

## Rayda Jacobs: An Overview

Leslie Marx

In Rayda Jacobs' collection of short stories, *The Middle Children*, published in 1994, she presents a series of interconnected stories and sketches that begin with the forced departure of the young mixed-race woman, Sabah Solomon, for exile in Canada and ends with Sabah's partial emotional adoption of her new country as she is about to cast her vote in the Canadian elections. Between these two points on a journey through separation, loss, yearning and questioning acceptance, Jacobs gives us sharply observed stories of the "middle children" of the Western Cape. One of the most remarkable aspects of these stories is her command of different voices and points of view; different political and personal stances towards South Africa during the struggle years, and as it looks towards liberation. Difference is figured especially in the use of dialects and accents, vividly capturing the varieties of spoken English and, by implication, the varieties of people that go to make up the rich tapestry of the Western Cape.

The shifts in mood of each story also contribute to the kaleidoscopic sense of the collection as a whole – from the part-comic, part-pathetic tale of Patty Gonzales and her search for the *doekoem* that will keep her philandering lover at her side, to the moving exploration of multiple inversions of race and class in "I Count the Bullets Sometimes," and the painful rituals of sexuality, exacerbated by the rules governing sexuality under apartheid in "Miss Pretorious," "Boundaries" and "The Bet."

Weaving through all this diversity is the terrible longing for home, captured especially in the sketch "For the Smell of the Sea." Challenged by a group of people as to why she wants to come back to South Africa, Sabah answers, "For the smell of the sea.... For the mist over Table Mountain....For *sourfig konfyt*. For the hawkker with the four missing front teeth, shouting, 'Merem, lovely *naartjies* -- HIV positively good!" Accused of romanticising Cape Town, Sabah is insistent: "I left my soul at the foot of Table Mountain. I want it back." Later in the scene, she makes the point that it is precisely the passionate engagement that has led to this argument -- to the attack on her as part of the "chicken run" -- that she misses: "I'm sorry," Ezz said. "We

shouldn't have attacked you like this." "You didn't attack me. This is the language I know. What I miss. Why I want to come back" (1994: 144-5).

The contrasts between Sabah in Canada and Sabah in South Africa is one of the focuses of the very funny story, "Billie Can't Poo." Billie is the Canadian focaliser of the story, trying to reconcile her image of the distant, reserved Sabah whom she knows in Canada, with the uninhibited and much-beloved woman back in Cape Town. The story is filled with the energy that marks Sabah's family. Their communal rituals are filled with warmth, laughter, food and hospitality. There is a breezy openness to life, notably symbolised by attitudes towards the body. Billie suffers constipation on her arrival in Cape Town. Instead of a closed, contained, and discreet response to her affliction, however, here in Cape Town among family and friends Billie's problem becomes a source of concern for everyone. Finally, Sabah's father's home-brewed ginger beer does the trick -- only too well -- and Billie is forced to throw decorum to the winds and relieve herself on a mountain pass. The symbolic Rabelaisian qualities of the story are irresistible, and work in poignant harmony with the underlying pain as the departure from Cape Town leaves Sabah once more withdrawn and silent.

The sense of place for Capetonians is very dearly held -- Jacobs conveys that sense by bringing its sights, smells and people to life, but also evoking, very powerfully, the horror that haunts that beauty under apartheid.

The crossing of boundaries is central to Rayda Jacobs' two subsequent novels, *Eyes of the Sky*, and *The Slave Book*, historical romances that begin the process of uncovering and recovering the slave history of the Cape for narrative fiction. Zoë Wicomb has written of the "postmodern effacement of history [that] stretches back to the very memory of our origins ...." She suggests that "[t]his failure or inability to represent our history in popular forms and consequently the total erasure of slavery from the folk memory presumably has its roots in shame: shame for our origins in slavery, shame for the miscegenation, and shame, as colonial racism became institutionalised, for being black, so that with the help of our European names we have lost all knowledge of our Xhosa, Indonesian, East African, or Khoi origins" (1998: 99-100).

One of the aims of Jacobs' work is to return to those origins and to revalue them, placing both slavery and miscegenation at the heart of her novels, giving us heroes who are slaves and of mixed blood. Turning to the genre of historical romance, she plays on the borders between fact and fiction, history and narrative and offers verification of André Brink's notion that such play may shape our consciousness, may act on the world, and free our imaginations from being victim to circumstance. Thus Jacobs incorporates the juxtaposition of historical, factual epigraph with fictional dramatisation, giving flesh and blood to the facts.

What is also important about the choice of historical romance is that this is by definition a genre that depends on certain kinds of characterisation, certain kinds of action and the particular use of place. R.W.B.Lewis's famous description of romance as a genre will serve for the moment: characters drawn in bold lines, an emphasis on plot, and a strong sense of landscape, all of which push the narrative towards the symbolic and allegorical. Northrop Frye characterises romance in terms of heroes, heroines and villains who all bear the imprint of the extraordinary, who are larger than life and who become the object of our deepest desires and fears. Romance is also marked by a space for fantasy and clear-cut moral structures. Thus, in *The Slave Book*, Sangora, Somiela, and Harman are not the ordinary folk of social realism, even though their social milieu is strongly evoked and the recovery of historical fact is key to the political thrust of the novel.

Just as key, though, is the romantic aura, the glamour, the recovery of a magical world of brave heroes and beautiful heroines -- but not with blue eyes and blond hair. The possibilities for romantic adventure are figured in new terms. The exploration of mixed-blood identity complicates this revision of romance -- we don't have simple inversion: 'for white read black.' In the figure of Harman, for white, read mixed-blood. In the valorisation of mixed racial identity, in a re-writing and erasing of the shame that Wicomb talks about, we have Harman as hero, as agent, as canny, brave, and desirable. Although the moral categories are clear in the novel, Jacobs avoids simplification, notably through the character of Andries, villainous in many ways, but also simply ignorant, someone who in some ways appears educable. His wife and daughter also have their moments of humanity.

In addition, place is handled with interesting ambiguity: the Wynberg vineyards are marked by

violence and injustice *and* by burgeoning love; the Hantam is the location of the beloved farm, of belonging and ownership, but also the place of murder; Hangklip is the scene of destitution and squalor, but also of the tying of an unbreakable bond between the man of mixed blood, Harman, and the man of pure blood, Sangora of Java.

In *Sachs Street*, Rayda Jacobs has returned to the finely observed realism of *The Middle Children*. She merges the not-too-distant past with the much-more-recent present in the story of Khadidja Daniels, a story which engages with the crises of history and identity confronting this one woman and with the ways in which her experience mirrors so much of South Africa's struggle towards self-understanding and the possibilities of hope and renewal. The novel moves between the first-person narrative of the young Khadidja growing up on Sachs Street, the third-person narrative of the adult Khadidja and her painful negotiations with her identity at multiple levels, and the journal entries of the protagonist. The self-reflexive focus on story-telling is central to the constitution of identity in this novel.

The novel ends in 1994 with the election of a new government, reflecting in the national story the hope that finally invests Khadidja's life in the individual story. Once more, the sense of place is important: the sense that roots are planted in streets and houses, in the smell and sights and sounds, the names of places as much as in the hearts of the people who live there, who form the community that shapes a sense of self. Even so apparently small a move as the one Khadidja makes from Sachs Street to Rosmead Avenue takes on personal significance as part of the struggle constantly to define and re-define the self in the growth towards understanding of one's self, one's past. Once that move is made, communication must take place through driving distances, through telephone calls, not through simply running over to the next house. Distances affect identity.

Infusing this sense of place are the complex relationships lived by the community: the uncovering of the secrets of the past, which, given South Africa's tortured history, are invariably inflected through racialised encounter. The novel explores the effects of this on self-perception especially through the metaphor and the reality of women's hair. Indeed, the valorisation of Khadidja's hair becomes a key image of the movement from her childhood pain at the prejudices

expresses against darker skin and curly hair, towards an ability to rejoice in her life at the end of the novel, where we find her, fairy-like, in a forested garden with her hair tumbling down her back.

Central to *Sachs Street* is the issue of religious identity. The historical novels sought to paint the Muslim community and the faith of Islam in complex vibrant tones. So, too, in her latest novel, Jacobs opens up the world of the Muslim community to those who may know very little about it, except insofar as a biased press perpetrates stereotypes. The novel offers a salutary inversion: Muslim faith and point of view are presented as multivalent, and totally resistant to the simplifications to which the media tend to reduce them. Against this we have the obsessive fanaticism of a marginal Christian fringe, in the form of Khadidja's unstable lover and his religious sect: a reminder of the need to register multiplicity and diversity as the reality of our society rather than stereotype and singular simplicity.

### References

- Jacobs, Rayda. 1994. *The Middle Children*. Toronto: Second Story Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Eyes of the Sky*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *The Slave Book*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. *Sachs Street*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- Wicomb, Zoë. 1998. "Shame and Identity: the case of the coloured in South Africa," in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy 1970-1995*, pp. 91-107, (eds) Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.