration
many-headed monster of corruption.

apartheid
open
unendorsed
exploitation.

democracy
enfranchised
covert
exploitation

27 APRIL 2005
THOUGHTS ON FREEDOM DAY,

Eleven years ago on 27 April 1994, South Africans of all races went to the polls for the first time to vote for a democratic system of government. Since then April 27 has been designated Freedom Day. And we will be celebrating “freedom” today; celebrating the fact that we voted out a government that believed in the hierarchical ordering of races and voted in a government that believes in equality and opened the ghettos in which poverty and crime were dammed and freed them to flow all over the land.

Massive poverty and its concomitant, crime, the legacy of the old regime, constitute the worst problems that face the new regime. The problem is of such magnitude, that government and opposition attempt to obliterate it only with a war of words. Meanwhile in our new democratic dispensation, we now have black *and* white beggars on our streets and we have squatter camps, which we euphemistically call informal settlements, spreading right into suburbia.

As the rise in crime, forces us to take note of this poverty, we call for better policing, for incarceration, for longer jail sentences and for the death penalty – as though they are solutions. We complain that there are not enough policemen and policewomen, but the number of law enforcement officers can never be adequate where poverty exists on a large scale.

We have developed slogans such as “the war on poverty”

but our strikes are against poor people, the enemy, whom we capture and incarcerate. We hide behind a concern for “the poorest of the poor” but our prisons are stocked with them. Judge Hannes Fagan, the Head of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons, in an episode of the TV programme, *Special Assignment*, which dealt with overcrowding in prisons, referred to the locking up of petty criminals as vindictive.

Some of our biggest prisons are filled to four times their capacity and a single cell in such centres may hold as many as forty prisoners. Most people initially enter prison for petty offences but once in that environment, they often develop into hardened criminals. So throwing people in jail does not reduce crime; it multiplies it – prison is simply a training ground for the most debased and inhumane behaviour

Prisons stand as monuments to our inability to eradicate poverty. And they are not bastions against evil and crime; they are hotbeds of evil and crime. But we focus on crime and criminals because instinctively we believe in evil, believe it is innate and that criminals are born, not made. A documentary on gangs in prison, one in a series entitled *Our Nation in Colour*, showed, however, that prison is a factory producing criminals. Before they are imprisoned, people are transgressors; in prison they become criminals. They become dedicated rapists, murderers and thieves.

Inside prison, perhaps to recapture lost self-esteem, prisoners set up structures to control and order their lives but the structures are tyrannical, and inculcate strict adherence to unofficial authority through fear, hatred and

coercion.

Such control is a decadent display of naked power – power not cloaked as it is in society by the humanitarian idea of service. Vengeance and punishment become the creed of people who are locked-up, a creed derived from being locked-up, a creed learned from despotic prison officials whose power turns incarceration into a form of vengeance and punishment, turns inmates into monsters preying on each other, and imprisonment into a living hell.

Once they have been inside, God help the society outside when they are freed.

And we become involved in schemes of prison reform. But you can't reform a prison; you can only burn it down. The prison itself is the problem. Human beings confined in small spaces, with no freedom of thought and movement, no privacy, lose their humanity and take to punitive ways, the ethos of imprisonment.

But we keep the prisons because we don't see them as inherently inhuman and we don't look for alternatives.

And when we hear of the depravity of that locked-up community, we are horrified so we embark on superficial reforms such as changing the language of incarceration, hoping that the right attitudes and behaviours will flow from the new jargon. We no longer speak of prisons but of Correctional Services, prisoners are "clients," warders and wardresses, "members." Meanwhile "clients" still live under the strict supervision of "members" in confined and controlled spaces.

Changing the jargon does not change the reality of

imprisonment and does nothing to address the real problem, poverty, which is outside the confines of prisons. And we continue to rely on imprisonment and the death penalty as answers to the terrorism that arises out of poverty. We still deal with the symptoms and not the root cause of our malaise. Gandhi wrote that the worst crime is poverty and to 'have' in a society in which millions 'have not,' is to be privileged. But those of us who are 'haves,' see the worst crime as our loss of privilege.

It may have taken a few centuries, but we have now *legally* eradicated the *notion* of racial inequality. That was easy compared to eradicating the real problem – poverty. Now our 'haves' are both black and white and our 'have-nots', both black and white. And inequality lives on. Our government has come up with schemes of self-development, skills training and economic empowerment but these become the purlieus of the middle and working classes and the squatter in the squatter camp still ventures out of his makeshift shelter, to sit on pavements in cities, towns and suburbs, begging. And when the frustrations of no money and no food, get the better of him, he employs his creativity in finding new ways to rob, steal, hijack and take hostages, often to the accompaniment of rape and murder.

On Freedom Day, I think of a visit I made last week to my nephew's house to deliver my sister Seetha Ray's *Monkey Business*, a storybook for children. I hadn't been to his place for probably more than a year. When I got there, I had to look hard before I recognised his house.

The property was now safeguarded by a fence with a motorized gate. I couldn't get in. I had intended to slip the envelope under the door as I knew that my nephew and his wife would be at work. But I couldn't get near the door.

Ironically, *Monkey Business*, set in Calcutta, depicts a rich man who has locked himself out of his home. He tries to climb over the high fence, slips and is caught on spokes of the gate by his clothes. He hangs there upside down until rescued by a poor man, who makes his living on the street with monkeys that sing and dance.

Clambering over my nephew's gate was out of the question for me, so I looked up and down for a neighbor to whom I could entrust the envelope, but all I saw were fences and security gates lining the street. They hadn't been there the last time I had come this way.

And I said to myself, "Welcome to the new South Africa." All the haves, and that includes me, are living in their own home-made prisons and all the have-nots are marching towards the official ones.

And today we celebrate Freedom Day.



SEETHA RAY

Seetha Ray

MONKEY BUSINESS

Tum-te-tum-tum-tum, tum-te-tum-tum-tum, throbbed the tiny drums in Ananta's deft hand as he tramped along the busy main street of Belpara, a little town in West Bengal, India. His other hand clutched two long leashes attached to his trained monkeys, Jinku and Tinku.

Jinku, debonair in his red velvet jacket and cap, his long curly tail waving in the air, frisked alongside his trainer looking this way and that. Tinku, big black eyes sparkling mischievously out of her pert little face swirled around in her yellow, floral dress.

A man lounging in front of his store called to Ananta and putting fifty paisa into a mug which Jinku was holding, said, "Let me see the monkeys perform."

At once a crowd of grinning people surrounded them on the pavement. The monkeys danced to the drumbeat and acted out a mime with great finesse. Everyone applauded when Tinku shook her hips and beat time with her foot to Ananta's drums.

Not to be outdone, Jinku suddenly put his hands over his tummy and groaned and moaned loudly. Then staggering backwards, he fell flat on his back and "died". Some folks burst out laughing, while others clapped and yet others made sympathetic noises.

Tinku went over to Jinku. She put her ear to his chest, listened, and then burst into sobs, her little body rocking back and forth while she covered her face with her hands.

The onlookers cheered and applauded wildly, but as soon as the act was over, they dispersed like magic – leaving the monkeys with empty mugs and drooping faces.

Ananta's tired voice grunted, "Come on, let's go."

Dragging his feet around a corner into a secluded street he sighed. "What can I buy for fifty paisa?"

When he looked up, he saw a handsome two-storied white house. All round it ran a red brick wall with two heavily padlocked wrought iron gates.

The trio stared through these gates. Mangoes, litchis and bananas dangled alluringly from the trees. Before Ananta could tear his eyes away, the monkeys slipped through the gates, sprinted across the lawn, and sprang into the banana trees. Pulling off bananas from the laden bunches, they jumped down, peeled fruit and ate ravenously. With his mouth hanging open, his eyes bulging, Ananta watched. Then beckoning frantically with his hands he called in a stage whisper, "Jinku, Tinku, come away – at once!"

Instead of obeying, Tinku scampered up a tree, broke off a banana and brought it to him. Ananta hesitated a moment, but his growling stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten all day. He grabbed the banana, tore off the skin and took a big bite. *Hmm – how good it tasted!*

Tinku was already racing back to the tree when the cook rushed out of the kitchen brandishing a brass spoon.

"Thieves, robbers!" He screamed at the monkeys, who quickly climbed up a tree.

Hearing the commotion, two servants came running out, followed by their employer, Mr. Banerjee, a wealthy merchant.

“What is all this about?” thundered Mr. Banerjee, his eyes taking in the monkeys in the tree and the quaking Ananta at the gate still holding on to his half-eaten banana.

Without warning, the monkeys bounded to the ground, and prostrated themselves at Mr. Banerjee’s feet. Then Tinku sat up and started sobbing piteously while her big black eyes pleaded with the merchant. Unable to resist her, his stern face broke into a smile.

“All right, I’ll let you go this time. But I don’t want a repeat performance,” he warned.

“Thank you, Sahib, God bless you!” Ananta spluttered, bowing to Mr. Banerjee, who let the monkey out by the gate which he unlocked with a key from a huge jingling bunch.

Several weeks later, the full moon singled out the figure of Ananta and his monkeys trudging heavily down the main street of Belpara. Turning the corner into the next street, Ananta’s eyes lit up as he recognized Mr. Banerjee’s house. But what was that ‘thing’ suspended across the wall? As they approached it, the “thing” kicked its legs up and down in the air. “What are you doing there?” Ananta cried.

“Get me off! Get me off!” groaned a voice. Ananta took hold of the feet and pulled the “thing” down.

“But Sahib, what were you doing there?” he gasped in amazement as he recognized Mr. Banerjee.

“I forgot my keys inside the house this morning,” he confessed. And anticipating Ananta’s next question he explained, “My family and all the servants are at my brother’s house two hundred miles away. They are helping with the preparations for my niece’s wedding in

two days time. I will join them tomorrow night when I have finished going through some work,” he confided to Ananta with a worried frown, “But I don’t know how I’m going to get in the house.”

Ananta looked absently at his pets. Suddenly an idea struck him. “Sahib, are any of the windows open?”

“Why yes, the cook always leaves the kitchen window open, but that’s too small for anyone to go through. Besides, there’s a burglar guard on it.”

“I know, but Jinku and Tinku can squeeze through it. Won’t you let them try, eh, Sahib?” coaxed Ananta.

The desperate merchant agreed.

Ananta urged the monkeys through the gate. Next he hoisted his slim body onto the wall and leapt down to the other side, landing on his bare feet. With the monkeys at his heels he made for the kitchen wall and stood under the window. Taking the key to his shack out of his pocket, he dangled it in front of the monkeys. “Go inside,” he ordered, pointing to the window. “Fetch the key,” he stressed, holding his key and shaking it at them.

The monkeys sprang onto the window-sill and squeezed themselves through the iron bars.

Ananta ran back to the merchant waiting anxiously at the gate. “Where did you leave your keys, Sahib?” he panted.

“On the table in the dining room, just across the hallway from the kitchen.”

When Ananta reached the kitchen window once more, he pressed his face to the bars, “Open the door Jinku,” he yelled, pointing to the inside door of the kitchen. Jinku smartly turned the door-knob and opened the door.

Standing outside at the window, Ananta could see right through the kitchen door and into the dining room where the keys lay on the table. The sharp-eyed Tinku spotted the keys before Jinku. Hopping across the hall on all fours, she entered the dining room, jumped onto the table and scooped up the keys.

Shaking them at Ananta she skipped to the kitchen, slid through the bars at the window and handed the keys to him.

Mr. Banerjee was so grateful to get his keys back that he took out his wallet and gave Ananta twenty-five rupees.

“What treasures those monkeys are!” he marveled. “Go on, get some fruit for them. Take as much as you want. Come whenever you like and pick fruit. I’ll tell the servants.”

“Thank you, Sahib. You are very kind.”

Smiling, Ananta sped toward the trees with his monkeys. They plucked the delicious fruit and had a glorious feast in the moonlight. With the twenty-five rupees, Ananta planned to buy new clothes for all of them, and he would prepare a scrumptious meal for them the following day.

The next morning, the inhabitants of Belpara missed the familiar beat of Ananta’s drums and the antics of his pets. Everyone went about their business as usual but as the day wore on, there was still no sign of the monkeys.

As evening approached, people were startled by the sound of the animated thudding of drums, followed by the appearance of our famous trio, resplendent in new clothes.

Jinku strutted along in a gold jacket and cap while Tinku, in a scarlet dress shimmering with gold sequins, rode on his back, stately like a queen.

Not to be outdone, Ananta, in crisp white punjabi and pants, marched along proudly. He did not stop, and the folks of Belpara gazed with wonder at the departing trio.

SEPTEMBER 2006

RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

Religion and Democracy work in ideological and practical ways to give definition to individuals and communities and to provide stability, security and guidance for an existence that is ethical, moral, and responsible.

But their focuses are different; democracy operates in the imperfect world of everyday things while religion envisions a perfect world that can only be attained after death. As democratic governance deals with the here and now, the striving for perfection is in the here and now and life becomes a manifold process towards achieving that goal.

In contrast, the perfection sought through religion can only be obtained by following precepts that have a divine origin and have been passed down through charismatic men whose suffering and exemplary lives sanctified their words and imbued them with an authority that put them above challenge and change.

In its adherence to centuries old doctrines, religion attempts to encapsulate the present in the past, while democracy, which is continuously evolving, attempts to set the present in the future. As a result, religion and democracy treat the individual differently.

In religion, which requires total submission to prescribed scriptures and practices, movement is introspective and controlled. In a democratic society, with an infrastructure that supports and encourages personal

exploration, growth and independence, movement is towards the unknown in the vast universe in which we have our being

As democratic values are expressed through processes rather than prescription, they change and expand to accommodate new understandings of individual rights and freedoms. Witness the current debates on The Civil Union Bill and same sex marriages.

In religion emphasis is on norms and values established in ancient texts, so conformity becomes a large measure of faith. In contrast, in a liberal democracy, norms and values are set up in the community and the emphasis being on individual independence and development, its members have the opportunity to create unique destinies. *Motho ke Motho ka Batho* (I am, because we are).

In modern times, the migration of people across the globe, especially from East to West, has led to the formation of multi-cultural communities in strongholds of western democracy where the unfamiliar practices of migrants bring to the surface xenophobic impulses that enclose democracy within ethnocentric boundaries.

In such communities, government by the people, of the people, for the people, developed for a homogeneous culture, has to expand to include a diversity of cultures with practices that may be contrary to the liberalism that obtains in the original community. When newly assimilated cultures assert restrictive beliefs that run contrary to liberal rights, they challenge the taken-for-granted notions of freedom that obtain in their host societies and paradoxically expose them as forms of

coercion.

So liberal democrats, committed to the expansion of individual freedom, have to ask themselves whether democracy includes the right of the individual to impose restrictions on herself – such as covering herself from head to toe, leaving only a slit for the eyes. To the liberal democrat this appears to be a severe denial of individual freedom and is not acceptable.

If democracy means freedom of choice, does that include the freedom to give up the freedom of choice? What is the purpose of this kind of conservative challenge? Does it undermine or expand liberal democratic values?

As different value systems collide and clash, what is treasured in one culture may be obnoxious in another; what is regarded as harmless in one may be hugely offensive in another.

Danish cartoonists, who caricatured the Prophet Muhammad, took for granted their freedom of expression and gave little thought to the sensibilities of the Muslims living in their midst. According to Islamic beliefs, the act of depicting the Prophet Muhammad is, in and of itself, a desecration; the irreverence of portrayals compounds the sacrilege. The outbursts that followed the publication of the cartoons were based on mismatched perceptions, religious versus democratic values. As the arguments of the two sides were differently contextualised, there was no common ground for discussion. So there were people shouting, ‘Abuse, Desecration, Racism,’ on the one hand and, ‘Down with censorship; viva freedom of speech’ on the other. With each side clinging to its own understand-

ing of the issue, there could be no meeting of minds. How do people standing on different platforms get together to reconcile their views? Who takes the initiative towards reconciliation?

The individual in the liberal democratic tradition, constantly challenging restrictions and striving for independence, is fulfilling her destiny. Should she adopt the same mode of operation when she encounters values and norms that run counter to her own in another culture? If she does, she runs the risk of being perceived as intolerant and abusive. She, however, is simply acting in accordance with values inculcated in her society. Must the freedom that she derives from her culture, a freedom that guides her thinking and actions, that makes her who she is, must her taken-for-granted freedom be abandoned when she encounters the restrictive notions of another culture? Should she abandon her understanding of freedom, which defines who she is?

If she cannot be her authentic self when she encounters difference, who should she be? An enemy, a hypocrite, a patron, a missionary? There is no equality in the assumption of such roles and in order to afford people of different cultures respect and friendship, one is required to meet them on equal terms. We have worked out only superficial protocols for interaction between peoples of various cultures because our meetings have been at borders and after formalities, we have gone our separate ways.

Now we live as neighbours and the accepted international protocols predicated on fleeting relationships, are woefully inadequate. Living with

people who do not think or behave as we do, we have to develop new ways to relate and while we struggle to establish new modes of interaction, we are being forced to examine our own ethnocentricity and the xenophobia that we had no idea could result from liberal democracy.

But our negative feelings provide opportunities for growth as they force us to search for ways across cultural divides. The process is fraught with difficulty. How do people who embrace change interact with those who do not? Do we have the right to impose values on others because we believe ours to be more humane? Should freedom of expression, a tenet in our community, embed itself in another and fire off missiles at the adherence to a different set of values? Is that humane? But if one adopts a hands-off policy, how far should such tolerance go? To acceptance of authoritarian attitudes, gender bias, sexism, racism, slavery, abuse, genocide? Or do we live together but separately? Resurrect apartheid?

At present, we are witnessing cultures in collision through happenings such as the Danish cartoons, a Pope's remarks, terrorism and President George Bush's desire to democratise the Middle East.

And we ask:

- "Is it right to interfere in another culture and make it conform to our norms and values?
- Is a return to religious orthodoxy the panacea for all the world's ills?
- Is democracy?
- Will Bush's attempts to foist democracy on Iraq end the conflict in a country where Shii and Sunni have not,

for over a thousand years, resolved their religious differences; where religion, perceived as a way of life prescribed by Holy Scriptures, does not allow for that constant pushing back of the boundaries of individual rights, that is characteristic of Western cultures? Since there seems to be no fit between Bush's requirements and Iraqi aspirations, is he not embarked on ideological colonisation of a diverse group of people who have been fighting colonialism in one form or another ever since the British created a land called Iraq?

In South Africa, we began to live in a multi-cultural society for the first time in 1994. Like any other multi-cultural society, once we had come out of our group areas, we had to find ways to interact. Having emerged from apartheid, we had the incentive of not wanting to appear racist and began to commit ourselves to the effort.

In our Truth and Reconciliation processes, which continue informally in our daily interactions, we are learning to forgive, forget and move on. But the past is easily dealt with compared to the present and the future. With our new constitution and our new government, we have embraced the ideals of democracy.

But on the ground, the challenges are new and respect for the individual of different race, colour or creed, still remains a conscious effort. And prejudice, our *raison d'être* before 1994, is channeled in new ways – against foreigners and gays – and quietly maintained against women, the disabled and the poor as well as in subtler forms of discrimination.

Though we have made and are continuing to make

strides in overcoming our conservative social conditioning and though we began with a truly liberal new constitution that sought to empower the individual, we then agreed to proportional representation, which cut the voter off from the representative and made the representative accountable to the *party* not the people. Thus began the process of disempowerment of the individual that was completed with the adoption of the floor crossing legislation that left the voter not knowing what party she was voting for and from whom she could demand accountability. Now we have government of the people, by the party, for the party.

It is a form of democracy, but not the democracy for which I voted in 1994.

But who can say that it is wrong when those, bound by tradition, not able to move forward into the future with the party, wish to bring back the death penalty, denounce homosexuality and the right to abortion and find obnoxious the idea of a woman as president of the country. Since the laws abolishing capital punishment and endorsing gay rights and gender equality were promulgated by the ruling party voted in by the very majority that repudiates these measures, I have to ask myself again, what actually does democracy mean? Are our leaders, who have evolved a democratic philosophy far in advance of that of the people they lead, imposing democratic ideals in the same way that Bush seeks to impose them in the Middle East?

It is easy to define democracy in the abstract, hard to identify it in its implementation because its workings depend on human integrity – in particular, the integrity of

leaders and cannot be guaranteed as power corrupts, and corruption, which rides roughshod over individual rights, dispenses little or no benefits to the governed.

We got rid of apartheid but we kept the corruption and the poverty. So what does democracy mean?

With the maladjustment, between liberal democratic values and traditional norms, that arises from race consciousness, we cannot depend on the vote to ensure the accountability of politicians.

The ease with which democracy can be sabotaged makes it necessary to have arbiters who stand outside party politics. Religious leaders are ideally situated to be arbiters but their focus on the hereafter distorts understanding of the here and now.

In Archbishop Desmond Tutu, however, we have a leader who has found a way to combine religious and democratic values. We need to learn from him how to abstract from both that which is essentially humane and life affirming.

CONFERENCE 2008 CALL FOR PAPERS

**16th INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH ACADEMY JOINT
CONFERENCE**

in association with **The South African Writers Association (SAWA), The Association of University Teachers of English (AUETSA), the South African Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies (SAACLALS);** and in collaboration with

Die Suid Afrikaanse vereniging vir algemene literatuur wetenskappe (SAVAL)

Hosts: Unisa School of Languages

Venue: Unisa Sunnyside Campus

Dates: 22—25 June 2008

Conveners: Prof. Zodwa Motsa (UNISA) and Prof. Rosemary Gray (University of Pretoria)

Being a pensioner and a volunteer at Irene Homes Curiosity Shop, when I received the above call for papers for this conference, I thought that I had received it in error. It was addressed to *Dear All*, and included the ominous warning: *This communication is intended for the addressee only. It is confidential. If you have received this communication in error, please notify us immediately and destroy the original message.*

So I notified.

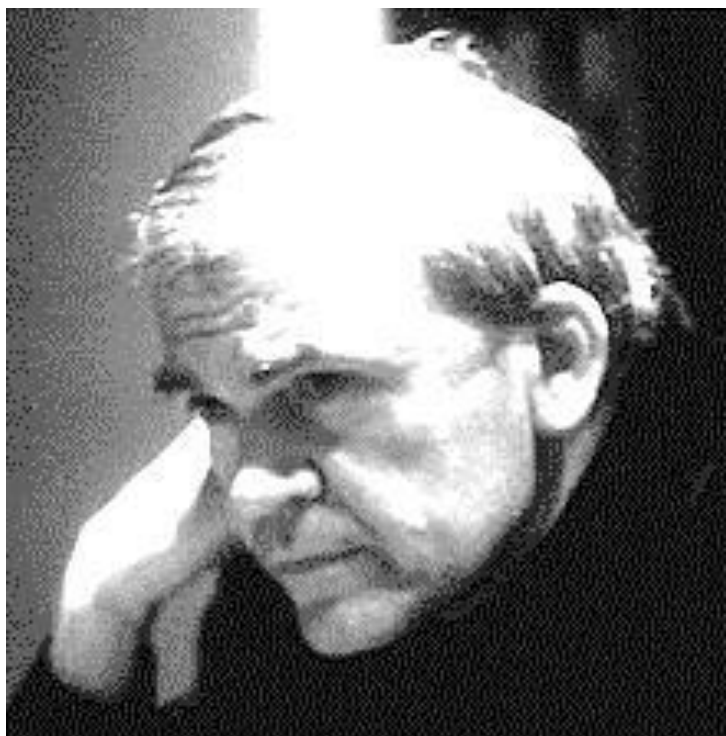
Naomi Nkealah assured me that I was not a mistake and had indeed been included in the virtually real world in which chance is not a factor.

At the time, I had, by chance, picked up a book, *Immortality*, donated to Irene Homes Curiosity Shop and inscribed, *Mom, Merry Christmas, Love, Graham*. What a lucky Mom! On the first page of the first chapter, I found this wonderful sentence: “*It was the charm of a gesture drowning in the charmlessness of the body,*” and knew right away that I had to read this author, Milan Kundera, who now occupies a special place in my personal Hall of Fame. The coincidence of finding his book in the Curiosity Shop and receiving a call from the English Academy inspired the following paper which is really my attempt to thank Kundera for being.

At the same time as I embarked on it, there were other happenings in our world:

- The Deputy Minister of Health was fired,
- The Minister of Health was being investigated.
- The President had come under fire.

My paper, “The Eleventh Commandment” which takes its title from Kundera’s *“Immortality”*, relies heavily on Kundera’s ideas, and uses the above happenings to compare the journalist’s understanding of truth with the novelist’s understanding of truth.



Milan Kundera in 1980

SEPTEMBER 2007

“THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT”²
[Tell the Truth]

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. (Milan Kundera: *The Art of the Novel*, p.6)

The acknowledgment that truth is relative has uncovered the paradox of our existence. We live in relative truth, but we act on the basis of what we designate as ‘absolute’ truth.

But is that truth or merely coincidence?

As this is our dilemma, I begin with a consideration of Kundera’s reference to the novel’s dependence on coincidence.

It is wrong...to chide the novel for being fascinated by mysterious coincidences...but

² Milan Kundera: *immortality*

it is right to chide man for being blind to such coincidences in his daily life; for he thereby deprives his life of a dimension of beauty. (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p.52)

Human beings, far from being blind to coincidence, are very conscious of it; it invokes our instinctive urge to connect disparate happenings and to abstract meaning from connections, as in metaphors. This is a common mode of operation for the storyteller and when, in our everyday existences, we turn coincidence into sequence, we may also be turning our lives into fiction.

According to Jan Čulík, Kundera sees the metaphor, which is a way of tying coincidences together, as the means of mythicizing reality:

Kundera closely scrutinizes man's myth-making propensity. He finds that the basic vehicle of myth-making is the metaphor. Out of a large number of characteristics pertaining to two facts or events, we arbitrarily choose one isolated feature which they both have in common, because this superficial similarity happens to please us (it emphasises an aspect that we momentarily, for no good reason, find important, to the exclusion of all other aspects, most of which we are often not aware of). In Kundera's view, the laws of man's perception of life closely resemble those of the novel, since the novel is also based on arbitrary

metaphors ... The most pernicious metaphorical constructs of reality are those which consciously set out to exclude the negative aspects of life. Kundera calls these constructs ‘kitsch.’³

Once life was shown to be indeterminate and uncertain, some languished in existential angst while others, seeing a gap, seized the notion of myth-making and turned the metaphor to profit. These opportunists, whom Kundera calls imagologues – image makers, make-over artists – demonstrate great expertise in milking our insecurities and have conquered the world with a new dogma:

“Imagology!” ...this word finally lets us put under one roof something that goes by so many names: advertising agencies; political campaign managers; designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey.”
(*Immortality*, p. 127)

Impermanence is the business principle of imagologues; change, their existential code; and metaphor, their *modus operandi*.

The word *change*, ... has been given a new meaning: it no longer means *a new stage of*

³ Jan \Culik; “A Self-referential Paradox ,p. 3

coherent development (as it was understood by Vico, Hegel or Marx) but *a shift from one side to another*, from front to back, from the back to the left, from the left to the front (as understood by designers dreaming up the fashion for next season). ... Imagologues create systems of ideals and anti-ideals, systems of short duration which are quickly replaced by other systems but which influence our behaviour, our political opinions and aesthetic tastes, the colour of carpets and the selection of books ...(*Immortality*, pp.129 - 130)

Now we no longer fear change, we fear being out-of-fashion. Imagology may seem innocuous, but according to Kundera, it has dethroned ideology.

“Imagology has gained a historic victory over ideology. All ideologies have been defeated: in the end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stopped taking them seriously. For example, communists used to believe that in the course of capitalist development the proletariat would gradually grow poorer, but when it finally became clear that all over Europe workers were driving to work in their own cars, they felt like shouting that reality was deceiving them. Reality was stronger than ideology. And it is in this sense that imagology surpassed it: imagology is stronger than reality...”(*Immortality*, p. 127/8)

While ideologists theorise, plan and create structure upon structure to implement change, imagologists⁴ with no bureaucratic twists and turns to impede their progress, have made change user-friendly, turned choice into a matter of trade, and thereby, have given everyone a concrete taste of democracy.

Furthermore, they employ a powerful means of consultation that ensures the support of the people.

“Public opinion polls are the critical instruments of imagology’s power, because they enable imagology to live in absolute harmony with the people... Public opinion polls are a parliament in permanent session, whose function it is to create truth, the most democratic truth that has ever existed. Because it will never be at variance with the parliament of truth, the power of imagologues will always live in truth and although I know everything human is mortal, I cannot imagine anything that could break this power.” (128-9)

... “the findings of polls have become a kind of higher reality, or to put it differently: they have become the truth.” (*Immortality*, p. 128)

Unlike politicians, whose allegiance is to other politicians

⁴ Imagologist – creator and advertiser of new trends and fashions,

as party lists and floor crossings indicate, imagologues keep in touch with the people and supply even before demands are articulated. Imagologists know what we want/need even before we do. As a matter of fact, they no longer simply respond to our needs, they are in the business of creating them and their ability to deliver makes us impatient with politicians who have disappeared into bureaucracy.

Only every five years when elections are held, is there a connection between governors and governed. In between, democracy devolves into an abstract principle; and power, into a vested commodity. It is *amandla* without *awethu*, *cratos* without *demos*, and power assumes a lightness of being that floats without the weight of the people.

When the masses shout *amandla awethu*⁵, they believe it to mean the Freedom Charter – the land belongs to all who live in it, education and decent living standards for all. But with a government's assumption of power, *amandla awethu* becomes an abstract principle and freedom charters become kitsch.

As rights and responsibilities are not goods to be bought off shelves, the exchange, not being in concrete terms, (money and goods), but in terms of trust, which is abstract, they are easy to ignore. So we place on high, plaques and banners that read, '*Motho ke Motho ka Batho*,' – 'A person is a person through other people,' and reduce them to kitsch.

Unfortunately for politicians, they are required to deal

⁵ Power to the people

with reality, actual conditions on the ground. If, like imagologues, they could generate needs and not have to respond to real ones, they would be able to fulfill them too and still get rich. And, like imagologues, they would also be involved in a totalitarian fantasy of democracy and would not be under constant fire for poor delivery.

Having turned supply and demand into a metaphor for democracy, imagologues proliferate it through the media.

“The imagologue is a person of conviction and principle: he demands of the journalist that his newspaper (or TV channel, radio station) reflect the imagological system of a given moment. And this is what imagologues check from time to time when they are trying to decide which newspaper to support.”
(*Immortality*, p. 127)

The globe has become the constituency of imagologues who are homogenising the planet. At the same time as we sit in our designer jeans, embracing this new form of totalitarianism, we lament the loss of individuality and cultural uniqueness. Though imagologues, involved in the continuous recreation of reality with their swiftly changing modes, demonstrate that there are no absolutes and existence is evanescent in an infinite universe, we, nevertheless, cling to their metaphors – new ways and fashions – as though they are reality. They give the illusion of being absolute, but they are reductionist, and have become coping mechanisms for being-in-the-world.

In an uncertain existence, we need certainties to give us reason to be. Society, in itself a reaction to arbitrary existence, exemplifies this need and so do its institutions which try to capture ‘*the truth*’ in the play between chance and causality.

In the justice system, for instance, court cases are about determining whether events and happenings are coincidental or whether they are causally linked through intent.

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire. They can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse. They require that: someone be right: ...This “either-or” encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge. (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 7)

People in the real world are forced to translate the “language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse”; are forced into the reduction process because they have to make decisions and to act. Even Hamlet, who put off making decisions because he didn’t have absolute knowledge, eventually had to act. “To be” means to act; “not to be” means we

are nothing as we do not act.

And we are not *unaware*, though our awareness may be subliminal, that our decisions and actions are commitments to reductionist, not absolute, truth. Hindus call this karma. Why else are capital punishment, abortion and euthanasia, such dilemmas? Why else, even after a judge has made up his mind, are there appeal courts? Why else do we have such contradictory views on how to treat AIDS?

Everything about the way in which we have set up our societies, reveals our quest for certainty – a forlorn quest as we can never know for certain; it is a tilting at windmills. Though truth is relative, in the practical world, we have the burden of making categorical decisions. That makes us yearn for a world in which good and evil are clearly distinguishable, so we can make right decisions. As that is not possible, it takes courage to make decisions and declare the rightness or wrongness of a situation when we know full well that the truths we declare are compromises based on overwhelming but not necessarily conclusive evidence.

That is why we need confirmation from others; that is why we have majority decisions and consensual decision-making. But we have to be wary. Decision-making being courageous, can blind us to the dangers of reducing reality to assumptions of “absolute truth”.

In our paradoxical world of ambiguous truth, totalitarianism peeks from behind mass decision-making and mass action. When we still believed in the dichotomy of good and evil, it was easier to make categorical

judgments. But after Einstein, we could no longer be in denial.

Perhaps, it was to overcome the horror of uncertainty – the unbearable lightness of being – that led to the mass psychosis that gave rise to the atrocities of the holocaust. By demonstrating that they had control over life and death, the SS sought to wipe uncertainty out of their consciousness, impose certainty on the world, make truth and knowledge absolute and thus remove ambiguity from existence.

Perhaps Kundera is warning us that the demand for “the truth,” is a demand only for reductionist truth that does not recognise the complexity of being-in-the-world, and could lead to more catastrophic events such as the holocaust.

Though living in the world involves us all in categorical decision-making, the task is seen as primarily that of journalists and judges. It is their function to identify the particle in the wave (the paradox of our existence), i.e. to reduce infinity to the finite; the relative to the categorical. In seeming to do so, they have gained tremendous power. Kundera gives Woodward and Bernstein the credit for making journalists aware of their tremendous power,

“thanks to a mysterious provision (coincidence) of history. ... when the American journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward uncovered the sordid dealings of President Nixon during his election campaign, forcing the planet’s most powerful man to lie

in public, then to admit publicly that he had lied, and finally to leave the White House with bowed head ... this episode a sign of great historic transition, a milestone, an unforgettable moment, a changing of the guard; a new power had appeared, the only one capable of toppling the former professional power-brokers, the politicians. Toppling them from their throne not by means of arms or intrigues, but by the mere force of questioning. (p. 123)

“Journalists realized that posing questions ... was a means of exerting power. The journalist ... has a sacred right to ask ... the power of the journalist (however) is not based on his right to ask but on his right to *demand an answer*.’

Please note carefully that Moses did not include among God’s Ten Commandments: ‘Thou shalt not lie!’ That’s no accident. Because the one who says, ‘Don’t lie!’ has first to say, ‘Answer!’ and God did not give anyone the right to demand an answer from others.

‘Don’t lie!’ ‘Tell the truth!’ are words which we must never say to another person in so far as we consider him our equal ... The inequality between one who gives orders and one who must obey is not as radical as that between one who has a right to demand an answer and one who has the duty to answer.

This sanctified imperative, ‘Tell the Truth!’, (is the) Eleventh Commandment.”
(*Immortality*, 121-2)

For journalists, the Eleventh Commandment, ‘Tell the truth,’ means the absolute truth.

...even (in Democratic countries) the authority of the Eleventh Commandment is in full force. After all, people do need some Commandment to rule over them in our century, when God’s Ten have been virtually forgotten! The whole moral structure of our time rests on the Eleventh commandment; and the journalist came to realise that thanks to a mysterious provision of history, he is to become its administrator. (*Immortality*, p. 123)

In becoming the defenders of democratic values, journalists are involved in a paradox. Democratic values mean individual rights and freedoms, a myriad truths, relativity. So journalists are in pursuit of ‘absolute truth’ in the domain of relative truth. As ‘absolute truth’ is only available in apodictic fact, it is found at what Kundera calls the “lowest ontological storey,” the ground floor of existence, and is ...

purely positivist factual truth: what did C do yesterday? What is he really thinking deep in his heart? What does he talk about when he gets together with A? And does he have intimate contact with B? (*Immortality*, p.124)

A look at a selection of newspaper headlines from 10 August 2007 – 23 August 2007, indicating problems plaguing the Health Ministry, confirms this view.

THE WEEKENDER: 11-12 August 2007:
FIRED DEPUTY WAS A FAILURE AT HER JOB,
SAYS MINISTER: MADLALA ROUTLEDGE
'PLAYED WITH HER PHONE IN KEY MEETING':
DISDAIN FOR PRESIDENT, HEALTH MINISTER,
LED TO HER DISMISSAL.

THE SUNDAY TIMES: 12 Aug 2007
MANTO'S HOSPITAL BOOZE BINGE

BUSINESS DAY: 17 August 2007
MINISTER GOES TO COURT TO OBTAIN HER
MEDICAL FILE

PRETORIA NEWS 17August 2007
MANTO GETS RECORDS BACK: Minister in urgent
bid to gag Sunday Times after its claims of her 'boozing'

THE SUNDAY TIMES: Aug 19, 2007
MANTO: A DRUNK AND A THIEF

SOWETAN: 21 August 2007
'MBEKI ORDERED MANTO LIVER': DA wants
public protector to probe claim that president used his
power to get ailing minister rare life-saving organ.

PRETORIA NEWS: 23 August 2007:
AXED DEPUTY GETS MASSIVE BILL
Manto set herself out as one touched by 'true greatness'
(p.15)

These headlines are a display of mundane facts that reveal the journalist as an opportunist, dependent on sensationalism. He uses isolated fact divorced from context in order to present a startling picture that will capture immediate attention and sell newspapers. A journalist deals with the here and now. Driven by the nature of his occupation, he has to make an immediate and compelling impression on the public mind, so he does not hesitate to blame and shame. What he presents, therefore, is not the whole truth; it is simply a startling montage of isolated facts.

A novelist, not being harried by the need for sensational revelations, and being filled with the desire to understand and interpret the meaning of life, searches for the motivations that drive actions by examining the circumstances that give rise to them. He does not examine apodictic facts, i.e. isolated events or actions, he examines his main characters in situations and considers all their thoughts and actions, big and small, their motivation for the choices that they make and the consequences that follow. The novelist gives us a full picture.

As long as facts simply remain facts, they are merely coincidences and prove nothing. To make the case for

dismissal, they have to become metaphors, abstracted meanings, – and it is in this process that ‘truth’ moves from the absolute to the relative. The unconnected facts, the only absolutes, form the basis for a superstructure of relative truth. Some put the bits together to form a picture that exposes dangerous incompetence and apathy; others see them as indications of a conspiracy aimed at toppling the President.

But which of these interpretations/pictures/metaphors/scenarios – represent “THE truth”?

There is no way to establish the absolute truth or falsity of metaphors, but, in order to make decisions and take action, we accept one interpretation or another as the truth.

For example, where a crime has been committed, the scenarios, called allegations, are put to the test at a trial. The defence puts one meaning on the facts; the prosecution another and whichever has the most sway is declared the truth. In countries where trials include juries to represent public opinion, the meaning that is accepted as truth, is seen as the result of consensus and has the weight of a majority decision. In our country, which does not use the jury system, judges have to weigh up the evidence to make decisions.

Making a judgment is an onerous task as no one knows with absolute certainty. That is why we have recourse to appeal at higher levels, even in countries where juries are used. Thus we demonstrate that our understanding is relative. It can change from High Court to Supreme Court and needs our consent for our perceptions to be declared ‘the truth’.

In the end, what we accept as truth depends on consensus: if a meaning carries the weight of numbers or power, it becomes 'the truth'. It is this dependence on consensus that has made the public opinion poll the arbiter of truth; journalists, the administrators of the Eleventh Commandment; and imagologists more powerful than politicians.

Despite their power, however, journalists are unable to penetrate the inner sanctum of administrative functioning as is indicated by their demands for transparency – which Kundera regards as naïve:

TRANSPARENCY: A very common term in political and journalistic discourse in Europe. It means: the exposure of individual lives to public view – which sends us back to André Breton and his wish to live in a glass house in full view. The glass house: an old utopian idea and at the same time one of the most horrifying aspects of modern life. Axiom: the more opaque the affairs of State, the more transparent an individual's affairs must be; though it represents a public thing, bureaucracy is anonymous, secret, coded, inscrutable, whereas private man is obliged to reveal his health, his finances, his family situation, and if the mass media so decree, he will never again have a single moment of privacy either in love or in sickness or in death. The urge to violate another's privacy is

an age-old form of aggressivity that in our day is institutionalized (bureaucracy with its documents, the press with its reporters), justified morally (the right to know having become first among the rights of man), and poeticized (by the lovely French word *transperence*). (*The Art of the Novel*, p.150)

And the quest of the journalist for absolute truth, frustrated in the public sphere, is deflected from the public to the personal, to the individual in his/her private capacity, a realm in which categorical judgments will be made as private lives are subjected to the consensus of accepted moral values and modes of behaviour.

Journalists question the morality of actions; novelists, however, examine them as coping mechanisms. Novelists are interested in how characters make meaning of their lives in an uncertain existence. Facts are of interest to them only in so far as they illuminate a character's reason for being and her/his struggle for identity.

As Kundera explains:

The self is determined by the essence of its existential problem... To apprehend the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its existential problem...To grasp its existential code. (*The Art of the Novel*, p.29)

... the existential code is not examined *in abstracto*; it reveals itself progressively in the action, in the situations. (*The Art of the Novel*, 30)

The novel pursues understanding of being in a world that has become a particle in an ever-expanding universe.

In Kundera's words:

... I thought of the fate of Descartes' famous formulation: man as "master and proprietor of nature." Having brought off miracles in science and technology, this "master and proprietor" is suddenly realizing that he owns nothing and is master neither of nature (it is vanishing, little by little, from the planet), nor of History (it has escaped him), nor of himself (he is led by the irrational forces of his soul). But if God has gone and man no longer master, then who is master? The planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is – the unbearable lightness of being. (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 41)

While the novelist objectively contemplates the paradox of existence, the journalist is subjectively involved in it. As journalists are in the karmic world, embroiled in its uncertainty, the Eleventh Commandment has become their weapon against the relativity of truth. What is a philosophical inquiry for the novelist is for the journalist, a search for absolute truth.

In the real world, we are impelled by our existential code to search for certainty; in the novel, however, we may pursue the 'wisdom of uncertainty.' (*The Art of the Novel*, p.7)

If we took the events surrounding Y (the Health Minister) and placed them in a novel, we would not be concerned to verify or deny facts. Our concern would be to discover and establish Y's (our heroine's) existential code. Let us assume it is her desire for acknowledgment as a pre-eminent personage in order to overcome the noxious influence of having been brought up in a racist society, with its reduction of people of colour to second class citizenship. The novelist, searching for understanding, will then explore the vicissitudes of Y's life in her struggle for proper recognition and respect.

He will search for understanding through examination of the circumstances of her life. He does not examine apodictic facts, he examines the character in the situations in which she finds herself.

But the journalist, as headlines concerning the Health Minister reveal, is an opportunist dependent on sensationalism. He uses apodictic fact i.e. isolated fact divorced from context, in order to present a startling picture that will capture immediate attention and sell newspapers. He deals with the here and now. Driven by the need to make an immediate and compelling impression on the public mind, he does not hesitate to blame and shame. Consequently, what he presents is not the whole truth and nothing but the truth; it is simply a startling montage of isolated facts.

The novelist and the journalist are driven by different needs. The journalist needs to make an immediate and powerful impression; but the novelist attempts to

illustrate life in all its complexity and the struggle of the individual to make meaning of existence. In this way the novelist makes his contribution to human knowledge and humane understanding.

A novelist's search is a search for understanding from within, from subjective consciousness, the heart of relativity. It is a search for understanding that does not lead to moral judgment.

A journalist, however:

- looks for simple, incontrovertible 'truth' and finds apodictic fact -- truth detached from context;
- assumes that s/he is objective and makes categorical judgments;
- focuses on moral rectitude (unlike the novelist who focuses on the vicissitudes of being-in-the world);
- requires commitment to social welfare, while the novelist invites us to contemplate the unbearable lightness of being.

"The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think.' That is the novel's eternal truth." (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 18/30)

Conclusion

When I began this paper, I mentioned some of the coincidences that gave rise to it. One coincidence that I did not mention was that my neighbour, knowing I

admire and respect Archbishop Desmond Tutu, lent me her copy of *Tutu as I know him*, which I read in the midst of my discovery of Kundera.

The Archbishop and Kundera have both gained their insights from experiences in the oppressive uniformity of, and conformity to, totalitarian conditions.

For Kundera, in a situation from which God has withdrawn, there is no absolute knowledge, no dichotomy of good and evil, no truth – existence is ruled by uncertainty. The lightness of being, in its fearsome ambiguity, is as oppressive as it is liberating and leaves the individual free to be responsible/irresponsible; faithful/unfaithful; to rise/fall; in her/his efforts to find a way of being in arbitrary existence.

In reading *Tutu as I know him* and having listened to the Archbishop in various TV interviews, I believe that he has found – in the same institutionalised conventions that Kundera questions – a freedom which in Kundera's universe is ambiguous as it accompanies God's departure from the world. As God remains with the Archbishop, for him, the human universe maintains its duality of good and evil.

Oddly enough, however, he also recognises the relativity of truth in the world. As Justice Edward Cameron explains:

In his lecture at King's College, London, on Thursday 22 January 2004, he (the Archbishop) gave the key: sycophancy, he said, is fatal to freedom. Sycophancy is the

business of servile flattery, of toadying to power. We cannot toady to political power any more than we can submit ourselves unquestioningly to derived convention in morality. Unexamined invocation of immoral moralism is a form of toadying to power. And in both spheres, Desmond Tutu calls us to better. Tutu's life has questioned power, and it has questioned received moral precepts. In embracing full human citizenship for gays and lesbians, and in insisting on full justice in a sexually-transmitted epidemic, Tutu Offers us a vision of true individual autonomy.⁶

The Archbishop, it seems, has found a way to reconcile absolute truth with relative truth, compassion with action, dharma with karma, and has resolved for himself the paradox of existence.

Having abstracted the basic significance of religious conventions and having found the human and humane essences of their formulations, he has risen above their taken-for-granted-ness into a sphere in which faith in God and religion have fundamental (not fundamentalist) meaning, and truth is not ambiguous. He has discovered a way to be that is anchored in community and one absolute truth – life is precious. For him, *Motho ke Motho ka Batho* is not kitsch; it is his way of being-in-

⁶ Justice Edward Cameron, "Speaking Against Silence," *Tutu as I know him: on a personal note*, ed. Lavinia Crawford-Browne, Umuzi (Random House): Houghton, Johannesburg, 2006, pp. 208

the-world and it cannot be consigned to the back of consciousness.

As Pieter-Dirk Uys puts it:

“Desmond Tutu has proved one thing. Practice makes perfect. You practise humanity long enough, you become a perfect human being.”⁷

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KARMA

When people say, 'It is my karma,' they are usually referring to a causal connection between action and consequence and are looking at karma in terms of reward or punishment.

But karma means act, action, performance so why the shift in emphasis to consequences?

I believe it is because consequences help us understand the nature of the choices for action that we make. As our choices are based on imperfect knowledge, there are always unforeseen consequences and there can be no guarantee that we have made the right choices. Our actions, therefore, represent leaps of faith and we get things 'right' or 'wrong'; but even belief in the 'rightness'/'wrongness' of our actions and judgments cannot be taken for granted.

Nevertheless we believe and that is what Hindus call *maya* (illusion), mistaking relative for absolute truth.

Though defined as act, action, performance, karma incorporates choice based on uncertainty, and points to the ambiguity of our actions and of our existence. The human desire for finiteness in an infinite universe is paradoxical. The mystery of our existence makes it impossible for worldly truth to be anything but relative. So we cannot avoid karma. And karma becomes the tool

by which to examine the complexity of being in the world.

In our worldly existence, we have created superstructures over uncertainty and mystery to give meaning and stability to our existence. Naming, classifying and categorising give fixity and order to the conduct of our lives and provide us with the alphabet to make sense of our world and the universe. We rely on names, classes and categories for the truth of our beliefs. Though such definition does not represent absolute knowledge, we nevertheless use the term 'categorical' synonymously with 'absolute'.

But as worldly truth is relative not absolute, our ability to classify reflects not only the ability to interpret, but also a propensity to misinterpret and therein lies karma - choice and action based on incomplete knowledge, on ultimate ignorance.