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*Title:*

***On Reconciliation and Its Representations in Select  
Plays by Reza De Wet, Girish Karnad and Griselda  
Gambaro***

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*For my life partner, Hichem,*

*My dearest parents, El Mekki and Rachida,*

*And whoever threw a positive word on my way.*

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## Abstract

This dissertation entitled, *On Reconciliation and its Representations in Select Plays by Reza de Wet, Girish Karnad and Griselda Gambaro* explores the representations of reconciliation in modern drama through a reading of select plays by playwrights Reza De Wet, Girish Karnad, and Griselda Gambaro. ‘On Reconciliation and its Representations’ can be broadly conceived as a contribution to literary scholarship on how reconciliation is imagined and represented in literary works notably in societies with a traumatic heritage. Constructing my main argument through thinking of reconciliation as *any attempt to subvert hegemonies/hierarchies and imagine alternative realities* in works of literature, the study questions the relevance of literary works in disseminating patterns of inclusion, compromise, acceptance of the other, embrace, and/or exclusion. Even though the study adds to previous research on reconciliation, it breaks from earlier approaches to it which fall under the category of a ‘literature on forgiveness’ for the domestic and intimate forms of reconciliation they unveil in works of literature. It argues instead for a kind of reconciliation as a ‘collective experience’ and one which molds itself in social contexts where trauma and violence as instigated by stigmas defined by religion, ethnicity, race, caste, and social class or power are predominant. Framed within a constellative account of critical approaches to text *in context*, and through viewing literature as a locus of imagining different realities and a space to deconstruct ‘imagined communities’, I investigate reconciliation and its representations by analyzing six plays which are written at the backdrop of violent and traumatic social realities namely Reza De Wet’s *African Gothic* and *Good Heavens*, Girish Karnad’s *Talé Danda*, and *Bali: the Sacrifice*, and Griselda Gambaro’s *Del sol naciente* and *La malasangre*. Religious and inter-caste violence in India, the apartheid trauma and the difficulty of transition into a democratic multicultural society in South Africa, the aftermath of a decade long dictatorial whirlpool in Argentina, and the repression or marginalization ushering from it are the kinds of traumatic experiences and social distortions the playwrights studied in this research are responding to. I argue that in each of these plays, there is an imagining of a different reality, a dismantling of hierarchies and hegemonies, a crossing of boundaries between different ‘others’ (social, racial, religious, and caste), empowerment of margins, and a ‘settlement of accounts’ between victim and perpetrator. After the introduction which situates the research within a growing tradition of interest in reconciliation and literary representation, chapter one entitled *On Reconciliation Between Context and Literary Representation* sets the research argument in negotiation with a number of critical insights to text *in context*, and to the role of literature as a source of empowerment and ‘symbolic resistance’. In each of the chapters which follow, there is a venture into understanding the imaginings or representations of reconciliation through an excavation in history and culture, and through providing an interpretation to the texts in ways that reveal how the three playwrights view literature as an abode to imagine alternative realities/worlds and interrogate culture itself.

### Keywords/Concepts:

Reconciliation; representation; religion; caste; ethnomania; power, margin; class; hegemony; conflict; trauma; othering; repression.

## Résumé

La présente dissertation intitulée, *La Réconciliation et sa Représentation dans les œuvres de Reza de Wet, Girish Karnad et Griselda Gambaro*, a pour objectif de mettre en exergue l'analyse de la notion de « réconciliation » dans le théâtre moderne, plus précisément, dans les textes sélectionnés de De Wet, Girish Karnad et Griselda Gambaro. Cette recherche est une contribution aux études menées déjà sur la problématique de la réconciliation. Notre objectif est d'étudier comment ce concept apparaît dans les textes d'auteurs dont les sociétés ont fait expériences d'un trauma à travers leurs Histoire. A ce titre, la réconciliation peut être définie comme étant une tentative orientée envers la déconstruction des hiérarchies, des structures hégémoniques, tout en envisageant des réalités alternatives dans les textes littéraires. Bien que notre recherche, comme déjà précisé, ait pour but de s'aligner aux études sur la réconciliation, elle, néanmoins, diffère dans son approche. Contrairement aux efforts empiriques entrepris précédemment, objet de notre recherche est de montrer que le concept de réconciliation peut être dissocié de son cadre expérimental qui est collectif. Ainsi, il est étroitement ancré dans un contexte marqué par des tensions d'ordre ethnique, religieux, racial ou social. Notre hypothèse est basée sur une vision du texte littéraire comme étant un lieu d'imaginer des réalités différentes et déconstruire des communautés imaginaires. De ce fait, la réconciliation va donc être examinée dans *African Gothic* et *Good Heavens* de Reza De Wet; *Talé Danda* et *Bali: the Sacrifice* Girish de Karnad, et enfin *Del sol naciente* et *La malasangre* de Griselda Gambaro. Nous tenterons de montrer que la violence du religieux et inter caste en Inde, le système d'Apartheid et son impact dévastateur sur la construction d'une société démocratique et multiculturelle en Afrique du Sud, ainsi que l'apparence d'un system dictatorial et répressif en Argentine, constituent tous des expériences traumatiques sur lesquelles les écrivains vont s'appuyer pour produire leurs textes. Dans des pièces sélectionnées, il y a une tentative d'envisager d'autres réalités, de déconstruire des hiérarchies, de violer les frontières entre les différents ordres établis (social, religieux, et raciale), et enfin renforcer les marges et régler les comptes entre la victime et le tortionnaire. Pour mettre en lumière ces points cités, notre recherche va s'articuler en premier lieu sur une introduction visant à ancrer les travaux choisis dans un cadre théorique choisi en relation avec la thématique de la réconciliation et ses représentations théâtrales. Le premier chapitre se basera sur l'analyse des textes dans leurs contextes qui servira à relever l'intersection de l'expression dramatique et la condition humaine jugée incessamment changeante. Dans les chapitres qui suivent, on tentera d'appréhender la réconciliation à travers l'histoire et la culture qui va nous permettre de montrer le texte littéraire comme étant un moyen d'imaginer des réalités et des mondes alternatifs.

## ملخص

هذه الأطروحة التي تحمل عنوان "حول المصالحة وتمثيلها في مسرحيات مختارة لرضا دي ويت وجيريش كارناد وجريسيلدا جامبارو" تستكشف تمثيلات المصالحة في الدراما الحديثة من خلال قراءة مسرحيات مختارة للكاتبة الجنوب أفريقية رضا دي ويت الكاتب الهندي جيريش كارناد والكاتبة الأرجنتينية جريسيلدا جامبارو. يمكن تصور هذه الأطروحة على نطاق واسع كمساهمة في الدراسات الأدبية حول كيفية تخيل تمثيلات المصالحة في الأعمال الأدبية وبشكل خاص في المجتمعات ذات الإرث المؤلم. من خلال تصور المصالحة على أنها "أي محاولة لتفكيك التسلسلات الهرمية وإيديولوجيات الهيمنة وتخيل حقائق بديلة" في الأعمال الأدبية، فإن هذه الدراسة تتساءل عن أهمية الأعمال الأدبية في نشر أنماط المصالحة والتوفيق وتقبل الآخر والانفتاح نحو الاختلاف الاجتماعي أي كان عرقي، اثني، ديني أو طبقي. على الرغم من أن هذه الدراسة تنوي أن تضيف إلى الأبحاث السابقة حول المصالحة، إلا أنها تخرج عن المقاربات السابقة لها والتي تندرج تحت فئة "أدبيات التسامح"، وتجادل بدلاً من ذلك لصالح نوع من المصالحة على أنها "تجربة جماعية" والتي تشكل نفسها في سياقات اجتماعية حيث تسود الصدمة والعنف والاذان تحرض عليهما الوصمات التي يحددها الدين والعرق والطائفة والطبقة الاجتماعية وقمع السلطة. ضمن إطار نظري للمقاربات النقدية للنص والسياق، ومن خلال اعتبار الأدب كمساحة لتخيل حقائق وعوالم مختلفة، أقوم بدراسة المصالحة وتمثيلاتها من خلال تحليل ست مسرحيات مكتوبة في سياق خلفيات من الحقائق الاجتماعية العنيفة والصادمة. العنف الديني والعنف بين الطوائف في الهند، وصدمة الفصل العنصري وصعوبة الانتقال إلى مجتمع ديمقراطي متعدد الثقافات في جنوب إفريقيا، وعقد من الدوامة الديكتاتورية في الأرجنتين والقمع أو التهميش الناجم عنها هي أنواع التجارب المؤلمة والتشوّهات الاجتماعية التي يستجيب لها الكتاب المسرحيون المشار إليهم في هذا البحث. هذه الدراسة تزعم أنه في كل من هذه المسرحيات، هناك تخيل لواقع مختلف، وتفكيك التسلسلات الهرمية، وكسر الحدود بين "الأخرين" المختلفين (الاجتماعي والعنصري والديني والطبقي)، وتمكين المهمشين من حقوقهم و "تسوية" الحسابات بين الضحية والجاني. بعد المقدمة التي تضع البحث ضمن دراسات سابقة للمصالحة والتمثيل الأدبي، في كل فصل من الفصول التالية، هناك محاولة لفهم تخيلات أو تمثيلات المصالحة من خلال التنقيب في التاريخ والثقافة، ومن خلال تقديم تفسير للنصوص بطرق تكشف كيف ينظر الكتاب المسرحيون الثلاثة إلى الأدب كمساحة لتخيل حقائق /مجتمعات بديلة

## **Note on Abbreviations**

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the primary texts. Full bibliographical details are provided in the upcoming chapters:

AG	<i>African Gothic</i>
GH	<i>Good Heavens</i>
TD	<i>Talé Danda</i>
BS	<i>Bali: the Sacrifice</i>
LM	<i>La malasangre</i>
SN	<i>Del sol naciente</i>

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## General Introduction

In a tired, disillusioned, cynical world which has hurt so frequently and so grievously... reconciliation will always be a long and complex process.<sup>1</sup>

In his approach to Eric Hobsbawm's reveries about the disorderly nature of late modernity and the disruptions characteristic of the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which are presented in-depth in his *The Age of Extremes* (1994), Jock Young says that Hobsbawm talks about an era during which "a world of seeming certainty was replaced by one of pluralism, debate, controversy, and ambiguity."<sup>2</sup> Relating this to late century social changes in the aftermath of WWII, the Cold War, the New world order, and the debates over democracy, and nation-building, he further speaks about a coming of age or a type of society where commentators "of all political persuasions talk of 'the compass' failing, where each of the seeming certainties of society - the family, work, the nation, and even affluence itself - became questioned."<sup>3</sup> Speaking about a 'failing compass' is motivated by, according to Young and as seen through Hobsbawm and several other critics, by the seemingly irreconcilable realities which came to define many world societies after long periods of instability, and in the aftermath of continuous debates about national reconciliation which oscillate between a desire to reconstruct/restore the past and a hope for more promising future realities.

Hobsbawm's and Young's views, shared by many others, hint upon the idea of societies and communities in continuous flux, a change in order and shape, and a kind of a late modern society where questions about to cultural otherness (with its ethnic, religious, racial, linguistic, and identity aspects), social inclusion and exclusion, xenophobia, trauma, marginalization and

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, foreword to *Pathways to Reconciliation: Between Theory and Practice*, by Philipa Rothfield et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Jock Young, *The Exclusive Society: Social Exclusion, Crime and Difference in Late Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1999), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Young, *The Exclusive Society*, 2.

political repression are permeative. They comment about a time during which writers, as they have always done, chose to write back to their cultures and societies, criticizing wrongdoings, ideologies, and hegemonies, and in a way, interrogating culture itself. Contexts as such usually motivate an envisioning of alternative realities, inclusive societies, and more orderly experiences in works of literature. They, likewise, motivate imaginings of pathways towards reconciliation between past and present, self and other, individual and society...etc., rendering, thereby, 'reconciliation' a preponderant theme in the contemporary literary scene.

### **1. Conceptualizing Reconciliation**

Reconciliation, by that means, is always thought of as a possible trajectory when periods of conflict, either between individuals or groups, or when moments of social or historical disruption take place. After periods of state violence or repression, genocides, periods of religiously or ethnically motivated conflicts, or when eruptions, caused by stigmas which can be triggered by ethnicity, race, religion, or caste, are commonplace, exclusion, repression and marginalization come to feature group or social relationships. In such contexts, reconciliation is thought of as both a process and an expected outcome when conflicting parties can be said to have overcome their past prejudices or wrongs, or when an improvement in the way people relate to each other can be observed.<sup>4</sup>

Defining reconciliation and how it is theorized about across different disciplines or how various societies conceive it is not of a focal interest or practical value to this study. It is likewise beyond the scope of this research. However, a brief account of how the concept is defined or

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<sup>4</sup> In an introduction to a study on the concept of reconciliation in non-western cultural traditions, Paul A. Komesaroff compares the Arab concept of *sulha* or *musalaha* which "was applied to resolve disputes in the absence of a legal system," and which was later adopted by some other countries integrating it "into the judicial system," and reconciliation in Indian and Buddhist cultures which emerges as a "hermeneutical exercise requiring dialogue with the self and the application of interpretative skills through self-purification, abstinence and fasting, meditation and pilgrimages." (In Rothfield et al., *Pathways to Reconciliation*, 1-2). In Buddhism specifically, as the author asserts through quoting Paul Williams, reconciliation translates into a desire of connecting opposites or conflicting interests in order to achieve communion where "heart and soul, subjectivity and objectivity, become fused into one whole." Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 1989, quoted in Rothfield et al., *Pathways to Reconciliation*, 2.

thought of as a resolution during periods of conflict, trauma or crises would give more relevance to our approach to it when we move to consider its representations in the selected texts. This helps us understand that despite its “too far-reaching and diffuse”<sup>5</sup> nature with “little agreement on its definition,”<sup>6</sup> reconciliation, and as recent history confirmed, “remains a potent force.”<sup>7</sup>

That being said, when it comes to theorizations about reconciliation in areas of politics, law or transitional justice, we are often made to visualize its trajectories or achievability through ideals like forgiveness, reparation, amnesty, truth-telling, punishment, justice, or apology. In their critical work on reconciliation, its process, and instruments and relating it primarily to situations which witness “the aftermath of civil war or the end of a brutally oppressive regime,” David Bloomfield et al., define reconciliation as an “over-arching process which includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness, healing and so on.”<sup>8</sup> In more intimate domestic contexts, it also means, according to the authors, “finding a way to live alongside former enemies – not necessarily to love them, or forgive them, or forget the past in any way, but to coexist with them, to develop the degree of cooperation necessary to share our society with them, so that we all have better lives together than we have had separately.”<sup>9</sup>

In his “Why Reconciliation?” and based on conclusions drawn from the scholarly work of (Lederach, 1997); (Kriesberg, 1998); and (Bar-Tal, 2000);<sup>10</sup> and in relation to societies with a traumatic heritage as instigated by “interethnic, interracial, or interreligious conflicts,” Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov concludes that reconciliation means “restoring friendship and harmony between the rival sides after conflict resolution, or transforming relations of hostility and resentment to friendly and harmonious ones.”<sup>11</sup> Viewed as such, however different language

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<sup>5</sup> Rothfield et al., *Pathways to Reconciliation*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Bloomfield et al., *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Rothfield et al., 2.

<sup>8</sup> Bloomfield et al., 12.

<sup>9</sup> Bloomfield et al., 12.

<sup>10</sup> Full bibliographical details are provided in the bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, ed., *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

dictionaries define it and whichever motivations are there behind speculating about it, reconciliation can be defined as a desire for improvement, a better future, healing, or the overcoming of past prejudices, supported, in most cases, by laws or legal processes.

Added to this political, peace-related or restorative understanding of reconciliation, reconciliation can be also thought of as a resolution in several other ways according to the situations which motivate the need for reconciliation. During moments of alienation and estrangement both with self and other, individuals may experience the anxiety to reconcile themselves with the realities surrounding them. In this sense, it can be seen as an ontological or existential necessity to reconcile oneself with truth, existence, or a way to find meaning among fragments, amidst dissonance. In exilic and displaced moments, reconciling oneself with land and one's origins emerges as a desire to seek communion with past realities which are lost or forgotten. When wrongdoing takes place at the interpersonal, intimate, or domestic level, reconciliation turns around also a desire for, among other hopes, atonement or forgiveness. Margaret Urban Walker argues about it as a 'moral repair', a communal responsibility, and a desire to reconstruct relations after wrongdoing.<sup>12</sup>

Seeking communion with the Divine through sustaining a well-defined path amidst the ambivalences of the religious can be also seen to be motivated by a desire for reconciliation of self and God. Linking the concept to Christian theology, Rowan Williams argues that reconciliation emerges as a longing for "the experience of being reconciled, being accepted, being held (however precariously) in the grace of God."<sup>13</sup> Related to William's argument is John de Gruchy's emphasis that reconciliation from a religious point view, and from a Christian doctrine more specifically, is perceived through the lens of "'salvation', 'redemption' or

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 2.

‘atonement’” and is understood as triumphing over alienation from God through “love and grace” and through saving “humanity from its bondage to sin and its consequences.”<sup>14</sup>

This brief review of the concept leads us to a point of appraisal. We come to understand that, despite its “ambivalent character,”<sup>15</sup> reconciliation remains a *desideratum* and ‘wishful thinking’, a pathway towards order, stability and dialogue. Or, as Habermas puts it in his *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, and whether past or present, “as a process involving communication across the obstacles presented by – among other things – culture, race, religion and politics,” despite the fact that such communication is “often difficult, unpredictable, ambiguous and fragile.”<sup>16</sup> As it includes the pathway through which “a society moves from a divided past to a shared future.”<sup>17</sup> The thinking about reconciliation this study is interested in investigating in each of the plays resonates with these last perceptions of it given the fact that I am interested in reading its representations in social contexts where exclusion, division and othering as instigated by stigmas related to religion, power, caste, social class and ethnicity are predominant. In that sense, reconciliation “encompasses a broader field than conflict resolution alone,” and relates to the “role of cultural, religious and other factors in promoting or obstructing dialogues, and the sensitivity of such dialogues to local variables.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, different nations have appealed for different kinds of reconciliation as both an aspiration or ‘wishful thinking’ and an ethic for coexistence and peace: post-1995 Bosnia, post-Holocaust Germany, post-genocide Rwanda, post-trauma societies like South Africa, Argentina, Algeria, post-1989 India, among many other cases, aspired for safer and more harmonious societies for future generations. Perceived mostly within the contours of the political and the legal because conflicts or traumas generally acquire political overtones when

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<sup>14</sup> John de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 45-48.

<sup>15</sup> Rothfield et al., *Pathways to Reconciliation*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed., Borradori, G. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 38, quoted in Rothfield et al., *Pathways to Reconciliation*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Bloomfield et al., *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Rothfield et al., 11.

they grow in intensity and become a public concern over stability and security, reconciliation as an ideal becomes part of many debates over how conflicting groups/individuals which previously excluded/othered other groups and individuals within the confines of one social setting or cultural fabric, can come to terms with their mistakes or transgressions. These debates, becoming more prominent with South Africa's move towards considering reconciliation as a pathway to peace and democracy in the aftermath of the apartheid regime, received more attention in politics, theology, and transitional/restorative justice, with very little attention, however, granted to it in the world of literature and literary criticism.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine how writers imagine or represent this 'wished for reconciliation' in works of literature. It takes the position that literature, mostly in conflict/trauma-riven societies and in "a tired, disillusioned, cynical world which has hurt so frequently and so grievously" as Desmond Tutu asserts in the epigraph above, offers space where possibilities towards reconciliation can be imagined. Keeping this in mind, this study delves into different representations of reconciliation as imagined by writers who are known for their active engagement with the traumatic and social history of their societies. Works of literature, as they constantly react to a shifting human condition, communicate different forms and representations of reconciliation which emerge in response to the socio-cultural realities which stir this thinking about reconciliation on the part of writers. In recent years, therefore, there is a significant concern over the relationship between literature and reconciliation or the possibility to use the literary space as an abode to both address and reconcile division. This thesis is a contribution to this literature, and sets out to explore reconciliation and its representations in select playtexts by the South African playwright Reza De Wet, the Indian playwright Girish Karnad, and the Argentinian playwright Griselda Gambaro as seen through issues related to caste, religion, ethnicity, power, political repression and social class.

## 2. On Reconciliation in Literature

Reconciliation was imagined and addressed differently in the works of different writers whether in fiction or drama. Very few critical studies, however, have been devoted to this theme and its representations in literature. It is from this gap, among others, that this study extracts its potency for the new insights it intends to generate towards understanding representations of reconciliation in works of literature. Despite this lack of scholarship, nonetheless; some exceptions are to be made.

Approaching it through the lens of the spiritual or theological,<sup>19</sup> Mark Williams's study of the autobiographical work of the Japanese writer Endo Shusaku in his *Endo Shusaku: A Literature of Reconciliation* (1999) takes a closer look at reconciliation between the personal and the divine. It looks into the writer's conflicted journey to reconcile his Japanese values and upbringing with his Catholic faith, his 'monotheistic West' with his 'polytheistic East' addressing the silences, rifts, and fluctuations rising along with it.<sup>20</sup>

Added to this religious glare at the concept and seen generally as a 'literature on forgiveness', some critical studies are concerned with examining forms of intimate/domestic or inter-personal reconciliation through the trajectory of 'forgiveness'. Studies of the sort include, among very few others, Sarah Beckwith's *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (2011), Melissa Schramm's *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* (2012), Gibson Hughes's *Forgiveness in Victorian Literature* (2016), Leah Whittington's *Renaissance Suppliants: Poetry, Antiquity, Reconciliation* (2016)<sup>21</sup> which focus mainly on addressing those aspects or forms of reconciliation which take place between individual

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<sup>19</sup> A large number of other studies on reconciliation from a religious perspective focus on the analysis of religious stories or religious archetypes (inspired mostly by Christian theology) and how their journeys can teach lessons about reconciliation with the divine, rather than seeing its imaginings through literary texts of individual writers.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Williams, *Endo Shusaku: A Literature of Reconciliation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>21</sup> Full bibliographical details are provided in the bibliography.

characters and which turn around feelings like remorse, atonement, and forgiveness.<sup>22</sup> Hughes's critical study, for example, provides insights into "how debates about the doctrines of the Atonement and Incarnation have implications for conceptions of forgiveness in familial and communal contexts."<sup>23</sup> In his *Poetics of Forgiveness*, Jill Scotts aims to fill in what he thinks a gap in the study of "forgiveness in Literary Studies." He agrees with Julie McGonegal who, in her study *The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness* (2009), contends that "literary works do invite us to imagine new possibilities in ways that judicial and other dispute resolution mechanisms cannot,"<sup>24</sup> and who emphasizes the role of literature in helping us "think through the personal and political complexities of forgiveness and reconciliation."<sup>25</sup> As such, Jill investigates reconciliation as forgiveness in a number of texts through investing with the "the semantic and extrasemantic rhetorical features of literary language" for he thinks that every literary text entertains "its own unique model of forgiving."<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, Frans van Dijkhuizen's *The Literary History of Reconciliation* (2018) is one of the most recent critical studies on reconciliation in works of literature. Dijkhuizen explores the theme as it is imagined or as it emerges from texts of both pre-modern and contemporary writers like John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and some of his other plays, McEwan Ian's *Atonement*, Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and some other texts representative of different cultural backgrounds and histories. His study is a literary history of reconciliation, and while Scott's 'poetics of forgiveness' chose to investigate

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<sup>22</sup> Here, it is worth noting that, apart from critical works emerging from the South African post-apartheid context which center around addressing reconciliation as an engagement with the cultural/racial 'other', most literary criticism is devoted to investigating the imaginings of reconciliation at the domestic/interpersonal level and with 'forgiveness' or 'atonement' as major themes.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Ludlow, Review of Forgiveness in Victorian Literature: Grammar, Narrative, and Community, by Gibson Hughes, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 21:1, 2016: 137.

<sup>24</sup> Julie McGonegal, *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2009), 13, quoted in Jill Scott, *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Cultural Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *A Poetics of Forgiveness*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Scott, 3.

the theme as it is informed by literary language and its rhetorics, Franz looks into forms of ‘interpersonal reconciliation’ investing with the domestic aspects of conflict in the belief that “intimate or familial reconciliation offers a crucial paradigm for imagining reconciliation in the political sphere.”<sup>27</sup> Based on his analysis of these texts, Dijkhuizen concludes that reconciliation, as he sees it represented in each of them, refers to “any scenario in which parties that were formerly in conflict with each other arrive – or attempt to arrive – at some form of peaceful coexistence, and commit themselves – or try to commit themselves – to sustaining this coexistence in the future.”<sup>28</sup>

A quick sketch of these scholarly approaches to the theme of reconciliation shows that most of them are produced over the last two decades during which, as I earlier indicated, more theorizations as inspired by the South African experience with reconciliation proliferated over the world.<sup>29</sup> While some critical studies approached its imaginings in the writings of specific authors, others engaged in producing literary anthologies of this concept through exploring writings by both classical and contemporary authors.

Therefore, most previous research into reconciliation in literature targets “small-scale”, interpersonal or domestic reconciliation (to borrow the term used by Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen in his study on reconciliation) which takes place “between two characters, one of whom has wronged or been wronged by the other – or at least feels that this is the case.”<sup>30</sup> Critical works of this sort are mostly concerned with exploring interpersonal reconciliation (between family members, between victim and wrongdoer, between lovers, in the form of self-transformation,

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<sup>27</sup> Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *A Literary History of Reconciliation: Power, Remorse and the Limits of Forgiveness* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, *A Literary History of Reconciliation*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> In the South African context, few critical studies have been devoted to the question of reconciliation despite its centrality in cultural and political debates. Still, Francesca Mussi’s recent study *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation* (2020), provides us with deep insights into how reconciliation is imagined by different writers from both sides of the cultural divide.

<sup>30</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, 5.

intergenerational reconciliation... etc.) which sheds light on issues such as forgiveness, remorse, contrition, repentance and oblivion as signs and measures of reconciliation.

### **3. Focus and Contribution of the Study**

This study sets out to continue this journey of highlighting how reconciliation is represented in literature, even though it intends to do it in a way that drifts from the previous insights into it. Even though it deals with playtexts which define their curves within the domestic sphere,<sup>31</sup> this study takes reconciliation from the intimate or domestic context to see how it finds its way out amidst a complex cycle of social hierarchies, hegemonic systems, different forms of religious, racial, and political exclusion, and in contexts where conflict and division are predominant. As such, there is an attempt to demonstrate in what way (s) the three writers use their texts to juxtapose opposed worldviews and desires in need of reconciliation, all set against the historical, cultural, and social realities informing each text and the aesthetics of each writer.

Sharing Franz's perspective that works of literature "play an important role in shaping the reconciliation paradigms available in a given culture," there is an attempt to understand how the three writers make use of literature to negotiate and represent these opposed narratives, and address their thoughts about reconciliation in conflict-ridden post-trauma societies by looking in details at the inclusion, compromise and syncretic patterns these dramatists bring to their texts and their characters. However, it is important to mention that this expectation at reconciliation persists as just an aspiration for the three playwrights and this goes in line with

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<sup>31</sup> This is the case because the three playwrights chose to invest with the dynamics of the domestic sphere in order to reflect upon issues of more complex nature. De Wet leads us into the details of the life of Afrikaner families, the relationships between siblings and parents, into their repressed desires and dreams to satirize the discourse of Afrikanerdom and its segregationist policies. Karnad constructs his views towards inter-caste/inter-religious conflicts through investing with court life, mother-sister-in-law conflicts and the complications of married life in *BS*, while a marriage issue directs the events in *TD*. The victimized characters (including women, daughters, mothers, servants and geishas) in *Gambaro* are locked in enclosed family spaces, and the intensity of their predicaments is conveyed through their fight against the authority of patriarchal fathers, and the machismo tyranny of other men within the context of both plays. As such, the proceso repressive regime is portrayed through family power relations.

the argument that “literary writers imagine reconciliation as longed for but never fully realized.”<sup>32</sup>

What sets the present study apart from previous studies on reconciliation in literature is my focus on investigating a kind of reconciliation that takes the form of a ‘collective experience’ where group fantasies, fears, and othering as informed by categories like race or ethnicity (in the case of the Afrikaners in South Africa), religion and caste (in the case of India), power and social class (in the case of Argentina) attempt to arrive at a point where their collectively, historically and communally held or inherited beliefs come face to face with the real world and its repressive need for dialogue and reconciliation. Reconciliation in literature, in this sense, foregrounds a desire on the part of the writer to arrange, settle, erect a bridge, give shape to experience, dismantle and subvert, shake and stabilize hierarchies defined by the way classes, races, religious ideologies or worldviews, and ethnic identities relate to each other in a manner of exclusion or othering and embrace.

My motives in writing this dissertation are threefold: first; in view of the fact that reconciliation is a timely topic given the distorted realities featuring our contemporary history, I wanted my research to contribute to our understanding of how literature (just like politics, laws and institutional policies) can help us disclose pathways towards ethics of reconciliation, togetherness and convivencia. Second; I want to address further pathways towards understanding reconciliation which drift from much earlier research about it which chose to unveil its representations through the trajectory of ‘forgiveness’. Third; my objective in this has also been to articulate other less studied facets in the writing philosophy of the three playwrights through choosing to situate their works within the traumatic, violent, and transitional social realities under which they emerged, to further address the positionality of the literary expression in regions where different forms of disruption are common and part of the regions’ history.

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<sup>32</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, *A Literary History of Reconciliation*, 21.

#### 4. Issue and Working Hypotheses

For the purpose of my study, therefore, I construct my argument through thinking that the three playwrights represent or imagine reconciliation through “subverting or dismantling hegemonic systems and hierarchies, and imagining alternative realities” in their texts. Instead of providing a definition of reconciliation the way the previous critical studies did, I chose to shift focus into exploring “how” writers present their visions and channel possibilities towards reconciliation in their texts. This, however, does not exclude the fact that this study agrees with the previously reviewed definitions of reconciliation which argue about it as desire for better future, communion, a resolution of conflict, reconstructing the past, hope for improvement in the human condition, restoring human relations, as a ‘moral repair’ and a wish for forgiveness and atonement.

And because any literary work “cannot be exhaustively analysed in terms of general codes and conventions, no matter how relentless the analyser,”<sup>33</sup> I chose to take a different path to understand how writers channel or speculate about different possibilities towards reconciliation, other than the trajectory of forgiveness or atonement addressed by the earlier cited critical studies. My argument is informed by the belief that ‘any failure to understand how power works, how hegemonies function, how social hierarchies remain relevant in informing violence and exclusion, and failing to understand the sources of victimization,’ as the playwrights seem to tell us, reconciliation will not be achievable. This morphs into a literary desire to raise the consciousness of people to the importance of dialogue, engagement with the social other and mutuality to the project of reconciliation. Having said this, there is an attempt to see how the playwrights ‘read against the grain’ of repressive ideologies, inherited hegemonies, religious

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<sup>33</sup> Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 46.

and ethnic mythologies, and historical forces which lie at the heart of the continuous victimization, repression and marginalization of people in their respective societies.

What is more, my way of thinking about reconciliation entails that the three playwrights don't envision to reconstruct, or recover a pre-existing reality or relationships, but imagine a different order from the one which existed before, one which can be constructed through reconciliation and dialogue. This argument about the pressing need for reconciliation is universal, always thought of as an alternative narrative in places or contexts where tension, violence, chaos, and exclusion persist. Still, I am reading it through investigating its imaginings in texts which respond to different cultural contexts with different forms of disruption, notably Reza De Wet's apartheid/post-apartheid South Africa, Girish Karnad's post Mandal Mandir India and Griselda Gambaro's post-proceso/Dirty War Argentina. Religious and inter-caste violence in India, the apartheid trauma and the difficulty of transition into a democratic multicultural society in South Africa, and the aftermath of a decade long dictatorial whirlpool in Argentina, are the kinds of socio-cultural disruptions the playwrights chosen in this research are responding to.

This is why, there is an interest in looking at the kinds of realities the writers are trying to spotlight, and how relevant is the past or history still to make sense of the present. In De Wet's plays, we encounter the legacy of a long history of repression and false claims to racial superiority which did nothing more than isolate the Afrikaner communities from mainstream South African culture. In Karnad, we are pulled into an aura of intra-religious, intercaste, and interreligious othering and exclusion, and with events reaching back to 12<sup>th</sup> century India and through tales about the past; we come to make sense of why the traumatic Mandal/Mandir incidents in the 1980s, for example, and the many others preceding/following them, took place. We end up understanding that similar forms of violence and trauma are still part of modern Indian culture and identity because the reasons behind them are never/or insufficiently

addressed, challenged, or interrogated. We equally meet a similar rhythm in Gambaro who, through choosing to historically distance the settings of many of her plays where dictatorship and power-informed violence have been rampant, leads us to understand that late modern Argentinian history and culture are not much different from 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina or Argentina of the 20s, 30s, during which similar forms of political repression, and victimization prevailed. So, these writers are writing back to both culture and history to trace the different motifs behind modern stigmas, seeing it as a necessary step towards reconciliation.

Likewise, and related to the previous point, there is a belief that in the social realities to which the writers are responding, there was no *status quo ante* to restore or return to, as the general definition of reconciliation usually tends to imply.<sup>34</sup> In each of these societies, division, exclusion, and animosity were always part of people's lives. The Afrikaner community has always professed itself of a cultural purity that needed, therefore, the apartheid state to preserve it. In the India Karnad is assessing, casteism and religious conflict have always been part of Indian life. Inter-caste exclusion and the sharp social divisions associated with it are still so much common as they were at the time the Vedic justifications of the necessity to follow a Varna system were put into practice centuries ago. In Gambaro's Argentina, power as inscribed by dictatorship and the marginalization of disempowered groups or classes along with it was always part and parcel of the Argentinian individual's life. There was always that center-periphery distinction between those who ruled and owned the right to direct the country's history and those whose presence was always perceived as a threat to this power monopoly. So, in the three contexts, there was no stable or harmonious form of society to return to or retrieve. That's why, the playwrights envision a new form of a social order where the practices or ideologies which exacerbated division and exclusion before, can be interrogated. The kind of reconciliation I am trying to single out from each of the texts is not 'restorative', but one which

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<sup>34</sup> The word 'reconciliation' stems from the Latin root verb *re-conciliāre* which translates as 'reconcile' and means 'reunite' or 'restore' something to its former state or condition. (Appropriated from Van Dijkhuizen, 3).

tries to envision ‘alternative realities’ to the ones which motivated the writers’ interest in addressing reconciliation and dialogue in their works.

A further implication of this argument is that reconciliation (or irreconcilability) cannot be understood outside the forces which continue to inform the repetitive cycle of conflicts/divisions in contemporary societies. As such, it is necessary to unveil the binaries, hierarchies and hegemonic structures which the three writers address, and try to destabilize in their texts. This implication is driven by a belief, like many other critics do, in the role of literature and writers in taking part in political debates through addressing forms of ‘dissidence’ in their texts, and imagining possibilities towards a better future through ‘aesthetizing the political’, ‘politicizing the aesthetic’, ‘speaking truth to power’, or as Spivak puts it, appealing to the ‘aesthetic power of literature.’

Accordingly, reconciliation, as I conceive it through a close reading of the chosen texts and how I intend to argue about it throughout the dissertation, is envisioned by the three playwrights as one which rests on the following basic convictions. It implies revealing the truth about the past and interrogating cultural stigmas; creating a space for communication between ‘self’ and ‘other’; deconstructing or subverting myths about the past and reversing the logics of power; empowering the marginalized; and facing the perpetrator with his or her atrocities as the first step towards reparation. It also implies violating the boundaries between castes, classes and religious groups, and defying prevailing structures of hegemony, othering and marginalization which, according to the writers, lie at the heart of the conflict, trauma, and violence defining the cultural contexts to which their plays respond. As will hopefully become clear in the course of this dissertation, the three playwrights address ‘patterns’ as to how divisions in their societies can be reconciled, but they do not seem to negotiate the ‘achievability’ of reconciliation per se as earlier indicated, it lives as an ideal and ethic for the future, rather than a process or course of action.

Building on these insights, this dissertation sets out to provide possible answers to the following questions: how can literature be viewed as a locus of imagination where traumatic history might be articulated and culture interrogated? How do literary texts act as textual abodes where broader socio-cultural tensions or disagreements might be addressed for new/alternative or inclusive societies to take shape? More precisely put: how does literature address, imagine and represent reconciliation in settings where tensions motivated by power, race, ethnomania, caste and religion prevail? What kinds of ‘alternative realities’ or ‘responses to conflict’ the three playwrights envision in the worlds of their plays in view of the chaotic and divided realities informing the texts themselves? As such, the present research embraces the assumption that De Wet, Karnad and Gambaro imagine and envision reconciliation through ‘subverting/dismantling hegemonic systems/hierarchies and imagining alternative realities’ in their plays, amidst a complex cycle of social distortions, othering ideologies, power relations, and traumatic histories.

The plays I have selected for analysis are Reza De Wet’s plays *African Gothic* (1986) and *Good Heavens* (2006), Girish Karnad’s plays *Talé Danda* (1993) and *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2004), and Griselda Gambaro’s plays *Del sol naciente* (From the rising sun, 1984) and *La malasangre* (Bad Blood, 1982). I intend, within the compass of my dissertation, to unveil and explore the imaginings or representations of reconciliation as they emerge from these texts which were written at the backdrop of social and national periods of disruption, trauma, conflict, and violence. These disruptions are instigated by stigmas related to religion, caste, ethnicity, class, and power. My choice of authors and texts from South Africa, India, and Argentina is not exclusive since similar experiences can be found in other cultural contexts and histories. Rather, it stems from my familiarity with the histories of the regions selected and their literary traditions. As it also stems from my desire to explore, however challenging it has been, the theme of reconciliation in texts which reflect different histories and cultural contexts as it is

important to show that, however differently approached by the writers and however diverse its motivations are, interest in human relations and dialogue is a universal value which cuts across cultural and geographical borders.

## 5. Approach

Imbibing the rhetoric of the time, De Wet, Karnad, and Gambaro can be described among those authors who “distorted and splintered reality, trying to discern something deeper and truer” and “capture glimpses of human possibility against overwhelming meaninglessness and the void.”<sup>35</sup> Concurrently, these authors use their texts as spaces to think through different cultural conjunctures that raise questions about identity, otherness, dialogue, belonging, nation building and, democratization. Reconciling division through challenging hegemonic ideologies within their texts and giving dynamism and voice to the ‘other’ and ‘silenced’, be it religious, racial, caste, or political, is what brings the three playwrights together however different their cultural backgrounds and aesthetic proclivities are.

To help orient my reading of the selected texts in which there is an attempt to delineate the ways in which the three playwrights represent or imagine reconciliation in their texts and in what ways they think of reconciliation as an ‘alternative discourse’ to different distortions within their societies, I chose to engage with a number of critical insights to text *in context* and to the role of literature as a source of empowerment and ‘symbolic resistance’. It is my way to see how, as a “noble and essential human impulse,” and like any other “political process that results from contests of human will,” reconciliation “must be understood within *historical time*,”<sup>36</sup> and within the social and political realities which prompt the thinking about reconciliation in works of literature. My objective as such is to understand the possibilities

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<sup>35</sup> David Krasner, *A History of Modern Drama*, vol.1 (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), x.

<sup>36</sup> David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 387. (Emphasis added).

and/or limitations the plays examined offer towards reconciliation in view of the distorted, conflicting or traumatic social and historical contexts which inform their content.

My choice of theoretical insights is done according to the way I am thinking of reconciliation as it emerges from the works of the three playwrights. First, because reconciliation is often thought of as a possible resolution during moments of conflict, division and trauma, I have to look beyond the texts themselves to see what kinds of distorted realities and ideologies that motivated the playwrights' thinking of reconciliation in the first place. Hence, I am making resort to the new historicist views about 'the historicity of texts', Fredric Jameson's elucidations about literature or writing as a "socially symbolic act"; and Brecht's theorizations about the literary text or drama as a space to evoke the "strangeness of political and social conditions," among other critical insights which argue about the need to read texts within the contexts which have shaped them. Second, each of the playtexts proffers marginalized groups in need of empowerment, repressed characters which need to be unleashed, lower castes and religious groups which are excluded and social groups which are 'othered' due to state repression and power ideologies. In tandem with this, it is appropriate to revisit theories which think of texts as spaces which can give voice to the 'margin, muted, othered and repressed' like the cultural materialists' arguments about the 'subversive role of literature' and their 'dissident reading' of texts and subaltern criticism to literature, historiography and politics.

Last, part of my argument about how reconciliation is represented in the texts examined relates to the fact that the authors 'imagine alternative realities' or 'alternate worlds' where reconciliation can be an alternative to division and disorder. As such, added to my own understanding of how this imagining takes place in each of the plays, I found it useful to have my argument negotiate with 'counter discourse' in literary criticism as introduced by Richard Terdiman which approaches literary texts as sites of 'symbolic resistance' and pathways to write back to culture and history. Also, I have chosen to make recourse to 'deconstructive

criticism' to the reading and interpretation of literary texts. Since the three playwrights are themselves counter discursive in their treatment of the hegemonies and power ideologies which stand in the face of achieving reconciliation in their societies, I will myself engage in a 'deconstructive reading' of the texts in order to unveil 'how' they subvert/dismantle the hierarchies, hegemonies and constructed imaginaries which inform the content of their works.

That being said, my approach to the study of the six plays is 'historicist'; grounding the texts in the social and historical contexts which inform their content to see 'why' reconciliation emerges as a central issue from each of them. My historicist approach is backed up by 'a deconstructive reading' of the plays in order to unveil and try to understand 'how' the playwrights subvert, destabilize and deconstruct the hegemonies, ideologies, and hierarchies which inform the traumatic and violent realities they scrutinize in their texts. This, as I argue about it, emerges as the playwrights' way of communicating their visions of reconciliation.

My research takes as its reference plays originating from written drama, even though staged thereafter, rather than performance-oriented scripts. The plays chosen are approached and analysed thematically and are treated as 'closet drama,'<sup>37</sup> otherwise my research will fall within performance and film studies.

## **6. Overview of the Chapters**

In an attempt to develop the research arguments and help answer the questions posed by this study, I have divided this dissertation into five main chapters. The first chapter acts as a threshold to the whole dissertation and briefly introduces us to the various dialectics which bring the plays examined in this research together. The second chapter locates the writers within the literary and cultural contexts which shaped their writings, and places their texts within the social disruptions or stigmas which inform their content. In the remaining three chapters, there is an attempt to exploring reconciliation as represented and imagined in the chosen plays. Each

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<sup>37</sup> i.e., dramatic texts which are directed to readership and criticism even though, in most cases, staged henceforth.

chapter settles with a concluding section which further develops the arguments discussed over the whole chapter and brings it into a point of appraisal.

The first chapter, “On Reconciliation between Context and Literary Representation,” brings under focus the study’s major argument in negotiation with a number of critical insights to help mitigate the ongoing negotiation between literature and context, thus revealing the selected plays as sites which try to reconcile division and imagine alternative realities to the disruptive worlds they negotiate with. Because it is important to locate the texts within the distortions and divisions to which these writers have responded, the second chapter explores the lives and times of the playwrights and their play-texts, contexts and histories, pointing out their motivations and impacts, to pave the way to a more focused and relevant analysis when the discussion moves to the actual texts. The breadth of my research, encompassing writers from three countries with different histories, cultural specificities, and literary traditions, has, of course, enriched my approach to the issue of reconciliation and the way I intend to address it in this dissertation.

The third chapter takes a closer look at how De Wet imagines or envisions reconciliation in her plays. Published under the title Reza de Wet's “Free State trilogy”, with *Breathing In* as the third play, *AG* and *GH* represent, according to many critics, De Wet’s response to the dynamics of Afrikaner identity construction during the Apartheid repressive years. Written at a time when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was entrusted with the task of theorizing about the possibilities towards reconciliation and democratic transition in a nascent ‘rainbow nation’, they are perceived, also, as two plays where De Wet’s views about syncretic reconciliation are communicated. This chapter aims at highlighting how De Wet’s plays “challenge the stability of meaning” and “arouse disconcerting suspicions that everything is not as it appears to be; that dark undercurrents underscore perceptions of idyllic domesticity.”<sup>38</sup> In

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<sup>38</sup> Anton Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom: Explorations of Identity in New South African Drama* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 208.

line with the argument about reconciliation inserted above and through locating her plays within long-held beliefs about racial superiority and cultural purity, informed as they were by ethnonationalism and Afrikanerdom and how they were legitimized through the apartheid state, I argue that De Wet's view of reconciliation takes the form of self-reconciliation, which can give way to reconciliation with the racial/cultural 'other'. The chapter starts with a section on the aspects of repression in her two plays which is discussed as a legacy of long years of isolation in accordance with Apartheid policies and the ideals of Afrikanerdom. The next two sections move to consider how De Wet represents her view of reconciliation. She does so through first; laying open or propagating hidden stories of repression which characterized Afrikaner farm life for decades; bridging the racial border through giving voice and authority to the cultural 'other'; and through addressing the importance of overcoming feelings of restorative nostalgia and the inability to forget as pathways to achieving reconciliation with both self and other. As such, as I intend to showcase, De Wet posits that without self-reconciliation and the ability to get over one's past prejudices and accept oneself as part of a larger multicultural/heterogeneous reality, her Afrikaner community can achieve neither catharsis nor reconciliation with the cultural 'other' from which it was historically distanced.

The fourth chapter, and after situating his plays within a long history of casteism, communalism, and religious fundamentalism in the second chapter, reads through Karnad's representations of reconciliation in his two post-Mandal/Mandir plays *TD* and *BS*. Wrapped in a mythical/historical veneer, Karnad's plays inveigh against a long tradition of religious fundamentalism and inter-caste exclusion in the history of his Indian society. Like a "wayfarer groping in a huge cavern filled with the ruins of an old and unfamiliar mode of life,"<sup>39</sup> Karnad interrogates, parodies and deconstructs the long-held (and continuously politicized) beliefs

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<sup>39</sup> Aparna Dharwadker, "Introduction," in Girish Karnad, *Collected Plays: Talé-Danda, The Fire and the Rain, The dreams of Tipu Sultan, Two Monologues- Flowers, Broken Images*, vol.2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), xiv.

about 'self' and 'other' which define contemporary India. In this chapter, I argue that Karnad imagines reconciliation in his two plays through bridging the boundaries between castes and faiths in several ways. The first section reads through *TD* where I argue that the playwright evokes and recreates an ancient Basava reformist movement with a focus on its reforms in favor of lower castes. Basava and his Sharannas present the society of their time with alternative views, demystifying and demythologizing the strict social lines which demarcate sects and tribes; harsh social divisions which were/are supported by the Vedas, myths, invented traditions, and royalty. Added to depriving the language of the Vedas of its sacredness and communicating the sacred in the language of the downtrodden, and reversing the character of the historical king from an uncompromising into a compromising one, the playwright defies inter-caste rigidity through structuring the play around an inter-caste marriage which, according to the socially exclusive system of the time, should not take place. The second section deals with his other play *BS* and argues that Karnad presents his views towards inter-religious/caste reconciliation through invoking the nonviolent Jain ethics of *ahimsa* and non-sidedness; violating boundaries between castes through giving voice to a low caste born character; and through investing the king with a compromising attitude towards the interreligious conflicts within his court. The last section puts Karnad's views on reconciliation in negotiation with a number of insights on religious fascism, nation building and democratization in India.

In the fifth chapter, I read Gambaro's two plays where empowerment of margins, an unleashing of the repressed and bridging of state and individual power logics takes place. *Como un teatro de márgenes*, Gambaro's post-proceso (Post Dirty War) dramaturgy, informed by a long decade of state repression and *Desaparecidos*, and set against post-Guerra sucia calls for 'national reconciliation' and the ambivalences surrounding the 'Nunca mas' reports, is seen as a space through which she engages in a "settlement of accounts" as part of her views towards reconciliation from a dictatorial into a post-dictatorial reality. With settings which range from

a Medieval Japanese feudal house and 19th century Argentina under the notorious Rosas regime, and with characters extending from victimizers/perpetrators and victims/repressed and with an interplay between domestic and political forms of power, I argue that Gambaro's two plays envisage reconciliation through a number of trajectories. In both plays and over three sections, we examine how she gives voice to the repressed to speak against their victimizers, and how she creates a space for communication between victim and perpetrator (however irreconcilable their desires and worldviews are/end to be). There is an attempt also to see how she reverses the order of power with the margin reclaiming position within the social world when it defies the center and shakes its power logic. For consistency, quotations from Gambaro's plays are mentioned in their original Spanish language with a personal English translation provided. I am comfortable with the language in which most Latin American works are written and published, allowing me to read un-translated documents, play texts, criticism, or interviews conducted with the writer.

The general conclusion braids together the different literary representations of reconciliation which emerge from the various plays examined throughout the dissertation. It draws parallels between the plays and showcases how, despite the different social realities they engage with, they share this view of reconciliation as a 'subversion of hegemonic systems and hierarchies and an imagining of alternative realities' in works of literature.

## Chapter I

### **On Reconciliation Between Context and Literary Representation: A Constellative Critical Approach**

(T)exts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.[...] The realities of power and authority - as well as the resistance offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies — are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics.<sup>40</sup>

The epigraph above, taken from Edward Said, speaks of the literary text as world and event. This means that any attempt at reading, analyzing, or interpreting a literary text has to account for the socio-cultural and historical foundations that make a particular text possible. This means that texts “cannot but be part of the world” and that any discussion about texts as just “representing reality” sidesteps the different “ways in which texts are already part of that reality, and ways in which literary texts produce our reality, make our worlds.”<sup>41</sup> In tone with Said’s view, the present study starts with the assumption that texts are worldly events, platforms of social commentary, and abodes that offer the writer a possibility to reconcile divisions and antagonisms. My view is that a text, instead of driving the reader into a world of abstractions and hermetic dialogues dissociated from their socio-cultural and historical frames, has to seek relevance through problematizing contemporary social issues, and conscientizing society about its socio-political situations because

witnessing a sorry state of affairs when one is not in power is by no means a monotonous, monochromatic activity. It involves what Foucault once called "a relentless erudition," scouring alternative sources, exhuming buried documents, reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories. It involves a sense of the dramatic and of the insurgent, making a great deal of one's rare opportunities to speak, catching the audience's attention, being better at wit and debate than one's opponents.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, eds., *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), 32.

<sup>42</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xviii.

and so goes Said in detailing the task of the intellectual in society which he further asserts as to ‘speak truth to power’. By ‘speaking truth to power’, Said refers to the intellectual’s role to speak against falsity and injustice and to advocate for the rights of the world’s silenced, oppressed and marginalized. In tandem with this, there is a *proposmon* that, in the context of the societies chosen for analysis, literature provides space for socio-cultural engagement in provoking critical thought and in interrogating culture itself. The plays under study are, therefore, viewed within the larger historical, political, and cultural contexts within which they emanated and to which they actively respond, behooving us to consider the importance of both the cultural context and the playwrights’ ability to bring such contexts into critical examination.

Imagining possibilities towards reconciliation and working out ‘possible worlds’ in their playtexts (as such; taking part in larger political and cultural debates on nation building and democratization in their societies), is De Wet’s, Karnad’s and Gambaro’s way of engaging with the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts which inform their plays. This resonates with the theorizations of a plethora of other critics who argue for the intersectionality of the literary expression and the realities beyond the texts themselves. As indicated in the introduction, my approach to the playtexts considers reconciliation and how it is represented as a way to read through the plays regarding the fact that it is, as I see it emerging from each of the plays, the three playwrights’ way of writing back to the divided, conflict-riven and traumatic realities with which they negotiate. It is their way to engage with the contexts which prompted their thinking about reconciliation in the first place. Therefore, I would engage in a reading of text *in* context through bringing the playwrights’ vision of reconciliation as it emerges from each of the plays; my own way of thinking about it as a ‘subversion/dismantling of hegemonic systems and hierarchies and imagining alternative realities’; and the selected theorists’ insights, together in a way which can help me make sense of the texts and their niceties. Taken together, there will be an attempt to see how, in response to conflict, trauma, and violence which are

generally prompted by different forms of othering, marginalization and exclusion, De Wet, Karnad and Gambaro use their texts as loci to address traumatic experiences, think rhizomatically against a reality full of hierarchies and divisions, and, more importantly, imagine alternative social realities where reconciliation, however remains an ideal to be yet attained, can be envisioned. Seen as such, the plays studied become, as Said states in the epigraph, sites for the playwrights to scour ‘alternative sources’ and catch the ‘audience's attention’ to the solemnity of the issues addressed by their texts.

In tandem with this, the aim of this chapter is to set the dissertation’s argument in negotiation with a constellation of critical insights to text *in* context. In the first section, ‘History, Politics and the Aesthetic’, I revisit the new historicists’, Jameson’s and Brecht’s critical insights on the historicity of the literary expression, and its relevance in taking part in social and political debates. The second section which I have entitled ‘Voicing the Muted, Repressed and Othered’ starts by pointing out aspects of othering, repression and marginalization which emerge from the six plays, then moves to consider how cultural materialists and theorists within the Subaltern criticism share the view of literature or writing as a locus to both address ‘dissidence’ and give voice to the muted, repressed and marginalized. The third section responds to the second part of my argument on how the three playwrights ‘imagine alternative realities’ through being counter discursive. I support it through a negotiation with Terdiman’s insights on ‘discourse/counter-discourse’. There will be also an attempt to show how I intend to engage in a deconstructive reading of each of the plays in order to reveal how the playwrights challenge the hegemonies, hierarchies and power ideologies informing their texts, drawing, as such, on ‘deconstructive criticism’ to literature as a mode of reading rather than a theory, approach or method of analysis. The last section brings the whole chapter into a point of appraisal.

This ‘selective appropriateness’ of critical insights remains a constellation of my own which I see relevant to help me interpret and read the texts within the realities which inform their content. This constellation cannot seemingly be exhaustive given the scope of the research and the nature of its investigation.

## **1. History, Politics and the Aesthetic**

### **a. New Historicists on the ‘Historicity of Texts’ and ‘Textuality of History’**

As it is clear from the rich history of literary criticism we inherited, the way texts relate to the world outside is subject to continuous debates “like a vampire that will not lie down.”<sup>43</sup> New historicists (among others like cultural materialists, postcolonialists, feminists and poststructuralists) are among the ‘vampire-killers’ when, in approaching literary texts, they disturbed “all assumptions about a separation between world and text.”<sup>44</sup> They are critical of the extreme separation of text and its context imposed by the formalist or textualist approaches to literature. Instead, they see that in response to the world beyond the text, literary works can offer alternative visions of the real; a ‘touch of the real’ without considering the text to be a mere representation of the real.

Even though new historicism (seen as a practice rather than a theory or school of criticism) is often dismissed on the grounds that it “reduces the historical to the literary or the literary to the historical,” and that it is “anti-theoretical,”<sup>45</sup> it remains a potent approach to the analysis and interpretation of literary texts in ways which can help us comprehend culture as a “semiotic system” of relations both overlapping and hegemonic, and history as “discourse.”<sup>46</sup> According to Stephen Greenblatt and his ‘cultural poetics’, just like it is becoming hard to read literary texts as “objects” which are free from the influence of their “author and readers,” it is equally

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<sup>43</sup> Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Bennett and Royle, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *The Greenblatt Reader*, ed. Michael Payne (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Greenblatt, *The Greenblatt Reader*, 3.

relevant to say that it is not feasible “to transcend one’s own historical moment,” whereby “all histories are themselves historically contingent on the present in which they are constructed.”<sup>47</sup> Drawing conclusions based on their criticism of the Renaissance literary texts and Shakespeare’s plays, new historicists consider literature and history to be “mutually imbricated” where it is not enough to consider history or context to be “serving as background to literature” (the way traditional historicists like Basil Willey argue) but any engagement with literary texts needs to consider historical times or realities under which literary texts are written like “the soil” and the product itself or text as “the aspiring plant.”<sup>48</sup> Besides the relationship they establish between history and literature, new historicist approaches help in “demonstrating the ideological and political interests operating through literary texts.”<sup>49</sup> Approaching a literary text, thus, entails seeing in what ways it ‘resonates’ with the larger and more complex constructions of the world which can take the form of political questions, power ideologies, social changes, or historical disruptions.

Through what he terms ‘resonance’, Greenblatt points to the fact that contextualizing the reading of a text helps in deciphering its intricacies and in understanding the forces at play within it. It equally helps in revealing the text’s ability to stimulate an effect of ‘wonder’ in the reader in a way which can draw his or her attention to more urgent issues. This effect emerges from Greenblatt’s theorizations through what he calls ‘wonder’. By resonance, Greenblatt means “the power of the object displayed” or text to “reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged,” while wonder, according to Greenblatt, refers to “the power of the object displayed *to stop the viewer in his tracks*, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, *to evoke*

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<sup>47</sup> Greenblatt, *The Greenblatt Reader*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Greenblatt, 6.

<sup>49</sup> John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 11.

*an exalted attention.*”<sup>50</sup> Texts, by that means, and as Said also asserts, have the power to alert the reader to both the cultural forces which inform the texts and to the intensity of the issues being presented. This relationship between texts and their historical and cultural imports is formulated as the ‘historicity of texts and textuality of history’ by another notable new historicist, Louis Montrose. In his essay, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” Montrose summarizes this formula as follows:

By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest *the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing* - not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that *we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question* - traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement.<sup>51</sup>

Depicted in this way, texts are embedded in the society which produces them, as they act as a source of intellectual history about a given society, its complex stories of struggle and survival, and its accumulated memories. The way, for instance, Greenblatt, Montrose and other new historicists like Catherine Gallagher, Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Orgel and Leonard Tennenhouse subjected Shakespeare’s texts to their historical timeline and treated them as “part of the fabric of Elizabethan society” reflects the essence of this approach in interpreting texts.<sup>52</sup> Borrowing from Foucault, Raymond Williams, and Geerts, new historicists view “social relationships” as “intrinsically, relationships of power.”<sup>53</sup> In view of that, a new historicist reading of texts would try to unveil how power and ideology operate within a text, and how they direct or alienate individual and social relationships.

And just as one would find useful “the accounts of life and death, wealth, imports and monopolies, class structure, riots and disorder, the legal status of women, the Reformation in

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<sup>50</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 175-176. (Emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> Louis Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” in *The New Historicism*, First Edition, ed. Harold Aram Veesser (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 20. (Emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup> Brannigan, *New Historicism*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Louis Montrose, “Eliza, Queen of Shepherdes, and the Pastoral of Power,” in *The New Historicism Reader*, ed. Harold Aram Veesser (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 88.

England, Henry VIII's children, the English Bible, Queen Elizabeth, and other such topics,"<sup>54</sup> in order to interpret and understand Shakespeare's literary impulse, it is important, in the context of my study, to bring to discussion the historical and cultural realities which help make sense of the plays examined. De Wet's plays are better understood within the context of 1990s South Africa, the crumbling Afrikaner ethnonationalist discourse and the troublesome legacy of the Apartheid. In order to make sense of Karnad's plays *TD* and *BS* and see how they are written in response to the escalation of the religious frenzy in the 80 and 90s and to the plight of *untouchables* in contemporary Indian history, it is relevant to account for, among other issues, the Indian Varna system, casteism, India's religious history, Vedantic philosophy, the Mandal Mandir incidents of 1989 and the history of untouchability. A discussion of Gambaro's plays would certainly make recourse to the proceso decade, and its legacy of repression on both individual and society.

That being said, with the aforementioned critical insights on the "historicity of texts" and the "textuality of history", I share the belief that the six playtexts studied in this research cannot be fully understood without a critical consideration of how they are shaped by their context and how they equally take part in shaping history through acting like loci to imagine alternative realities to the divided panorama of the histories with which they negotiate. In their study of Elizabethan literary texts, new historicists are concerned with unveiling the ways in which the monarchy played the role of a "the central axis governing the power structure" according to the whims of which other forms of social changes, realities or aspirations revolve, and its role in "reproducing and renewing the powerful discourses which sustain the system."<sup>55</sup> In the case of my plays, this 'central axis governing power structure' is the Brahminic/Kshatriya order and its Varna Vedic/Hindutva ideologies; Afrikanerdom and its segregationist ethnonationalist

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<sup>54</sup> Brannigan, *New Historicism*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Selden Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 183.

discourse (policies), and the proceso repressive Argentinian state and its ‘mechanisms of terror and victimization’. As such, just as the new historicists establish a reciprocity between the discursive and the material, I think that addressing/envisioning possibilities towards reconciliation emerges as a desire on the part of the three playwrights to write back to their cultures and their accumulated histories of division and violence.

### **b. Jameson, ‘Ideologemes’ and the ‘Politicization of the Aesthetic’**

Similar to the new historicists’ ‘historicity of texts’ thesis and their interest in power and ideology, literature is seen by Fredric Jameson as “a socially symbolic act.” In his *The Political Unconscious* and in his linchpin essay “On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act,” Jameson outlines an approach to the interpretation of literary texts which accounts for three levels of analysis; the political, the social and the historical. Still, he views the political interpretation of texts as the “absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.”<sup>56</sup> Even though he points out to the relevance of, for example, “the Florentine political background in Dante”, “Milton’s relationship with the Schismatics” or the “Irish historical allusions in Joyce” in understanding their works, he prioritizes the political interpretation of texts, and perceives social or historical events as just “preconditions” which don’t yield in interpretation.<sup>57</sup> Narrative, then, the way Jameson argues about it, is not just “one literary genre among others” but all that acts as our “chief means of access to reality;” historical, social and political.<sup>58</sup>

Drawing on Lacan’s notion of the ‘Imaginary’ and Levi-Strauss’s way of thinking about myth and narrative as an imaginary resolution to real social problems and contradictions, Jameson proposes that the aesthetic or literary serves a political purpose and is to be seen as “an ideological act in its own right” because it has the “function of inventing imaginary or

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<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Gary Shapiro, Review of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* by Fredric Jameson, *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 6; Iss. 1-2, 1982: 206.

formal ‘solution’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”<sup>59</sup> Each of the playwrights in this study aims to offer solutions to contradictions which lie behind the accumulation of division and wrongdoing in their societies. If Jameson speculates about resolution through what he calls the ‘ideologeme’ and through the ‘unity of two contraries’ within a text, the playwrights seek to offer their resolution to opposed desires, ideologies and interests which emerge from their texts through imagining possibilities towards reconciliation. Jameson’s concept of ‘ideologemes’ is explained by his oft-quoted statement which asserts that ideologemes refer to “the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes.”<sup>60</sup> The term is used to refer to any conflicting voices and interests which emerge from a given text (which act as symbolic resonances of larger social problems), between different classes which are reflected through the attitudes, beliefs, and discourses communicated by the text’s characters. He views a text as a collection of ‘ideologemes’ which act as “the strategies by which a text "contains" social reality while at the same time revealing it.”<sup>61</sup>

An example to mention in this regard is Jameson’s reading of Balzac’s *La Vieille Fille* in which he argues that the author contrasts the old order (*ancien régime*) and its values with the new order (the bourgeoisie) and its ideals, and that while he longs for the old order, he criticizes its faults and imperfections. As a resolution to this contradiction, Balzac finds a middle way through the ‘old regime’ restoring a ‘Napoleonic energy’ which is “dissociated from the culture, values, and practices of the *ancien régime*,” yet one which is not “wholly identified with the business society that will come on its own after 1830.”<sup>62</sup> Still, according to Jameson, the resolution the author offers; that “hybridization of Jacobin values and monarchic trappings,” might prove to be a “dead end.”<sup>63</sup> A clear association can be made with the kinds of resolutions

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<sup>59</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Jameson, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Poster, Review of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* by Fredric Jameson, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 36, No. 2 (Sep., 1981), 253.

<sup>62</sup> Jameson, 152.

<sup>63</sup> Jameson, 152.

to conflict, trauma and exclusion the playwrights offer through their texts. De Wet envisions it as a ‘reconciliation with both self and other’; Karnad speculates about it through the lines of inter/intra-religious and inter-caste reconciliation; and Gambaro works it out through the empowerment of margins and insurgency against authoritarian repression. These resolutions, as we shall see in the upcoming chapters, remain blurred given the ravaging, gloomy and unsettling closing scenes of the plays. The playwrights, whether consciously or unconsciously, try to offer their resolutions through envisioning reconciliation as an alternative to conflict; yet, the seeming unattainability of this ‘wished for reconciliation’ subjects their resolutions to, borrowing Jameson’s words, “stark antimony” and “insoluble logical paradox.”<sup>64</sup> Whether their resolutions take clear shape towards the end of their plays or not, nonetheless; what each of the texts reveals is a dismantling of borders and hegemonies, an empowerment of margins and a ‘reconciliation of accounts’ which reflect how the worlds left behind at the end of the plays, despite their dejection, involve some glimpses of hope towards change and reconciliation.

### **c. Brecht on ‘Alienation’ and ‘Historicization’**

The new historicists’, Jameson’s, Said’s arguments about the need to read texts within the realities which inform them can be aptly linked to the dramatic theorizations of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht, the German playwright and theatre theorist, advocated for a kind of playwrighting that can act as a platform for social commentary by which he sought to “present a Marxist-based analysis of social relations” where ideologies can be scrutinized and questioned to show to his readers and “audiences the true nature of society, thereby empowering them to change it.”<sup>65</sup> Brecht believes that writing ought to be with a social purpose where the reader/spectator can actively take part in the social criticism the writer might be engaged in. Responsively, Brecht devised several dramatic techniques as part of his Epic Theater paradigm. One of these

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<sup>64</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 153.

<sup>65</sup> Colin Counsell, *Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth- Century Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 81.

techniques is the *Verfremdung*, or alienation/estrangement effect (A-effect). The A-effect is “a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as striking, *something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural*. The object of this ‘effect’ is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view.”<sup>66</sup>

This view of playwrighting turns around incidents and real events dramatized to serve a social purpose. Similar to Greenblatt’s notion of ‘wonder’ which evokes an ‘exalted attention,’ Brecht’s notion of alienation, as Peter Brooker explains, aims to both “historicize and negate the commonplace and taken-for-granted, to prise open social and ideological contradictions,” and to “provoke an awareness of the individual’s place in a concrete social narrative.”<sup>67</sup> This alienation effect, compared sometimes to the defamiliarizing effect of Jacques Derrida’s ‘différance’ and Freud’s ‘the Uncanny’ for the emotions of uneasiness each creates in the reader or spectator, aims at inciting an ‘intellectual empathy’ in the reader or audience in a way which leads him or her to reflect upon and understand the intensity of the situation itself, and not just react emotionally to the reality being presented. Added to the alienation effect, Brecht’s technique of distancing the event of the play historically or ‘historicization’ (*Historisierung*) as it is sometimes termed, draws parallels with a current situation and communicates present disruptions through a reworking of the past. To provoke “the correct political response,” it is essential to consider “the careful choice of telling detail and through it a sense of historical specificity,”<sup>68</sup> as John White comments in his study of Brecht’s dramatic theory.

Brecht’s ideas on ‘alienation’ and ‘historicization’ are relevant to my analysis of the six plays. Figuring more notably in De Wet’s and Gambaro’s plays, the effect of estrangement or alienation manifests through both writers’ use of shocking language and setting. In satirical

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<sup>66</sup> Wasserman, S. Bonnie, *Metaphors of Oppression in Lusophone Historical Drama* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 37. (Emphasis added).

<sup>67</sup> Peter Brooker, “Key Words in Brecht’s Theory and Practice of Theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, eds. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 210.

<sup>68</sup> John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht’s Dramatic Theory* (New York: Camden House, 2004), 98.

disturbing tones and with inspiration from the gothic in literature, De Wet's plays expose the secret life of Afrikaner families deliberately excluding themselves from other cultural groups in fear of mixing and losing cultural distinctive traits. Inserting character types who fantasize about past and present in both dream and reality reflects De Wet's desire to emphasize the alienation of her characters and the Afrikaner ideals they reflect in response to the larger realities surrounding them. To communicate their sense of alienation, the playwright projects them in self-contradictory situations which reflect larger dynamics of the Afrikaner community's bewildering self-conception in the aftermath of the Apartheid regime.

While Karnad chose to distance the setting of his two plays to a 12th and 13th-century Indian history and mythology to create a present effect, he insists upon revealing the religious and social fanatic attitudes exhibited by his people based on lack of knowledge and understanding of the 'Other', be it caste or religious. Gambaro, on her right, chose to historically distant the settings for her plays like the ancient Japanese context in *SN* and transferred the 19th-century dictatorial aura of Rosa's regime to reflect upon an Argentinian repressed society of the '60s, '70s, and '80s in *LM*. In both plays, we feel emotionally placed in a late 20th-century violent society; yet, we are driven to make associations between a distant past and a present reality but ones that share the pain and the trauma of victimization, terror, and an inability to communicate with the social 'other'. The historical distancing adds to the effect and intensity of her characters' (readers and spectators along with them) sense of alienation which reflects the general mood of a society under the effect of a repressive regime.

## **2. Voicing the 'Margin', 'Othered' and 'Repressed'**

### **a. On Othering, Marginality and Trauma/Repression in the Selected Texts**

In the playtexts under examination and the contexts informing them, *mutatis mutandis*, there is a fear of the other, of the different, of the marginal, a fear of dissolution of a certain social order or the break away from old ways, traditions and hierarchies. The plays

communicate different forms of exclusion, marginalization, and othering where the ‘self’, whether defining itself through the lens of race, ethnicity, religion, or social class, tends to distance itself from what it regards as the ‘other’ within the geography of a single cultural space. In the worlds of the plays, the ‘other’ does not refer to the “remote and esoteric usually encountered in books or popular stories” but one which is “part and parcel of the neighboring entourage and among street crowds.”<sup>69</sup> The othering and marginalizing motifs which emerge from plays examined are reflective of a ‘hegemony from within’, and ones which are instigated by long traditions of religious, ethnic, political and social exclusion, discrimination and repression.

Seen as such, and as far as the present research is concerned, ‘othering’ can be viewed as a “process of creating the ‘other’ wherein persons or groups are labeled as deviant or non-normative happens through the constant repetition of characteristics about a group of people who are distinguished from the norm in some way.”<sup>70</sup> Individuals or groups, thereby, can be ‘othered’, ‘excluded’ or ‘marginalized’ under different circumstances and for different reasons dictated, in most cases, by long-held convictions about religion, ethnicity, race, nation, identity, power, and class.

From the standpoint of moral philosophy, theorists like Emmanuel Lévinas argue about an ‘ethical community’ based on an ethics of ‘obligation’ and responsibility towards the ‘other’, suggesting that ‘subjectivity’ results from the individual or social group continuously denying the possible relations which can bring him or her closer to others, and therefore making ‘possible the pluralism of society’; a pluralism “whose basic ground model is the relation of the Same (*le Meme*) and the Other (*l’Autre*).”<sup>71</sup> Postmodernist understanding, seen mainly through

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<sup>69</sup> Khedidja Chergui, “Reconciliation or Asymmetry? On the Religious Other in Literature and Theory,” *Language Practices*, Volume: 11/Number: 04, (2020), 66.

<sup>70</sup> Alison Mountz, “The Other,” in *Key Concepts in Political Geography*, eds. Carolyn Gallaher et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009), 328.

<sup>71</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, “The One for the Other: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 24; Iss. 4, 1991: 440. (Emphasis in original).

the postulations of Zygmunt Bauman in his *Postmodern Ethics*, thinks that othering and exclusion of the other in one socio-cultural spatiality grows in intensity due to a ‘cognitive spacing’ which takes place because “each of us ‘builds’ his variety of ‘others’ from the sedimented, selected memory and processed past encounters, communications, exchanges, joint work or battles.”<sup>72</sup> Instead, Bauman argues for a society that “gives priority to a social order in which being for the other is more ethically favored than being *with* or *above* the other.”<sup>73</sup> Whether from an ethical or postmodern pontification, othering or exclusion emerges as a force mostly determined by inherited ideologies that nurture the way individuals and groups perceive each other in the social realm, and in response to which reconciliation emerges as a desire for “the recovery of cultural identities, building trust and overcoming personal enmities.”<sup>74</sup>

In the context which informs De Wet’s dramaturgy, the ‘othering’ ‘exclusionary’ discourse of Afrikanerdom sought to devalue, exclude and marginalize a black majority from within the South African sociocultural fabric; a cultural ‘other’ which is part of the culture against which the Afrikaner apartheid separatist discourse molded itself. An ideology, nurtured by a strong religious and ethnic belief about purity and distinctness, heightened, with time, the cultural and social divide between the different ethnicities and cultural groups in South Africa. Constituting an ethnic ‘self-image’ through exclusion and self-distancing, as we shall see in the next chapter, was part of a struggle to maintain ontological security in the face of what was thought of as a threatening ‘other’, a Black peril. In *AG* and *GH*, while the racial ‘other’ does not have a strong presence and manifests only through the figure of Au Alina, we see, instead, that De Wet exposes the legacy of the ‘othering’ discourse of Afrikanerdom on her Afrikaner characters’ behaviors and sense of ‘self’ and ‘other’, yielding in a difficulty of transition into a post-apartheid multicultural reality.

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<sup>72</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 260, quoted in Chergui, “Reconciliation or Asymmetry”, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Chergui, “Reconciliation or Asymmetry,” 8. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>74</sup> Rothfield et al., *Pathways to Reconciliation*, 11.

In Karnad's cultural background, this 'othering' takes the form of an inter-religious, intra-religious, and inter-caste exclusion and oppression, where the religiously different is seen as a threat to one's socio-cultural and religious identity. The Jain-Hindu debate, the question of untouchables and the caste or Varna system informing it lie at the heart of Karnad's speculations or discussion of the need for reconciliation, dialogue and cultural understanding in contemporary India. The growing rift between Hindus and Muslims in a society where religious identities are politicized, and the growing discontent with the Dalit question help us understand how nationalist discourse in India invested with its own religious and ethnic diversity to serve the political interest of the BJP and other Hindu nationalist groups with their understanding of modern Indian identity as one which has to respond to a pure Indian *Jati*, religion and caste. In *TD*, inter-caste exclusion drives the actions of the characters where the Sudras, untouchables and other outcastes view the Kshatriya upper class and the Orthodox Brahmins as their 'oppressors' due to the latter's social exclusion and marginalization, while the latter see the lower and inferior classes as their unequal others, and a source of danger and threat to old ways and traditions. In *BS*, there emerges a dichotomy of others: the Hindu mother and the Jain queen, the Kshatriya King and his low caste mahout (and the others they stand for in the world of the play) and the ideas they represent stand in sharp opposition to each other.

In the context to which Gambaro's texts respond, the 'other' is pulled into the margins and one, due to state repression, violence and victimization, is denied voice in the face of power and its silencing ideologies. In Gambaro's Argentina, as we shall see in the next and last chapters, the 'other' emerges as a 'social other' which is constructed as an 'enemy of the state' which should be eliminated. In *LM* and *SN*, othering emerges in the form of victims and perpetrators whose ethos and views towards power and nation stand in sharp opposition to each other.

The playtexts examined do not, likewise, escape the rhetoric about trauma and violence as they deal with and respond to moments of critical importance in the history of their societies with varying degrees of pain and atrocity. Trauma, in the context of my research, transcends the general definition which relates it to a range of individualized forms of traumatic experience like psychic shocks, fear, torture, among other forms of internalized disruption. In response to the contexts informing the plays, trauma is taken as rather a ‘collective experience’ or ‘cultural trauma’ as instigated by periods of national disruption, social distortion and victimization.

This view of trauma is inspired by Dominick LaCapra’s understanding of trauma as a historical phenomenon. Trauma, according to LaCapra, conflates with history as it is motivated by violence which emerges in societies where divisions across lines of cultural differences or where social inequalities prevail. In her seminal text *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra addresses the historicity of trauma and calls for the importance to contextualize the study of traumatic experiences, whether individual or collective, as a feature of historical events and where trauma and “its causes may indeed be a prominent feature of history, notably modern history, which should not be airbrushed or denied.”<sup>75</sup> Thinking that it is “misguided to see trauma as a purely psychological or individual phenomenon,” LaCapra further argues that “the causes of historical traumas” often stem from “extreme differences of wealth, status, and power that facilitate oppression, abuse, and scapegoating concerning class, gender, race, or species.”<sup>76</sup> Viewed as such, La Capra’s arguments about the historicity of trauma are relevant to my study as they help me make sense of the six plays and how historical events or the past and its ideologies seem to yield in traumatic disruptions which can help us understand their present accumulations or manifestations.

South Africa’s apartheid regime and the impacts it had on the psychology of the South African individual and his struggle to locate himself historically has special attention in Reza

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<sup>75</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), xi.

<sup>76</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History*, xi.

De Wet's dramaturgy. The Apartheid's policies of othering and racial separation, while were intended at first against the Black racial threat and growing English supremacy, were supported by an ethnic-nationalist Calvinist cultural discourse which insisted on keeping the Afrikaner community distanced from any bad influence. Such policies had culminated in decades of repression and isolation on enclosed towns and farmhouses where rigidity, religious orthodoxy and the ideals of the nation survived at a domestic level. This strict separation and false conviction in superiority and distinctiveness motivated continuous reactions from within the Afrikaner nation itself where writing back to self and one's culture meant unveiling the truth about the past and stressing the traumatic outcomes of Apartheid on both Afrikaners and the different cultural others in South Africa, especially Blacks and Coloreds. De Wet's dramaturgy situates itself within this 'writing back to self' tradition where her plays are regarded to be very revealing and forward in terms of deconstructing the myths surrounding a traumatized Afrikaner psyche, and an entire culture along with it.

In *AG*, the apartheid trauma can be deeply felt through the repressed, alienated psyches of the siblings and their revenge against long years of repression through the murder of their parents. The second play is structured around a plotting for murder after long decades of confinement and exclusion from the community. De Wet's plays, in this sense, become testimonies to long decades of repression, orthodoxy, false domesticity, and a harsh sense of othering which the first architects of Afrikanerdom tried to instill in their follow people. Trauma, in De Wet, is ethnically self-generated and the repercussions of which, however, marked other groups and ethnicities when the nationalist discourse which led to it became politicized and institutionalized.

Karnad's literary impulse molded itself within a hostile socio-political scene of religious fundamentalism, social exclusion, state manipulation of identity politics, the caste rhetoric, and the violence they generated especially during the last three decades of the 20th century and the

first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *TD* and *BS* were written in the aftermath of the Mandal-Mandir issues which were primarily the result of religiously mobilized animosities between a Hindu majority (which was made to believe that Indian meant Hindu) and a Muslim minority, and the growing discontent emerging from the untouchables or OBCs (the Other Backward Classes). As historically proven, the upper caste ruling minority's status, power and position grew in importance through the silencing and marginalization of these lower caste groups. The waves of violence this has generated and the state's reaction to them ushered in decades of violent extremism and communal frenzy, and a traumatism that instigated the attention of writers and social reformers. The religious trauma of 1989 in India is one that was regarded as a culmination of many earlier forms of religious conflicts and which inspired some of Karnad's writings among which are the plays under study in this dissertation. In *TD*, the play ends in bloodshed in Kalyan ushering in havoc with the death of thousands at the hands of the King's son and his Brahmin fold. In *BS*, we become witnesses of a ravaged court life and a blood self-sacrifice committed by the queen in the name of her religious beliefs.

Gambaro's Argentina, como un país aterrorizado, and the Dirty War, the secret disappearances and kidnappings of people, and the collective trauma and loss of faith between individual and state that these events have generated inform her texts *SN* and *LM*. The difficulty of transition from a dictatorial into a post-dictatorial reality in Argentina posed further questions about how a traumatized and repressed psyche, one which had to endure long decades of repression, is to get over its memory and the inability to forget and reconcile itself with the new 'Nunca mas' ideals. Trauma in Gambaro's work is both historical and individual, with both overlapping in the life of the ordinary marginalized citizen. The physical torture, the plotting to escape the house by Dolores and her tutor, and the murder of Rafael under the command of the patriarch Benigno in *LM*, and the scenes of loss, roaming beggars, desperation, the lack of

empathy, and the reincarnating body of Oscar in *SN* attest to the true trauma that Argentinians underwent over a decade of kidnappings, disappearances and state terror.

### **b. The Cultural Materialists and the ‘Dissident Reading’ of Texts**

In response to these othering, exclusive, marginalizing and repressive/repressed realities against which the three playwrights have crafted their texts, there emerges a necessity to think of literature as a space for dissidence, empowerment and political debate the way cultural materialists argue about it. In the plays examined, there is a hegemonic or dominant social order which tries to “legitimize itself” through the “construction of socially marginalized groups as ‘other’,”<sup>77</sup> along, among others, lines of class, race and caste. In that sense, cultural materialists read texts for “signs of subversion and political dissidence” with the purpose of intervening in “cultural political debates.”<sup>78</sup> A cultural materialist reading of a literary text would account for “the contexts of its production,” and in the case of a Shakespearean play (the subject of much cultural materialist criticism), for example, the “economic and political system of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church).”<sup>79</sup>

Drawing mostly on a Marxist (as revisited by Raymond Williams) rather than a Foucauldian vocabulary and leaning more towards an Althusserian notion of ideology, major critics within the cultural materialist tradition like Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, and Catherine Belsey, apply their strategies to the study of Shakespeare through looking in his texts for aspects of dissidence and counter-hegemonic behaviors against Elizabethan society and its governing norms. What is useful, however, to my analysis of the plays is the cultural materialists’ interest in issues of ‘ideology’ and ‘hegemony’ and their interest in exploring “processes of inclusion and exclusion, incorporation and marginalization, acceptance and

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<sup>77</sup> Hans Bertens, “Cultural Materialism: Literary and Critical Theory,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, Feb 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Bertens, “Cultural Materialism.”

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, second edition (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), viii.

opposition,”<sup>80</sup> which clearly shows the Marxist influence on their view of culture and, therefore, their approach to texts and literature. By a “dissident reading of texts”, I refer the way cultural materialists look for aspects of dissidence, marginality and hegemonic structures which inform the power relations a given text underscores and communicates.

Similar to the way, for example, Dollimore reads texts like Jason’s *Jesanus*, Marlow’s *Dr Faustus* and Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* on the basis that they proffer anti-providentialist accounts of Renaissance society, I equally see in the plays I am analyzing a demystification of ‘hegemonic politics’ and ideologies which according to the playwrights have nurtured exclusion, repression and marginality in their respective societies. I read Karnad’s *TD* and *BS* as two plays through which he critiques and satirizes the homogenizing (yet marginalizing) paradigm of Hindutva. I read De Wet’s two plays as texts which show her demystification of the ethnonationalist discourse of Afrikanerdom and its racial superiority rhetoric through showcasing its repercussions and legacy of repression on Afrikaner families, where repression and isolation feature individual and group relationships. I equally read Gambaro’s texts for the kinds of insurgent propensities she brings to her characters against the repressive and ‘othering’ discourse of the proceso decade and its architects. If cultural materialists wanted to channel “alternative Shakespeares” in their reading of Renaissance literature and Jacobean tragedy, I aim to see how the plays chosen for analysis in this research (reflecting the reconciliatory visions of their writers) channel ‘alternative realities’ to the ones which have incited the need for reconciliation and dialogue in their societies.

Extending the application of their strategies to read texts produced in post-war, Thatcherite and contemporary British history, the cultural materialists interpret literary texts in a way which is geared towards “articulating dissident perspectives on contemporary cultural politics, and this often gives to its practitioners a sense of political and social mission.”<sup>81</sup> Sinfield’s reading

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<sup>80</sup> Brannigan, *New Historicism*, 42.

<sup>81</sup> Brannigan, 105.

of Tennyson's poetry, for example, is a good example to cite in regards to how cultural materialists approach texts in relation to power and social ideology. In his reading of *In Memoriam*, Sinfield went into seeing how this poem seems to support the desires and interests of the dominant cultural system through scandalizing homosexuality in a conservative Victorian society and through the "legitimation of heterosexual love as the only natural and therefore legal form of marriage", as he similarly reads it in terms of how it "yields dissident or subversive readings."<sup>82</sup> So, the way this poem can be read as a vehicle "of a dominant hegemonic ideology" (Monarchy in this case), it can also be read as a critique of dominant ideologies on empire, sexuality, morality and capitalism.<sup>83</sup>

Related to the idea of 'dissidence' is Sinfield's view that power or dominant cultural structures proffer their own "faults" which can, consequently, incite change or dissidence from within the cultures themselves. Regarding this, Sinfield further remarks that

Dissident potential drives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from *conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself*. Despite their power, dominant ideological formations are always, in practice, *under pressure, striving to substantiate their claim to superior plausibility in the face of diverse disturbances*.<sup>84</sup>

Similar to this view is Raymond Williams' view that 'dominant order' is not omnipotent or flawless, and which, therefore, engenders the conditions of its own dismantling. In his *Marxism and Literature* and in an essay entitled "The Dominant, Residual and Emergent," Williams argues that the culturally 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' is not 'omnipotent', thus, it can be challenged by the 'residual' or 'emergent'. By the 'residual', he means that which has been "effectively formed in the past," but one which "is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present," while the 'emergent', according to Williams, refers to "the new meanings and values, new practices,

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<sup>82</sup> Brannigan, *New Historicism*, 105.

<sup>83</sup> Brannigan, 110.

<sup>84</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 41.

new relationships and kinds of relationships which are continually being created.”<sup>85</sup> A such, and as Sinfield further asserts in relation to his view about ‘fautlines’, while it was “the Elizabethan social structure that produced unemployed laborers, and military leaders,” it could not then, prevent “such figures conceiving and enacting dissident politics, especially if they were able to constitute milieux within which dissidence might be rendered plausible.”<sup>86</sup> In the context of the plays in this study, this ‘milieux of dissidence’ emerges in Karnad’s *TD* through Basava joining untouchables to the Sharanna movement and Gambaro through the victimized or repressed joining efforts against oppression, and in De Wet’s plays, the siblings in *AG* and the two spinster sisters in *GH* rebel in their own particular ways against the source of their agony and predicament. While the siblings murder their parents, the sisters plot to get rid of their sister who, through her abominable behavior, brought pain and everlasting exclusion to the entire family. In the plays examined, however the forms of hegemonies and power games they try to dislodge and criticize, and as a cultural materialist reading of them would like to reveal, a “commitment to transgressive and oppositional voices” emerging from the side of the excluded, repressed and marginalized “becomes more explicit.”<sup>87</sup>

In that sense, cultural materialism, according to its architects Dollimore and Sinfield, “registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender, and class.”<sup>88</sup> Texts, by that means, become sites where the oppressed can speak against oppression and where the margin can claim position within the order of things. As my analysis of the plays will clearly show and as I will further pinpoint in the third section of this chapter, as part of their imagining of reconciliation, the three playwrights dismantle the structures which support the continuous victimization and marginalization of

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<sup>85</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122-123.

<sup>86</sup> Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 41.

<sup>87</sup> Selden et al., *A Reader’s Guide*, 187.

<sup>88</sup> Dollimore and Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare*, viii.

people from within, and give space to ‘dissident’ voices to emerge from within the layers of their texts.

### **c. On the Empowerment of ‘Peripheral/Subaltern Subjectivities’ in Subaltern Criticism**

Similar to the cultural materialists’ interest in investigating forms of dissidence and counter/hegemonic structures, critics associated with Subaltern criticism have their share in unveiling the workings of marginality and subalternity both in cultural and literary discourse. Prominent among them are the South East Asian Subaltern Group which provides its “discursive displacements’ (as Spivak thought of their methodology) and revisionist discourse to nationalist, dominant and elitist historiography and how it pushed into the margin of scholarship subaltern and other marginal groups in Indian history. Also, within subaltern criticism, other engagements with the question of marginalized subjectivity can be traced in the methodologies offered by scholars within Dalit Studies (as far as the Indian context is concerned) and scholars associated with ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ studies and their role in investigating forms of hegemony and counter-hegemonic behaviors in pluralistic, cosmopolitan and culturally diverse settings.

At the outset, I would like to pinpoint that the way the term ‘subalternity’ is deployed in this research is to be rather taken to represent different forms of subjectivities; othered, repressed and marginalized. The term is used in the context of power and hegemony, and agreeing with John Beverley in his account of subalternity and representation, as to “who has it and who doesn’t, and “who is gaining it and who is losing it.”<sup>89</sup> Even Gramsci who is most associated with the term refers to it to cover a large range of ‘histories from below’. Subalternity, according to Gramsci, exists on a broader scale including “people from different religions and cultures, or those existing at the margin of society,” and many who are subject to

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<sup>89</sup> John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

hegemony of various sorts and that understanding it must account to locate it within its “specific historical context,” where “the processes by which it is produced and reproduced,” can be “exposed.”<sup>90</sup> In that sense, subalternity is to be linked to any condition where power, hegemony and repression intervene to determine people’s or groups’ position in society. Due to the diversity in the cultural and historical realities which inform the plays analyzed in this research, and the different power struggles, hierarchies, and hegemonic structures they expose/criticize, I am taking the concept to mean any condition under which individual or social groups are othered, muted and repressed for they are perceived as a threat to nationalist ideals or old traditions (like untouchables/Dalits and religious minorities in the context of Karnad’s plays), or to stability of a political regime and its logic of domination (in the case of Gambaro’s plays).

The Subaltern Studies Group emerged to be “systematically critical of elitism in the field of South Asian studies,” and as a discursive displacement to the “failure”, as Ranajit Guha asserts in the preface to the third volume of the Subaltern Studies series in 1984, of much academic practice within historiography and the social sciences to “acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny.”<sup>91</sup> This scholarly group took the banner of the endeavor to disturb the “charmed and almost soporific smugness of established scholarship,” and to “doubt orthodoxies cushioned in the self-assurance of final truths.”<sup>92</sup> Constituted of a plethora of scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, David Hardiman, and Gyanendra Pandey, and inspired by a “Gramscian analysis of the subaltern classes,”<sup>93</sup> Said’s and Foucault’s ideas on power and hegemony, these theorists view

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<sup>90</sup> Kylie Smith, “Gramsci at the Margins: Subjectivity and Subalternity in a Theory of Hegemony,” *International Gramsci Journal*, 1(2), 2010: 45.

<sup>91</sup> Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), vii.

<sup>92</sup> Guha, *Subaltern Studies III*, viii.

<sup>93</sup> Deepti, “In Defence of the “Subaltern”: Tracing the Concept Through/across South Asia and Latin America,” in Sonya Surabhi Gupta, *Subalternities in India and Latin America: Dalit Autobiographies and the Testimonio* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022),74.

both literature and historiography as two pathways to restore agency to the oppressed, excluded, and silenced.<sup>94</sup>

In his introduction to a collection of essays entitled, *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, David Ludden traces the genesis and development of subaltern studies. He maintains that they emerged at a time when “major transition in political culture was under way, which entailed new interpretations of the nationalist past,” and at a time, mainly in the 70s and 80s during which, in historical studies, “new schools of specialization defined themselves by opposition to one another.”<sup>95</sup> The subalternists are interested in explaining how “high caste elites had always needed coercive power to keep lower castes, peasants, workers and tribal groups in place.”<sup>96</sup> In elaborating their methods and concepts, they benefited from the “countless studies of societies, histories, and cultures 'from below'” which have penetrated into academia during the last decades of the 20th century.<sup>97</sup>

Though historiographically oriented in terms of focus, the group’s insights and concepts were imported to literature and literary criticism by Gayatri Spivak and a number of other literary critics who “explored the language and textuality of discursive power” which subaltern scholars had introduced in various volumes of criticism.<sup>98</sup> Its revisionist historiography has also inspired studies about the Latin American subject who, according to Mabel Moraña’s description, “all throughout history has been successively conquered, colonized, emancipated, civilized, modernized, Europeanized, developed, given consciousness, un-democratized (and

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<sup>94</sup> The Subaltern Studies project laid down its conceptual and methodological framework through six-volume series subtitled *Writings on South Asian History and Society* and a number of other individual contributions by some of its leading intellectual voices. Some of the group’s representative texts are cited in the bibliography.

<sup>95</sup> David Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 7.

<sup>96</sup> Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Ludden, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Ludden, 17.

with all impunity, re-democratized).”<sup>99</sup> Like its Indian counterpart, the Latin American subject has been at the center of much criticism undertaken by the Latin American Studies Group whose stratagems and ideas, according to Deepti, sought “to reconceptualise the history of subalternity in the subaltern location of Latin America”<sup>100</sup> in the midst of elitist politics and repressive power ideologies in many Latin American countries especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If the subaltern studies project leans more towards an anti-colonial anti-nationalist/elitist historiography, Dalitism and Dalit studies developed in response, primarily, to the question of *untouchability* and caste-based discrimination in Indian society. Inspired by the political activism of B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) for decades and the Dalit Panthers movement’s role in raising consciousness towards the issue of *untouchability* in India in the 1970s, many of its advocates like, among others, Swami Achhutanand, Mangoo Ram, Bhagya Reddy Varma, Jagjivan Ram, Iyothee Thass, and Gopal Guru sought to reclaim “Dalit culture as an alternative to mainstream Hindu print culture, and in this sense, it is seen as the harbinger of a “politics of liberation.”<sup>101</sup> Critical of the absence of the issue of ‘untouchability’ in the scholarly engagements of the Subaltern Studies Group “even though caste continues to be the primary form through which hierarchical discrimination is practiced even today,”<sup>102</sup> Dalit Studies emerged to prominence in the 1990s with the aim to address caste inequalities, the continuous hegemony of the varna system in postcolonial India, and to “rewrite history, rename identity, and challenge Brahminical knowledge production.”<sup>103</sup> They equally aim to write “histories of struggles for human dignity” and recover “histories of struggles against caste discrimination.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Mabel Moraña, “The Boom of the Subaltern,” in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, eds., Ana Del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 651.

<sup>100</sup> Deepti, “In Defence of the “Subaltern,” 70.

<sup>101</sup> Francesca Denegri, “The Touch of the Other: Testimonio and Autobiographical Writing in India and Latin America,” in Sonya Surabhi Gupta, *Subalternities in India and Latin America*, 38.

<sup>102</sup> Ramnarayan S. Rawat, and K. Satyanarayana, eds., *Dalit Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 13-14.

<sup>103</sup> Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, 16-17.

Encompassing a large number of both Dalit and non-Dalit intellectuals, authors, historians and literary critics, Dalit studies created a scholarly shift in the study of contemporary Indian society in the way they provided new discursive frameworks and methodologies which consider the relevance of ‘history from below’ or lower caste and untouchable histories in telling the story of the nation. Also, they constitute a scathing criticism of the political and academic practices which, according to Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana in their introduction to Dalit Studies volume, “allowed caste discrimination to persist” either as a social inequality/stigma or through marginalizing it in writing or political and cultural discourse.<sup>105</sup> Critics associated with the Dalit Studies project aim to revise and go beyond previous conceptualizations of Indian history/nation as crafted by nationalist leaders which, according to Dalit thinkers, fostered a “uniform view” of Indian social history and further perpetuated the power, authority and hegemony of upper caste and elite Hindu leadership. Dalit revisionist scholarship/social discourse aims to restore the agency and dignity of ‘muted and excluded’ groups against long held prejudices, stereotypes and misrepresentations as it played a major role in redefining the way the untouchable subject is to be viewed and portrayed in both historiography and literature against the homogenizing discourse of the Hindu Right.

Considering Dalit writing as a ‘subaltern critique’, Supta shares perspective with a number of other critics who view Dalit writing as a form of resistance and counter-discourse against oppression and misrepresentation. In her study, Laura Brueck, referring to Nancy Fraser’s concept of ‘subaltern counterpublics’,<sup>106</sup> argues that Dalit literature which emerged from within India’s subaltern and marginalized classes acts as a “space for the exchange of different

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<sup>105</sup> Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> Frazer’s notion of ‘counterpublics’ is usually present in different discussions on ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’. Defining ‘counterpublics’, Frazer says that they refer to “discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” In Frazer’s view, these counterdiscourses can be led by different marginalized groups like, among others, women. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990): 67.

discourses that are all relevant to the contemporary Dalit experience in Indian society,” and entertain topics “that are often ignored in more mainstream discursive spaces.”<sup>107</sup>

My view of reconciliation as imagined by the three playwrights can also be linked to a range of critical insights brought by ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ scholars and their views on counter-hegemonic politics. The three playwrights give voice to the voiceless, empower/domesticate margins and advocate for an openness towards the ‘other’ (be it social, religious or ethnic) as part of their thinking about reconciliation. Therefore, to further add to the insights of the previous approaches to subalternity and marginalized subjectivity, I would briefly link the three playwrights’ way of thinking about the need of ‘coming closer/together with the other’ to Shail Mayaram’s insights about cultural difference and inclusion, Ash Amin’s ‘politics of propinquity’ and Doreen Massy’s concept of ‘throwntogetherness’. In “Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: Concept and Approaches”, Minhao Zeng comments that “the studies on subaltern cosmopolitanism have generally pursued their inquiry along two trajectories: some turn us *inwards* by focusing on the coexistence of ethnically, racially and culturally different groups in a particular place; and others direct us *outwards* by locating their discussions within broad translocal and transnational frames.”<sup>108</sup> For the purpose of my research, I am particularly interested in reviewing the first trajectory of what is meant by ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ and how it is relevant to understand politics of inclusion and exclusion in a given social or cultural setting.

While the approaches of the Subaltern Studies group and Dalit scholars are driven by a revolutionary revisionist impulse against colonial, nationalist and postcolonial hegemonies with a focus on reclaiming voice and agency to the ‘subaltern’, ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ scholars (especially those involved with the first approach as indicated above) are interested in looking

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<sup>107</sup> Laura R. Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>108</sup> Minhao Zeng, “Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: Concept and Approaches,” *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, 2014, 137-138, (Emphasis in original).

into im/possibilities of coexistence, connectivity, cooperation, and reconciliation in settings which are characterized by racial, ethnic, religious, class and linguistic diversity (and which are, in most cases, prone to conflict). They seek to understand the ways through which different groups can engage in ‘cosmopolitan’ behaviors or practices against different forms of social oppression, marginality and power ideologies. In her *The Other Global City*, Shail Mayaram, taking South East Asia as her focus of analysis for its “very high degree of plurality (Vatsyayana)”, “overlapping religions” and “notions of difference,”<sup>109</sup> argues that cosmopolitanism is demonstrative of “the capacity of the self to relate to non self not in denial, negation, otherness, and annihilatory politics but in feelings ranging from prejudice, ethnocentrism, and indifference, to civility, accommodation, dialogue, mutual respect, learning, and sharing to compassion, friendship, and even love.”<sup>110</sup>

This view entails the capacity (and obstacles to it) of individuals and groups to ‘live together’ which scholar Doreen Massey describes through her notion of ‘throwntogetherness’. Massey sees that being together with different ‘others’ in one social setting morphs into an “ever shifting constellation of trajectories,” where one finds oneself unexpectedly in contact and/or wrestling with various ideologies, both social and political. As such, the social context becomes a potential source of chaos and conflict, as it can be a “chance” (in her analysis, Massey refers to Derrida’s expression of “chaos is at once a risk and a chance”, 1996) for togetherness and the ability to live in communion with multiple social identities.<sup>111</sup> While frictions and conflicts are inevitable in any community or social context, it is also possible (through dialogue, reconciliation and mutuality), according to Massey, for people to negotiate and tame their differences. Similar to this argument is Mayaram’s view that just like complex social and cultural settings can be “the site of prejudice, conflict, and exclusion,” they can also

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<sup>109</sup> Shail Mayaram, “Rereading Global Cities: Topographies of an Alternative Cosmopolitanism in Asia,” in Shail Mayaram, ed., *The Other Global City* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.

<sup>110</sup> Mayaram, ‘Rereading Global Cities,’ 10- 11.

<sup>111</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2005), 151.

be places of “cohabitation and conflictual coexistence, where difference is encountered and confronted, hate speech articulated but also negotiated.”<sup>112</sup>

Referring to post-partition India as a case in this regard, Shail further relates: “The violence in Delhi in 1984 and in Gujarat in 2002 involved Dalits and tribals. Nonetheless, *in the crevices of society one sometimes witnesses glimpses of cosmopolitan being.*”<sup>113</sup> ‘Glimpses of cosmopolitan being’ where “subaltern visions for democracy, citizenship, and justice come alive in their discourse.”<sup>114</sup> Accommodating differences which emerge in the presence of various ‘others’ and where contrasting cultural practices predominate, a ‘politics of propinquity’, a term put forward by Ash Amin, might be seen as an alternative to incoherence or division; politics which “might attend to the challenges thrown up by negotiations of everyday difference” and helps us understand how “different needs,” “different voices and interests can be heard, on how local differences can be reconciled.”<sup>115</sup>

Zeng further comments that the concept of ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ helped scholars “theorize social and political agency” of large array of subalternities and marginalized subjectivities and “broaden the possibilities of resistance and empowerment against hegemony of various kinds.”<sup>116</sup> These scholars delve into the daily encounters and crossings over which bring people of different creeds, ethnicities, and social affiliations face to face. Between constant negotiations and contestations in the social realm, these views seem to tell us, there emerges a possibility for togetherness, coexistence and reconciliation of division.

What the previous approaches to subalternity and peripheral subjectivity share in common is the idea of ‘opposition’. They all nurture the notion of ‘opposition’ to hegemony, oppression and repressive ideologies as a pathway to reclaim voice and agency. Whether historical or

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<sup>112</sup> Mayaram, ‘Rereading Global Cities,’ 23.

<sup>113</sup> Mayaram, 23. (Emphasis added).

<sup>114</sup> Mayaram, 24.

<sup>115</sup> Amin Ash, ‘Regions Unbound: Towards a New Politics of Place’, *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography*, 86 (1), 2004, 38-39.

<sup>116</sup> Zeng, “Subaltern Cosmopolitanism,” 140.

social, various forms of insurgency, dissidence and cosmopolitanism usually emerge as counter-hegemonic practices through which the ‘muted, excluded, repressed and marginalized’ can reclaim agency within a complex network of hierarchies and forms of power. Taken together, these critical insights help us understand the workings of power and hegemony within societies. In order to give voice to the ‘muted’ and ‘silenced’ and reclaim the position of untouchables (stated as Sudras in the play) and religious minorities in ancient Kalyan, Basava, in Karnad’s *TD*, and his followers decide to rebel against and challenge the rigid laws and religious orthodoxies of royalty and Brahminism in their society, in an attempt to provide alternative perspectives which foster equality, tolerance, and freedom. In Gambaro’s plays, the victimized Suki in *SN* and the repressed Dolores and Rafael in *LM* rebel in their own ways against the forces which oppress them. The playwright grants these characters voice to speak against repression through injecting them with attitudes and desires which fly against the norms of the ‘closed spaces’ within which they are confined, and against the ‘power logics’ of their victimizers.

### **3. ‘Alternate Worlds’, ‘Deconstructed Imaginaries’, and ‘Counter-Discourses’**

If Benedict Anderson’s seminal text theorizes about a logic of an ‘imagined community’ as to how nations “have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy,”<sup>117</sup> ‘imagined communities’ as abstract constructs, supported from within by different forms of ‘rituals’ and ‘symbols’, don’t refer only to the idea of the ‘nation’ since other different forms of ‘collective grouping’ or identities can be created along other forms of consciousness. Forms of consciousness like those generally constructed around categories such as ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, or language. Such constructions around shared destiny or identity, as Anthony Smith asserts in his *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, “often change their symbolic

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<sup>117</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 4.

forms and content over time in relation to different perceptions of significant others outside the community and varying degrees of conflict or competition with those outsiders.”<sup>118</sup> In that sense, myth, history, shared stories or cultural symbols, are usually inserted in works of literature so as to fashion out a sense of community, common ‘identity’ or ‘vision of nation’.

If this is the case, it is also relevant to suggest that literature can also be seen as a space to dismantle or ‘deconstruct imagined communities or constructions’ through violating borders, dismantling hierarchies, subverting hegemonies, domesticating margins, and reversing the logics of power. As such, the present research embraces this suggestion and claims that the three writers react to social worlds, group identities, or communities that are constructed around beliefs of racial superiority, cultural distinctiveness, casteism, religious exclusion, and ones that are created and maintained through the repression of margins. The way communities are usually structured around common beliefs or shared destinies and histories to serve a national ideal, communities can also be constructed through exclusion, violence, trauma, and the ‘marginalization of the other’. The three writers, informed by the specific histories and social changes which shaped their texts, see that key to the achievability of reconciliation is the dismantling of these structures which divide and victimize people from within their societies.

In the society which Karnad critiques in his plays, an idea of nation was created and supported by a Varna system (dividing society into upper and lower classes through casteism) and a Hindutva ideology which assumes certain criteria as to when and how one can identify as a true Indian (a point to be further explored in the next chapter). Using history and myth to support the idea of a certain form of Indian society led to the exclusion, oppression and elimination of lower castes like the untouchables/Dalits, and non-Hindu religious minorities like the Muslims in, what Arundhati Roy likes to call it, a modern ‘nakedly fascist state’. In the context of De Wet’s plays, Afrikanerdom was the Afrikaner nationalists’ way to imagine an

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<sup>118</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.

idea of the nation within a larger culturally diverse South Africa. “To consolidate their ethnonationalism” and foster “a new ethnies,”<sup>119</sup> Afrikaners relied on myth, Calvinist Orthodoxy, the institutionalization of Afrikaans, land ownership and later a political system to give shape to this imagined structure (through the apartheid state) which had to maintain itself through excluding the cultural ‘other’; that Black peril which threatens its stability. Smith speaks of this as a desire on the part of constructed communities to “create an overriding commitment and bond for the community.”<sup>120</sup>

In Gambaro’s dictatorial Argentina, a different image of an ‘imaginary community’ or a typical ‘Argentinian identity’ survived in the cultural and political discourse of the successive authoritarian regimes which governed Argentinian life for long decades. The image of the nation these regimes wanted to fashion is built around the ideals and supposed heroism of the ‘fathers of the nation’ (like Rosas and all those who were recreated in his image afterward) as it equally relates to how the dictatorial regime during the proceso decade constructed a sense of ‘community’/image of nation which “destabilizes the population and therefore makes it easier for the government to maintain power by creating a climate of fear in which subversion would be impossible.”<sup>121</sup> This imagined vision of nation survived on the exclusion of ‘state enemies’ amongst the people, therefore; dividing the public sphere into two different ‘social others’ (into victims and victimisers) with each trying to maintain its identity and defend its ideals against this constructed or imagined ‘other’, and two ‘social worlds’ (public and clandestine).

Therefore, I hereby argue that as part of their thinking about reconciliation, the three playwrights think that ‘deconstructing’ these confining/exclusive imaginaries through violating

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<sup>119</sup> Abulof Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations: Jews, Afrikaners, and French-Canadians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 227.

<sup>120</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 57.

<sup>121</sup> Diana Taylor, “Theater and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's 'Information for Foreigners,’” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 42; Iss. 2, 1990, 174.

boundaries and dismantling hierarchies, propagating hidden histories, and unveiling the truth about the past is essential to envision a reality where reconciliation can be possible. This is the case because these plays were written during periods of social and national disruption, of violence and trauma, so speculating about reconciliation calls for such thinking about a culture from within, investigating its ideologies and foundational myths, and its troubled historical memory. As such, I think, and as I will try to explain in the upcoming chapters, the writers think of deconstructing these imaginary constructions as part of their thinking about reconciliation.

As earlier asserted, to further develop this argument, I would briefly draw on ‘discourse-counter discourse’ as introduced by Richard Terdiman, and refer to deconstructive literary criticism and its concern with the ‘deconstruction of foundations’ and the ‘disruptive power of writing’. Since the plays can be read as counter discourses to the ideologies and hegemonic systems which motivate division and conflicts as I explained earlier, a possible way to understand how this counter discourse takes place is to ‘read through’ and explore how the binaries, hierarchies and imaginaries which inhabit the worlds of the plays are dismantled or subverted by the three writers.

With the 19<sup>th</sup> century as his site of exploration seeing it as “counter-discourse’s classic moment,”<sup>122</sup> Terdiman traces forms of “symbolic resistance” in works by major literary figures like Balzac, Daumier, Mallarmé and Baudelaire. Considering culture as a “field of struggle,” Terdiman, with reference to major theories on power and social discourse like those put forward by Foucault, Bakhtin, Kristeva and Derrida, reads these texts as “counter or alternative discourses,” to the bourgeoisie and its dominant power discourse in 19th century France.<sup>123</sup> And because no “dominant discourse is ever fully protected from contestation,” as Terdiman puts it, I suggest that the three playwrights, through their texts, contest the ideologies, political

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<sup>122</sup> Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>123</sup> Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 15.

mythologies, and practices which engender violence, division and trauma, seeing them as obstacles to both reconciliation and change. And since counter discourses, as Terdiman argues, “evoke a principle of order just as systemic as that which sustains the discourses they seek to subvert,”<sup>124</sup> I also suggest that through unveiling the contradictions and the legacies of the ideologies they criticize in their texts, the playwrights offer their alternative visions of how reconciliation can possibly take place, and equally negotiate the limits of this reconciliation as they do with its achievability. The plays examined, in this sense, become appropriate spaces of ‘symbolic resistance’, to use Terdiman’s words. In his *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, and regarding how counter-discourses function, Terdiman reiterates: “for in their opposition to the dominant, counterdiscourses function to *survey its limits and its internal weaknesses*. From this dialectic of discursive struggle, truths about the social formation-its characteristic modes of reproduction and its *previously hidden vulnerabilities-inevitably emerge*.”<sup>125</sup> Hegemonic ideologies, as such, become the target for “vampirization,” “subversion” and emerge as “the inevitable referent of their counter-assertions.”<sup>126</sup>

The texts examined disclose a number of hierarchies, binaries and conflicting worldviews. In De Wet’s plays, we are introduced into different binaries like individual and community, self and other, past and present where incest, death, isolation, alienation, and dreams add to the intensity of the different characters’ sense of repression. In Karnad’s texts, different hierarchies and incompatible views intersect: kshatriyas, upper castes and other superior Brahmins dominate and subjugate the untouchables and Shudras, whereas Jain and Hindu, orthodox and secular debates shape the dynamics of both plays. The dialogues between various characters intensify the depth of friction and hierarchy between Brahmins and Sharannas, low caste mahout and king, and the Jain queen and the Hindu queen mother. In Gambaro’s plays, the

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<sup>124</sup> Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 56-57.

<sup>125</sup> Terdiman, 68. (Emphasis added).

<sup>126</sup> Terdiman, 64.

binaries emerge in the form of the conflicting power logics and desires of victims and victimisers, center and margin, public and clandestine. In both plays, physical imagery and pain intensify the tensions between victims and victimizers and enlarge the gap between them. As such, reading the six plays with a deconstructive impulse would mean an attempt to understand ‘how’ the playwrights subvert these hegemonic structures and hierarchies, and cross the border between these binaries, hence; disclosing the alternatives to conflict and disruption they bring to their texts.

Deconstruction or deconstructive criticism, as performed by Derrida, and a number of other subsequent critics from both Europe and America like the Yale critics Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman, is taken to be a mode of reading or interpretation of texts rather than a theory, method or critique. If any given text communicates ‘irreconcilably contradictory meanings’ which can take the form of contested ideas, opinions, philosophies, power relations or ideologies, a deconstructive reading of it would try to understand what ‘binary oppositions’ or conflicts a given text exposes. Montrose comments: “the propositions and operations of deconstructive reading may be employed as powerful tools of ideological analysis,” and quoting Derrida himself, he further asserts that “deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with... conceptual and semantic contents.... *Deconstructive practices are also and first of all political and institutional practices.*”<sup>127</sup>

This means that a deconstructive reading a text is not done only through considering the rhetorical or semantic aspects of the text, but that, as Derek Attridge asserts in his *Reading and Responsibility*, even “the ethical and the political” are not “avoided by deconstruction, but implicated at every step.”<sup>128</sup> It also means that, as Attridge further emphasizes, “the spectre of deconstruction is present” whenever there is “a willingness to attend to that which has been marginalised in the constitution of a dominant entity or power, whenever there is a suspicion of

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<sup>127</sup> Louis Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance,” 15-16. (Emphasis added).

<sup>128</sup> Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, 19.

neat binary oppositions.”<sup>129</sup> As Atkins puts it, “textual interpretation” from a deconstructionist perspective, “need not be slave to the text,” and that any reading of a text “leads always outward to large questions and issues,” where it acts as a “site, as an opening, and as an opportunity” to understand issues of more complex nature beyond the text itself.<sup>130</sup>

Building on these insights and sharing their line of thought, I hereby argue that in their attempt to “thunder against (“tonner contre”)” hegemony and domination, the playwrights engage in different dismantling initiatives. Karnad violates the boundaries between castes through inserting a reformist movement with its subversive Lingayat/Virashaiva order of society and through inserting a low caste character as a voice of reason and mediation in a Kshatriya dominated court. De Wet does this through dismantling the world order around which her peoples’ fake suppositions about racial superiority were constructed through showcasing the contradictions and the repressive legacy of that world from within. Gambaro injects power and authority into the marginalized who are pushed into the margins due to the repressive state’s ‘version of the nation’.

Because any counter-discourse attempts to “unmask the fetish character of modern forms of social domination,” harboring “the dream of victoriously replacing its antagonist,”<sup>131</sup> we may assume that the three playwrights speak with a visionary impulse. They respond to chaotic post-conflict, post-traumatic experiences in need of reorganization and reordering however ‘idealistic’ or ‘unattainable’ the kind of reconciliation they want to address might seem to be. My research embraces the argument that in societies where conflict and division prevail, writers respond with texts in which they try to envision a certain order where reconciliation, harmony, and dialogue can replace division and antagonism.

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<sup>129</sup> Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, 37.

<sup>130</sup> Douglas G. Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction, Deconstructive Reading* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 3.

<sup>131</sup> Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 75/56-57.

#### **4. By Way of Appraisal**

So far then, we come to understand that in divided, conflict-riven and traumatic social contexts, literature or the aesthetic becomes an appropriate space where othering beliefs and traumatic histories can be questioned and, possibly reconciled, cutting the red tape for a certain order to manifest.

The previously discussed critical insights to text *in* context emphasize how power, politics, and ideologies alienate individual and groups from each other through reinforcing division and exclusion. While new historicist and Jameson's discernments strive to show how people are trapped in complex cycles of power ideologies and competing hegemonic systems, both cultural materialists and subalternists offer their 'dissident reading' of culture in their attempt to show how texts can 'allow space to challenging voices' and 'politics of subversion' to emerge. As such, works of literature become sites for the disruption of hierarchies and hegemonies, for the demystification of long held mythologies on race, caste, religion and class, and become loci of 'decentering', 'domestication', and 'empowerment' of marginalized, muted, othered and repressed voices and desires.

The critical insights I have consulted over this chapter intersect with various arguments about reconciliation as both a resolution to conflict and an alternative to disruption of different kinds. As we have demonstrated in the dissertation's introduction, different approaches to the concept of reconciliation (whether from a political, religious, legal, ethical or literary perspective) theorize about it as a wish for more harmonious societies and an improvement in human relationships in the aftermath of both small scale (domestic or interpersonal) and more complex forms of conflict. It is also thought of as possible pathway towards democratization and nation building in societies which pass through periods of disruption and violence. As such, the new historicists', Jameson's, Said's, and Brecht's arguments about the disruptive power of literature and its role in taking part in political debates and alerting people to the dangerous

extremes a culture might take, support my choice of the six plays as spaces to examine the different resolutions to disruption the three playwrights communicate through their texts. The approaches to text *in* context and to the issues of subjectivity and subalternity I have delineated over this chapter resonate with my research argument that reconciliation, as both an ethic for co-existence and an aspiration, can be achieved when the different hegemonies, hierarchies and forces of domination which oppress/traumatise people and divide societies are challenged and dismantled. While how this can be undertaken is usually addressed as an issue in politics and restorative justice, I am devoting this dissertation to see how writers and literature also can actively outline their approaches and offer their visions to questions of more complex nature.

In each of the texts studied in this dissertation, there is a new interpretation and analysis of the playtexts provided which was not previously unearthed in the texts' criticism. This venture at providing new interpretations (without trying to cultivate an entirely different cut for each of the plays' dress) is a personal intellectual desire to provide a new reading of the texts which, first, serves my research purpose of understanding the workings of reconciliation as represented in each of them, and second, to highlight the fact that texts can be interpreted in various ways, knowing that literary criticism is but this capacity to read beyond what certain texts might offer when we think of them beyond the contours drawn for them by other critics.

Additionally, because I am analyzing literary texts that respond to different cultural contexts/histories and which communicate different exclusionary othering, traumatic experiences yielding, therefore, in different engagements from the three playwrights, I want to make clear that specific contexts need, henceforth, other specific analytical pathways which will be chapter-specific. With this in mind, I will further consult critical scholarship by Latin American critics to culture and political discourse to situate Gambaro's dramaturgy in the context of the military memory-related victimhood in Argentina. Karnad's concern with Indian history and myth calls to my analysis scholarly criticism by a number of Indologists, and De

Wet's preoccupation with the question of Afrikaner identity and collective trauma in transitional and post-apartheid South Africa will make recourse to critical analyses as regards identity, memory, Afrikaner cultural specificities besides other aspects of Afrikaner history which will possibly emerge in the course of this research.

The next chapter introduces us into the lives and times of the three playwrights and their playtexts. It looks into the different social and historical forces informing the traumatic and divided realities which have inspired each of the playwrights' own vision of reconciliation.

## Chapter II

### **‘Speaking Truth to Power’: Lives and Times of the Playwrights and their Play-Texts**

“On the page, history is present in every text, ‘historical’ or not.”<sup>132</sup>

The plays examined in this dissertation bear witness to the relationship between text and its context and to the presence of history on ‘their pages’. The three playwrights are shaped by their times within which their works emerged, determining and influencing their literary legacy and their aesthetic engagement. The first part of this chapter introduces us into the lives and times with which De Wet’s plays interact with an emphasis on the anti-apartheid literary expression, Afrikaner racial and ethnic discourse among other issues of relevance to our understanding of her plays. The second part shifts to locate Karnad’s plays within a long tradition of casteism, religious fundamentalism and othering. This provides frame and context to Karnad’s views about inter/intrareligious and inter-caste reconciliation which emerge from his plays. The third section introduces us into Gambaro’s drama locating it within a post-proceso violent and repressive Argentinian reality. In the three parts, and in line with the new historicists’ argument that texts are better appreciated when situated “in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment,”<sup>133</sup> I also make resort to other playwrights, literary trends or movements which intersect with the three playwrights, the plays examined and the realities informing them.

#### **1. South African Context in Light of De Wet’s Selected Texts**

##### **a. De Wet, the Playwright**

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<sup>132</sup> Jonathan Morse, quoted in Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

<sup>133</sup> Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 176.

Known in South African literary circles as the ‘female Fugard’ and an ‘Afrikaans Chekhov,’ Reza De Wet (1952-2012) provided the South African literary/theatrical scene with playtexts and fictions which deftly question what lurks behind the seemingly stable and harmonious South African Afrikaner identity. As both a playwright and a university drama lecturer, De Wet chose a literary road not taken by her contemporaries in the way she shunned away from experimenting with the political and overt governmental criticism (a trend which brought together many South African writers during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both Blacks and Whites). She, instead, chose to engage with the deeper layers of her Afrikaner culture and ethos with a desire to unnerve and shake an ethnic community’s belief in old and sustained myths on cultural purity, superiority, and Calvinist orthodoxy. Her plays, as much as they surprised readers, critics, and audiences for the openness with which she treated themes which were for long considered taboos and unquestionable, pulled them into an unsafe terrain of self-questioning, with a past which was for long well-enclosed within the confines of farms, gatherings, and church communities, being now well exposed before their eyes. While some hailed her dramaturgy for its unusual, yet very relevant, subject matter, many thought of her plays as disrespectful to the memory of her people’s history, regardless of the darkness it accumulated over the decades.

Reza De Wet belonged to *Die Sestigters* (the Sixtiers or the generation of the sixties in English); a South African Afrikaner literary movement of the 1960s which had as its activists anti-apartheid Afrikaner writers. The movement’s main figures like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Reza de Wet, Jan Rabie, and Elsa Joubert among others were influenced by the existentialist trend in literature which they had the chance to experience thanks to their educational tours in Europe. These writers aligned themselves with the anti-apartheid movement, vehemently criticizing the monolithic discourse as advocated by their fellow Afrikaner nationalist leaders. Their plays, poems, novels, and essays aimed at freeing the

Afrikaner literary expression from the ethnic isolationist tendencies that accompanied the political calls for exclusion and the provincialism which governed its stylistics for decades.<sup>134</sup> They, as De Wet did, called for inter-racial tolerance and interested themselves with laying open stories of repression, taboos, and the tethering restraints of Christian Orthodox puritanism surrounding a group “which, through apartheid, through geographical necessity, and through the rigidities of Calvinism, has made a virtue of isolationism; a group almost wholly out of touch with the ‘world outside,’”<sup>135</sup> as André Brink elucidates. Brink and those who chose to speak against the atrocities committed by the apartheid state were seen as enemies of the state, and as ‘traitors to their tribe’ (i.e., the Afrikaner nation).<sup>136</sup>

With several violent events accumulating over the decades, among which are the notorious Soweto killings of 1976,<sup>137</sup> some Afrikaner writers reconsidered their role and responsibility as a ‘literary elite’. They addressed the transgressions issued by a ‘white minority’ whose self-image was that of a ‘hunted down people’, and a community whose existence, ontological security, and self-preservation relied on its ability to keep the border that brings its nearer to other communities or races firm and unbreakable. In this sense, De Wet can be seen as a ‘tribe traitor’ herself for she chose to subvert the myths and ethnically-composed image of superiority. Also, she chose to address reconciliation not just as a need for resolution, communication, or dialogue with the ‘cultural other’, but one which brings her people into communion with who they are, not as a racially superior minority with a civilizing mission to fulfill, but one which is

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<sup>134</sup> This upsurge in anti-apartheid writings coincided with the rise of other Afrikaner artistic forms of expression like the *Voëlvry* (meaning free or outcast) anti-apartheid musical movement which, in a rock and roll style, had as its objective the emancipation of the Afrikaner youth from the poisonous rhetoric of the apartheid policies and practices.

<sup>135</sup> “An Introduction to the Sestigers.” *Die Sestigers*, May. 2011.

<sup>136</sup> Freedman, Samuel G. “A Traitor to His Tribe.” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 2015.

<sup>137</sup> Student led, the Soweto uprisings starting in 1976 changed the sociocultural realities of South Africa for decades to come. Revolting against the forced institutionalization of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in Soweto schools, large numbers of Black students started a series of rebellions against a language they perceived as a ‘language of the oppressor’. With more than 600 lives lost during the protests at the hands of the apartheid state, the uprisings incited the reactions of many commentators inside and outside the country, leading to further mobilization against the atrocities of the Afrikaner state. Alistair Boddy-Evans, “16 June 1976 Student Uprising in Soweto.” *ThoughtCo*, Jan., 2021.

part of a larger reality and a world which brings many other cultural others together under one social fabric. De Wet's version of reconciliation, as the next chapter will try to demonstrate in details, drives people to look critically at the past, and that healing starts when the 'wrongdoer' both understands and assumes his or her wrongdoing. With the "Dutch reformed religious leaders" extolling the "nationalists' version of 'loving thy neighbor as thyself' in the comforting guise of 'separate but equal,'"<sup>138</sup> De Wet seems to argue that this separation of the Afrikaner people from their 'racial other', though started as a religious and ethnonationalist project, had direct and ever-lasting impacts on entire generations' image of self and other. It widened, according to the playwright, the gap of the possibility towards dialogue or reconciliation, even though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had these as an aspiration after the hearing and truth-telling journey which started in 1995.

In this regard, De Wet is known for her theatrical experimentation which interested itself with the New Post-Apartheid South African social transformations, with a specific focus on what relates to ethnicity and identity construction. Her plays like, among others, *African Gothic*, *Good Heavens*, *Crossings*, *Concealment*, *In a Different Light*, and *Worm in the Bud* try to spotlight the dark side of the Afrikaner ethnic community's fake suppositions of enjoying healthy isolationist domesticity. In his introduction to Reza De Wet's *Plays Two*, the primary source used in this research, Marthinus Basson asserts that:

The Afrikaner is a contradictory creature. We have a complex and difficult history of abusing, and being abused, and it clings to us like a hump. We were taught by the system we created to think around corners whilst trying to shoot straight from the hip. For me, Reza De Wet's work will always be quality, hand-crafted lace that shows much beauty while it exposes a potent sweat of guilt and the power of raw muscle.<sup>139</sup>

This dichotomy of 'abusing' and 'being abused', and the continuous obsession with 'repression' and thinking 'around corners' lie at the heart of De Wet's views about reconciliation when she

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<sup>138</sup> Marthinus Basson, "Introduction," in Reza De Wet, *Plays Two: African Gothic, Good Heavens, Breathing In* (London: Oberon Books Ltd., 2005), 7.

<sup>139</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 7.

chose to invest with the domestic forms of repression and abuse in order to transmit the image of an entire community's perplexing position between being victims and perpetrators at once.

As a professor in the drama department at Rhodes University in Grahamstown and one of those who thought that the current Afrikaner literary mode of writing has failed to realistically engage with and respond to the newly emerging South Africa, De Wet reacted against the White South African drama, produced mainly in English, accusing it of 'deadliness'. Instead, she favors the kind of literature or themes which engage actively with the fast-changing silhouettes of South African society, and one which is contextualized, and maintains a dialogue with the multivocal character of the new South Africa.<sup>140</sup>

On various occasions, De Wet made it clear that she belonged to a family setting which was not much dragged into the Afrikaner Calvinist and nationalist ideologies, and that her family exposed her to other languages like English, and had her familiarize with other people coming from other cultural backgrounds. This seems to have helped De Wet arm herself with the sufficient tools to write back to her culture and its norms with a critical impulse, as it opened her up to other possibilities as to understand how culturally, linguistically and religiously different people can relate to each other. This can also be seen as a reason why De Wet chose to engage with the question of reconciliation and syncretism in a different way from her contemporaries, where she made of the Afrikaner culture and the myths about the past a starting point to her approach to the issues of identity and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa. In a conversation with Barrie Hough back in 1998, De Wet had a say about the role of her upbringing in shaping her attitudes towards other cultural groups in South Africa and even her own:

My family is not hyper-Afrikaans. I have a strange family. It is more the people who lived around us and with whom I came in contact, who gave me the Afrikaans foundation. I actually come from a slightly dilapidated, decadent family when one speaks of Afrikanerdom. I was never dragged to church. There's never been whipped with such things. There was actually a lot of freedom and I have come in tremendous contact,

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<sup>140</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 204.

since I was little, with English and other literatures. My mother-in-law's books were all English. Also, what I read when I was little was often English. I think it forms insight.<sup>141</sup>

In her *Russian Trilogy*, including plays as *Three Sisters Two* (Drie Susters Twee, 1996), De Wet brings the realistic current of late-nineteenth-century Russian literature, as seen through Chekhov, to bear on Apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Anton Chekhov's plays *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull* (1898) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1902) inspired De Wet's trilogy which has the characters of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Like Chekhov who dealt with a "submerged life in the text,"<sup>142</sup> and treated issues that are both socially and psychologically engaging like the paradoxical dimension and vulnerability of civilization, people's unfulfilled and failed expectations within the confines of a dissolving social order, De Wet contemplated about a dissolving Apartheid order and the psychological trauma it generated. In re-creating Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, De Wet settled on the original Chekhovian plot whose events stopped in 1917 with the hymns of the Bolshevik Revolution and people fantasizing about an ideal version of Moscow. In addition to keeping the setting as it is (revolutionary Moscow) and the characters' names and individual stories, De Wet took the pessimistic sensation of this play and applied it to South Africa of the 1990s which shares with Chekhov's Russia the disintegration of the old order (Apartheid Afrikaner/old imperial Moscow) and the coming of a new one (the first post-apartheid government/Bolshevik or army led Russia).<sup>143</sup> Chekhovian techniques of role-play and flashbacks are recurrent in other plays by De Wet, using them as such to purge and deal with the past.

Out of her rich dramatic output which is considered to have participated in drawing the picture around the newly aspired to 'Rainbow nation', De Wet's plays *AG* which appeared in Afrikaans as *Diepe Grond* (1986) and *GH* (2005), which originally appeared in Afrikaans as *Op Dees Aarde* in (1991) question and subvert the myths about the past, racial purity,

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<sup>141</sup> Erika Terblanch, "Reza de Wet (1952–2012)," *ATKV*, Oct. 2018.

<sup>142</sup> John Louis Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>143</sup> Marisa Keuris, "Found in Translation: Chekhov Revisited by Reza de Wet and Janet Suzman," *Journal of Literary Studies*, 20:1-2, 2004: 155.

Afrikanerdom and how they pose challenges to post-apartheid reconciliation and democratic transition. They serve as her best to illustrate the issue raised in the present research. Before bringing forward her two plays *GH* and *AG* as two illustrative dramatic spaces that address her views about reconciliation in a transitional post-apartheid period in the upcoming chapter, it would be useful to my analysis to situate her dramatic output within the sociocultural context that informed its philosophy and shaped its dynamics.

### **b. De Wet and Post-Apartheid South African Literary Tradition**

De Wet's dramatic output took a critical turn when the transition from an apartheid regime to a democratic state as envisioned by the architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>144</sup> started polarizing at a national scale. Within this new transitional spirit, issues related to the past and its legacy of repression, the Afrikaner nationalist discourse and its segregationist ideology, the question about identity construction and reconstruction, among other issues reflective of the period, marked the South African sociocultural and political debates. Writers like De Wet responded to this growing concern about how the aspired to 'rainbow nation' is to be envisioned or made possible in the face of a complex heritage of othering, exclusion, and trauma.

The initiation of the (TRC) in 1994 was an impetus for South Africans to mind their past histories and work towards mutual understanding. With "bringing out the truth" as one of its guiding emblems, the TRC, politically and socially speaking, was established as a body to restore justice in a nation witnessing a transitory period through inciting people to speak out the hidden in cycles of testimonies and public hearings. Influenced by the Ubuntu<sup>145</sup> theology of the South African Anglican cleric Desmond Tutu, this reconciliation commission was thought

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<sup>144</sup> Referred to, heretofore throughout the chapter, as the TRC.

<sup>145</sup> In defining *Ubuntu* as an altruistic and humane philosophy, Desmond Tutu reflects, "According to ubuntu, it is not a great good to be successful through being aggressively competitive and succeeding at the expense of others. In the end, our purpose is social and communal harmony (...) Social harmony is for us the summum bonum- the greatest good. Anything that subverts, that undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague." Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 27.

of as a step for people to surmount their prejudices and would “provide a safe, non-interrogative space in which victims and survivors could tell their own stories and reclaim their human dignity.”<sup>146</sup> The TRC called for its reconciliatory political project, though it was religiously motivated at first, through motivating people to testify, confess and reveal the truth; a step which was considered essential to achieve the commission’s major objective which is healing and dialogue. This step, however supported by some as a way to bring together the different constituents of the desired “rainbow nation” into dialogue, was contested by many others seeing it as a political manipulation of the past and its traumatic legacy which, many thought, has to be kept fresh and open, if it is to be surmounted and, if possible, reconciled with its present realities. Announcing the end of the apartheid state and opening up the door for those who committed atrocities to confess, appeared to be hasty and many believed that it was not really about revealing the truth of what happened as much as it was about how a ‘collective life’ under the rainbow nation slogan would be like in the future if the stigmas of the past are made to be forgotten.

In literature, whether fiction or drama, writers have had different inclinations as to how one can engage with a long history of victimization and, if so, what issues are of more concern to the people. Different perspectives coming from those from the minority, who were part of the apartheid nationalist project and those, the majority, whose voice, place and liberties were eliminated in the name a mythically constructed nationalist ideal. Describing South African literature as a ‘literature of communities,’ Christopher Heywood, in his book *A History of South African Literature* (2004), comments that “amidst confusion, violence, and conflict, South African literature has arisen out of a long tradition of resistance and protest.”<sup>147</sup> Heywood’s remark came out as a result of long research into the way communal identification and ethnic

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<sup>146</sup> Shane Graham, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 31.

<sup>147</sup> Christopher Heywood, *A History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 01.

loyalty determined the nature and scope of literary production in South Africa for decades. This, of course, culminated and became more visible during the Apartheid years and under the new repressive policies imposed by the Afrikaner republic. Before 1948 and the initiation of the Afrikaner apartheid state, South African literary production responded mainly to themes like colonial occupation, land, family and community, and the tales of the past. This statement, nonetheless, excludes the Afrikaner community's literature which, from the 1850s onwards and as I will point out in the next section, was mostly directed in the service of a slowly emerging nationalist discourse which was to be later strengthened with the institutionalization of Afrikaans as an official language.

From the 1960s onwards, nonetheless, as more ethnic groups including the Afrikaner one could perceive the dangers inherent in the new norms directing South African society, more rebel voices emerged from different regions like the Cape, Johannesburg, Durban, and some other rural and farm communities. These voices tried to reverse this segregationist violent political tradition, yielding in many poems, novels, short story collections and dramas which spoke directly and fearlessly to the ruling party and its manipulation of identity politics in an ethnically, linguistically and racially diverse South Africa. "In the new social whirlpool," literature "can at best amuse, console, horrify, and electrify us into moments of exuberance and despair," Heywood comments.<sup>148</sup> These writings tried to assert the collective and nationally diverse nature of the new South Africa.

The dramatic expression, however, got more momentum during this transitional period due to its overt messages and the possibility to render written texts and plays into open rituals of performativity in streets and public spaces:

Theatre and society in South Africa at the end of the twentieth century are not yet post-apartheid but rather tentatively post-anti-apartheid. This interregnum properly began not with the election in 1994 but with Mandela's liberation in 1990 and may end with his retirement in 1999. It has been shaped by the sense, shared

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<sup>148</sup> Heywood, *A History of South African Literature*, 21.

by Mandela and his generation of international activists, of history as well as the problems of redress and reconciliation, reconstruction, and development, which demand an eye on the past as well as the future.<sup>149</sup>

Addressing the need for and the problems facing reconciliation, and post-apartheid reconstruction occupied the writings of the upcoming decades. Hence, the Post-Apartheid era provided literature in general and the stage in particular with new insights on how to view the newly emerging 'ghettoized' nation seeing that “racial and ethnic loyalties are still the most prevalent sources for identity in South Africa.”<sup>150</sup> Anti-apartheid resistance sentiments shaped the writings of South African writers up to the 1990s where a move towards the question of identity, memory, and aspirations towards reconciliation took on a more serious presence as themes and topics. Indeed, the South African stage or drama, for more than four decades, had experimented with the ‘Theater of Protest’ propagating anti-apartheid sentiments and stressing the plight of people under the Apartheid regime. Keeping in mind that ethnocentrism has determined what was to be written and published in South Africa for long decades, this new move into open criticism of the apartheid state and its ethnic-nationalist discourse meant that more writers and theater practitioners were to be put under the censorial gaze of the state. Some of whom had to leave the country towards Europe and America for their ideas seemed threatening to the regime’s stability.

The post-Apartheid literary expression, as such, grew as a tool for protest against the racial laws that ruled over the country for decades. Making use of the power of words, writers, however their writings proclivities, captured the scenes of horror and chaos that undermined the possibility of upholding an unwavering existence. Believing that drama or theater can “play an important role both in mediating social consciousness and, indeed, in constituting it,”<sup>151</sup> many writers set out to address an image of a nation divided by the evasive tendencies driving

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<sup>149</sup> Loren Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants and Publics since 1910* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 183.

<sup>150</sup> Steven M. Burgess, *South African Tribes: Who We Are, How We Live and What We Want from Life in the New South Africa* (South Africa: Claremont, 2002), 85.

<sup>151</sup> Ian Steadman, “Race matters in South African theatre,” in *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, eds. Richard Boon and Jane Plastow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 56.

its constituent parts, and a people living to their memories more than the present and the real. South African playwrights found themselves entrenched within a long and historically compounded cycle of linguistic, racial, and class divisions: “In post-apartheid South Africa, therefore, one fundamental aim of literature during and after the work of the TRC is to represent the past, and particularly the victims of that past, in such a way as to attempt to accommodate the contradictions, opacities, and ambiguities unearthed by the Commission.”<sup>152</sup> Indeed, many writers of the period tried to propagate the idea that coping with changing socio-cultural realities requires embracing an ‘ethics of mutuality’ (to use Achille Mbembe’s words) which can be fostered through openness and flexibility towards the other.

There is also an argument that literary writing in South Africa shifted from its tone of protest against oppression and inequalities to a period of self-questioning and self-criticism, especially on the part of Afrikaner writers as I previously indicated.<sup>153</sup> While “social realism” at first proved more appropriate as a mode to express opposition to the Apartheid state, many writers in both fiction and drama shunned away from this trend of writing or what Nadine Gordimer describes as “a conformity to an Orthodox way of opposition,”<sup>154</sup> to choose a more self-reflective and introspective content; topics and settings which open possibilities towards understanding “love and personal relationships”, “the family and sexual taboos”, and more importantly, to “truth-telling and soul searching.”<sup>155</sup> Therefore, in response to this trauma rhetoric, and the newly emerging hostile cultural identities, many South African dramatists aimed to give space for the different, the new, and the rigid, to achieve a kind of proximity based on the ‘ethics of mutuality’ in a multi-ethnic society where no single ethnic identity is

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<sup>152</sup> Francesca Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11.

<sup>153</sup> Jane Poyner, “Writing under Pressure: A Post-apartheid Canon?,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44:2, 2008: 103.

<sup>154</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. and intro. Stephen Clingman (London: Cape, 198), 106, quoted in Poyner, “Writing under Pressure,” 105.

<sup>155</sup> Poyner, 105.

endorsed as dominant. The next section will dive deeper into the Afrikaner nationalist discourse, its various arguments, its continuous calls for the distinctiveness of the Afrikaner racial traits, and how De Wet's dramaturgy can be said to have responded to such a discourse in a way that deconstructs and demystifies many of the tales which held it together for more than a century, with the events, ideas and characters emerging from her two plays as a literary testimony to such a deconstruction.

#### **a. Afrikanerdom/Afrikaner Racial Discourse and De Wet's Plays**

In her dramaturgy and mainly in *AG* and *GH*, Reza De Wet inveighs against a long tradition of mythmaking, racial exclusion, and the othering tales of Afrikanerdom, and nationalism. In the plays under study, De Wet reacts to the legacy of insisting on racial purity, which her people made themselves to believe, had on the character, psyche, and reality of the 1990's generation. As chapter three explores in detail, De Wet traces aspects of repression, allusion, unhealthy domesticity as imposed by the long tradition of preaching about cultural purity, in an attempt to unveil the truth about the past and, hopefully, reconcile the Afrikaner identity with the new cultural reality against which it tried to 'other' itself. In what follows, I will try to locate De Wet's dramaturgy within the different debates about 'cultural distinctiveness' long supported by Afrikaner nationalist rhetoric, to later know how this same 'ethnonationalism' became, with time, a source of agony for a whole community when, at last, it recognized itself to be part of a larger reality from which it was systematically distanced for more than a century. De Wet's two plays emerge as two spaces where the repercussions of repression, secrecy, a fake sense of domesticity, and social othering seem to hunt the lives of her characters. Reconciliation in De Wet, and as I intend to explore it, works along this desire to reconcile her people's history and self-perception with its true social reality.

Afrikaner racial identity and how it was averred as a national ideal in both political and literary writings is of central importance in this research as it draws the context not just for Reza

De Wet's two plays, but it gives insights into how literature, in the case of South Africa, was molded according to the interests of individual groups. And in the case of the Afrikaner community, according to the desires of a nationalist project which found space not just in the political arena and speeches of leaders but in the form of narratives, poems, and performances. De Wet's syncretic drama, *AG* and *GH* in particular can be very well understood when we read it against the background of the long calls for Afrikanerdom and Afrikaner racial values. The Afrikaner community's attachment to a doomed isolationist way of life and the feelings of repression, loss, and the harsh Orthodox values which shaped the lives of Afrikaners during the decades under the apartheid state, are related to the ideologies and norms which have been dictated by Afrikaner racial discourse, backed as it was by religion and mythology.

The history of the Afrikaner's search for a distinct and pure cultural identity dates back to past movements and popular initiatives which, governed by a politics of exclusion, called for Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikanerdom, or unity of vision. The Afrikaner's identity historically evolved to incorporate different forms of related nicknames (It was referred to as Dutch, *Trekboers* or frontier farmers, *Voortrekkers* or Trekboers descendants, simply Boers or farmers as the descendants of the Voortrekkers).<sup>156</sup> The way Afrikaner identity came together as it is known now was the result of a series of attempts (sometimes abortive) at self-determination against the backdrop of both British imperialism towards the end of the 19th century and the native South African populations. Driven by such fears as to be rendered "a subject minority in the land of their birth,"<sup>157</sup> Afrikaner organizations started polarizing with a desire to give shape and meaning to Afrikaner identity in the face of both a rising British influence and a Black threat.

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<sup>156</sup> Fairweather, J.G., *A Common Hunger: Land Rights in Canada and South Africa* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), xv, quoted in Riaan Visagie, *Struggle(s) for Self-determination: Afrikaner Aspirations in the Twenty-first Century* (MA in political science, Stellenbosch University, March 2018), 55.

<sup>157</sup> Colin Knox and Padraic Quirk, *Peace Building in Northern Ireland, Israel and South Africa: Transition, Transformation, and Reconciliation* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 2000), 144, quoted in Riaan Visagie, *Struggle(s) for Self-determination*, 76.

The 'Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners' (or the Union of Real Afrikaners), established in 1875 by the Cape Afrikaner intellectual S.J. du Toit and some of his followers, propagated for nationalist separatist ideas as they saw in the ties that might bring them closer to other social groups in South Africa, primarily Blacks and Coloreds, as threatening their “civilized” status.” They see them as a threat to their “ontological security;” as “the “black threat” (swart gevaar)” which “both challenged the evolving Afrikaner identity and helped it crystallize both by marking racial boundaries and by contributing to the creation of a unique Afrikaner culture.”<sup>158</sup> Du Toit saw the importance of both language and religion to his cultural revival project. As such, he took it upon his shoulders to revitalize the Afrikaans language, which previously resided at the level of mere communication, through linking it to the Afrikaner religious ideal of divine providence, something which was seen as a prerequisite, according to Du Toit, to preserve the distinctive cultural identity of his fellow people.

Added to this initiative at promoting Afrikaans as a Germanic language in the Cape and its surrounding areas, an ‘imaginary community’, inspired by self-crafted historiography of struggle and martyrdom according to the Boer mindset at the time, was forged concomitantly and the intentions of which were made popular and visible through the Union’s 1876 *Die Afrikaanse Patriot* newspaper popularizing for its ideas and injecting its readers with the spirit of the nation.<sup>159</sup> With time and during the first decades of the 20th century, this group’s nationalist ideas gained more momentum, widened in scope, with a more organized agenda when a political nationalistically separatist dimension was added to its linguistic/religious ideals.

Following in the steps of Du Toit’s efforts during the second half of the 19th century, the 'Purified National Party', on its part, led by the Afrikaner nationalist D.F. Malan and most popular in the 1930s, and as its name indicates, took this dream of a separate nation which

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<sup>158</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, 230.

<sup>159</sup> Graham Leach, *The Afrikaners: Their Last Great Trek* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 29, quoted in Uriel, 235.

would lead South Africa. Leading Africa into civilization and light, a step further, yet, according to the ideals and values of the aspired to the Afrikaner nation. Malan and his advocates believed that Afrikaners “were no longer any whites who gave allegiance to South Africa”, but ones who “were defined first and foremost by their language, religion, and culture.”<sup>160</sup>

Similarly, but more vehemently, 'The Afrikaner Broederbond' (or Afrikaner Brotherhood), as an Afrikaner Calvinist secret society, was inspired by the idea of Christian predestination on earth and the Super-Afrikaner rhetoric. This society sought to apply its supremacist racial ideals to the kinds of relationships the Afrikaner group ought to have with other ethnic groups in South Africa as clearly asserted by one of its charring bodies, J. C. Van Rooy, in a 1994 statement:

God created the Afrikaner people with a unique language, a unique philosophy of life, and their history and traditions so that they might fulfill a particular calling and destiny here in the southern corner of Africa. We must stand guard on all that is peculiar to us and build upon it. We must believe that God has called us to be servants of his righteousness in this place.<sup>161</sup>

This belief in the Afrikaner divine duty in South Africa, a political statement wrapped in a religious cloak, had attracted the attention of middle-class Afrikaners like ministers, teachers, civil officers, and urban professionals who saw in it an aspiration to compensate for the glory they lost during their wars with the British, the Great Trek and the humiliation of the concentration camps. "At braaivleissande,<sup>162</sup> at jukskei meetings, at the local kultuurvereniging<sup>163</sup> meetings, and even on occasion at church", Afrikaners “could meet in that Trekker dress which was to be the uniform of the movement and feel a sense of community, of culture, of common heritage" and “the highest common factor of Afrikanerdom.”<sup>164</sup> "The Afrikaner Broederbond' relied on extensive publishing in journals and magazines of different

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<sup>160</sup> Mark Suzman, *Ethnic Nationalism and State Power: The Rise of Irish Nationalism, Afrikaner Nationalism and Zionism* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990), 42.

<sup>161</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1985), 29.

<sup>162</sup> Afrikaans for ‘barbecue’ or ‘picnic food gathering.’

<sup>163</sup> Afrikaans for ‘cultural association’.

<sup>164</sup> De Sheila Patterson, *The Last Trek: A Study of the Boer People and the Afrikaner Nation* (London: Routledge, 2004), 115-116.

materials and especially school texts which promoted common ethnic, linguistic, and religious Afrikaner consciousness. Usually associated with Christian Calvinist nationalism which started molding towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this organization and its leaders stressed the common destiny of Afrikaners. They stressed the long plight which Afrikaners and their Boer ancestors endured (related in the popular imagination to the Tower of Babel tale) either along their way to the tip of Africa back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or during their conflicts with the British during the Anglo-Boer wars, necessities their unity under the umbrella of one nation, language, past, and future. This last *Broederbond* society had been more influential compared to the nationalist groups mentioned earlier for it believed in the collective importance of religion, language, and the domestic sphere to its nationalist project.

These organizations and nationalist groups and their exclusionary nationalist discourse had the most impact on the Afrikaner psyche and sense of identity, both positively and negatively. While they injected their fellow people with sentiments of common heritage, self-pride, superiority, racial purity, and a divine mission in the tip of Africa, many Afrikaners, especially in the rural areas after the establishment of the TRC and transition into a democratic state, had to live to these ideals during the harshest years of the Apartheid regime. They had to live to the ideal that the world according to which their sense of self and other was shaped is no more the same, and that change or reconciliation is a necessity for survival. This sudden, though transitional in tone, change from an ethnically crafted world based on domesticity and seclusion to the culturally pluralistic post-apartheid world; posed various challenges to all cultural groups constituting South Africa, but mostly to the Afrikaner community whose vision of ‘self’ and ‘other’ was determined by a strictly confining nationalist discourse. Stepping up into the new realities and a multicultural democracy meant a deconstruction of these long-held ideals, as De Wet wants to demonstrate through the two plays under examination.

Afrikaner nationalists eked out their path towards self-determination and their right to ethnic self-preservation through what Uriel Abulof, in his profound study on *The Mortality and Morality of Nations* calls “existential threads” or “the lifelines of Afrikanerdom.”<sup>165</sup> After pointing out how Afrikaner nation and identity had to outlive what they considered ontological insecurity during the first decades of their presence in South Africa, Abulof points out how arguments along race, religion, history, culture, and survival were equally used to support the “development of Afrikaner identity” and their “desire and ability to dissociate from the nonwhite “other.”<sup>166</sup> Race, used, as history indicates, by many ideologues as a pathway to seek legitimacy in foreign lands, religion is employed to drive people into the belief in their civilizational mission according to Christian Orthodox ideals, and history and culture to argue for common ancestry and heritage.

Moreover, the 'laager' (or 'circle the wagons') practice which became more popular in the 1960s heightened the Afrikaners' belief in them being an ethnic minority that needs to assert its cultural distinctiveness and save itself from being smashed. The 'laager' mentality of Afrikaners, as many like to think of it, tends to be “strange to the ways of the world and prone to deny reality, especially harsh realities or those that somehow challenge their constructions.”<sup>167</sup> Different factors, therefore, led to the Afrikaners' obsession with the 'superiority, blood purity' rhetoric, which in turn accentuated their belief in the need to 'separate' and 'segregate' from those who were regarded as the threatening cultural other. In her study on the performativity of 'whiteness' (which further supports the ethnic discourse of 'Afrikanerdom) by the Afrikaner 'laagered nation', Megan Lewis comments: “Circling the wagons was a historic practice on the frontier but is also a philosophical and ideological blueprint for how Afrikaners write, and perform, their etiological myths; it is the symbolic

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<sup>165</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, 262.

<sup>166</sup> Uriel, 230.

<sup>167</sup> Phil van Schalkwyk, “From Laager to Lager: Reflections on Afrikaner Identity,” *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, 1/2004, 211-222: 215.

image to which they return repeatedly. Principally designed for protection, the laager kept out undesirables (wild animals, enemy forces, black Africa).”<sup>168</sup> Keeping out ‘undesirables’ meant, as the quote indicates, self-protection and power to live to the ideals of the first Boer communities and how they needed to stay united, in a ‘gated’ fashion, against enemies of all sorts. With South Africa transitioning into a democratic rule where alternatives like multiculturalism and reconciliation coming under focus, deconstructing this myth of a ‘distinct’ and ‘pure’ nation posed difficulties for Afrikaners when they tried to reconcile their history and culture (the way they were made to internalize them over time) to the new post-apartheid socio-cultural realities.

In literature, this ethno-nationalist spirit had clear expressions over the decades fostering, ideologically in most cases, shared destiny and heritage. Dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as previously pointed out, Afrikaner nationalism, with its emphasis on the history and collective myths which sustained Afrikaner life, acted as a source of unity and pride for many Afrikaner writers. Many writers resorted to old tales which narrate the sufferings and plight of the first Afrikaner or Boer generations in their attempt to survive both British imperialism and Black resistance against them moving into the interior. With Afrikaans becoming the state’s official language in 1925, literature produced in this language started dominating the scene. Mainly during the 1930s and 1940s, writers shifted from dealing with earlier themes related to adventure and Afrikaner mysterious stories to embracing a more ethnically engaged form of expression. Responding to the general nationalist aura created by the previously discussed nationalist organizations, writers discussed and made central “historical tales about the Great Trek and other heroic movements from the Afrikaner past.”<sup>169</sup> Deeply influenced and emotionally moved by the migration of their ancestors, by wagon, from the southern regions

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<sup>168</sup> Megan Lewis, *Performing Whiteness in the Postcolony: Afrikaners in South African Theatrical and Public Life* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 28.

<sup>169</sup> Martin Trump, “Afrikaner Literature and the South African Liberation Struggle,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 25; Iss. 1, 1990: 44.

and the tip of South Africa towards the grasslands in the North, in large groups and long trails, between 1835 and 1838, in what is popularly known as the Great Trek, Afrikaner people, their leaders, nationalist writers, and their children strove to keep that collective memory and experience alive. Associating it with trauma and struggle for survival, these early sacrifices grew into myths, legends, tales, and stories shared around fire evening talks, public gatherings, church sermons, and in children's books. These shared sentiments defined, in a romantic mode of expression, the thematic concern of the writings of this period.

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, Afrikaner writers started reflecting upon issues related to the newly rising and swift urbanization and economic prosperity of their fellow people and the new ideas these urban people nurtured as the new city masters in South Africa. Writers of the period experimented with both style and genre bringing new urban and universal rhythms to their texts, leaning away from the Afrikaner traditional Orthodox values featuring earlier writings. The focus remained as such until the 1980s and 1990s during which more voices challenging the Afrikaner policies and ideologies started emerging from the heart of the Afrikaner society. This group of writers challenged the thorny social climate generated by the apartheid government and its repressive policies. This new wave of writing coincided with the rising Black anti-apartheid protests and the various reactions on the part of the international community towards the country's leaders. Therefore, because of the topics they discussed, these writers had to face state censorship over their plays, novels, and stories; something which raised their consciousness to the seriousness of the atrocities practiced by the White regime against the Black non-Afrikaner populations.

Writers like De Wet, Andre Brink and Welma Odendaal, for instance, gradually perceived the allusions and contradictions surrounding the ideals of Afrikanerdom. The anti-apartheid temper which grows later to characterize, more openly, the drama and fiction of the '80s and '90s was preceded by an escalating dissatisfaction with Afrikaner ways and values. A discontent

over the way the Afrikaner community failed to cope with the new circumstances brought by the changing social character of South African at the time, or coexist with other cultural groups despite modernization and technical progress. Similar to the scenes of decay and isolation in De Wet's *AG* and *GH*, In *Die Groot Vrot* (This Great Rot, 1966), for example, Jan Rabie, in satirical tones, fictionally locates his Afrikaner townsfolk in a town surrounded by a decaying land which then starts sinking amidst the crack caused, hypothetically, by the families getting apart from each other. Desperate as they were, the story's characters seem unable to understand what is taking place and unable to cope with their new condition. Like the new dry version of the siblings' farm in *AG*, Rabie wants to emphasize the fact that the town's residents are faced with a reality that has not much communion with what they are used to and their desire to keep isolated and apart made them lose the sense of the events. Like the sisters' nostalgic feelings in *GH*, their pride in their old, seemingly tightly woven world is now collapsing while they are unable to take part in pulling it together again.

Writings of the next two decades, transitional in mode between apartheid and a post-apartheid reality, kept that satirical tone but got more interested in highlighting violence and trauma and their impacts on the South African psyche, both Black and White. Post-apartheid South African literature gave birth to different writings which assumed opposing inclinations about racial identity and nationalist politics at a time when Afrikaner identity was put on trial for the wrongs of the past. This period offered examples of plays, almost all produced after 1990, which are geared towards the promotion of a specific cultural identity, a certain nationalistic agenda, some of which assume nostalgic overtones about a lost past. These texts are colored with jingoist and xenophobic statements towards other racial groups making up the South African nation.

Other playwrights, however, used their dramatic space to reinforce mutuality, and shared histories, and whose interest lies not only in addressing socio-cultural and political changes and

how they impacted their societies but went further to explore the possibility of eking out new forms of societies where reconciliation, syncretism, and dialogue can be aspired to. Even though they belonged to the dominant group and enjoyed the privileges of being of white skin, playwrights such as Reza De Wet, Athol Fugard, Greig Coetzee, Mike Van Grann, Frederick Guy Butler among others opted for diverse writing styles and modes of rebellion against ethnic chauvinism, racial ideologies, and apartheid policies in South Africa.

Greig Coetzee's play, for instance, and in line with De Wet's plays, *Happy Natives* (2004) is regarded as a sharp satirical comedy of the cross-cultural relationships in contemporary South Africa. He crafted this drama as an outline for people to learn how to triumph over suspicion, misunderstanding and enjoy life through tolerating cultural and linguistic differences. As a writing philosophy, Coetzee tries to limit people's assumptions based on racial groupings by directing their attention towards one unified reality that needs the attention of every spectrum in society. In the play, Coetzee confronts characters endorsing attitudes from diverse grounds, Zulu, English, and Tamil. He places in proximity characters presenting their convictions towards various issues related to history, politics, economy, and identity. Instead of presenting a unified cultural vision, this play, along with De Wet's, depict embattled worldviews and feelings in need of reconciliation through reciprocal tolerance and open and inclusive flexibility towards the other.

Another writer, Mike Van Grann, for example, made a considerable track by bringing the turmoil of the apartheid era and the multiethnic character of the South African society into a clearer light. His most notable play *Brothers in Blood* (2006), dialogic in tone, brings together a Jewish doctor, a Muslim high school principal, and an evangelical Christian pastor to address the danger of prejudices based on religion in shaking the stability of multi-culturally diverse societies like South Africa. As the play develops, the boundaries which kept these ethically different characters apart start to slowly dismantle whenever the characters engage in

conversations about what is unfolding around them as what relates to political issues, economy, family life...etc., leading them to understand that they belong to one reality and that the cultural differences which keep them apart are but an accumulation of a long history of encounter and communication.

While the previously mentioned plays veer towards an assertion of brotherhood, shared destiny, and interracial dialogue as part of their reconciliatory ethics in a transitional South Africa which turn more explicitly around an encounter between 'self' and 'other', De Wet stands out through digging deep into the psyche of the Afrikaner family (and community) to lay open the hidden and satirize what was thought of as pure and ever sustained on the part of her fellow people. She speculates about a kind of reconciliation that goes beyond achieving mutuality to convince people of the futility of their insistence upon past myths which are of no use to the present; myths about cultural purity, religious predestination, and racial superiority among other self-constructed ideologies. The next three sections introduce us to the context which informs Karnad's plays.

## **2. Girish Karnad's Texts in an Indian Conflict-riven Context**

### **a. Karnad, the Playwright**

Girish Karnad (1938-2019) is one of India's most renowned and accomplished men of letters. As one of the most important voices in Indian Kannada literature, Karnad weighed his writing philosophy against a rich and equally complex background of myths, histories, and traditions both Kannada and Indian.

Karnad's talent invests with tradition for a modern literary audience. His drama negotiates with classical, Medieval, and pre-modern religious and communal aspects of Indian identity. This intertextuality, as what relates to myth, folklore, and history, is a way, according to Karnad, to reflect on the present pressing issues through reminding his contemporaries of what went wrong and why. Karnad treats history as a "myth" and "rather than writing a strictly factual

historical play, he gives it a symbolic reshaping to reinforce the contemporary issues.”<sup>170</sup> Karnad’s years as a Rhodes scholarship recipient at Oxford University introduced him to the major tenets of Western thought and drama. He read and searched extensively on Shakespeare, Samuel Becket, and George Bernard Shaw, and was influenced by the existential current as represented by Sartre and Camus.

Still, even though he acknowledges the influence of the western realist mode of playwrighting, for example, on his contemporaries and predecessors at a time when many Indian writers “were all united by a common concern for social reform and national independence and in their optimism which believed changing history possible,”<sup>171</sup> Karnad satirizes their uncritical reception of western ideas. Adaptations of Shaw’s, Ibsen’s and Miller’s plays by a number of Indian writers failed, according to Karnad, to represent true Indian society. “If in the West the need of a person to be seen as an individual, as a being unique in himself” is a major feature of Western dramatic realism, in India, realism “never went beyond social problems” because in India “individualism has never been accepted as a value in itself and every Indian defines himself in relational terms, in terms of his relationship to the other members of his family, clan, and caste.”<sup>172</sup> Whereas Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, for example, is about “a man’s pursuit of the American dream,” the “breakup of a close-knit family” was seen as the “real theme of the play.”<sup>173</sup> Therefore, Karnad, claiming that western playwrighting aesthetics had “nothing to offer” him, he had to “find his own way”<sup>174</sup> through taking refuge in his Kannada tradition, local rituals and myths and classical Sanskrit dramatic forms to fashion a style of his own. This is clear in how he retrieved a 12th century historical incident and

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<sup>170</sup> Jayadeep Sarangi, “Myth, History and Tradition: A Study of Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana and Tughlaq,” in *Contemporary Indian Dramatists*, ed. Shubha A. Tiwari (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors LTD., 2007), 70.

<sup>171</sup> Girish Karnad, “Theatre in India,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 118, No. 4, 1989, 340.

<sup>172</sup> Karnad, “Theatre in India,” 340.

<sup>173</sup> Karnad, 341.

<sup>174</sup> Karnad, 340.

revolutionary movement and a 13th century sacrificial epic in both *TD* and *BS* to shed light on social issues as pervasive as religious fundamentalism and inter-caste prejudices.

Writing in both Kannada and English, Karnad's dramatic corpus includes plays that are based on Kannada and other Indian myths, histories, and folktales. Plays like *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Anjumallige* (1977), *Nagamandala* (1988) *Taledanda* (1990), *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2002), *Two Monologues: Flowers and Broken Images* (2005), *Flowers* (2012), *Benda Kaalu on Toast* (2012), *Boiled Beans on Toast* (2014) and *Crossing to Talikota* (2019) among many others. Many amongst these plays are redolent with scenes and ideas from both Indian past and present, the popular imagination, folklore, colonial experience and its violence. Some of Karnad's plays are a rendition of original ancient epics and myths as presented in classical and traditional Indian thought and philosophy. He adapted stories from India's classical Sanskrit and sacred texts and popular myths; he took stories from the famous Vedic texts like the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the Kannada poetic work of the *Kavirajamarga*,<sup>175</sup> the *Natyashatra*,<sup>176</sup> and its rich discussions on the poetic and philosophical origins of Indian dramatic thought, and the devotional writings and spiritual tales of the Haridasa saints.

Also, he was inspired by the poetic treatises of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Kannada poet and dramatist Adikavi Pampa, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Jain and Virashaiva Puranas or collection of stories, besides many other secular philosophical commentaries and dialogues about politics, race, morality, sex, life and death, karma, and ecstasy. When asked about him borrowing from Indian myths, legends, and histories to work out his plots without crafting his own, Karnad says in an interview with Chaman Ahuja:

In a folklorist framework, I find the great advantage of being able to subvert the traditional, even classical, beliefs. Since folk tales make fun of everybody- rulers, priests, even gods-everything is taken in good humor.

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<sup>175</sup> Kavirajamarga; A classical Kannada collection of poems and stories.

<sup>176</sup> Natyashatra; A classical Sanskrit collection of essays and treatises on drama and performance which inspired many Indian writers over the ages.

Of course, I must hasten to add, my basic concern is with the human spirit and not with the folk per se, using folk as a mere aesthetic device with no further exploration of what it is to be human, does not attract me.<sup>177</sup>

Kannada tradition, on its part, provided Karnad with rich layers in history and folk epic from which he can inspire either to use the way they were passed over generations or adapt them and twist symbolically to serve more contemporary concerns. In both cases, we end up revisiting the Indian past, entering temples and castles, hearing out the spiritual hymns of the Vedas, taking part in stories about war and heroism, as we end up questioning the harshness of some social practices, divine anger and the carefully besought sacrifices. Karnad motivates us to establish associations between past and present, tests our sense of judgment, and leaves us space to contemplate what is right and what is wrong, where events and actions do speak for themselves. This reminds us of the modernist impulse in literature where a talk about a "dissociated sensibility" enjoyed much aesthetic space, led as it is by Eliot's mythic method and historical analogism which view experience as a fractured narrative in need of recollection and adjustment, like flotsam that needs to be put tight again. Karnad's use of myth and epic in *TD* and *BS* and a number of other plays emerges as his desire to "evoke an ancient and premodern world that resonates in contemporary contexts."<sup>178</sup>

For he thinks that "to have any value at all, drama must at some level engage honestly with the contradictions that lie at the heart of the society it talks to and about,"<sup>179</sup> Karnad addresses different rivalries within Hinduism especially those informed by caste and social status. On many occasions, Karnad insists on the danger inherent in such age-old practices, yet maintained and perpetuated, like untouchability, inter-religious and intra-religious exclusion, and elimination. Being thought of as the most profound contemporary Indian critic of Hindutva (Hinduism) ethics, casteism, and religious fanaticism in India, Karnad created dramatic spaces

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<sup>177</sup> Chaman Ahuja, "Building a Great Tradition: Charma Ahuja Interviews Girish Karnad," in *Contemporary Indian Drama Astride Two Traditions*, eds. Urmil Talwar and Bandana Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005), 173-282.

<sup>178</sup> Dharwadker, "Introduction," in Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol.2, ix.

<sup>179</sup> Karnad, "Theatre in India," 336.

that attempt to dissolve the boundaries between religions fostering the idea that religious fundamentalism is the pathogens of social instability in the world.<sup>180</sup> He is well known for his critical stance towards Hindu Orthodoxy and its socio-religiously eliminating discourse. His plays foreground philosophical and religious confrontations where characters, because of the fanatic attitudes they uphold, seem to be losers at the end. Tutun Mukherjee comments about Karnad's critical approach to fanaticism in his plays: "Karnad's plays are written against the backdrop of growing fundamentalism and communal frenzy in the country presenting individual endeavor towards communal integration during epochs of violence."<sup>181</sup>

Added to his literary engagement with issues of social injustice, religious fundamentalism, and casteism, Karnad is known for his outspoken activism against Narendra Modi's present government and its ethnically/religiously driven discourse (as it is in itself inspired by the BJP's communal and ethnic philosophy). And against writers who seem to side with the government's policies in the likes of V. S. Naipaul whose stance on Indian Muslims is responsive to the political agenda of equating 'Indianness' with Hinduism. Also, while leaders in the Dalit intellectual thought like Arun Prabha Mukherjee who, in his introduction to the autobiographical work *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, claims that "literary representations either ignored untouchables or portrayed them as victims in need of saviors, as objects without voice and agency,"<sup>182</sup> Karnad, being a Brahmin in origin and upbringing, proves this statement wrong because many of his plays engage with the evils of untouchability, class/religion motivated distinction and fundamentalism, and the plays under examination testify to and fall within this class of texts.

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<sup>180</sup> Shukla Supriya, "Indian English Drama: An Introduction," in *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*, ed. Tandon Neeru (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2006), 290.

<sup>181</sup> Tutun Mukherjee, ed., *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006), 20.

<sup>182</sup> Arun Prabha Mukherjee, "Introduction," in Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xvii- xviii.

Karnad's preoccupation with the themes of casteism, the political manipulation of religion, and faith-informed violence started with other dramatic texts at the beginning of his career. In reworking the classics, Karnad recapitulates the original plots/tales but makes some alterations at the level of characterization, plot structure, and narrative to support the dialectics informed by the new issues he wants to communicate to the reader. In his historical dramas, for example, Karnad takes from history to dramatize issues of contemporary relevance for he thinks that transgressions keep taking place because both individuals and societies are reluctant/failed to learn from the mistakes of the past. His play *Tughlaq* (1964), which re-enacts the story of the Indian Muslim Sultan of Delhi Mohammed bin Tughlaq, is retrieved by Karnad to reflect upon his lust for power, his ambition and ruthlessness, his success and failure, and their impacts on the Indian society of the time molding it as such for a postcolonial Indian readership whose history was the target of both retrospective revisionists and colonial apologists. In this play, Karnad revisits Indian society of the 16th century to reflect upon how the political manipulation of religion led to social and political instability, and where the Muslim-Hindu conflict, according to Karnad, reached a critical stage.

As an ambitious leader who becomes a ruler after he kills his father and brother while in prayer, Tughlaq, and against the will of his surrounding advisors and court scholars, shows flexibility towards the different cultural others over which he rules. He is portrayed to be an idealist, one who believes in equality and justice between the different religious groups and sects in his kingdom, but one, because of the lure of politics and control, turns whimsical in front of those whom he trusts as advisors, but who vie for his place, those who attempt to kill him in the same way he did with his father and brother, in prayer.<sup>183</sup> As a sign of goodwill and to work out his welfare plan to assure equality between his subjects, he dismisses the Hindus from paying the Jizya which is meant as a sign of loyalty and protection for the Hindus, and

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<sup>183</sup> Sadhana Agrawal, "A De Novo Vision on Theology and Monarchy in *Tughlaq*," in Tiwari, *Contemporary Indian Dramatists*, 96-97.

which Karnad, though satirical of Tughlaq's wavering attitudes and clumsy character, emphasizes as a step towards reducing religious animosity and bridging the gap between his subjects regardless of caste, sect or religious affiliation. The same goes for his other historical play *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), which is about a Muslim Sultan whose governing ideals and complexities amidst foreign British onslaughts in the 17th century India need, according to Karnad, to be shown credit. In an opposite tone to Tughlaq, Karnad enacts Tipu's life as a history lesson which pushes Indians to reconsider their past judgments and the exactness of their historical narratives. His other play *Talé Danda*, which is taken as a case study in this research, falls within this category of what is called historical drama.

Furthermore, in his mythical allegorical plays, Karnad revisits many of the myths and legends which are central to Indian culture, taking from them stories and themes which prove suitable to communicate his thoughts about different issues especially those related to violence and intrigue and how, even in classical India, seemed relevant to tell how society was. In his very first play *Yayati* (1964), Karnad revisits the story of king Yayati as presented in the *Mahabharata* to bring to light the issue of casteism and its impacts on social stability. Still keeping with the aura of sexual greed, moral transgressions, the strong desire for eternal youth besides other issues, Karnad, in evoking the story, emphasizes the inter-caste and Brahmin conflicts and how they molded the lives of all other characters in the story. The play highlights the story of the Aryan king Yayati and other characters each of whom is made conscious of his social status and what it means in a society where human worth is measured by birth and background. The king, as an Aryan, takes a mistress in secrecy, one who comes from a noble upper-class bloodline, while his wife is the daughter of a Brahmin priest who is in the service to the king. As events develop, the two women characters, motivated by their caste, turn against each other, culminating in war and bloodshed. On the versatility of Karnad's literary borrowings and the depth of his treatment of material, Sinha, A. K says:

Karnad has cut below the surface to reveal the burning core of mental or spiritual reality. The main concern of the playwright here becomes central on human (and non-human) beings in combination, interacting, entering into one another's lives, becoming part of another. What Karnad seems to be primarily interested in is real contact, a real meeting of the selves, depending on mutual knowledge.<sup>184</sup>

Of all the literary spaces he devotes to his reconciliatory ideals in modern Indian society, his plays *TD* and *BS* dexterously advocate his idea that religious compromise and tolerance at the individual and the community level can avert the communal clashes which modern world has been and is still facing. His profound and assertive entanglement with Indian mythology, religion, and history allowed him to fashion dramas that foster a settlement of differences through mutual concessions; and where agreements are reached by adjustment of conflicting or opposing claims. In the two sections which follow, there is an attempt to single out the elements of casteism and religious othering or exclusion in response to which both plays are written, and link Karnad's preoccupation with the themes of intra-religious/inter-religious an inter-caste to the work of other Indian writers with the aim to locate his dramaturgy within a wider cultural consciousness of the impacts of religious fundamentalism and casteism on contemporary Indian society. This will later help up comprehend how Karnad communicates his views about reconciliation, and how he tries, through the texts, to address what he thinks of as a possible way to achieve reconciliation and dialogue.

### **b. Casteism, Religious Fundamentalism and Karnad's Plays**

On the banks of the Gangs holy river in the Uttar Pradesh district in Northern India, the *Kashi Vishnawath* temple lies as a testimony to a long history of intercultural and interreligious construction and reconstruction. According to historical accounts with their varying degrees of exactness, even though a mosque was built in the temple's place, the temple regained its status as a place of worship to Lord Shiva when it was rebuilt, though not in its original site but

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<sup>184</sup> Sinha, A. K. "Thematic Concerns and Technical Features in Girish Karnad's Plays," in *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999), 68, quoted in Manish Padia, *Thematic World and its Concerns in Select Plays of Girish Karnad: A Critical Study* (PhD Thesis, Faculty of Arts, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India: 2015), 151-152.

adjacent to the mosque.<sup>185</sup> The various attempts to demolish the mosque and rebuild the temple in its original site left behind an architectural heritage that lives to the memory of the coexistence of two religious philosophies which historical circumstances brought side by side. Whereas the temple's golden dome prays to Lord Shiva through the daily hymns of his mahants, its ancient destroyed columns still decorate the back part of the Gyanvapi Mosque. It is a spiritual site where the Muslim calls for prayer intersect with the ritual sounds coming out from the temple daily pilgrim congregations. This coexistence and desire to attain *moksha* on the part of different religious groups, nevertheless, survived at the symbolic architectural level for reality offered a different religious picture; one featured by frictions and antagonism. As history goes, religious animosity, either between Hindus and Muslims, between Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains, or between the different sects within Hinduism, and caste served as aspects of social identification in India for centuries. Conflicts and violent eruptions (involving either forced appropriation or destruction) over the spiritual ownership of some religious sites or shrines are well documented in India across the ages.

Karnad's two plays *TD* and *BS* communicate such conflicts and are written primarily as a reaction to religious and caste-based violence which featured the last decades of the 20th century, but one which is still much present. The first play *TD* (literally meaning 'death by beheading'<sup>186</sup>), which draws on a 12th-century historical event in Karnataka,<sup>187</sup> takes place in the ancient Indian city of Kalyan and around 1168 AD and depicts the clash between a reformist movement with an anti-caste philosophy and the upholders of the traditional religion and its rigid system of social stratification. In this play, Karnad evokes a conflict that took place in ancient Karnataka between Basavanna's revolutionary movement which aimed at subverting the dominant caste structure and the local people from the ruling and religious elites and the

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<sup>185</sup> Paola Bacchetta, "Sacred Space in Conflict in India: The Babri Masjid Affair," *Growth and Change*, vol 31, no 02, (Spring, 2002), 257-258.

<sup>186</sup> Karnad, "Note to *Talé Danda*," in *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 2.

<sup>187</sup> The modern name of ancient Kalyan, the contemporary city of Karnad.

laity who consider the movement a fanatic venture and a threat to old ways. In the preface to the play, Karnad has explained its relevance to contemporary Indian society. He writes:

When I returned from the USA, India was in turmoil over the Mandal-Mandir issues. Society was being polarized and the country was moving in dangerous directions. *Talé Danda* is a solid issue-oriented 'literary' text that tries to address issues of religious belief that create social and political crises. I wanted to present the consequences of religious fanaticism and highlight the futility of such attitudes in the face of people's aspiration for happiness, peace, and prosperity.<sup>188</sup>

As earlier indicated, Karnad is known for his criticism of Hindu Orthodoxy and fundamentalism. This is clear in most of his historical dramas where he retrieves and makes use of old age events and stories, especially those violent in nature, to dramatize present pressing realities. Similar in fashion and based on the 13<sup>th</sup> century Kannada Sanskrit epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, Karnad's second play *BS* addresses the Jain-Hindu debate which characterized the Indian religious past and its impacts on Indian society, both ancient and contemporary. This debate shapes the core of many discussions and issues evoked in Karnad's dramatic corpus. *BS* shares rhythm with the previous play and enacts a harsh and uncompromising tension between two religious ideologies with three individuals representing different religious principles engaged in a long debate. In the play, the queen stands for non-violence as advocated by Jainism, the queen mother represents Hinduism that deems violence involved in sacrifice divine and sacred and the king, staying in between, is for peaceful tolerant co-existence in life. As the play unfolds, the extreme opposition and zealotry of the queen and the mother complicate the lives of all those around them culminating in the queen giving her life for a sacrifice she does not believe in.

The Mandal-Mandir issues which Karnad refers to in the previous quote and in response to which both plays were written relate to a series of violent eruptions taking place in the early 1990s. Violent eruptions due to disputes over the Mandal commission reports concerning the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and their overlooked rights in the government's jobs, and the

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<sup>188</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 2.

Ram Mandir religious temple controversy in Ayodhya, in the Uttar Pradesh district which resulted in the death of thousands and the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992.<sup>189</sup> Here, there are two types of disputes. While the first concerns the caste problem and how it escalated due to the government's exclusion acts, the second relates to the inter-religious, Hindu-Muslim controversy which survived for decades and was settled constitutionally in 2020 to the disappointment of many.

The Mandal commission which was signed in 1979 under the recommendations of the politician Parasad Mandal, was assigned the task of identifying and classifying those castes which qualify, both culturally and economically, as backward. This meant that government jobs and services were distributed based on one's caste or birth, not merit or character. After a decade of its initiation, another politician tried to put into action the commission's recommendations in 1990, which culminated in nationwide protests, especially in regions with an OBC majority.<sup>190</sup> Protesters called for equal opportunities in accessing government jobs and were against the exclusion of many low caste people from the government's state welfare plans. Largely student-led, the protests led to the resignation of the leading party and gave a possibility to large low caste background classes to mobilize and join efforts in the form of regional parties and assemblies; bodies that can stand in the face of the Congress or the growing monopoly of the BJP.

The Mandir issue, however, assumes a different tone even though it has the seeds of inter-caste discrimination and violence within it. It relates to the claim that a mosque, the Babri Masjid, is built on land that is regarded by the Hindus as the birthplace of their Lord, Rama, in the holy city of Ayodhya. With Rama believed to be once a king in Ayodhya, it was inconceivable to many Hindus and Rama devotees that a mosque that goes back to the Mughal

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<sup>189</sup> Sukumar Muralidharan, "Mandal, Mandir aur Masjid: 'Hindu' Communalism and the Crisis of the State," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 18, No. 10 (Oct. 1990): 27-28.

<sup>190</sup> Muralidharan, "Mandal, Mandir aur Masjid," 28-29.

period is built on land that is religiously sacred to them. The claim goes on that the Rama temple was destroyed during the Medieval Mughal rule and was replaced by the mosque.<sup>191</sup> Supporting themselves with some archeological findings which say that some inscriptions testify to the fact that the place was a Hindu worship site, many zealous rioters attacked the mosque and destroyed it in 1992. According to many historical accounts, the dispute over the mosque's site erupted several times during the rule of the British colonial government in the 19th century to erupt again after the independence of India in 1947 on the part of some locals in the Ayodhya region calling for their right to regain authority over Rama's site. Communal riots took place again in the years to come in 1949, 1964, 1980, and 1990 to severely culminate in the final demolition of the mosque in December 1992.<sup>192</sup>

Fueled by the hateful speeches of the BJP leaders, whose actions and transgressions incited the criticism of many intellectuals, writers, and activists of the time including Girish Karnad and his contemporaries, the riots which led to the destruction of the religious site escalated into a nationwide question in major Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi.<sup>193</sup> In *TD*, for example, when Basavanna was informed by one of his followers that the Sharannas succeeded in putting down a riot in a region where a group of Brahmins attacked and tried to take control of a Jain temple, he, satirically responds saying: "yes, some of our people have occupied a Jain temple there by force. They are threatening to smash the naked idols in it and turn it into a Shiva temple. Things could go out of hand," "violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity."<sup>194</sup> In *Bali*, this shows clearly through the king's mother whose astound belief in sacrifice, however violent it can be, and the necessity to shed

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<sup>191</sup> David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 1-2.

<sup>192</sup> Amrita Basu, "Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy? The Puzzle of Hindu Nationalism," in Ludden, *Contesting the Nation*, 55.

<sup>193</sup> Basu, "Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy?," 55-56.

<sup>194</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol.2, 36.

blood to achieve moksha and to ask for forgiveness for the adulterous behavior of her daughter in law. The Mandal Mandir issues and their impacts on the social stability of Indians incited the critical attention of many men of letters who think that their fellow Indians, whatever is their caste or religious affiliation, have to be cautioned about the dangerous extremes a society may reach during times of similar conflicts. Karnad's *TD* is a reflection of such a spirit as it presents the reader with similar inter-caste and religious conflicts which, even though taking place in the distant past, seem to undoubtedly resonate with events of the 1990's India.

Such violent outbreaks might also call into question how India, as a modern postcolonial nation, came to be viewed by most theorists whose visions of the nation vary considerably. This is the case because defining the Indian nation, as many scholars argue, was determined by "narrower loyalties."<sup>195</sup> Personal and communal loyalties presided over the task of defining what represents Indianness, which treat, in most cases, Hindu and India as synonymous terms. This overlapping scene leads us to question the relevance of religion, social class, and regional communalism in creating division in Indian society which vary in both tone and clarity in the writings of the Indian literati. Various, usually historically narrow and one-sided, attempts to define the Indian nation feature the writings of 19th century Indian intelligentsia. Many of these definitions forge fragments within the Indian socio-cultural consciousness of what should and shouldn't be considered truly Indian. While some definitions are in favor of some sections of the Indian society who are thought more eligible to claim a true sense of belonging and "who were constructed as a category that always belonged to the country;"<sup>196</sup> a section often referred to with the term "Hindu" usually associated with 'Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs', other definitions center around the remaining category, non-Hindus mostly Muslims, which is regarded unfit for this general conception of the nation. A detailed sketch of the development of the idea of nation

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<sup>195</sup> Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 126.

<sup>196</sup> Chandra, *The Oppressive Present*, 177.

in Indian politics and socio-cultural discourse helps us understand that the way religious and social groups related to each other from past to present is, in most cases, governed by exclusion and othering. Those belonging to upper-class castes see those inferior to them as their unequals, and those who identify with a specific religious faith perceive the religiously different as a cultural ‘other’, envisioned, in some cases, as an ontological threat:

As one religion became ascendant at the expense of another, it transgressed all norms of right and wrong in dealing with adherents of the earlier religion. This was the chief cause of the desolation that stalked the land. When Vedic religion weakened and the Jains and Buddhists gained in strength, libraries were burnt and sacks filled with Vedic works were sunk in rivers. When the followers of Shankar became predominant, the Jains and Buddhists suffered a similar fate. Then came the Vaishnavites. These votaries of non-violence showed little compassion in obliterating the glories of the ancients.<sup>197</sup>

Similarly, some 19th-century Hindu revivalist groups prioritized the role of the Vedas and classical Indian religious texts as sources of inspiration to their reformist ideals which had as their objective bringing back Indians to the original path of devotion as dictated by Hinduism and eliminating the impact of what they think of as foreign religions like Islam and Christianity. The Arya Samaj movement leaders, for example, believed in the Aryanism of the Hindu race and the high unquestionable authority of the Vedas. Therefore, they engaged in large conversion campaigns towards the end of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century during which they had missionary activity in the name of Hinduism and through a practice called the *Shuddhi*. By force, they had large numbers of previously converted Indians back to Hinduism. This forced conversion, of course, resulted in violence and conflicts in different regions where the Arya Samaj had preachers and supporters.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Chandra, *The Oppressive Present*, 139.

<sup>198</sup> In her study of the question of caste and Hindu nationalism in India since the 18th century, Susan Bayly thinks that some of the supporters of this “Aryan Hindu” sense of identity seemed to have come under the influence of western scientific and enlightenment views towards race, human beings and societies, driven mostly by social Darwinist slogans like “survival of the fittest”. Bayly sees an affinity between what Indian racial theorists like Shiv Kishan Kaul, who was “a leading proponent of so-called Aryan Hindu regeneration” and the western ideologies of the time, for he foresaw India’s survival in proclaiming the greatness and vitality of Hinduism”, a “Hindu heritage” which “had to be represented as something more than an array of sacred texts and cult beliefs”. Susan Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India: Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 152-153.

On the other side of the spectrum, some other 19th century intellectuals responded to this revivalist rhetoric through an inclusive, non-monolithic view of Indian society. Prominent among those was the Bengali intellectual Rammohan Roy who joined the reformist efforts of some other leaders through his syncretic views towards Indian society of the time. In his *Second Defense of the Monotheistical System of the Veds*, Roy denounces many of the Hindu traditional practices which are, according to him, confining to the individual freedom of choice and the possibility to open up to other culturally diverse practices, mainly those brought about by inter-civilizational or intercultural contacts.<sup>199</sup> He advocated for a secular society in which monotheism does not mean the exclusion of the religious other and where the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian doctrines can coexist in 19th century Bengal. Roy's initiatives at bridging the social barriers in a Hindu-dominated society inspired many other intellectuals and reformers who also shared in the task of propagating for a society that can embrace and invest with its differences whether in terms of caste hierarchy or religion. Roy's influence was clear through religious movements like the Brahmo Samaj of Kolkata and the religious ideology resulting from it which was called the Brahmo religion. Also, his reformist ideas extended into the southern part of India especially in Kerala leading to the emergence of the Sugunavardhini social movement which supported the rights of the underprivileged and downtrodden classes like the untouchables and women, and the freedom of faith.<sup>200</sup>

Nevertheless, and as Karnad clearly explains in the notes to his plays and about his motivations behind responding to the inter-caste and religious traumas which have swept the nation, the 1980s marked a more violent rise of religious fundamentalism in the modern Indian state since independence. The Hindu Radical Right, represented chiefly by the BJP or 'Bharatiya Janata Party' (Indian People's Party), advocated for a Hindutva (or Hindu identity)

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<sup>199</sup> Rachel Van M. Baumer, "The Reinterpretation of Dharma in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Righteous Conduct for Man in the Modern World," in *Aspects of Bengali History and Society*, ed. Rachel Van M. Baumer (Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), 87.

<sup>200</sup> Baumer, "The Reinterpretation of Dharma," 87.

ideology which “equates religious and national identities.”<sup>201</sup> The Hindutva ideology promotes the idea that ancient Indian peaceful history was interrupted by the Muslim Mughal rulers and, therefore, a revival of that lost ‘Hindu’ ‘Aryan’ Indian identity is required. Some historians, however, challenge such a proposition pointing out examples where violence towards the religious ‘other’ was commonplace and characteristic of the Hindu religious and cultural mindset. One of the historians criticizes the falsity of such a claim and argues that the ill-informed glorification of the classical and Medieval Indian history is due to the “accentuated dichotomy between the Aryan and the non-Aryan which continues to haunt Indian historical writings” and the “the periodization of pre 'British' Indian history into Hindu and Muslim.”<sup>202</sup>

In *TD*, an instance of violence which corresponds to this feeling of superiority, and therefore justifying the use of violence to eliminate those which identify differently whether in terms of caste or faith, among many others, relates to when Sovideva, the king’s son, tries to take control of Kalyan. He plans it secretly against his father the king due to his support of Basava and the inter-caste marriage, he does this through violence and destruction. So, we are told that before he moves on to put an end to Basava’s movement and deport the Sharannas from the city, Sovideva is soothed by his advisors that even those supporting the movement in the regions neighboring the kingdom are eliminated and that they will cause no threat to the future king’s authority in Kalyan. One of his advisors, Manchanna, comforts him saying, “Sir, King Mihirakula of Kashmir took care of the Buddhist menace by *decimating sixteen hundred viharas. Our Pandyan neighbor impaled eight thousand Jain scoundrels along the highway*. So, why are we being so circumspect?” Damodara, the prince’s chief priest, adds:

The coronation is round the corner. It is essential the new king is seen as capable of forgiveness, generosity-  
*Manchanna: And what is coronation, pray? The gross body is cleansed of its lowly birth and made worthy of receiving Vedic mantras and the Brahmins’ salutations. (...)*

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<sup>201</sup> Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India: The case of the Punjab* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 45.

<sup>202</sup> Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims. Eighth to Fourteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1998), 14.

Sovideva (excited): I shall strike terror in their hearts, I shall wreak havoc.<sup>203</sup>

This Hindutva ideology was an aspiration driving most Hindu reform movements and revivalist groups since the 19th century. In his book, *Why I am a Hindu*, Shashi Tharoor presents an account of Hinduism and the politics of Hindutva and explains the role of some revivalist writers and groups in promoting a radical Hindutva or a Hindu-based nationalist ideology. Shashi thinks that these writers and political groups treat ‘Indianness’ with a confining understanding where race, religion, land, and language should be taken collectively and used interchangeably if one is to define the Indian nation.<sup>204</sup> Among his examples are the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar as its major spokesman and the one who is credited with coining the term Hindutva in his famous 1928 treatise, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*. Savarkar considers the fact of being Indian to mean Hindu ethnicity and Hindu faith. He argues that a Hindu is one who “considers India to be his motherland (*matrbhumi*), the land of his ancestors (*pitrbhumi*), and his holy land (*Punya bhumi*). India is the land of the Hindus since their ethnicity is Indian and since the Hindu faith originated in India.”<sup>205</sup>

This description allows in and out certain types of people who make the fabric of the modern Indian state. While Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains are allowed in because they “fulfilled the same three criteria” like Hindus and, therefore, regarded as variants of the original Hindu race, other religious sects (which are equated with race) are put out of this category like the Indian Muslims and Christians because they “were born out of India,”<sup>206</sup> and their original mother or holy lands are seen to be regionally non-Indian. Hindutva ideology, in this regard, can be said to go beyond a simple religious classification of who and who is not characteristically Indian and develops into a political philosophy of power and domination. According to this ideology, the fact of being born in India, even centuries ago, does not make

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<sup>203</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol.2, 88. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>204</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am A Hindu* (London: C. Hurst and Co. Publishers Ltd., 2018), 141-142.

<sup>205</sup> Tharoor, *Why I Am A Hindu*, 142.

<sup>206</sup> Tharoor, 142.

one an Indian if one doesn't exhibit the previously mentioned criteria. Savarkar thinks that they can't claim their Indianness because they "could not claim allegiance to the three essentials of Hindutva: 'a common nation (*Rashtra*), a common race (*jati*) and a common civilization (*Sanskriti*), as represented in a common history, common heroes, a common literature, a common art, a common-law, and a common jurisprudence, common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments."<sup>207</sup> Savarkar and his fellow ideologues were not the only ones to equate Hinduness with Indianness.

The Hindu revivalist Savitri Devi (known as a Nazi sympathizer) argued for the need for a Hindu revival or regeneration; the only thing that might assure political unity or unity of vision among the Hindus. In support of her view, she claims that "Hinduism is the national religion of India, and there is no real India besides Hindu India."<sup>208</sup> Taking this Hindutva understanding a step further, the RSS leader M.S. Golwalker from 1940 to 1973 added more fervent insights to Hindu nationalism where his "aggressive belief in totalitarianism, casteism, Hindusuisation, racial ethics, anti-minorityism, and anti-democratic ideas came to be known as Golwalkerism"<sup>209</sup> so says Shamsul Islami in his critique of Golwalker's foundational book *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939). Following in the footsteps of Savarkar, Golwalker considers the importance of race and its purity in defining a nation.

Another issue to which Karnad responds in the two plays is that of casteism and how it exacerbated inter-caste violence and social exclusion over the decades. The Indian divided religious scene and the fierce competition emanating from its representative sects is in conjunction with a highly hierarchized and variegated social system. Indian society is organized according to a social hierarchy informed by what is commonly known as the caste system. Described as a "social deformity" by Manchi Sarat Babu in his study on the different aspects

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<sup>207</sup> Tharoor, *Why I Am A Hindu*, 142-143.

<sup>208</sup> Tharoor, 144.

<sup>209</sup> Shamsul Islami, *Golwalker's We or Our Nationhood Defined: A Critique* (New Delhi: Pharos Media and Publishing Ltd, 2006), 12.

of cultural and civilizational deformity afflicting the Indian condition for centuries, caste system consists of four “recognized” classes or *varnas* and one “unrecognized” class or *avarnas*. Headed by the Brahmins (represented by priests, ministers, teachers, and poets) and Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), the caste system deprives the other classes of the right to step up the ladder of social recognition. The Brahmins, motivated by their priestly position, went further to rely on myth and folklore to justify their divine endowment on earth resorting into a Hindu myth, as cited in the Vedas, which claims that the four “recognized classes” represent Brahma’s, the Hindu God of creation, mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.<sup>210</sup> The “unrecognized” class or *avarnas*, also known as the “scheduled castes” or more popularly as the “Untouchables” (while the state classifies them as the ‘Other Backward Classes’ or OBC), represent those considered unfit within the caste structure due to their supposed social deformity. The untouchables (known recently as *Dalits* in some Indian regions) live mostly in the outskirts of villages or main residential areas as those populated by higher castes.

Perceived to be of an unclean polluted nature, they perform tasks of a polluted nature too like cleaning animal places or removing corpora of dead animals from the streets, as elephant keepers, as they are forbidden from entering temples or other sacred areas or sharing in festivities in which other castes take part, especially the upper ones, among many other social injustices. Therefore, the Brahmins and other upper castes have always thought of themselves of a racial purity in the land of the Sapta Sindhus and the sole exponents of the main Hindu religious texts. In *TD*, Damodara, the court’s chief Brahmin priest, and in his reaction to the inter-caste marriage Basava and the Sharannas want to make possible, argues that this marital link between a Brahmin girl and a low-born boy would bring a curse to the land, and would defy the “Vedic Dharma” which “branched out in strength over the centuries.”<sup>211</sup> He also goes

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<sup>210</sup> Sarat Babu Manchi, *Indian Drama Today: A Study in the Theme of Cultural Deformity* (London: Sangam Books Limited, 1997), 44-45.

<sup>211</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol.2, 71.

on citing the Rig Veda explaining the reason behind dividing the world into unequal castes (supported as it were by myth as previously mentioned), and that any defiance of such a sacred structure would be a defiance of nature itself, as a “perversity”, “sacrilege” and “profanity.”<sup>212</sup>

This belief was so often supported by their argument that cosmic and social stability or order can be maintained as long as the caste structure is respected where every varna assumes its specific duties. According to historical records, people belonging to lower castes, especially the untouchables were punished if caught reading or interpreting the scriptures. This socially excluded group grew into an oppressed minority with time and it was at the heart of many anti-caste Dalit reform movements starting from the mid-19th century. Though many of their initiatives at changing the predicament of this group remained salient in the face of government-enforced policies which are, in most cases, in favor of certain social or religious groups over others.

In his reveries on the issue of casteism and untouchability in a Brahmanically imposed social structure, the 19th-century Indian reformer, and activist Jyotirao Phule advocates for a casteless society and the need for genuine inclusiveness of the different ‘others’ making up the Indian nation.<sup>213</sup> In his 1885 *Gulamgiri*, Phule thinks that ancient legends and myths as crafted by those sects who claim their Aryanism as preordained were just a means to perpetuate the Brahmins’ hegemony. Phule thinks that “to keep better hold on the people,” Brahmins and other upper castes “devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of crude and inhuman laws to which we can find no parallel among the other nations.”<sup>214</sup> Later, and with a similar reformist mindset, the Dalit writer and social activist B. R. Ambedkar<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol.2, 63.

<sup>213</sup> Based in the western Indian district of Maharashtra, Phule’s Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) advocated for the rights of lower castes, fought against interreligious elimination and supported gender equality. This reformist society had followers and volunteers from different castes and religious backgrounds.

<sup>214</sup> In Omvedt, G., *Dalit Visions* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995), 17–18, quoted in, Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and John Zavos, *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 161.

<sup>215</sup> B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was and is still considered the spiritual father and the first champion of the cause of the Untouchables (later known as Dalits). Through his writings and activism, he could challenge Indian leadership to revise its divisive laws in favor of those who were for a long time, denied voice. He did also inspire

made further steps into challenging this socially imposed hierarchy through propagating for the rights of the Dalits and other low castes. Ambedkar, who grew to be a prominent popular figure in the Dalit question, criticised the Vedas and other Hindu sacerdotal texts thinking that, because they were written and read only by the Brahmins and other upper castes, they played a role in creating this harsh division based on caste. He even challenged Gandhi and the Indian National Congress which, he thought, was headed by people and intellectuals belonging only to the high castes.

More recent approaches to the question of social identity in India draw our attention to the fact that the postcolonial state and the independence era opened up a wider (and even harsher) door for these caste-related questions and the way religion and communalism continue to be the trajectories through which people come to be classified. This is why these issues persisted as the thematic concern in many post-independence writings, regardless of genre, growing in intensity under the recent Indian government. In their essay “India’s Identity Politics: Then and Now,” Vibha Pingle and Ashutosh Varshney argue that calls for assimilation into the Hindu spectrum on the part of Hindu nationalist leaders since 1947 is an indication that the ‘salad bowl’ syncretic view of the nation as advocated by leaders like Gandhi and Nehru is still a dream. A dream which is in struggle in the face of the regional and ethnically narrow perceptions of what should be brought to the table for accurate debates about the future of the Indian nation to take place.<sup>216</sup> On Karnad’s stance against religious fanaticism in contemporary India, Parvathi Menon states:

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a popular movement which developed in 1972 which came to be known as the Dalit Panthers, in the style of the Black Panthers movement which developed during the civil rights movement in the US. The Dalit architects of this movement likened their plight, suffering and state segregation against them to that of the Black Panthers. As a reaction to Hinduism and its strict sectarian division, Ambedkar converted officially to Buddhism, a milestone which is still marked by annual conferences and ceremonial festivities. (In., Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*. Translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xviii.

<sup>216</sup> Vibha Pingle and Ashutosh Varshney, “India’s Identity Politics: Then and Now,” in *Managing Globalization: Lessons from China and India*, eds., David Anthony Kelly, Ramkishan S. Rajan and Gillian H. L. Goh (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2006), 363.

Karnad has been a bitter critic in recent years of the rise of religious fundamentalism in India. He publicly condemned the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992; he uses all public platforms to warn of the threat Hindutva poses to secularism, multi-culturalism, and the freedom of expression. When religious fundamentalists tried to whip up communal tensions over the controversy about the Idgah Maidan in Hubli, Karnad (who hails from Dharwad) strongly opposed them.<sup>217</sup>

The playwright's overt criticism of the BJP and its manipulation of people's religious, ethnic, and communal identities is noted to have taken place in many other occasions. 'Speaking truth to power' for Karnad meant addressing the peril which the continuously politicised religious discourse in India poses in the face of the country's attempts to fashion a modern post-independence democracy.

### **c. On the Religious/Caste Other in Indian Literature**

Karnad's preoccupation with the issues of caste, religious violence and modern Indian identity is shared by a number of other writers. In literature, mainly drama and poetry, Indian writers actively responded to these issues of religious fundamentalism, casteism, regional communalism and their role in exacerbating division and antagonism in society. Because "Hindu identity is formed as a result of a process of stigmatization and emulation that is based on the 'threatening Other,'"<sup>218</sup> discussing the religious/caste 'Other' in Indian literature always brings about divided inclinations. Divided inclinations between writings which subjectively favor one religious philosophy over another (mostly Hindu in this regard), and those which interest themselves with pointing out patterns of religious exclusion without taking clear sides. This last group of writers opts for discussing how religiously driven ideas incite social or interreligious animosity with an attempt, rather, to bring conflicting voices side by side to seek dialogue and reconciliation. They regard literature as a space to amend social fractions and soften divided intentions, especially those determined by faith, caste, or communalism. Karnad is the epitome of this second group of writers. Before moving to tackle Karnad's reconciliatory

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<sup>217</sup> Parvathi Menon, quoted in Monika Yadav, *Tradition and Modernity in the Selected Plays of Girish Karnad* (Ph.D. Thesis, MM University, Haryana, 2017), 1

<sup>218</sup> Ornit, *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism*, 09.

pronouncements as regards religious fundamentalism and casteism in modern India in his plays, it is first appropriate to locate his dramaturgy and position towards these issues in relation to other writers who sought out reconciliation and dialogue of opposites instead of one-sidedness and favoritism.

In his 11th century Sanskrit allegorical play *Prabodhachandrodaya*, one which inspired many Indian writings across the centuries, the scholar and dramatist Krishna Misra scathingly jeers at the fanatic and emotionally charged behavior of some religious sects of the society of his time. In the play, Misra juxtaposes “the ideas of Buddhists, Jains, Charvakas, Kapalikas, and other sects which had taken hold of the public mind in his day, and he awakens in the people a spirit of inquiry into the principles of Vedantic philosophy.”<sup>219</sup> Using vulgar and erotic language, Misra reveals the destructive discourse each sect spokesman (namely a Buddhist Monk, a Jain Muni, and a Kapalika) tries to impose on his followers and devotees revealing, as Sudhir Chandra argues, their degenerate ecstasies.<sup>220</sup>

Added to Misra’s play and influenced by the bearings of Luther’s reform movement on the religious temper of continental Europe of the 16th century, Krishna Mohan Banerjea, in many of his pamphlets and dramas especially his play *The Persecuted* (1831) addresses the plight of the Christian Converted Hindu in 19th century Bengal with a focus on reforming the Brahmin Orthodox caste. Seen in the context of the polemics surrounding the revivalist ideas addressed by some of the reformist groups at the time, Banerjea’s text reflects the tensions and confrontations, mixed with assaults of betrayal, a convert had to endure and the writer’s desire to expose the “inconsistencies and the blackness of the influential members of the Hindu community” and caution his people against “the wiles and tricks of the Brahmins.”<sup>221</sup> Operating

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<sup>219</sup> Chandra, *The Oppressive Present*, 136-137.

<sup>220</sup> Chandra, 137.

<sup>221</sup> Dhruvadi Chattopadhyay, *Of Myths and Modernities: Literature by the Christian Converts of Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (Inaugural dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Philosophischen, Fakultät der Universität Heidelberg, 2013), 211.

along a line of mutual exclusion, Banerjea's play portrays a religious othering pattern as it takes place within the confines of a single family the members of which decide to follow divergent, seemingly opposed, religious paths. While the father lives up to his faith as a devotee of Krishna, the son, Banylal (reflecting the writer's plight)<sup>222</sup> drifts to assume his new role as a Christian convert through acting according to the customs and habits which the new faith implies.

In this play, Banerjea compares Hinduism and Banylal's newly embraced religion exposing his fears of the outcomes this new conversion might have on his father. Also, he stresses his ability to stand in the face of "the bigot's rage and the priest's thunders", for he knows with certainty that "prejudice and liberalism cannot long reign under the same roof without rupture"<sup>223</sup> referring to the traditional religion and the new one which he returned to for salvation, respectively. The Brahmin elite, with its attachment to its traditional values, ostracizes Banylal and his new convictions which are perceived as a threat to the traditional fabric of Hindu society, and Banylal, critical of Brahminical hierarchy in society, is depicted in a liminal space between the new faith he voluntarily chose and the religious ideals of his father, community and ancestors.

A contemporary of Mohan Banerjea and one of his admirers, the Bengali dramatist, and poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt has also written dramas and poems which speak to this interreligious controversy through juxtaposing Hindu mythology and Christianity and how this defined the social scene of India of the time. Even though perceived as a foreign cultural element, Dutt's conversion to the Christian faith introduced him to different social values which he tried to use to inform his reformist ideals in his society. Apart from unraveling the estrangement and exclusion he had to deal with for he chose to be religiously different,

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<sup>222</sup> The play is said to be reflective of the writer's personal story of conversion to Christianity in 19th century Bengal and the confrontations with his surroundings and the public this caused him.

<sup>223</sup> Dhruvadi, *Of Myths and Modernities*, 214.

criticizing the caste system was one of Dutt's major concerns in his dramatic output. Drawing upon Hindu mythology, especially in his 1859 play *Sermista*, Dutt dramatizes the story of characters belonging to two different castes; the daughter of a king and the daughter of his Brahmin advisor where, with the slightest of disagreements, the Brahmin's daughter is reminded of her status as a servant to the King's daughter, Sermista. The play exposes the family feuds which are a direct result of the inter-caste exclusion the characters try to exercise against each other as it seems to be reflective of the playwright's thoughts about the social stratification imposed on his society by some of its more powerful sections.

With his interest in addressing the plight of the downtrodden in society, the pre-independence period playwright and poet Hrinranath Chattopadhyaya shares the critical impulse of Krishna's play but shies away from Krishna's religious satirical impulse to adopt a more socially engaged and realistic path. Away from royalty as a source of major characters in literature, social inequality as motivated by caste and social class inform the plots of some of his plays like *The Window*, *The Parrot*, and *The Sentry's Lantern* (1937) and register his quest for egalitarianism in society and his acerbic criticism of such institutions like capitalism which was brought by imperialism and the traditional Hindu social structure which remained solid despite many initiatives at reforming it. In *The Window*, we are introduced into the daily irksome and tedious life of a low factory worker and his family who struggle to earn a living amidst the filth and degradation of social conditions, deprived of education and the right to upgrade in social status in a society where what is divinely inherited or scripturally issued is held more dearly and tightly than what is real, tangible and livable. His social devotion, however, denies not the fact that he tries to shed light on the social antagonisms as driven by the religious attributes of inter-caste relations in Indian society. Hrinranath's other play *Chokha Mela* centers on a conflict between a group of racially alienated Brahmins and a low caste saint. Perceiving themselves to be superior and, therefore, more appropriate to hold God's message and keep his

word, the Brahmins, in the play, deny a saint who is from a different caste the right to devotion or divine connection even from outside the temple. Desperate and so spiritually willing to offer prayers to his God, Chokha the saint, is comforted when a God's messenger visits him and informs him that his prayers, even from outside the temple, are heard and accepted by his God, Vithoba. The play stresses the fact that caste or social position does not or should not entitle some to certain religious privileges while it deprives others, especially in what relates to divine devotion or Man/God relationship.

The postcolonial period kept the same rhythm and has marked the critical engagement of Girish Karnad and his contemporaries. Postcolonial dramatists found themselves entangled between a complex cycle of realities both inherited and timely. The independence era motivated different questionings about the Indian renaissance between tradition and modernity, the new political elite and its alienated cultural discourse, and the ideals of the western-educated and their aspirations. Writers also spoke about Indian identity, and what constitutes it amidst the wavering attitudes of the revivalist/traditional camp and its reformist counterpart, religion and social class, and the plight of women among other issues. Therefore, "the major concern of the Indian theatre in the post- Independence period has been to try to define its 'Indianness' and to relate itself to the past from which it was cut off."<sup>224</sup> In response to this postcolonial and postmodern pandemonium, dramatic texts by playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Asif Curimbhoy, some blanketed in both history and myth while others more realistic in purpose and subject matter tried to bring to light the transgressions of the rising nationalist spirit as advocated by the Hindu Radical Right and its eliminating, monolithic religious and ethnic discourse. Many of their writings emphasize the way religion and caste were and are still manipulated by politicians to serve their goals and political aspirations with no thought about the outcomes. Violence, as a leitmotif, is much common in many of their

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<sup>224</sup> Crowe Brian and Chris Banfield, "Girish Karnad and an Indian Theatre of Roots," *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theatre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 152.

plays with characters playing both destructive and reformist roles and a sacrifice, either for the protection of an ideal or in the name of old traditions, lurking somewhere between the layers of these texts. Postcolonial texts shunned away from the misleading glorification of the Indian past and resorted to myth and history with the purpose of interrogation and criticism.

As such, Karnad belongs to the group of writers who although they “draw from the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the dramas of Kalidas and Bhasa”, “they do not uphold the Hindu hegemony” contained within them.<sup>225</sup> It is clear that, even though he refers to different Sanskrit texts, like the ones mentioned earlier, for material and inspiration, he stands in opposition to the trend in literary production which glorifies these sacred texts, treats them with immunity, and emphasizes the heroic forage of their stories. Karnad’s ideas on the Vedas and the Vedantic world and the aspects of violence they exhibit have shaped many of his writings and informed many of his positions against state policies which he thinks, especially during the last three decades of the 20th century and beyond, were manipulative of peoples’ class and religious identities, backed up as they were by the BJP and its Hindutva ideology. In his seminal study of drama and theory in India since independence, Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker comments that postcolonial dramaturgy in India shifted “from heroic self-praise to ironic self-reflexivity;” investing with “an ideology that simultaneously acknowledges and questions the power of the past in the mythology of the new nation.”<sup>226</sup>

Religion and caste are the biggest focus of this group of post-independence dramatists. Many plays opt for tales and episodes from the famous Hindu religious texts like the Mahabharata. Whereas earlier writers, moved by the call for decoloniality, nationalism, and cultural preservation, dramatize the heroic deeds and values of the forefathers, the new wave of writers went further to underscore the tragic aspects of the text with a tone that questions and

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<sup>225</sup> Obula P. Reddy, “Cultural Heterogeneity in Indian Drama,” in *Flowering of Indian Drama: Growth and Development*, eds. Venkata K. and Dhawan, Reddy, R.K. (New Delhi: Prestige, 2004), 35.

<sup>226</sup> Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 181.

criticizes, instead of one which accepts, without questioning, the elements of violence which emerge from ancient writings. For instance, in his poetic drama *Andha Yug*, the Indian dramatist Dharamvir Bharati reworks many stories of the original *Mahabharata* but twists them to highlight some issues of relevance to India of his time, the way Karnad has dealt with the 11th and 13th-century incidents he brings to the plays under examination in this thesis. Bharati, in his play, subjects a classical text to his local cultural context of unrest and violence; one which is informed by communal exclusion as dictated by caste and class.

Added to the previously mentioned writings, it is relevant to say that representations of untouchability, casteism, and social discrimination had more space in the narrative form since most of the stories take an autobiographical stance. This means that the issue of casteism can be explored more in-depth if we choose to read through narrative texts. Opting for drama, however, is motivated by the far-reaching and proliferating material from both history and myth with which dramatists, like Karnad, chose to mold their perceptions of different forms of social exclusion. This historical dimension can draw a clear picture of how entrenched those othering practices are to the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society and how old these practices are in history. This excludes not, of course, the fact that even narrative texts communicate elements of history and the past in their treatment of inter-caste, inter/intra- religious-related issues. Post-independence novels, short stories, and memoirs with a central focus on the issue of casteism include U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* (2000) to the most recent compelling novel *Ghost in the Tamarind* (2017) by Subramanian Shankar. Such narratives, according to many critics, have shaped the boom of what came to be known as the Dalit literature (or literature with untouchability and its impacts as central themes), as they lay open the evils of untouchability and casteism and how they influence the very small details in the life of modern Indians.

As such, Karnad's plays are regarded by many critics as an important literary pathway through which the forces at play in post-independence India can be very well fathomed. The fourth chapter builds on what I previously discussed about casteism and interreligious exclusion and how they, with time, became central tropes of social organization in India. The two plays chosen for analysis bring these issues together as they communicate certain forms of compromise, dialogue, and communication, reflecting Karnad's desire of violating boundaries, reconciling antagonisms, and adjusting group-motivated othering beliefs and ideologies.

### **3. Griselda Gambaro's Plays as Mirror to a Post-Proceso Violent Argentina**

#### **a. Gambaro, the Playwright**

Writing from the perspective of a repressed war witness and a writer who was forcibly exiled due to her fearless criticism of the oppressive Argentinian regime, Griselda Gambaro asserted herself as one of the most prolific voices coming out from modern Argentina. Born (1928-Present) to Italian parents in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Gambaro devoted a large part of her intellectual and artistic experimentation to addressing authoritarian and social power dynamics and their impacts on *el hombre Argentino moderno y su mundo*.

Gambaro belongs to the generation of the neovanguardias (neo-avant-gardists) which came to dominate the Argentinian literary and artistic scene in the 1960s and '70s. The neo-avant-gardists advocate for the idea that playwriting should have a social purpose. Given Argentina's wavering sociopolitical realities during the '60s and '70s, writers representative of the movement like Gambaro brought to their texts, theater, and art forms the tropes of both realistic and absurd currents of writing either popular within the Argentinian theatrical scene or those imported from other world literary traditions.

Influenced by the literary playwriting currents coming from Chekhov, Pirandello, O'Neill, Armando Discépolo, Francisco Defilippis, and Roberto Arlt, Gambaro advocates for a drama of change. Engagement with the grotesque in Argentinian drama started much earlier and

continued to influence later generations of Argentinian dramatists, among which is Gambaro. Gambaro has constantly asserted that Armando Discépolo's dramatic impulse, most popular in the '30s until the '50s of the last century, inspired her understanding of the workings of power and its impacts on the Argentinian individual, something which reincarnated again starting from the 1960s with the new wave of military power takeovers.<sup>227</sup> Discépolo's interest in the plight of the Argentinian individual and his call for the need for society to respond positively to his struggles, especially that of the immigrant, can explain Gambaro's approach of negotiating the social condition of those removed into the margins of society either intentionally due to repressive governmental policies or unintentionally due to harsh social inequalities which pushed people into the margins. Another playwright who seems, according to some Gambarian critics, to have influenced Gambaro's dramatic philosophy is Defilippis Novoa who was one of the very first pioneers of the avant-gardist drama in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Argentina. With Defilippis, Gambaro shares the impulse of presenting alienated individuals on stage and the passivity with which Argentinians faced their oppressive regimes.

The saying which defines the writer as both visionary and outcast fits very well with Griselda Gambaro. In an interview she granted Doggart Sebastian in January 1996, Gambaro, when asked about the extent to which she relates to Artaud's theater of cruelty for her plays were known to opt for violence as a trope to thematize about political repression, she agrees to that influence but she made it clear that the European or French version of this type of dramatic experimentation acquired new color, tone, and dimension when used to speak about an Argentinian, Latin American social reality. She says, "I have taken on the transgressive impulses of the 'theatre of cruelty'... use them selectively since many of his hypotheses are reactions to a sophisticated society and the rational, discursive French theatre of his age. This

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<sup>227</sup> Sebastian Doggart, *Latin American Plays: New Drama from Argentina, Cuba, Mexico and Peru* (London: Nick Hern Books Ltd., 2017), 8.

has not been, nor is, the situation of Latin American society and theatre.”<sup>228</sup> Writing against the tradition of *La Comédie Française*, which he regarded as frivolous and dysfunctional drama type, and sharing Brecht’s ‘theater for change’ impulse, Antonin Artaud’s ‘Theater of Cruelty’ in France marks a break away from western traditions of writing and staging. He believes that, beyond self-reflective reading, a piece of drama should wake people up through inspiring them “with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.”<sup>229</sup> Motivating people and waking them up to issues of importance to them bears, as Artaud argues, violent tropes suggesting a ‘cruelty’ with which writers, if willing to attribute to drama the change desired out of it, should invest their works. Similar to Brecht’s Alienation effect as the desired impact out of his Epic dramatic pieces, Artaud’s concept of ‘cruelty’ calls people’s emotions, attitudes, and experiences into a harsh questioning.

Added to the avant-gardist and criollo dimensions of Gambaro’s dramatic experimentation and in linking her treatment of the theme of power and repression to the aesthetics of Dadaism, Jorge Londono thinks that the Dadaist dimension in Gambaro manifests mainly through the use of language in a way that defies the “indulgent attitude and behavior of society,” and the way she uses her dramatic space to “criticize the notion of order and neatness that the military by then in power imposed on Argentine society.”<sup>230</sup> Londono maintains that Gambaro’s use of language aims primarily at deconstructing bourgeois /upper-class values from within; bourgeois values and interests which enjoyed the protective privileges of the successive repressive regimes in the country.

Gambaro provided the Argentinian literary scene with many texts which fall into different categories but she is most renowned, still, for the openly critical, burlesque, and ground shaking

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<sup>228</sup> Doggart, *Latin American Plays*, 109.

<sup>229</sup> Nathan Gorelick, “Life in Excess: Insurrection and Expenditure in Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty,” *Discourse*. 33 (2), 2011: 263.

<sup>230</sup> Jorge Correa Londono, “Dada Poetics in Griselda Gambaro’s Works: Toward a De(con)struction of the Argentinian State of Terror,” *Studia Ubb Dramatica*, LXI, 2, 2016: 172.

plays with themes that target both the public and the domestic. Her literary production includes texts like *El desatino* (The Blunder, 1965), *Las paredes* (The Walls, 1966), *Los siameses* (Siamese Twins, 1967), *El campo* (The Camp, 1967), *Información para extranjeros* (Information for Foreigners, 1973), and *Decir si* (Say Yes, 1981). It also comprises of texts like *La malasangre* (Bad Blood, 1982), *Real envido* (Royal Gambit, 1983), *Del sol naciente* (From the Rising Sun, 1984), *Antígona furiosa* (Furious Antigone, 1986), *Atando cabos* (Tie Loose Ends, 1991), *La casa sin sosiego* (The House without Peace, 1992), *Es necesario entender un poco* (It is Necessary to Understand a Little, 1995), *Almas* (Souls, 2004) among others. As such, Gambaro is viewed by many critics as the most versatile literary voice in contemporary Argentina. The previously mentioned texts, colored as they are with rich layers of history, myth, classical tales, scenes of violence, and stories emerging from both the domestic and public domains, share these themes of violence, repression, marginalization, and the interplay of the domestic and state forms of power. In her writing, Gambaro “focuses on the themes of persecution and criminal violence resulting from Argentina's warring political factions, on the country's ongoing fascination with fascism, on its misogyny, its antisemitism, its racism.”<sup>231</sup>

Furthermore, Gambaro has played an active role, together with several other playwrights and intellectuals, in the counter-state *Teatro Abierto* (open theater) movement of the 1980s which emerged when the dictatorship which ruled over the country started weakening. Crafted with the writings of playwrights like, among others, Griselda Gambaro, Roberto Cossa, Eduardo Pavlovsky, and Ricardo Halac, and with its “ganar la calle”<sup>232</sup> slogan, this theatrical movement questioned the possibilities towards national reconciliation and successful transition into a democratic state. While many dramatists lingered under the censorial gaze of the government in the period from 1976 to 1983, this movement opened the door to more overt

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<sup>231</sup> Taylor, “Theater and Terrorism,” 167.

<sup>232</sup> In English, it translates as ‘winning the street.’

treatments of issues like state oppression, the kidnapped and disappeared, and the ambiguities surrounding how the new ruling elite intends to deal with mistakes of the past.

Considering her works as “immoral, subversive, obscene, and unpatriotic,”<sup>233</sup> Gambaro was forcibly exiled in 1977, one year after the military seizure of power and the beginning of the Dirty War years (1976-1983), to leave to Barcelona, to only return to Buenos Aires three years later. Gambaro’s exile was part of a governmental scheme to shut down and silence any opposing voices coming from the Argentinian intelligentsia, or at least from those which deemed the government and its policies illegitimate, authoritarian and violent. Gambaro’s forced exile was due to the proceso president banning her play *Information for Foreigners* and her novel *Ganarse la muerte* (To Earn One’s Death, 1976). The play is considered as one of the most revealing texts in the way it predicted the “coming of state terrorism,”<sup>234</sup> to be performed in public only 15 years later in New York City.<sup>235</sup> In what she called a ‘Lexicon of Terror’, Marguerite Feitlowitz thinks that understanding how language was used during the dirty war years can give one a clear picture of how the suffering people, both public and intellectual, had to endure over this traumatic period. Verbalizing trauma and violence through language and writing was seen as a threat to the military state. In an interview, Gambaro explains: “There were raids; the army paid us ‘visits’ during which they looked at all the material in the house (1973). As any material was considered subversive-Marx, Freud-a great burning of books resulted. Everyone who owned books burned them.”<sup>236</sup>

Therefore, Gambaro came to be recognized for her outspoken anti-governmental criticism and incendiary plays. She considers her writings as spaces to address the injustices perpetrated

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<sup>233</sup> Brenda Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics in Argentina* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 103.

<sup>234</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Revised and Updated with a New Epilogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), x.

<sup>235</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, x.

<sup>236</sup> Becky Boling, “Reenacting Politics: The Theater of Griselda Gambaro,” in *Latin American Women Dramatists: Theater, Texts and Theories*, eds. Catherine Larson and Margarita Vargas (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 5.

by the different actors in the games of power and control, and their manifestations in the lives of the simple Argentinian individual. In her plays, the Argentinian individual resides at the periphery of events. One who ignores how his or her life is molded and by whom; one who is made invisible due to state mechanisms that render some segments in society more visible compared to others, and above all an individual who had to outlive decades-long trauma of repression, oppression, censorship, secret disappearances, and victimization. Gambaro's concern with Argentina's changing socio-cultural and political climate was/is always associated with her experimentation with, as I earlier indicated, the "Theater of Cruelty" and "Il Teatro del Grottesco" to serve her reformist vision in society. Both theater trends deal with clumsy and marginalized characters struggling with their plight and seeking identification in an uncaring society.

Gambaro creates textual spaces where the marginalized space traverses the mainstream space (represented by elite/upper-class power discourse). She reacts to a social reality where the mainstream space (both owned and manipulated by authoritarian regimes) is seen as the only accepted source of the nation's historical narrative. The city is the cultural space for Gambaro to speak about how these marginalized voices need to be domesticated and inserted into issues that concern society as a whole. Beggars, prostitutes, servants, and other low-positioned groups in society, Gambaro thinks, have to be removed from the margins and integrated through giving them voice in theater. We can then assume that Gambaro's theater serves to "domesticate" disempowered margins, which are in need to be spaced, against the general thinking of power relations in the contemporary Argentinean social scene. Through the literary and textual spaces she creates, Gambaro tries to break class specificity or what I describe as "domestication" of disempowered margins in the Argentinean urban centers. She does so through exposing disempowered groups in negotiation with their oppressors/victimizers or the "lettered elite", to use Rama Angel's term, weighing each group's ethos against the other.

In the spatial geography of the city, then, different marginalized and repressed/repressive groups are unconsciously led to confront each other in the worlds of the plays Gambaro writes. In *Del sol naciente* (From the Rising Sun, 1984), among the five characters, four characters, a prostitute, a beggar, a servant, a foot soldier, represent the most powerless and disadvantaged sections in society. These characters' opinions and concerns are weighed against Oban, the warrior, who is representative of the military elite and who epitomizes the sole source of authority in the play. Each character is given a space to confront Oban's supposed authority to control everyone else's way of approaching different matters. Her second play, *La malasangre* (Bad Blood, 1982), was written towards the end of the proceso decade during which thousands of Argentinians were kidnapped and tortured under the new military elite's proceso of reorganizacion. In the play, Gambaro dives into the power dynamics by juxtaposing the domestic and national forms of power to reveal the cruelty and the intensity of exclusion and victimization as practiced by authoritarian fathers who, in return, incarnate the fathers of the nation and their vision of Argentinian national identity. As such, Gambaro's plays can be said to establish center-periphery/margin analogies where the self-other oppositions are emphasized through both setting and characterization. Like many other contemporary writers who waged their socio-political criticism against state repression, Gambaro thinks that the mechanisms of exclusion of the different, opposing values still need to be exposed if society is to make a successful transition towards understanding, dialogue, and, more importantly, reconciliation.

Although Gambaro's plays are studied as an expression of a personal political ideology and texts which constitute a cry of anguish against an Argentinian corrupt socio-political scene, I intend to approach her plays in the belief that they are primarily concerned with addressing forms of social exclusion and victimization, and ones which express her views about transitional/post-dictatorial reconciliation in Argentina. She communicates her views about reconciliation through inserting oppressed/oppressive groups and their views in confrontation,

in a way that portrays them struggling to maintain themselves and their space within socio-political hegemonic structures. Most of Gambaro's characters are shown roaming the streets calling for recognition and a place to identify with in society. She always stresses the fact that raising solidarity between the marginalized in a repressed society is essential to open the door for a new type of society where social groups, previously divided across ethnic, class, religious and linguistic lines, can claim their position and possibly reconcile their antagonisms. Notably, there is an attempt to read both of Gambaro's plays as social spaces where power and its dynamics of victimization can yield in a change of order when those repressed and pulled into the margins of society can negotiate their position within the overall structure of power. With hopes, as Gambaro seems to speak through both texts, that reconciliation of past and present, individual and society, victim and victimizer can be aspired to.

#### **b. The *Guerra sucia*, Violence and Griselda Gambaro's Post-Proceso<sup>237</sup> Drama**

In front of the Casa Rosada, in 1977, a group of mothers gathered to claim the disappearance of their children in a place popularly known as the Plaza de Mayo. This scene took place every Thursday afternoon. These mothers, previously prevented from gathering according to the rules of the new military leaders who seized power in Argentina a year earlier through a coup d'état, shouted, cried, remembered, and soothed each other as they collectively recall and mourn the trauma of the secret and silent disappearances of their children and relatives. This phenomenon of mourning the 'disappeared' and the rituals associated with it, a point to which I will return later in this section, leads us to question what lurks behind this open female performativity of pain and trauma.

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<sup>237</sup> Refers to the "Proceso de Reorganización Nacional" (Process of National Reorganization), initiated after the 1976 coup and the military seizure of power in Argentina, and popularly known in Argentinian history, reductively, as the Proceso. Through persecution, violence, forced disappearances, detention and clandestine camps, this process aimed at hunting down what it perceived as the 'enemies of the state' from civil society or those known for their support of Peronism. For further insights on the proceso decade and its legacy, check Norberto Galasso, *Historia de la Argentina, vol. I & II* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2011).

Gambaro's response to a long history of repression, state violence, and social exclusion informs the background of her two plays *SN* and *LM*, where one can see the representations of violence through both setting and characterization. Using repression to downplay the voice of margins especially powerless people coming from desperate social classes and the intelligentsia, which were regarded as a threat to repressive state policies, has always been a pathway through which the Argentinian regime kept control over the Argentinian subject and his anxieties.

Using the past to look at the present and retrieving past forms of repression and violence to dramatize the Argentina of the 1970s and 80s mark both plays. In *LM*, Gambaro drives the reader to envisage the traumatic proceso years through allegorically referring to the regime of the 19th-century Argentinian leader Juan Manuel de Rosas. The last three decades of the 20th century, according to Gambaro, do not differ in the intensity of the violence and silencing practiced against the people from its 19th and early 20th-century power regimes. Backed by state terrorism, Rosa's regime in Argentina (which Gambaro uses as the actual setting where the events of *LM* take place) and which lasted from 1835 to 1852, ruled through the implementation of a repressive regime similar to the one which was popular during the 1970s and early '80s. Similar to the Proceso of reorganization launched by the military elite in 1976, Rosa imposed what came to be known as the *Mazorca system*<sup>238</sup> of repression through which he determined his power and legitimacy, as initiated the "cult of personality"<sup>239</sup> in the form of close advisors and right-hand agents which consolidated the leader's power over his subjects. This regime further imposed its power by eliminating other less powerful groups who were seen

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<sup>238</sup> Ruling/Exercising authority through "secret police force," in Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory Politics*, 103.

<sup>239</sup> Refers to the pathways a certain regime (mostly totalitarian in nature) takes in order to reinforce its image and the image of its leader, mostly in a heroic fashion. Some of these pathways include manipulative political speeches, public manifestations and appearances, journal publications, art, with these tasks performed usually by the leader's close advisors and right-hand assistants. For further insights about this concept and other related terms, check Frank Dikötter's insightful text, *How to be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019)

as a threat to the ruling party and the central power in Buenos Aires, mainly the indigenous populations.

In several notorious campaigns, Rosas waged a number of wars against many frontier and indigenous communities, taking their lands and putting them in concentration camps. So, if one is to compare the Dirty War politics to those of 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina, what becomes clear is that the same power dynamics which ruled over individuals at the time continued to be relevant towards the last decades of the 20th century, however different those targeted by repressive state policies are. It can be also reminiscent of that belief that those who are at the periphery of society are, in many cases, perceived of a marginal importance and the elimination or exclusion of which becomes, therefore, a necessary evil. The consolidation of this early version of an authoritarian form of governance marked again the Argentinian scene in the early decades of the 20th century.

What is also worth mentioning is that both plays were written in response to the process of national reorganization initiated by the military elite which seized power in 1976, starting a decade-long chain of repressive policies in the forms of kidnappings, killings, disappearances, and censorship over writing and speech. While Gambaro makes clear references to these developments, still, she does so in an allegorical way through a careful choice of her settings. Her settings range from an ancient Japanese Medieval context (in the case of *SN*), and 19<sup>th</sup> century Rosas regime (in the case of *LM*), as she equally opts for the domestic or the enclosed space of the house and family to launch her criticism of oppression and victimization, and how they result in widening the gap between those in power and those who are pushed to the margins; socially, culturally and politically. The Proceso decade and its reorganization plan bred terror and became notorious for the large waves of disappearances and kidnappings of innocents:

As the military learned, physical disappearance could not counter the psychological power of memory and unverified loss. Life became grindingly stressful, particularly if the family included university students or

young adults. The kidnapping of family members, relatives, or friends and the impossibility of discovering what happened when, why, and where produced a sense of powerlessness and despair.<sup>240</sup>

In tandem with MacLachlan's description in this quote, the issue of the *desaparecidos* emerges as a thematic concern in many writings of the period, whether in fiction or drama. Many writers and critics alike harped on this theme of the "the disappeared or the other disappeared" and it became the driving tool to reflect upon the politics of memory and healing which changed considerably from individual and intimate experiences of pain into a collective question of remembrance and agony. Jean Franco, in his *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* (2002), reflects upon the Latin American subject and his or her seismic psychologies which were a direct result of repression and denial and says: "The massive disappearances in Argentina have made the work of mourning particularly agonizing. On the one hand, there is the contentious battlefield in which the politics of memory are waged and, on the other, the slower and more painful work of mourning that often cannot be completed."<sup>241</sup> Executing power through repression and elimination of what was perceived as the 'other' or 'different', including socially marginalized groups calling for justice, writers and intellectuals seeking freedom of speech or voices representing other social segments which grew critical of the proceso's oppressive agendas, came at the offshoots of a decades-long Peronism whose philosophy of social justice was overtaken and silenced by the 1976 military coup.

*Peronismo*, named after leader Juan Domingo Perón, brought some hope with it due to the attention it gave to the rural workers, the socially disadvantaged, the immigrants, and those who needed a state to protect them. Considerably different from the political leaders which preceded them, and equally those which subsequently presided over the task of national reorganization, Peron and his wife Evita, showed sympathy and worked to "re-enforce power in the name of the downtrodden" and they were both seen as "the father and mother of the shirtless ones (the

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<sup>240</sup> Colin M. MacLachlan, *Argentina: What Went Wrong* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 147.

<sup>241</sup> Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 247.

*descamisados*).<sup>242</sup> Peron, critical of the ideologies driving political practice in the 20s and 30s with their rigid policies on the individual and his liberties, wanted to soften or reduce the links of his new socio-political philosophy with the politics which defined the Argentinian past. He, instead, believed in *Justicialismo*, that conviction of social justice and morality as prerequisites to nation-building.<sup>243</sup> He defied hierarchies through inserting his Peronism as a substitution to “the patria as the embodiment of the Argentine cultural spirit,” and through trying to “fuse the middle class with the masses.”<sup>244</sup>

However disturbing Peronism and its social justice rhetoric was to the middle class and those who benefited from the privileges of belonging to the oligarchy, several intellectuals and writers alike welcomed its ideas, seeing it as relevant to ensure an “upward transformation of the lower classes both in status and material wellbeing to eliminate the gap between the working and the middle class.”<sup>245</sup> This, however, does not deny the fact that Peronism failed in its reformist project and was equally accused of unjustified violence against those who seemed to disagree with its new policies. As one of the emerging critical voices of the period and one who has always stood in opposition to injustice and violence, Gambaro used her dramatic space to react to Peronism’s repressive approach towards literary production and free speech at a time when some, for example, of Beckett’s plays, were banned from staging due to their relevance to shed light on Argentina of the 60s and 70s.

Peronism’s failure to work out its social justice plans ushered in successive decades of struggles over power with groups ascending to the presidency and others overturning them. Oligarchy ruled over again and again with the frequent exercise of violence, and the situation remained as such until a military junta, through a coup, succeeded in taking over control. The junta opened the door to a decade of repression and violence which came to be known as the

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<sup>242</sup> MacLachlan, *Argentina: What Went Wrong*, 116.

<sup>243</sup> MacLachlan, 115.

<sup>244</sup> MacLachlan, 116.

<sup>245</sup> MacLachlan, 116.

*Guerra sucia* or the Dirty War from 1976 till 1983 during which a campaign of national reorganization was waged. In an attempt to ‘deperonise’ the country, the proceso leaders constructed a social narrative where suspicions over treachery and plotting against the state became popular, secretly kidnapping those who were thought of as the enemies of the state. censorship over writing and publication, the jailing of intellectuals and students, among other repressive measures, became effective silencing tools at the hands of the governing junta.

To further extend the implementation and efficacy of its new strategies, the state resorted to the “system of the disappearing people” as the new “chosen method of repression.”<sup>246</sup> This new way of silencing the threats supposedly coming from a secret ‘other’ became “structured around the clandestine system of detention and disappearance,” better known as “state terrorism.”<sup>247</sup> This ‘state terrorism’ spread in the form of, as Diana Tylor describes, “acts of deliberately orchestrated violence set in motion to destabilize the Argentine society, to divert public attention from the urgent political and economic contradictions facing the country.”<sup>248</sup> With the number of the disappeared (including intellectuals, writers, journalists, theater practitioners, students, pro-Peronists...etc.) escalating, the previously mentioned ‘Las Madres y Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo’ and other anti-state groups started mobilizing to unveil the real ‘perpetrators’ and their mechanisms of victimization and claim the disappearance of their relatives. This grew into an open, nationwide trauma and overt performances of rejection to violence and repression.

Similar in perspective and aim behind the initiation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that we have seen in the section on De Wet, the *Nunca Más* (Never Again) trials during what was perceived as a transitional period after the end of the Dirty War opened the

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<sup>246</sup> Novaro Marcos y Vicente Palermo, “La dictadura militar 1976/1983. Del golpe de Estado a la restauración democrática,” 2003, p.82, quoted in Maria Soledad Catoggio, *The Last Military Dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983): The Mechanism of State Terrorism, Mass Violence and Resistance*, [online].

<sup>247</sup> Marcos and Palermo, “La dictadura militar 1976/1983.”

<sup>248</sup> Tylor, “Theater and Terrorism,” 166.

door to negotiation with the hopes that this step would possibly yield in national reconciliation. The *Nunca mas* reports documented the disappearances and launched an official investigation against the violations committed during the *proceso* years, bringing forth the perpetrators (the military junta and its supporters) for open trials. The organization in charge of this, the *Commission nacional sobre las desaparicion de Personas* (the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), and similar to South Africa's TRC, opened the door for those who wronged, to tell the truth about the killings they committed, and reveal the truth about the fate of hundreds who were lost during the repressive decade. Despite this move towards opening up about the past, Argentinians, especially those who lost relatives to the trauma, refused this initiative, thinking of it as a hypocrite covering for the mistakes of the past. Therefore, the reconciliation of 'victim' (those still witnessing pain and trauma) and 'perpetrator' was viewed as devious and misleading.

Different writers, however, like Gambaro, wanted to transfer this 'difficulty' to reconcile to their texts envisioning, instead, some possibilities as to how 'victim and victimizer', 'individual and state' can come to a point where those with a victimized status can be given voice to speak 'back' and 'loud' against their perpetrators. In *SN*, this takes place through Suki challenging the authority of Oban in a way that teaches her how to love and be humane towards others, and how goodness can deploy the corrupt social ethos of the world she sees outside, or the one conveyed through Oban's, the warrior, words and attitudes. In *LM*, it takes place through Dolores (and those she represents either within the confines of the house or those outside) deciding to 'break her silence' and challenge the authority of her authoritative father or the house's patriarch. However pessimistic the end of the play is (which ends with the murder of Rafael, her lover and tutor, and her mourning his cruel death), she could say what she hid for long and scream against those witnessing the violence in front of them, but insist on keeping silent. Their passivity in front of this atrocity is further satirized when she sees their tears, which

she feels as unreal, improvised, and hypocrite, in the same way, as Gambaro wants to pinpoint, many Argentinians were during the proceso years. Gambaro inveighs against their passivity in the face of trauma, and their silence while hundreds of lives were lost in the regime's detention camps. So being said, the national reconciliation project of the state, which was planned under president Alfonsín, was rejected by people and the civil society, seeing it as a step towards 'self-amnesty' or self-justification, and saw that, under the current circumstances, 'victim/perpetrator' cannot reconcile as if nothing happened.

As pointed out in the previous section, most of Gambaro's dramatic texts were written in the post-proceso era and during the first years of Argentina's transition into a democratic regime. Plays reflective of this period had a clear critical stance against the repressive policies of the regime and its practices which diminished the rights and liberties of individuals, and how they widened the gap between center and periphery, socially speaking, and how marginality and social exclusion became part of the Argentinian daily encounters. Not an exception in this regard, Gambaro's drama is best understood within the power dynamics which molded the Argentinian socio-political scene from the military seizure of power (even though its signs were on the move much earlier) until the approximately late 1980s when the question of how to reconcile the post-trauma Argentinian individual with his traumatized past became an overwhelming question in the Argentinian literary scene.

The events and other developments pertinent to the dictatorial whirlpool found echoes in literature, mainly drama. Gambaro, still, remains the most powerful voice emerging from such a traumatic period with texts exposing both the workings of political power in her country and the passivity of individuals whose reluctance to take action remained one of her most addressed disappointments. How much it responded to the literary currents developing in Europe especially the existential experimentation in philosophy, literature, and the arts, the Argentinian literary discourse maintained its dialogue with the wavering Argentinian socio-political scene.

The military regime and the 1976 coup, the Malvinas War or the Falklands War of 1982, the Dirty War (the Guerra sucia) from 1976 military seizure of power until 1983, and the autocratic repressive policies and the instability they generated at the level of the social fabric determined what was to be discussed in works of literature. Despite censorship and repression, many writers continued to expose state violence, illegitimacy, and autocratic practices which yielded in social ills like marginality, exclusion, trauma and kept distancing the Argentinian individual from his ruling institutions, his environment, his community, from other social classes and his past, memory, and sense of being. The 1970s, therefore, heralded a turnabout in the Argentinian literary scene.

Perceiving it as a “país cuya identidad cultural estaba fuertemente marcada por la presencia militar en el panteón nacional, (*a country whose cultural identity was heavily marked by the military presence in its national pantheon*),<sup>249</sup> Gambaro and several other writers found themselves faced with a long history of trauma to which the Argentinian ordinary citizen was subjected. They found themselves in a chaotic social reality that requires reorganization and reordering. Therefore, many of the plays written and produced during and after the Proceso years were in their very essence questioning government policies and social reality, and were, according to Jean Graham-Jones, in her detailed study about Argentinian drama and literary production under dictatorship, dialogic and dismantling in nature:

In an attempt to understand the immediate history and the individual's complicity in the country's past and future, post-Proceso theater shifted its thematic focus regarding the relation between the individual and society. Split and doubled characters were utilized to embody internal and external conflicts, and the metadramatic technique of role-playing within the role was employed as a means of portraying individual conformism with and co-optation by a corrupt social order. By opening up the dialogic field, these plays participated in a dismantling critique of what Graziano has called the dictatorship's "fascist" binary discourse.<sup>250</sup>

In this quote, Graham-Jones establishes a connection between individual complicity (which Gambaro criticizes as passivity and sees as relevant in creating a ‘corrupt social order’) and the

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<sup>249</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 37.

<sup>250</sup> Jean Graham-Jones, *Exorcising History: Argentine Theater under Dictatorship* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press: 2000), 128.

growing fascist discourse of the repressive state. In many of her plays of the period and in *SN* and *LM* more specifically, Gambaro inveighs against this passivity and emphasizes it through the character of the servant in *SN* and the mother in *LM*. Both characters are seen as a reflection of Argentinians during the most intense years of the dictatorship whose silence in the face of their predicament led to the loss of lives and the disappearance of many others.

The other pathway through which state violence was imagined in the texts of the period is the domestic family context where husband/wife, mother/daughter, and siblings, their interests and desires, become a reflection of the state's way of repressing the voices of its imaginary 'other' amongst the people. Dramatizing state violence and oppression through the lens of family or domestic violence feature the writings of many Argentinian playwrights of the period. This association between state and family forms of violence is characteristic of some other Gambarian texts. In the plays under examination in this research, we get introduced to powerless people and their oppressors enclosed within the confines of the home, where power manifests through both emotional and physical violence reflecting the mechanisms of oppression performed by the state itself at a political national level.

Invoking the family and its power relations as a metaphor for state and nation became much common in many writings of the period. Under state violence, many writers resorted to the family forms of power because of "its liminal nature as both a public and private, and cultural and natural entity."<sup>251</sup> The Family and domestic power dynamics are employed as pathways to imagine the state and its power games against individuals and groups. While in *SN*, we encounter a sequence of events taking place inside a confining Medieval Japanese house with its hierarchies and limitations to freedom, in *LM*, we are made to envision repression from both the inside and the outside through a firmly enclosed family house.

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<sup>251</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 3.

With their plays comprising “a diverse repertoire of styles and genres, ranging from realism, expressionism, sainete, object theatre, and urban intervention,”<sup>252</sup> playwrights during the proceso decade engaged with the politics of memory, post-memory and the alienation they created. In their remarks about the dramatic impulse of post-dictatorial Argentine playwrights, Alicia Aisemberg and Adriana Libonati state that:

Their texts place direct causal logic in a state of crisis; they fracture narration, they present broad self-reflective zones, they separate themselves from the psychological-realist verisimilitude in relation to characters, and they produce an unmasking of their intertextual character. They unbalance their semantics, which produces an increase in ambiguity, behind which appear oblique, obtuse, and multivoiced meanings.<sup>253</sup>

Sharing Gambaro’s concern with issues of denial, repression, and trauma in the Proceso and post-Proceso years, dramatic texts by the previously-mentioned playwrights proved their active and realistic negotiation with Argentina’s troubled history. For instance, Ricardo Monti’s play *Visita* (the Visit, 1977), Roberto Mario Cossa’s plays *La nona* (The Granny, 1977), and *No hay que llorar* (No Need to Cry), many short stories by Luisa Valenzuela share Gambaro’s deconstructive and anti-repression impulse.

Building on what has been discussed earlier, we can say that the story of the nation in Argentina is molded by two opposing narratives; one is central and the other is peripheral. How the nation grew to be perceived especially under the dictatorial regime is one which is constructed by two tales in opposition: one told by a manipulative, repressive, authoritarian, and omniscient regime, and another, peripheral and marginal, coming from the side of the repressed or those who were seen as ‘others’ of the state and its monopolizing discourse. It is against this discrepancy that Gambaro wrote many of her texts. The next chapter sheds light on De Wet’s approach to reconciliation in her two plays, *AG* and *GH*. It examines the way (s) the playwright speculates about reconciliation as a reconciliation with both self and other.

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<sup>252</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 20.

<sup>253</sup> Alicia Aisemberg and Adriana Libonati, “La dramaturgia emergente en Buenos Aires (1990–2000),” in Pellettieri 2000, 77, quoted in Gail A. Bulman, *Staging Words, Performing Worlds: Intertextuality and Nation in Contemporary Latin American Theater* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 122.

## Chapter III

### **Crafting Proximity for the Ontologically Different in De Wet's Post-Apartheid Plays: Self-Other and Self-Reconciliation in *African Gothic* and *Good Heavens***

The attempt to engage with the social order, the presentation of the subject within the South African space on stage, has never been easy.<sup>254</sup>

Doesn't it bother you being an Afrikaner?"

No, I said, and added, "there is almost nothing in my life I can identify with as Afrikanerdom."<sup>255</sup>

In one of his testimonies, the Afrikaner South African lawyer Bram Fischer, who was mostly known for his anti-apartheid activism, and in the concluding session of the Rivonia Trial of 1963 during which he stood for a case in support of Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders, recorded how he grew up on a farm in the company of other Black kids. One thing that made him understand that human beings are the same and that he is equal to his black peers is the color of the blood he saw on the injured forehead of one of his black friends. His surprise at the similarity of the blood's color softens by the fact he has always loved to be among his black friends. His attitude, as he recalls, however, started changing as he joined the student's league when he was asked to shake hands with another black student. Because of the racial mindset that fed his mind and other white Afrikaners, Fischer found it hard to shake hands with a person as unequal and different as the black one. Fischer made it clear that society and its distancing racial laws influenced his attitudes towards other human beings and distorted his sense of humanity. Society, as he kept complaining, made of the black other a threat to a white racial purity, a *swart gevaar* (black peril) which should be both avoided and eliminated. A fact which grew into a national question of belonging and racial propaganda supported by the apartheid segregationist laws until the 1990s systematic attempts at reconciling frictions between the

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<sup>254</sup> Martin Orkin, *Drama and the South African State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1991), 2, quoted in Christopher Heywood, *A History of South African Literature*, 72.

<sup>255</sup> Pumza Fihlani, "Inside South Africa's Whites-only Town of Orania." *BBC News*, Orania, Oct. 2014.

various factions making up the South African nation. Emerging nationhood, however enigmatic as it is still being conceived, that was celebrated with various and competing calls for reconciliation from South Africa's representative ethnicities and religious groups, with different anthems representative of a new South Africa. "'Die Stem van Suid-Afrika' (or The Voice of South Africa, the Afrikaner national anthem)" and "'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika' (or God Bless Africa, the anthem of the African National Congress (ANC))", added to the "izibongo [praises] of izimbongi [praise poets] vying with one another to hail the arrival of the new nation and its leaders."<sup>256</sup> Celebrating the end of the apartheid state through words, poems, dances, and hymns coming from different groups within the newly aspired to rainbow nation created an aura of "unisonance,"<sup>257</sup> the way Benedict Anderson argues about it, and instilled in the different participants, however different in their identities and sense of belonging, that "physical realization of an imagined community"<sup>258</sup> or nation; that one block to which they intend to belong and which they aspire to serve as post-apartheid South African citizens.

Against this long history of exclusion and a desire for reconciliation and dialogue, this chapter investigates the ways the South African playwright De Wet outlines and addresses her vision of reconciliation in a transitional post-apartheid South Africa. De Wet's two plays *GH* and *AG* emphasize the dangers inherent in the Afrikaners' insistence on exclusionist attitudes towards other cultural and ethnic communities in South Africa to maintain cultural purity. The chapter brings to light the way (s) De Wet chose to dig deeper into the psychology of her Afrikaner people through uncovering the truth about the long repressive past ideologies which were maintained in service to the ethnic-nationalist ideals of Afrikanerdom. In support of this research's argument about reconciliation through interrogating culture and breaking down hierarchies and the myths espousing them, this chapter reads De Wet's two plays as a space

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<sup>256</sup> Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa*, 1.

<sup>257</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.

<sup>258</sup> Anderson, 145.

through which she propagates hidden histories about the past, demystifies myths, and presumed racial purity. As there will be an attempt to show how she, in a different tone from her counterpart Afrikaner writers, chose to dramatize about reconciliation through highlighting the past and its atrocities, rather than aligning voice with the TRC's rhetoric about reconciliation which is mostly based on a religious explanation of truth-telling and forgiveness.

Considering that she writes out of a personal impulse, I intend to shed light on her dramas the way she thinks of them as a "primary way of expressing repression in society"<sup>259</sup> with a focus on her plays as effectively participating in addressing both reconciliation and ir-reconciliation (or difficulty of transition into a post-apartheid reality), both personal and cultural, in a presumably pluralistic multicultural post-Apartheid South Africa. To proceed with this, I will draw from both history and theater scholarship, and situate De Wet's dramaturgy and writing philosophy against a long tradition of Afrikaner nationalist discourse and a strict Calvinist Orthodoxy. Discourses whose ideologies about racial superiority, ontological insecurity, and manifest destiny were the driving force behind the creation of the apartheid state and its distancing segregationist policies.

### **1. "To Think Around Corners"<sup>260</sup>: Repressed Domesticity in the Two Plays**

It was in the climate of political uncertainty, the nascent transition to a democratic rule, and the volatile consciousness of a people trapped in their ethnic identity politics that Reza De Wet penned her most accomplished literary works. Even though she writes from an Afrikaner position with characters representing Afrikaner linguistic, racial, and ethnic particularities, De Wet's plays serve as spaces that expose the dangers inherent in the insistence of this racial group on the ethics of "exclusion" in fear of losing cultural purity.<sup>261</sup> She creates dramas that

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<sup>259</sup> Anja Huismans, Juanita Finestone and Reza De Wet, "Anja Huismans and Juanita Finestone Talk to Reza de Wet," *South African Theatre Journal*, 9:1, 1995: 91.

<sup>260</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 13.

<sup>261</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 211.

aim at adjusting cultural resources for the sake of both the 'excluding' and the 'excluded' groups thinking of theater as a place of “transformation and a crucible of mysterious forces.”<sup>262</sup> With the rural Afrikaans milieu and farm life as the most recurring settings in her works, De wet is a taboo breaker and “proved to be able to unnerve and amuse in equal measure while tapping into a dark and richly subversive vein, mining both gold and puss from a festering Afrikaner psyche.”<sup>263</sup>

This section, therefore, aims at highlighting the different aspects of repression and self-stereotyping and claims to domesticity which emerge from both *AG* and *GH*. Claims and myths which had a major role in distancing the Afrikaner individual from the other constituent parts of the South African nation, and against which De Wet directs her criticism through calling for a syncretic form of reconciliation which works through reconciling the Afrikaner identity with its true history and memory the atrocities of which can never be denied. Building on what I explored in the second chapter in terms of the way the Afrikaner nationalist allegory, its ethnic identity rhetoric, its Calvinist ideals, its cultural myths and forms of self-justification, which participated to a large extent in shaping self-molded convictions of racial purity, superiority and distinction, this section aims to spotlight these issues as they prevail through De Wet’s two texts. A particular emphasis will be put on the repression, oppression, punishment, rigid Calvinist ethos, and the isolationism of farm life which, according to De Wet and her contemporaries, alienated and distanced, both socially and ontologically, the Afrikaner people from the realities surrounding them.

Repression, in the context of the two plays and looking at it within the Afrikaner historical and social experience, relates to both the Black majority which was targeted by the segregationist state policies, and to the Afrikaner community which, due to the same

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<sup>262</sup> Rolf Solberg, *South African Theatre in the Melting Pot: Trends and Developments at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grahamstown: Institute for the Study of English in Africa, 2003), 178-179.

<sup>263</sup> Basson, “Introduction,” in De Wet, *Plays Two*, 9.

segregationist laws which were based on distancing the Afrikaner subject from its threatening cultural 'other', had to deal with Orthodox and harsh ethnic-nationalist rhetoric which determined its identity, behavior, language, literary content, school syllabi...etc. This task of distancing Afrikaners was carried out by parents in towns and Free State farms, the Calvinist church, and the state itself. It, therefore, created generations with a heightened fear of exposure and mixing, generations thinking that the tales about the Trek trails of tears, the laager circles, Calvinist community gatherings among other self-fashioned stories about the distinctiveness of the Afrikaner 'nation', are what defines them as South Africans. Distancing, in this sense, led to repression and cultural othering.

Taking place in a "fly-ridden, decaying farmhouse on a Free state farm" with some "remnants of a former grandeur" which serve only as "a reminder of better times,"<sup>264</sup> *AG*, written in Afrikaans as *Diepe Grond* or *Deep Earth* and later translated into English as *African Gothic* in 2005, tells the story of two siblings, Frikkie and Soekie, who have inherited a farmhouse after the sudden and mysterious death of their parents. As the play evolves, however, it is revealed that the parents were the victim of a parenticide for they stood against the incestuous and immorally sexual behavior of their two children. They are portrayed as living in very limited and desperate conditions and taken care of, though being adults, by their Sotho black nanny, Ou Alina (and De Wet herself was brought up by a black nanny). To cover for their financial need and to avoid seeking out in public, the siblings resort to trading many of their belongings to purchase some necessities like toilet paper. Taking a refuge in the house's isolation which keeps them out of public gaze, the siblings lead a dull life, sleep most of the day and spend the whole evening digging and fetching for water to survive the drought afflicting the farm. During their chores, Frikkie and Soekie tell stories and sing, and more frequently,

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<sup>264</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 19.

recall and reenact the personas of their parents, and especially their mother, scolding them for one 'sin' or another, like the following reenactment:

*Frikkie:* But Ma was coming down the passage. Creeping quietly. And even in our sleep...we could feel her getting closer. And in our dreams, we could see her opening the door...quietly...quietly...because the hinges creaked. I woke up because I heard something, but I thought it must be a mouse...or a cricket. But it was her...coming closer. Creeping softly...very softly. And then she was standing at the foot of the bed...looking at us.

*Sussie:* I woke up because I could feel her eyes...Her eyes...hunting me. She was holding a candle...with a thin, sharp flame.

*(Suddenly, without warning, Sussie assumes the grown-up persona. She becomes rigid, her gaze transfixed on the bed. At first, she addresses an imaginary Sussie lying on the left side and then an imaginary Frikkie on the right.)*

*(Mother's voice loud)* Damnation! You will burn in hell! Yes. Burn in hell! And shame! You have brought shame on our family! (to 'Sussie'). Always so quiet. Always so good. 'Pappie's little doll'. But I should have known! You will be sent away. You will not spend another day near your brother. (to 'Frikkie') And you! Your father will flay you alive! Flay you alive! (Gasping for breath.) You are not my children! No! I have not given birth to such...monstrosities! Spawn of the Devil! How have I sinned? What have I done...to deserve...this? (Own voice.) And...then they locked us up...We stayed there all day. Without any food.

*Frikkie:* Each in our room...Waiting to be punished!<sup>265</sup>

Besides the stories which serve as a reminder of their parents' oppression and punishment, the siblings enacted the incident of the killing of their parents. Another character that becomes part of the incident's enactment was a visitor, a lawyer from Bloemfontein.<sup>266</sup> Grove, the lawyer, is the first visitor to the farm's homestead since the parents' sudden death. He visited the farm to discuss some legal papers on the issue of the siblings' aunt's property on the farm. Grove becomes the target of the siblings' attention and their most possible subject of sacrifice; a sacrifice they had to make to cleanse their sins and blood crime. Grove is portrayed to be tormented both physically and psychologically before being exposed to death towards the end of the play. *AG* is usually approached for its dark aura and the fact that it touches upon such themes as "incest, patricide, and the oppressive force of Afrikaner Calvinist morality."<sup>267</sup> In the introduction to the play, Basson draws the picture of what De Wet intends to do in this play:

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<sup>265</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 67-68.

<sup>266</sup> In many stories, novels or plays written by Afrikaner writers, Bloemfontein is inserted as a setting due to its historical importance to the Afrikaner people, identity and nationalist discourse, regarded as the heartland of Afrikanerdom.

<sup>267</sup> Temple Hauptfleisch, "The Background: Reza de Wet and the South African Literary Establishment," in *Women, Politics and Performance in South African Theatre Today (Contemporary Theatre Review, 1999)*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman, (vol 9, part 1), 64.

With one perverse and masterly gesture, Reza De Wet killed off the parents who built the world we grew up in and made the brother and sister transgressors of that primal taboo, incest, lovers doomed to re-enact key incidents from their childhood to pass the time. A mainly silent black nanny, who has become both mother and God, watches with great love as her former employer's children self-destruct. Even the order of day and night reversed. Frikkie and Soekie go to sleep at sunrise and rise at sunset to start their work. Where crops used to grow from neatly ploughed furrows, the farm now lies fallow as they burrow through the floor of their room in a futile attempt to strike a source of life-giving water.<sup>268</sup>

And is described by Simon Lewis as “a critical re-examination of Afrikaner myth and mentality...an incestuous, confined parody of '30s Afrikaans drama aimed at forging a national identity.”<sup>269</sup> Simon's comment relates to the fact that *AG* is a parody, reworking of and a reaction to, as perceived by commentators upon its publication, a 1930's collection of children's tales entitled, *Stories van Rivierplaas* by the Afrikaner writer Alba Boucher whose writings were seen as national allegories which supported the Afrikaner claims of racial superiority. These stories, which acquire a different tone in De Wet's play, fictionalize life's serenity on a Free State Farm as seen through the eyes and imagination of an Afrikaner girl. The feeling of innocence and serenity is twisted into a feeling of isolation and loss in De Wet's post-apartheid play where the Afrikaner tale of stability and unity is ironically subverted. Basson reads this play as a reaction to the ironically exaggerated depiction of a typical spotless Afrikaner farm life, a “South African Eden where the parents are good and responsible, the children safe and sound, the black nanny a second mother and friend, the workers smiling and happy and a benevolent God ever-watchful and at home in heaven.”<sup>270</sup> In the play, however harsh, Sussie's and Frikkie's killing of their parents is portrayed as revenge against the repressive manners and laws according to which they were raised and through which the entire house is governed.

In like fashion and with similar tones of repression and punishment, De Wet's second play *GH*, written in Afrikaans as *Op Dees Aarde* and translated later as *Good Heavens*, and taking place “sometime during the first half of the 20th century,”<sup>271</sup> exposes the secret life of an

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<sup>268</sup> Basson, “Introduction,” in De Wet, *Plays Two*, 9.

<sup>269</sup> Simon Lewis, Review of Drama for New South Africa, by David Graver, *Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (May 2000), 2.

<sup>270</sup> Basson, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>271</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 79.

Afrikaner family deliberately excluding itself from other cultural groups and neighboring Afrikaner families in fear of mixing, judgment and exposure. Considered as a post-apartheid play compared to *AG* which was written during the years heading towards the end of the apartheid state, *GH* tells the story of an Afrikaner family, composed of a mother, a son, two older and spinster daughters, and the imaginary figure of a deceased daughter, living on a Free State farm. According to the story, this family was punished by the church community due to an illicit relationship the family's most favorable and beautiful daughter, Baby, had with a visitor, who will later die after she runs away from home due to her moral indiscretion.

The main events of the play turn around the spirit of the dead daughter who returns home once a year for her birthday, eagerly anticipated by the mother and the brother, Tommie, but envied by the two sisters, Sophie and Minnie, whose plotting to get rid of her when she comes for the visit this time, out of jealousy of her youth and beauty, drives the play's central events. The play sets its tone with the evening preparations for the visitation of Baby, the dead daughter, whose visit and discussion with her sisters, brother, and sick mother become central to reveal many of the secrets surrounding the family's life and past, and why it is socially distanced from its social entourage. As the play unfolds, we are made to understand how Baby's illicit transgression, her envied beauty, and youth, her mother's favoritism, the brother's intention to run away like his sister, and several other issues grow to be a reminder of the family's desperate condition against which the two older sisters want to rebel, however immoral the idea of rebellion or change is according to the Afrikaners' mindset and upbringing.

Even though the scenes are "covered by a cracked and well-worn linoleum," the "vestiges of the original pattern-green leaves and red roses can still be discerned."<sup>272</sup> The misery and sense of loss with which the family's life is invested can be seen as an indication that this old order as drawn by the long-inherited Afrikaner racial rhetoric is self-destructing. In the play,

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<sup>272</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 79.

we are told that the family was expelled by the church community due to the illicit behavior of the daughter, and due to which a haunting fear of exposure became part and parcel of the family's everydayness:

*Sophie*: Do you want the people to peer at us? Do you want to be like Ma? Everything wide open! Without shame!

*Minnie*: If only I could get out of here! But where would I go? Only to Hannah Vlok who speaks about puff pastry and insides! Because everywhere there are townspeople who whisper behind their hands and who look at us over their shoulders.<sup>273</sup>

Bringing the two plays together, it is clear that, in the mouths of the play's characters, De Wet pronounces ideas, manners, and scenes that portray the Afrikaner family's fear of exposure and its attachment to a doomed and confining domesticity.

To help transmit the repressive aura of her plays to readers and audiences, De Wet surfs back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its gothic subtleties. She has constantly made associations between Afrikaner culture and the gothic heritage and literary style, especially in terms of the Calvinist influence on culture, belief in sin, desires, and approach to morality, dark secrets, haunted spaces, and ghostly appearances. In both plays, her borrowing from the gothic tradition and the affinity she could perceive between her Afrikaner culture and 19<sup>th</sup>-century dark aura are visible and easy to trace. In *AG*, the constantly appearing ghosts of the parents and their personification by the siblings take a large part in the play, added to the fear of the unknown and the feeling of being chased by their dead parents' desire to punish them for their sins, reveals the gothic underpinnings of De Wet's dramaturgy. In *GH*, obsession with the past and its dark secrets exhume the entire family's fear of judgment, exposure, and divine punishment. The ghostly visitation of the daughter Baby adds to the dark and enigmatic behavior of the whole family. It is through this borrowing from the gothic and its dark images that De Wet dramatizes the repressed life of her Afrikaner characters. Described as "actively participating in forming the drama for a New South Africa by reclaiming and popularizing hidden

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<sup>273</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 79.

histories,”<sup>274</sup> this play is full of satirical scenes that intend to reveal how much disharmonious the lives of those who insist on isolationist and exclusionist attitudes are. It reveals a culture “the mindscapes” it presents “leave viewers confronted by a sense of their subjective awareness of history and value, rather than prescribing an adherence to a group identity.”<sup>275</sup>

An aura of spiritual aridity and loss of faith features the discussions of the characters in both plays. In *AG*, with Grové, the visitor, declaring that he never “expected anything like this” and that he never saw “white people living like this,” De Wet takes us into the desolate life of the two siblings, with a series of reenactments of their deceased parents’ behaviors, attitudes towards different matters and schooling instructions. In every recall of the past, there is that desire to free themselves from what they have heard, seen, or noticed. Their repressed memories give way to their locked secrets, and self-denial whenever a reminder of that past comes in. While they regard their Black nanny as a witness of what took place in the house for decades, and one to whom they are thankful for she acts like a protective shield during hard times, they disclose their memories to each other, or later, to the visiting lawyer whose thoughts about the place and its people are full of surprise and pity. In a gothic aura, we are driven to envision the place through the words of the siblings when they start complaining about the physical aridity to which they were reduced, where there are only “acres and acres, as far as the eye can see, of bone dry, scorched earth,” a place where no “rippling cornfields,” no “sunflowers” or “Mealies,” because, as Frikkie mourns, “nothing grows in the dust.”<sup>276</sup>

What is more revealing of the siblings’ predicament, however, is the way they live a life that alternates between dream and reality. While they are busy with daily chores, however little and messy, the siblings hallucinate about the past, they enact the voice and action of their dead parents, and contemplate a present as desperate and motionless as the “broken tractor with its

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<sup>274</sup> Lewis, *Review of Drama*, 2.

<sup>275</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 184.

<sup>276</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 29.

wheels in the sand,”<sup>277</sup> thrown next door. What further shows how the siblings’ life as one which seems without meaning, in a purgatory between past and present, is the instance when they are asked by the lawyer about the time their parents died. The siblings recall nothing, or they predict not to remember. Frikkie simply replies, “I don’t know”, “sometimes it feels like a long time ago and other times...like yesterday,” while Sussie strangely replies, “I don’t know. The one day they are alive and the next day they are dead.”<sup>278</sup> The only thing they remember is that it happened “just before the drought.”<sup>279</sup>

Mike Prins comments about the way De Wet projects her characters in situations where they seem to be at loss with their surroundings, in an interrupted stream of consciousness, in order to emphasize the doomed domesticity and seclusion to which Afrikaners pulled themselves, as nurtured by their historically held prejudices about ‘purity’. In his study of the intertextuality between De Wet’s *AG* and Alba Bouwer’s 1930’s children’s tales, he relates the siblings’ distorted psyche and unstable, seemingly lost life on this desolate farm to the “social and educational ethos to which Frikkie and Soekie were subjected as children.”<sup>280</sup> The desolation and the chaotic situation are the results of an accumulation of decades of repression to which the siblings were exposed. They both recall how going to church mass was so important to their mother, yet, what Sussie, for example, seems to most remember is the way their mother punished both of them for the least of mistakes, especially in cases where they are made to think that they are drifting from the ‘way of god’ and his teachings. When Grové, the lawyer, shows Sussie his wife’s portrait, and on seeing that she has got “red nails and a red mouth,” she wonders whether this is bad because her mother carefully instructed her that “women who want to improve on God’s work are wicked and damned.”<sup>281</sup> She further exposes:

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<sup>277</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 24.

<sup>278</sup> De Wet, 31.

<sup>279</sup> De Wet, 31.

<sup>280</sup> Mike Prins, “Reza de Wet herlees Alba Bouwer,” *Journal of Literary Studies*, 12:4, (1996): 498.

<sup>281</sup> De Wet, 34.

“when I was naughty, I had to write out the commandments. One thousand times. (*very fast*). Thou shall not kill thy neighbor or his ox or his wife. Honour thy mother and father...”<sup>282</sup>

Therefore, with their farm Afrikaner milieu, both plays are perceived as “exploring the effects of Calvinism on the Afrikaner psyche” and the “farm stories of Afrikaans mythology where hard work and deep-set religious sentiments as well as Afrikaner baasskap\* rule in the midst of paradisiacal innocence.”<sup>283</sup> Historically, the farm and the tales surrounding it played a major role in shaping the Afrikaner mindset according to the spirit of the nation. The farm was the place where “efforts to buttress Afrikaner patriarchalism” take shape “so that a heightened significance should be attached to the acts of the founding fathers, to maintaining their legacy and perpetuating their values.”<sup>284</sup>

The two plays call to mind the scenes of fear, repression, and paranoia we encounter, for example, in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, George Orwell’s *1984* among other stories where Calvinism, puritanism, fear of the unknown and fear of judgment hunt the lives of every family and every individual. In *GH*, Baby starts telling how, in her dreams, and while afar, she constantly visits the family’s house, looking from far at its lights glowing like “shining stars,” at the church and its cross which reaches out to the moon, at the calmness of the streets and their lights, with cats “couching in the shadows.”<sup>285</sup> She describes how, in her dreams, she eagerly wants to get closer to the place and house she always thought she belongs to, to at last approach the window of her mum’s room, to caress it with her breath and fingers under the playfulness of wet nights. In reaction to her, her spinster sisters start addressing her with different names like an “unclean thing,” one who is “lurking in darkness” and “hunting the living.”<sup>286</sup> Baby goes on describing

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<sup>282</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 58.

<sup>283</sup> De Wet, 58.

<sup>284</sup> JM Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Radix: 1988), 88.

<sup>285</sup> De Wet, 116.

<sup>286</sup> De Wet, 116.

the family's house as she sees it in her dreams and as she recalls it the way it once existed; one which is still maintaining its old smell of "linoleum and paraffin," "the black kettle on the stove,"<sup>287</sup> and the lemon trees surrounding it. The sisters, however, especially Minnie who seems to be obedient and submissive to Sophie's ideas among which is the plan to get rid of Baby, keep denying this kind of life or house still exists.

In his insights about the way De Wet brings to her plays the troubled nature of the Afrikaner psyche during the years leading to the abolition of the Apartheid state, Anton Krueger maintains that "the long shadows of the past which haunt the family" are motivated by a "fundamentalistic dogma" and are "sustained by guilt, and the family suffers under the burden of maintaining their repression."<sup>288</sup> This becomes more apparent every time the two sisters complain about how, after the family's favorite daughter run away, a brother who seems detached from what is going on around him, and a mother with her grief over her daughter's death and the isolation she chose to pull herself to, they are the ones who "have been condemned to purgatory."<sup>289</sup> And, while their runaway sister's face is "shinning with pleasure," they are the ones who are "thin and pale and forgotten."<sup>290</sup>

The link between Afrikaners' Calvinist upbringing of their children and how this influenced their understanding of sexuality and moral behavior has been lampooned by many critics. Repression as imposed by the community on its members at large and how the family itself turns into a confining realm of carefully locked desires pushed the later Afrikaner generations into seeking freedom to act and think as they want in the unconscious world of fantasy. In this play, Sophie and Minnie, sharing the highest level of self-denial, fear, and repressed sexuality, nurture a mindset where they view themselves only through the light of darkness and desperation. Both sisters keep reacting to Baby's reminiscence of a calm and

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<sup>287</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 116.

<sup>288</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 210.

<sup>289</sup> De Wet, 117.

<sup>290</sup> De Wet, 117.

serene past which she wants to be part of again, with statements like, “she is the blessed and we are the damned,” “she is not being punished for anything,” “she is the instrument of the dark powers.”<sup>291</sup> And when Minnie starts to show resilience to the plight of her younger sister, Sophie urges her to close her ears and not to listen to Baby’s wickedness, to Baby who “brings darkness into this house! The darkness of doubt!” and tells her, “she will tempt us...into mortal sin! She will let us believe...that goodness will not be rewarded...and that sinfulness will not be condemned!”<sup>292</sup> A similar tone of a repressed desire goes through Sussie’s and Frikkie’s thoughts when Sussie, in her conversation with her brother, recalls how her mother used to carefully school her against the temptation of the flesh and forbids her from improving on God’s work.

In Afrikaner ethno-nationalist discourse, parents, or men and women, were thought of as active participants in linking family and children to the ideals of Afrikanerdom. The domestic was in service to the nationalist project of the nation. While both men and women were expected to fulfill this nationalist duty, Afrikaner mothers, who came to be known as the *Volksmoeders* (or Mothers of the Nation)<sup>293</sup> had specific duties to fulfill, roles which ranged from being ‘racial culture’ propagators, morality teachers and heritage transmitters. Louise Vincent, writing about women and Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s, supports this assertion when she contends that ‘mother of the nation’ ideal, *Voortrekker* women, as they were called during the Great Trek movement and during the wars with the British during which they acted as “teachers, doctors, nurses, and soldiers,”<sup>294</sup> became the new main actors in helping the newly rising nation mold itself. They were perceived as the “mothers of the nation” who can now take part in

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<sup>291</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 117.

<sup>292</sup> De Wet, 116.

<sup>293</sup> Added to *Volksmoeders* (or Mothers of the Nation), in Afrikaner nationalist discourse, women were also labeled the *Nasionale Vrouens* (Nationalist Women) (Vincent 168), with both linked to the nationalist role of Afrikaner women, especially those who were educated and who belonged to the middle class, for they were thought to be more aware of the real objectives and ideals of Afrikanerdom.

<sup>294</sup> Louise Vincent, “Bread and Honour: White Working-Class Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), 64.

disseminating the ethics of true Afrikanerdom on farms and during family gatherings. Because they were thought to have developed traits as being “religious, freedom-loving, honorable, selfless and incorruptible,”<sup>295</sup> they can be trusted with the task of transmitting the spirit of the nation to future generations, and help, therefore, in fulfilling the duty which would be to “physically and morally reproduce the nation.”<sup>296</sup> In both of De Wet’s plays, the role of the mother responds to this description, and as the siblings in both plays keep recalling, their mothers were up to that responsibility of being gatekeepers of morality, straight behavior according to Calvinist ethos, and the importance of one’s racial, ethnic and linguistic identity.

We come to see, then, that it is not only through state segregationist laws that the Afrikaner individual was made to trust only what was communicated through the family and church gatherings, and that parents, especially the mothers, played that role too. As I previously indicated, I am arguing about it as a self-enclosed repressed and repressive domesticity because of the interplay of the nationalistic and domestic in the Afrikaner family life. Life on farms and enclosed church communities meant, according to the mindset prevailing at the time, cultural purity, faithfulness to the true mission of Afrikanerdom, morality, and decent behavior, while urban settings meant a potential threat and vulnerability towards “Anglicization,” and the racially, ethnically and linguistically mixed city life.<sup>297</sup>

As such, this *Volksmoeders* ideal emerges so clearly from De Wet’s two texts. Sussie and Frikkie in *AG* and the two older sisters in *GH* are portrayed to be constantly schooled about how an Afrikaner house life should be. Thereby, moral transgressions (like the siblings’ incest and Baby’s escape with a stranger and pregnancy) are harshly judged by the entire community, and due to which both families are condemned to everlasting seclusion; seclusion from the community which is conceived as the basis of their nationalist project where unity of purpose

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<sup>295</sup> Vincent, “Bread and Honour,” 64.

<sup>296</sup> Vincent, 64.

<sup>297</sup> Vincent, 67.

and effort are important. Repression, in this sense and as I try to see it through a close reading of the two plays, is generated by harsh family conduct which favored service to the nationalist ideal over family stability and harmony. In the plays, we live through the impacts of this isolationism which grows more alienating after the death of the real upholders of Afrikaner Calvinist morality in the family, the parents.

Writing about how the domestic was a tool at the hands of nationalist groups and leaders, Marijke du Toit forwards a similar argument to the previous one in her study on how the domesticity of Afrikaner nationalism manifested itself, arguing about the “importance of an idealized notion of motherhood for Afrikaner nationalism,” further pointing out that “wives rather than their husbands were first to internalize an Afrikaner identity by reading Afrikaans books and magazines.”<sup>298</sup> Du Toit asserts that religious ideology, which is at the heart of the Afrikaner nationalist discourse, didn’t change in its perception of women’s expected role within the rising idea of the nation where its “idealized vision of motherhood”<sup>299</sup> remains linked to how much these mothers can maintain the image of the nation and its unity right from the home, through continuous teaching and instruction.

Afrikaners tended to see themselves and their predicament through the biblical tales about the Israelites as the chosen people of God, as the purest in blood and race, but ones who were enslaved in Egypt to flee later, under the protective gaze of God, and create land for themselves in Israel. To see this tale through the eyes of the self-molded Afrikaner nation, their journey stands in them escaping the oppression of the British, being forced into concentration camps and tortured, to, at last, be able to settle down and secure a safe homeland, that which translated into the apartheid state.<sup>300</sup> Fleeing oppression through creating an imaginary nation or

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<sup>298</sup> Marijke du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: Volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904-1929,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Mar., 2003): 156.

<sup>299</sup> Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism,” 164.

<sup>300</sup> Phil van Schalkwyk, “From Laager to Lager,” 215.

community fostered the Afrikaners' belief in the need to self-enclose, to keep distance from all that can cause harm or inflict any bad influence.

“Because of their supposed holiness and purity, Afrikaners traditionally have a great fear of bad “influences”, of things and people believed to be strange/foreign to the Afrikaans national character, of things that they perceive as evil or demonic.”<sup>301</sup> In reaction to this, De Wet wants to show that the presumed serenity on isolated farms, presided over by Calvinist norms is but an illusion, a make-belief of a people trapped in their self-constructed realities. This illusion played a role in alienating the Afrikaner communities from the true realities evolving around them, from the true cycle of history which connected them to other ethnic groups within one social South African fabric. It goes in line with the attitude of many in the newly formed South Africa who were not in harmony with any overstatements towards the activities or policies of the TRC. Many thought that the soundness of reconciliation along the line of truth telling, which is responding to a long history of interracial oppression and exclusion and having most impact on identity and its formation, should be questioned. They thought of it as a support to allusion and alienation more than being of service to the truth project as advocated by the TRC.

Historically, there was always a clear association between early Trekker rigid Calvinist ideals and the Afrikaner's cultural or ethnic isolation. Within the apartheid structure, a religious discourse based on the beliefs of the first founders of the Afrikaner nation heightened people's belief in the purity of their cultural values and even dictated their exclusionary behavior and their attachment to land and farm life. The repressed life of the siblings, in *AG* for example, and how this repression culminates in them murdering their parents were motivated, as we come to know from the play, by the siblings' incest, and how the parents, especially the mother react to it. The siblings' life, actions, daily chores, speeches, dreams, the way they recall and fantasize

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<sup>301</sup> Phil van Schalkwyk, “From Laager to Lager,” 215.

about the past give us a clear picture as to how life on farms and Calvinist homesteads led to more alienation of Afrikaners, and how molding the house and the domestic after the picture of the nation and its ideals seem to have pestered family ties and parents-children relationship. We come to see how, when the burden of the nation is taken to the home, it starts to work against the internal structures themselves, causing friction and disruption: “many Afrikaners stressed humanity’s divergences, rather than convergences, along with language, religion with race. They considered that many of the world’s problems were caused by interracial mixing, which they interpreted as ignoring God’s will.”<sup>302</sup>

Afrikaners, in this sense, and because they were part of the Apartheid state’s history of victimization, are perceived by other social groups and especially those who were directly targeted by the state’s unjust laws, as ‘perpetrators’ whose vision of nation survived on the traumatization of others. The feeling of guilt and repentance which swept the Afrikaner communities during the hearing sessions and after the end of the apartheid regime engendered a state of alienation. An alienation where the self, which previously acted according to the norms and ideologies of an ethnic collective, is now seeking out a new form of self-identification within a new framework of a self-evasive apologetic trauma. A self which is experiencing a “rupture in the web of meaning”, a “break of order and continuity” in the way Bernhard Giesen theorizes about it in his critical approach to what he proposes as “the trauma of perpetrators” linking his theorization to the Holocaust and how it grew, with time, to be a reference of the “German national identity.”<sup>303</sup> Because “collective consciousness tends to reject perceiving the actions of its community as barbaric at the moment when the barbaric violence occurs,”<sup>304</sup> Afrikaners were faced with a legacy, though they actively took part in its

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<sup>302</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, 265.

<sup>303</sup> Bernhard Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds., Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>304</sup> Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators,” 116.

creation except for the voices which chose to speak against its immoralities, they were, only later, pulled to stand its demeaning ramifications. De Wet's two plays speak to this aura and communicate this difficulty of transition, or reconciliation, of accepting the past and assuming the present, driven as it were by a feeling of denial and a desire to heal without being forced to hold past crimes as a burden. This, therefore, and as the two plays showcase, led to the "social expulsion of the perpetrators,"<sup>305</sup> of Afrikaners in this context, turning them into a despised minority after decades of rule, welfare, and supremacy.

This kind of distancing faced the new generations of the 1990s and the following decades with a double burden. A burden to free themselves from the repressive trajectories of the apartheid state which went hand in hand with the isolationist ethos their parents maintained inside farms and community gatherings, on the one hand, and assume the new identity, one based on dialogue and reconciliation, which the new social realities made urgent and necessary, on the other. In *AG*, Sussie, and Frikkie, as adults, find it rather challenging in an isolated Free State farm community to overcome the long years of oppression and strict life values to which they were exposed, to at last rebel against their condition through a crime as abominable as the killing of their parents. The incident of killing the parents can be seen as a desire to cut off any ties with the source of their misery, in the same fashion that the post-apartheid state Afrikaners wanted to do with the apartheid state itself or the past. A past which acts as a reminder of both an imagined nation which kept molding itself against the desires of the other social groups surrounding it regardless of the outcomes, and a past which became a source of shame and a reminder of human cruelty. In *GH*, it translates in the sisters' plotting to kill their sister, the source of their isolation and predicament, and their attempt to convince her that the kind of life, family, or community she is trying to recall and sensitively describe, with a nostalgic tone and a desire to be part of it again, no longer exists. Convincing her that life inside the house and

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<sup>305</sup> Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators," 135.

connection with the outside world stopped the day she run away, the day she brought the curse of isolation to the house. As such, De Wet sees that one way to liberate her people from the shackles of the past and grant them a possibility to connect to a wider reality beyond their confined lives is to face them with their repressed reality. In an interview, she comments on that saying, “if you repress something it will shatter you. Any deep repression that is never faced will destroy you.”<sup>306</sup>

These are but hints into a world falling apart from within after it remained solid and unshakable for long decades, and a change of condition into a ‘marginalized position’ after univocally taking hold of the center. The upcoming section will dive deeper into De Wet’s envisionings, imaginings, and representations of reconciliation at the backdrop of such repression and self-imposed seclusion. There is an attempt to see how she reverses and subverts old ways and values; how she points out the need to get over feelings of nostalgia and memory which can challenge any possibility towards reconciliation; and how she inserts the Afrikaners’ cultural ‘other’ as a source of authority, as part of her thinking about reconciliation in the two plays.

## **2. Subverting Old Myths and Propagating ‘Hidden Histories’: Reconciliation with Self and Other in *African Gothic* and *Good Heavens***

Building on what I have discussed in the previous section that De Wet’s two plays communicate forms of repression and a traumatized Afrikaner psyche, this section moves to discuss reconciliation and its representations in the two plays. Both plays reflect De Wet’s thoughts about reconciliation, and how excavating the past and its history of victimization is key to understanding how post-Apartheid Afrikaners found themselves at the forefront as both victims and perpetrators, and that accepting themselves as part of a larger and more culturally diverse reality is a prerequisite for reconciliation. While “defining exactly what was meant by

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<sup>306</sup> Huisman, Finestone and De Wet, “Unwilling Champion,” 94.

reconciliation remained one of the great incomplete tasks of the TRC,”<sup>307</sup> as Richard Wilson comments in his study on the politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa, and amidst this “lack of conceptual clarity”<sup>308</sup> about the notion of reconciliation, writers took different paths in addressing how they envision reconciliation. Whereas some authors like, among others, Athol Fugard, J.M. Coetzee, Achmat Dangor, and Nadine Gordimer chose to address it along lines of violence, race, hybridity, and interracial relations which remained as sources of division in post-apartheid South Africa, De Wet, I argue, chose repression and the contradictions of the domestic as tropes to communicate her views about both reconciliation and irreconcilability in a transitional South African society.

Despite the pressure of the healing and truth discourse of the reconciliation commission where both victim and victimizer were pulled into that ‘clearing of the chest’ experience, De Wet seems to argue that understanding the past and the reasons which motivated both the nationalist discourse and crafted the segregationist state itself is essential for her people to move forward, and possibly reconcile with the new realities surrounding them. She achieves this through propagating the truth about the past and through bringing out the accumulation of long decades of repression as reflected in the psychologies and mode of life of her characters into a final dance macabre. Through the analysis of the plays in the context of the realities which informed them, it is clear that reconciliation, according to De Wet’s thinking, with the cultural ‘other’ and transition into a post-apartheid reality cannot be achieved without self-reconciliation. She seems to argue that reconciliation with the ‘self’ (referring here to both the Afrikaner individual and the Afrikaner community at large) is essential to engage with the racial ‘other’.

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<sup>307</sup> Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 101, quoted in Francesca Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 175.

<sup>308</sup> Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC*, 175.

That being said, there is an argument that the playwright imagines reconciliation through, first; laying open or propagating hidden stories of repression which characterized Afrikaner farm life for decades through projecting her characters in moments of revealing the truth about the past as part of healing and catharsis and which goes in line with the TRC's approach to reconciliation. Second; De Wet bridges the racial border as part of her imagining of reconciliation through giving voice and authority to Old Alina, the representative of the cultural 'other' and the previous source of 'danger' according to the Afrikaner ethnonationalism discourse. Keeping in mind that segregation was sustained on isolated farms, and that "Afrikaner identity evolved dialectically by determining its boundaries,"<sup>309</sup> there is a suggestion that De Wet imagines reconciliation through driving her characters into a recognition of their true nature, their true reality and their true historical memory which is full of atrocities, and forms of repression which have to be recalled and re-assessed if moving forward and reconciling can be feasible. Seemingly, De Wet thinks that, if her people are to step up into a true understanding of the repressive legacy of their isolationist tendencies, they might end up succeeding in locating themselves realistically as a constituent part of a larger South African reality.

Third, I hereby argue that, besides the importance of revealing the truth about the past and bridging the racial border, De Wet thinks of reconciliation as 'catharsis' and insists on revealing the irreconcilability in the beliefs and behaviors of her characters. It is part of her understanding that transition from a pre-Apartheid into a post-apartheid reality put into question issues like memory, nostalgia and un/forgetfulness; an obstacle with which Afrikaners had to deal if they are to reconcile with the new dialectics of the 'rainbow nation'. Without the ability to forget, to fantasize about a possible future rather than a lost past and without an equipoise of past and present memories, De Wet seems to tell us, Afrikaners would find it hard to achieve the aspired

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<sup>309</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and the Morality of Nations*, 230.

to reconciliation. Self-reflection rather than denial, the playwright seems to suggest, is a possible trajectory to deal with or come to terms with a traumatic past.

Therefore, De Wet engages in a “de-masking process,” where “fantasy and a disillusionary reality are juxtaposed” with certain “traditional elements of the Afrikaner way of life come under fire.”<sup>310</sup> As I tried demonstrate in the previous section, in both plays, we are introduced into an old order which is now lost and mourned over with few remains which act as a reminder of ‘former grandeur’. We are introduced into a family setting where murder is chosen as punishment and a way to rebel against oppression/repression. We are led into the troubled temper of individuals with a distorted image of their new surrounding realities, characters in a twilight zone who fantasize about the past to escape the present, and who dream of better days that are reluctant to come. Therefore, fantasy, memory, and un/forgetfulness are well in interplay in both plays and which, as I see it, De Wet uses as a point of departure to present her views about reconciliation (or irreconcilability) in a South African transitional setting during which Afrikaners were seen as perpetrators (but ones which emerge as victims of the same system they created). Ones who are now faced with the dilemma of correcting the past and accept their new identity as people who belong to a new emerging social reality that is defining itself according to norms and values which stand in contrast to how the past and its governing ideologies were constructed.

De Wet’s drama is generally described by critics as one falling within the post-apartheid ‘syncretic theater’ tradition. Seeing the new South Africa as one where identity and its construction does not yield to such “a thing as a pure and distinct culture,” but rather one where “the fusion of cultural resources” and a recognition of diversity reign supreme, syncretic writing was seen as pertinent to fictionalize or dramatize about the new South African subject. This syncretization was at the level of both form and content. Before moving to see

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<sup>310</sup> Barbara Bosch, “Powerspeak in Rezá de Wet's “Diepe Grond”,” *South African Theatre Journal*, 9:1, 79-88, 1995: 79.

how De Wet transmits her views about reconciliation in both plays, it is useful at this stage to briefly have a look at the writing style she opted for to reflect upon the new kinds of identities which emerged in the new South Africa. At the level of theatrical mode, De Wet and some other writers experimented with a new form of writing, though to some extent improving on the writing techniques most popular during the '60s and '70s, where a “hybridity” of “African”, “European”, “Eastern” and “American” forms of writing were combined to fashion a form of writing that is better suited to a post-apartheid transitional South Africa.<sup>311</sup> This was viewed as an empowering mode since it brings to a single text a variety of styles which, especially when responding to an issue as complex as identity and its construction, seems to favor diversity over uniformity, and inclusion over exclusion.

De Wet preferred this new mode of writing as, in her plays, we encounter her use of “fairy tales, Christian myths, and references to the work of Poe, the Brontes and obviously Chekov,” as we see how she takes from and mingles “magic realism”, “melodrama”, with fluctuating layers from comedy and tragedy.<sup>312</sup> Added to the existential currents of writing to which she was exposed as I earlier indicated, De Wet took from African spirituality and storytelling embedding them into her “distinctly Afrikaans frame of reference.”<sup>313</sup> These elements emerge from De Wet’s plays where history and myth, dream and reality meet in such a way that ‘dreamscapes’ become a refuge for her characters on their way to figure out their existence and identity amidst a devalued, continuously alienated Afrikaner reality. Therefore, syncretism as a writing mode goes hand in hand with De Wet’s post-apartheid attitudes towards both individuals and society. In terms of theorizing about identity in the new South Africa, however, syncretism was seen as both a “sign of hope” for the future and a “threat” to the existing identity

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<sup>311</sup> Temple Hauptfleisch, “Eventifying Identity: Festivals in South Africa and the Search for Cultural Identity,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 22, Issue 2, May 2006: 182.

<sup>312</sup> Basson, “Introduction,” in De Wet, *Plays Two*, 9-13.

<sup>313</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 185.

structures.<sup>314</sup> Divisions in desires whether to stick to the identities constructed under the repressive and violent years of the apartheid state or respond to the new calls of the healing reconciliatory ideals of the TRC remained a point of contention among critics and social theorists for decades to come. Having said this, I return to the question left in abeyance, namely, in what ways De Wet imagines and represents reconciliation in her two plays and how she views a successful transition into a multicultural post-apartheid reality.

#### **a. Truth Telling as Catharsis**

Going back to the idea of truth-telling as a trajectory to reconciliation, I argue that, even though she imagines reconciliation to be achievable through several other lanes, part of De Wet's vision of reconciliation agrees with the TRC's idea of the importance of truth-telling about the past to achieve reconciliation. In his book, *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation*, James Gibson elucidates that views about the truth telling as reconciliation approach of the TRC were divided. Divided views between many who complained that the TRC's method of handling the democratic transition process would sharpen "racial tensions in the country by exposing the misdeeds of both the Apartheid government and its agents and the liberation forces," and those who rejected the notion that "truth can somehow lead to reconciliation" arguing, instead, that "uncovering the details about the horrific events of the past only embitters people, making them far less likely to be willing to co-exist in a new democratic regime."<sup>315</sup> The TRC's insistence on the importance of revealing the truth through public confessions and hearings finds echoes in both of De Wet's texts; however different is the writer's perspective of how reconciliation can take place. The following exchange between the sisters Sophie and Minnie and their sister Baby in *GH* reveals how an overloaded past starts to speak for itself in the mouth of the characters and how reflective their conversation is of the

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<sup>314</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 176.

<sup>315</sup> James Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation* (Cape Town: Russel Sage Foundation, 2004), 2.

general understanding of the importance of “revealing what is hidden”, “saying the truth” to release one from pain and the trauma of the past:

*Sophie:* (sighs deeply.) You don’t seem...to understand. Now...how should I explain? The truth is Baby...*you need to be released. Released from all your pain and suffering. And then you’ll be free...to go away from this place. And never to return.*

*Baby:* I don’t want that!

*Sophie:* That’s only...*because you’ve been blinded by your own wickedness.*

(Minnie starts crying.)

Because...*you’ve not repented.*

(Minnie starts sobbing loudly.)

Because *you’ve not asked for forgiveness!*

*Minnie:* (Bursting out.) Your wickedness!

*Sophie:* Be quiet Minnie! Be quiet.

*Minnie:* I won’t be quiet! I won’t! *For twelve years I had to keep quiet...and I can’t anymore!*<sup>316</sup>

While Sophie is trying to stop her sister from shouting for fear to reveal what she herself is trying to hide along with the whole conversation, Minnie comes to the point where she starts releasing what made her burst out in anger:

*Minnie:* If I only think...of this life...if I only think...*for twelve years...no one ever visiting us...except Hannah Vlok...For twelve years, we could never leave this house!*

*Sophie:* Forgive her Baby. Since her ovaries were removed, she became easily overwrought.

*Minnie:* Only to church...*where the people move away when we sit down.*<sup>317</sup>

While Sophie keeps asking Minnie to stop pouring out what happened during the twelve years after Baby’s incident and her death and/or disappearance (as the real cause of Baby’s death is not revealed throughout the play), Minnie goes on complaining: “or to the shop ...where the people fall quiet when we come in. And all because of you,”<sup>318</sup> referring to Baby. The scenes of the play move to reveal deeper corners of the family’s past and how it impacted the psychology and plight of everyone in the family, with varying degrees of remorse. What is revealed throughout the text, however, has to be taken collectively to understand what kind of a doomed self/socially imposed domesticity is like. To understand how De Wet’s approach of dramatizing the present through excavating the past; through revealing hidden histories, and demystifying or subverting the social myths that informed the Afrikaner people’s identity

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<sup>316</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 115. (Emphasis added).

<sup>317</sup> De Wet, 115. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>318</sup> De Wet, 116.

becomes clear when the series of confessions and testimonies are motivated by the visit of the dead daughter/sister. A visit which played with and caressed the calm and still waters of the past. “However painful, the experiences, the wounds of the past” are entrenched in people’s collective consciousness, “they must not be allowed to fester,” argues Desmond Tutu, “they must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured upon them so they can heal.”<sup>319</sup>

In *AG*, a play perceived as one which “clearly overturned every single rule and moral principle that upheld society,”<sup>320</sup> releasing the past and its trauma can be seen through the incident when, while they are expecting the lawyer, Sussie decides to open a box which the siblings have kept in secrecy. A trauma (both that which is caused by the parents towards their children and the crime which is committed by the children to get rid of their source of repression) deepened by the siblings’ fear to have it revealed to the visitor (for old Alina has already been a witness of the different atrocities in the farmhouse but favors to keep silent: “I know many fings.<sup>321</sup> Many, maaany fings. But I not say.”<sup>322</sup>). While Frikkie insists in fear that the box should not be opened, Sussie sees no trouble in opening it again for she wants to find something she can wear to receive the visitor:

*Sussie:* Ja! Ja...in here...look! (*Opens chest.*)

*Frikkie:* (Running forward and banging the lid closed.) *Don’t do that! Never open that!*

*Sussie:* But what must I wear...? (...)

*Frikkie:* If you open that...something terrible will happen.

*Sussie:* Let’s just open it...and see. Please. Just a little bit and then we’ll see.

*Frikkie:* just don’t blame me, that’s all.

(*Sussie opens the lid cautiously.*)

*Sussie:* See! Just old clothes. Nothing to be frightened of.

(*Starts rummaging through the old clothes.*)

*Frikkie:* (Approaches and then turns away.) I can smell them.

*Sussie:* It’s not so bad.

*Frikkie:* It’s getting stronger! The whole room...stinks of them.

(*Frikkie opens the window and leans out.*)<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Quoted in Faith Kent, *Troubled Writing: Cultural Responses to Trauma in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cardiff, 2008), 48.

<sup>320</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 9.

<sup>321</sup> This can be read as Alina’s way of pronouncing the word ‘things’, influenced by her Sotho tongue.

<sup>322</sup> De Wet, 24.

<sup>323</sup> De Wet, 25. (Emphasis added.)

The lid above shelters the secrets which the siblings were trying to hide, secrets that testify to the killing of their parents and the smell of the crime coming out of the parents' clothes. Amid this unveiling of a hurtful past, Sussie recalls another version of this past too the way Baby does in *GH* where she feels nostalgic to a time during which the house was full of people; a time during which they "sat on the front steps and listened to the grown-ups in the dining room," when "the cups and the teaspoons sounded like little bells...", "the starched tablecloth...and all the shining silver things..."<sup>324</sup>

Every time a reminder of the repressive traumas of the past emerges from the characters' reminiscences of details colored with hardly understood murmurs (a feature much prominent in both plays), the speeches get interrupted with expressions that speak to the future and the importance to get over the past. In *GH*, and after the sisters recall the incident when their sister run from the house and how they are deposed by the entire community for it, the mother intervenes with words like: "I don't want to dwell on the past," addressing the siblings. "All that is gone and doesn't matter anymore."<sup>325</sup> This hope for the future is interrupted by the mother's acknowledgment (something she didn't spell out for a long time) that she was pleased that Baby escaped from the house, praising her bravery instead: "When she left, I went to the window and looked out...and I thought, 'My little girl, yes my little girl. Run...run away. Away from the thick walls...the watchful eyes...the cold cellar with the blocks of ice.'"<sup>326</sup> Here is an implicit assertion/confession on the part of the mother that the world her runaway daughter and the entire family were part of is as confining as it is the moment these final thoughts of the mother are shared, in the present. And while Sophie's attitude is that "it's no use dwelling on the past," and that the family has to "make the best of it,"<sup>327</sup> the contradiction and the inability to get over the past emerge when we know that the sisters (Minnie and Sophie) secretly plan to

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<sup>324</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 26.

<sup>325</sup> De Wet, 97.

<sup>326</sup> De Wet, 97.

<sup>327</sup> De Wet, 95.

get rid of their sister when she comes for a visit this time, for this year's birthday. Just like the siblings in *AG* who commit a parenticide to get rid of what they think as the source of their pain in a way to get over their traumatized past, the sisters think that by getting rid of Baby; that reminder of their dark past, they and the family would at last set free from a life of purgatory, hiding, fear, secrecy and one which has for more than a decade been trapped between "the church and the mortuary."<sup>328</sup>

So, one might argue that De Wet's view of reconciliation, however part of it agrees with the general objective of the TRC in terms of confessing wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness, works through a different and more forward, ground shaking path. she envisions the importance of reconciling the Afrikaner identity with its true past which is full of myths, lies, and falsifications about racial superiority, and the divine mission of civilizing the African Hamitic, which served, according to De Wet, nothing more than alienating the Afrikaner psyche its possibility to connect/be part of the newly envisioned South Africa. As I pointed out in the previous sections, because De Wet chose to write back to her culture unveiling the past and its repressive ideologies, especially on the generation which was faced with the realities of the transition and call for reconciliation, she had to lay open 'hidden histories' and 'subvert old myths' about an idyllic life; one which is modeled after an idea of a nation which survived through excluding the 'other'. And I hereby agree with the cultural materialist Jonathan Goldberg when he, similar to Sinfield's and Williams' view that dominant discourses and ideologies create the conditions of their own dismantling, observes that "dominant discourses allow their subversion precisely because hegemonic control is an impossible dream, a self-deluding fantasy."<sup>329</sup> Indeed, the Afrikaner state's dream of creating a culturally pure nation according to the ideals of Afrikanerdom and according to the whims of its founding fathers,

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<sup>328</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 87.

<sup>329</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, "Speculations: *Macbeth* and Source," in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 244-247, quoted in Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 48.

slowly stimulated the conditions of its own destruction. A destruction through its separatist and repressive policies which influenced both its main actors (Afrikaner families and communities) and the racial 'other' whose presence shaped a threat to the 'ontological security' and survival of Afrikaner hegemony. Per se, it is possible to suggest that De Wet (like a number of other anti-apartheid writers) rebelled in her own way against the 'self-deluding' discourse of the Apartheid state through subverting its foundational myths, and propagating its hidden histories of repression. She has accomplished this through her characters who have rebelled in their own particular ways, as I earlier explained, against the sources of their pain and constant victimization.

#### **b. Reconciliation between 'Reflective' and 'Restorative' Nostalgia**

In the transitional period into a new democratic reality, South African writers took different paths concerning how they perceived transition into a 'multicultural reality' or as one of the slogans of the TRC says 'unity in diversity' and how they treated this advocated for 'rainbow nation' idea. As I earlier demonstrated, opposed to writers, both Whites and Blacks, who saw it more useful to use their aesthetic spaces to channel more possibilities towards reconciliation, syncretism, and reciprocity in the aftermath of long decades of repression and violence, other writers gave primacy to the past speaking of a lost Eden and a kind of society over which their forefathers reigned, unchallenged. So, while some texts tried to dismantle and disturb the idyllic image usually associated with farm life and the ethnomania supporting it like Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004), Lisa Fugard's *Skinner's Drift* (2006), and texts by De Wet among others, texts like Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1993) and Jo-Anne Richards's *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996) give way to more nostalgic and restorative desires towards the past and its identity types.

This last category of texts is the one which De Wet seems to be satirizing, the way she did with the children's tale I previously mentioned, for the restorative tones they disseminate while

the intensity of emotions about how to deal with the mistakes of the past was at the heart of South African sociopolitical debate. These texts were seen as untimely and provocative in the sense that more reconciliatory and culturally adjustive themes were needed to assist people, whether victims or perpetrators, make sense of their unrelenting present. The nostalgic content which emerges from this second category of texts is generally portrayed through characterization; characters are portrayed as longing for a distant past during which they enjoyed the privileges of a 'segregated' 'white owned' social landscape and their tormented psyches at watching a swiftly changing new South Africa, with the previously excluded social 'other', claiming space again.

In an attempt to see how De Wet explains the difficulty of reconciliation or transition because her characters are trapped in conflicting feelings related to fantasy and memory (something she sees important to deal with and get over if reconciliation is to take place), I will revisit Svetlana Boym's reflections about various types of nostalgias which tend to obstruct people's move into future realities, especially in contexts where traumatic histories persevere. In her analysis of the different types of nostalgia that feature individual and cultural behavior during periods of rupture and transition in her study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002), Boym points out two forms of nostalgia that seem to intersect, yet at some point, might be mutually exclusive. She distinguishes between *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia. According to Boym's analysis, restorative nostalgia holds within it the seeds of both inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion in the sense that it creates a feeling of belonging to a 'collective' which defines the 'self' especially when that 'collective identity was constructed in response to 'nationalist' or 'fundamentalist' ideals, therefore, creating symbols and myths to give this identity shape and meaning. This form of nostalgia, according to Boym, can turn into an obstacle to, for example, community harmony, reconciliation, or national building as it develops exclusionary xenophobic attitudes towards the 'other' due to its self-inclusive understanding of self and

group identity. Regarding this, Boym sees that “the stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented.”<sup>330</sup> Restoration in this sense appeals to a kind of present where the past is retrieved and continues to be seen of a utilitarian value for the present and one which returns even in a more perfect image to that which prevailed in the past.

The second form of nostalgia, *reflective* nostalgia, emerges like the restorative one in contexts where a rupture with the past takes place. A rupture especially in the aftermath of traumas and in relation to more complex questions of nation-building, and democratization like the South African (and the Argentinian) case. In such cases, questions about amnesty, retribution, and forgiveness are seen as a resolution to trauma, with individuals, mainly those who enjoyed certain privileges in the past, trying to make sense of the present. Reflective nostalgia is invested with flexible feelings about the past, a recognition/understanding where “mediation on history and passage” is more common than a desire for “recovery”, and one which is more concerned about “individual and cultural memory.”<sup>331</sup> Those with a reflective nostalgia cherish “shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space,” and recognize that “home is in ruins”, something which “drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future.”<sup>332</sup>

In analyzing De Wet’s plays in line with Boym’s views on nostalgia, we see that her characters are portrayed to be trapped between the two forms of nostalgia mentioned above. While they think reflectively and critically about repression and the strict life norms to which they were exposed, they are also nostalgic about the past and their desire to restore it to escape the deadliness of the present. While in *AG* this manifests in the siblings’ desire to restore the farm life which they lost to desolation or to restore their murdered parents in an image different

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<sup>330</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 42.

<sup>331</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

<sup>332</sup> Boym, 50.

from the one they were used to in the past, in *GH*, restorative nostalgia manifests when Baby keeps recalling the long serene past in which she wants to be part of again, while she is constantly reminded that this kind of world no longer exists. The feelings of regret with which each character speaks about the past, however resentful at the repressive side of it, make it clear why reconciliation for De Wet centers around people's ability to reconcile their memories of the past with their present realities because being entombed in the past, both nostalgically and regretfully, puts an obstacle to reconciliation. So, reconciliation is not only a matter of truth and confession (even though De Wet put her characters in situations where they had to reveal the mysteries of the past as I indicated in the previous section) but transcends into a consideration of how Afrikaners can overcome their racial prejudices and perception of self and group identity to be able to accept themselves as equal players within a new different reality. Through pointing out the interplay of both forms of nostalgia in her characters, De Wet intends to show that part of her characters' (Afrikaners') plight is their inability to overcome their nostalgic feelings about a past which they lost forever and it is, therefore, an obstacle to reconciliation.

In *GH*, before the final scene which announces the death of the mother and before the ghostly visitation of Baby to act as a persona in the play, De Wet takes us into the details of an interesting dream seen by the mother the other night and who starts sharing it with the kids. The mother's dream speaks of a "very big hand" coming "out of the clouds," a "big hand with long white fingers," with her trying hard to "hide between the blossoms."<sup>333</sup> The voice emerging from the sky addresses the mother saying: "why are you wasting time Magdalena Susarah Roos? What on earth are you doing there? Time to go to heaven!"<sup>334</sup> After the voice fades away, the mother notices how "the thin, pale fingers were curled around the tree and tried to pull it out by the roots."<sup>335</sup> Seeing the mother's dream and the kids' frightened reaction to it in

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<sup>333</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 98.

<sup>334</sup> De Wet, 98.

<sup>335</sup> De Wet, 99.

light of the characters' fluctuating thoughts between past and present, reality and fantasy, and within the transitional context the pressures and uncertainties of which De Wet is trying to visualize through the play, the big hand which tries to "pull the tree out by the roots" can be read as a metaphorical reference to the new post-apartheid realities which Afrikaners were afraid to penetrate. A new society which, according to many like the mother, is alienating Afrikaners from their past, roots, identity and being, uprooting them from who they are, as racially and culturally distinct people.

Again, just like *AG*, this unveiling of the past and its secrets reflects how nostalgia, memory, and an irresistible attachment to the past drive De Wet's characters into situations where they seem at odds with the present and its swiftly changing contours. While Minnie can't help thinking of her "trousseau linen...yellowing and forgotten in the chest,"<sup>336</sup> (just like the way she thinks of herself as pale and forgotten), Sophie, sharing her temper, repeatedly advises her to "forget"<sup>337</sup> and to "make peace with that."<sup>338</sup> While their house sheltered their secrets and protected them from the community and church which cursed and abandoned them, it is also one which is, as seen by Minnie, "airless," "smells of bedpans...and carbolic soup...and embalming fluid,"<sup>339</sup> for it was closed to the outer gaze for more than a decade. What acts sometimes as a reminder of better times in the eyes of each member of the family turns also into a memory about repression. This predicament, De Wet thinks of it, stands as an obstacle to a successful reconciliation with the self; a successful transition into both a different mindset and a different social order which necessitates a more inclusive attitude towards the present. Saying so, De Wet seems to argue that part of reconciliation lies in both the ability and desire to overcome feelings of regret and nostalgia.

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<sup>336</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 101.

<sup>337</sup> De Wet, 102

<sup>338</sup> De Wet, 101.

<sup>339</sup> De Wet, 103.

Linked to these feelings of nostalgia and regret with which the playwright invests her characters is the issue of memory and the inability to forget the past. To further comprehend the dynamics of reconciliation the way De wet thinks of it, I would briefly relate Paul Ricoeur's views on memory and forgetting to the difficulty of transition or reconciliation as communicated through the two plays. In his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur historicizes his approach to the study of memory and emphasizes its various aspects especially in societies where there is a desire/struggle to move from a traumatic or repressive past into the present. The inability to 'forget' which is stirred by memory, conflicting nostalgias and a sense of belonging into a specific past identity in the two plays resonates with Ricoeur's views about memory, and forgetting. In Ricoeur's theorization, memory acts as "the womb of history," since it remains "the guardian of the entire problem of the representative relation of the present to the past," and that it defines itself "as a struggle against forgetting."<sup>340</sup> As such, reconciliation or the ability to connect past and present, according to Ricoeur, becomes challenging when "the traces of the past" remain, with the "historical guilt" and "moral guilt" constituting an obstacle.<sup>341</sup> It also becomes difficult because "conflicts among individual memory, collective memory, and historical memory,"<sup>342</sup> usually intersect and impose equal pressure on both individuals and societies.

Seeing this through both plays, I suggest that De Wet's characters linger between a "duty to remember" (which is labelled as 'ethical memory' according to Ricoeur's theorization) and an inability to get over the past (a 'blocked memory'). The irreconcilability of both memories is much emphasized in both plays if we read them outside the domestic contours of the texts themselves, and relate them to more complex theorizations about identity, reconciliation, and forgetting. In the following exchange, and after a series of remarks by Grové as to how Frikkie

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<sup>340</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 87/413.

<sup>341</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 414-436.

<sup>342</sup> Ricoeur, 87.

and his sister can survive the aridity of the farm especially that they (since the sudden death of their parents) refrained from seeking out in the community, Frikkie insists on the importance of the farm not only as a means of survival but a place that gives meaning to his entire existence:

*Grové:* One of these days, it's going to collapse, mark my words. Yes, that's what will happen to you: dead and buried under the rubble.

(Frikkie stares at him without reacting)

And out there! There is nothing out there! Nothing! I've never seen...such desolation.

*Frikkie:* (softly and ominously.) Let me tell you something. *I sit here and wait for the rain. The rain doesn't come. But I wait here. Here- where I belong. I wait and I wait and every day the sun burns deeper into me. It burns through my skin. It burns through my flesh. It burns...into my bones. But...I wait. (Loudly.) And I'll always be here! Because this is my place!!*<sup>343</sup>

As emphasized by Frikkie here, the siblings' strong attachment to the farm and its rituals (even though the house itself acts as a reminder of the past and its atrocities including the siblings' own crime) is a reflection of the kind of a doomed domesticity to which the Afrikaner families were exposed during the most intense years of the Apartheid regime. Yet, a domesticity which sheltered them from the danger of mingling with a larger (threatening) reality. De Wet seems to both question and imagine the achievability of reconciliation while her society's desire to 'reconcile' is still struggling against 'forgetting' (which remains an obstacle to change from one state to another; as 'an endless abyss' in Ricoeur's description). While at the beginning of the play Frikkie responds to Grove's question, "and when the drought is broken, do you think you could make a fresh start?" with "the rain won't come,"<sup>344</sup> he later changes tone and starts expressing his attachment to the farm which defines him and is his for a long time saying: "I sit here and I wait for the rain...because this is my place!"<sup>345</sup> This oscillation between desperation and hope, that desire for change and transition and those memories which jump in to block this anticipation for better days reflect De Wet's attitudes towards how memory and nostalgia stand on the way of reconciliation. They reflect her views on how overcoming these constant

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<sup>343</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 59. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>344</sup> De Wet, 29.

<sup>345</sup> De Wet, 56.

reminders of the past is essential for reconciliation, both with ‘self’ and with ‘other’ (which can be seen as both the racial ‘other’ and the new realities that the abolition of the apartheid state ushered in).

In her *Mapping Loss*, Shane Graham brings under focus a number of South African writings (both fictional and dramatic) which resorted to the trauma of the past as a source of inspiration emphasizing the ways they remap “collective memory” and strive to “develop new cognitive maps of the post-apartheid”<sup>346</sup> realities. Linking this to how De Wet focuses on issues of memory, nostalgia and regret as exhibited by her characters and the attitudes they uphold within the world of the plays and as manifesting through the issue of repression, I can argue that the playwright invests with the open sores of the traumatic past without “freezing it into ossified formulae that may be easily forgotten precisely because they become so familiar.”<sup>347</sup> It is clear in the way the siblings in *AG* and the two older sisters in *GH* try to release the accumulations of the past (while with avoidance and hesitancy at first) without denying the relevance of their past lives in shaping their present.

### **c. Voicing Ou Alina, the Racial ‘Other’**

Also, the playwright’s vision of reconciliation can be understood through her attempt to violate the racial border which has for long stood as defining feature of different South African identities. This same racial border against which Afrikaners shaped their rhetoric of ‘self’ and ‘nation’. In *AG*, De Wet does so through giving voice and authority to a representative of that ‘racial other’ which is the Black nanny. As I asserted in the previous section, and after the murder of the parents, it is the nanny who observes the troubled psyches of the siblings and soothes their pain while watching them ‘self-destruct.’ For her to become their source of protection and comfort, replacing in a way the role of the parents, is decisive here. Alina can be

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<sup>346</sup> Graham, *Mapping Loss*, 4.

<sup>347</sup> Graham, 4.

seen as a persona inserted in the play to be a source of the true story of the nation, as a voice of reason about what life is really like outside the idyllic domesticity of her masters' children. Watching the children of her murdered employer "self-destruct" is a strong metaphor for the more realistic world which exists outside the confines to which Afrikaner families pulled themselves, because "for her, the stories were not myths, they were true..." and as De Wet herself acknowledges in an interview about her nanny: "and for me, they also existed, of course....she made me realize there are many realities."<sup>348</sup>

Alina is seen by Grové, the visitor, as a danger when he says addressing Frikkie: "she looks...dangerous to me. I wouldn't trust her if I were you."<sup>349</sup> And he even speculates that she is the one who might have murdered the sibling's parents saying: "Statistics show that there is very often an insider who is involved in these brutal murders. They're the ones who supply the information. Who open the doors while everyone is asleep."<sup>350</sup> The siblings, however, and as De Wet did, view her in a different light. They view her as a protector (a point to which I will return in the next section) and see in her words a source of their comfort. The black nanny and her stories or version of reality are a representative of the cultural "other" against which Afrikaners molded their identity either during the Apartheid state years or through the slow, little understood, move towards the reconciliatory ethics of the TRC. When the cultural 'other' acts as a reminder of a different world and as a judgment, this might entail that reconciliation, whether the way De Wet imagines it or the way the TRC theorized about it, equally rests upon the belief that without an inclusive attitude towards and reconciliation with the 'other', self-reconciliation and catharsis are hard to achieve. And as Zygmunt argues about the ethical relationship between 'self' and 'other' where the other can help define and even shape the self,

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<sup>348</sup> Solberg, *South African Theatre in the Melting Pot*, 183, quoted in Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 206.

<sup>349</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 32.

<sup>350</sup> De Wet, 32.

the siblings in *AG* see in the attitudes and behaviors of the racial ‘other’ within the borders of their house as a reflection of their locked secrets and troubled memories.

De Wet chose to rather concentrate on the issue of repression through a deeper investment with her characters’ psyches and the complexities of domestic life on isolated farm communities, making of the racial ‘other’ as a witness to this self-destruction. In so doing, she seems to be critical of how the TRC gave importance to investigating forms of violence (mostly physical) as worked out on the South African body while sidestepping the crucial question of racial division which was central to the functioning of the Apartheid regime. By inserting Old Alina as a voice of comfort in the absence of the original owners of the household and the upholders of its norms (the parents), the playwright seems to argue that a proper transition into the aspired to ‘rainbow nation’ needs to consider the role of the racial other or interracial dialogue in shaping the ‘self’ because, “the persistence of a racist mind-set and racial inequalities in the “new” South Africa can partly be attributed to the avoidance of a necessary and proper dialogue on the issues of race and racism during the life of the TRC.”<sup>351</sup> In concurrence with this statement, Madeleine Fullard observes: “by circumscribing the borders of its mandate to violence directed at the body, and by implicitly casting race/racism and politics as two separate domains, the TRC effectively sidestepped the traumatic issues and trenchant debates around race, racism and the legacy of apartheid.”<sup>352</sup>

For De Wet, reconciliation can take place when the self, which is distanced historically and racially, comes to terms with its true reality, and when this same self can view its existence within a larger heterogeneous scene, where ethnomania and mythic derivations to define one’s identity and being would prove pointless. De Wet’s call for a syncretic form of identity and amalgamation as a condition for reconciliation (an attitude shared by several other Afrikaner

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<sup>351</sup> Nahla Valji, “Race and Reconciliation in Post-TRC South Africa” (2004), in Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC*, 76.

<sup>352</sup> Madeleine Fullard, “Dis-placing Race: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Interpretations of Violence” (2004), in Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC*, 76.

writers) shapes a clear break away from the beliefs propagated for, as I earlier demonstrated, by the different nationalist movements, leaders, and writers whose novels, plays and short stories shared in the task of creating an unspoiled “Die Afrikaanse gedagte.”<sup>353</sup> Even the title of the play *African Gothic*, for example, which appeared at first as *Deep Grond* (or ground) is, according to Mike Prins, an allusion to the old Afrikaans idiom, “Still waters, deep ground. Below, the devil turns around.”<sup>354</sup> This reflects the idea that beyond the seemingly harmonious quiet life of different Afrikaner families, harsh and exclusive orthodox Calvinist laws dictate the life of those who adhere to them.

So, as I have assumed at the outset of this section, De Wet envisions reconciliation through several ways and one of them is that she, in both plays, embarks on a reversal of order/condition: a transition from an Afrikaner version of reality as defined by Afrikaner values and racial prejudices into a world of disdain and regret, a world of nostalgia trapped within the contradictions of the past and an inability/lack of readiness to face the present. In both plays, we can easily see how reminiscences of the past color the speeches of individuals in both texts. In both plays, De Wet subverts the ideals of the Afrikaner nation and racial discourse from within through investing the domestic sphere and its upholders (especially the mothers of the nation) with images and scenes which are in clear contradiction with the image of the nation which its architects tried to instill in their fellow people for a long time. Something which says that separating people on isolated farm communities and drawing the line between them and their threatening racial others had a counter effect and that it precipitated the fall of the nation and the destruction of this ‘imagined community’ from within.

Besides pushing her characters to unveil the past and its secrets, De Wet reconciles her characters as both victims and perpetrators. Victims of their ethnonationalism repressive discourse, and perpetrators for the atrocities they committed against other ethnic minorities in

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<sup>353</sup> Afrikaans, it translates as “Afrikaner thought or identity” in English.

<sup>354</sup> Prins, “Reza de Wet herlees Alba Bouwer,” 496.

South Africa, and mainly against a Black majority under the Apartheid state. While I see it emerging from both plays, one may wonder how this can take place and to what extent recognizing oneself as a perpetrator can lead to acceptance, catharsis, and finally, reconciliation. The complexity of the issue of identity construction in South Africa after the abolition of the Apartheid state makes it compelling to answer such a question, and as the chapter's first epigraph acknowledges, dealing or talking about the subject in South Africa is never easy because many factors have to be considered which go beyond the TRC's vision of reconciliation and democratic transition.

Going back to the idea of in what way De Wet gives voice to the 'other' as part of her thinking about reconciliation, some argue that even after the end of the white apartheid state, the Afrikaners' willingness to accept the new multicultural realities which bring them in close contact with different 'others' is still ambivalent. Drawing on Victor Turner's notion of 'liminality' and linking it to Afrikaner identity politics after 1994 and even to their status nowadays, Kees van der Waal, in an article published in 2011, thinks that "their ideas and practices around a sense of a primordial identity *continue to have an influence in the present*, although they are also being questioned and transformed by new experiences and pressures, especially amongst Afrikaners of a younger generation."<sup>355</sup> Kees also establishes a relationship between the sense of victimhood with which Afrikaners defined themselves after the end of the old regime with the way early century Boer and Afrikaner tales about their subjugation at the hands of the English and Black Africa. He further asserts: "the liminality experienced by many early 20th century white Afrikaans-speakers, which tended to take on the character of victimhood, especially after the South African War, has re-emerged in a similar liminalised victimhood after the transition to democracy, a century later."<sup>356</sup> While De Wet inserts Ou Alina

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<sup>355</sup> Kees (C. S.) van der Waal, "A return to Turner: Liminalities in Afrikaner Identity Politics after Apartheid," *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 34:1-2, 2011: 66. (Emphasis added).

<sup>356</sup> Van der Waal, "A return to Turner," 67.

as a representative of the cultural ‘other’ within the Afrikaner farm house, we could witness how Alina is viewed differently by different characters; seen as a shield against danger which they can’t manage without by the siblings but as a source of danger by the lawyer who makes the speculation that she has murdered the parents even before getting to know her. This resonates with the sense of ‘liminality’ in Afrikaner identity politics which Kees refers to.

### **3. Self-enclosed Domesticity and Reconciliation: An Appraisal**

De wet ends both plays in a way that throws the reader into uncertainty about what is going on or what happened to the characters. In *AG*, despite Sussie’s aspirations that their predicament will change one day, and that their desolate farm will be injected with life again, the ending scene of the play seems in no way leading to this aspired to kind of life. After murdering their visitor the way they did with their parents, and with Frikkie’s clothes covered in blood, Sussie tries to calm her brother down by evoking a different future; a future when “the water will come out,” streaming through the house, water to “wash everything away,” even their “Ma’s church dress” and their “Pa’s shoes, “the feather pillows...and the bed...everything.”<sup>357</sup> A time when “big plants will grow...with broad leaves,” with “flowers everywhere, turning like windmills.”<sup>358</sup> So, after we share the siblings this moment of imagining a different and more promising life, De Wet pulls the reader again into the reality of this farmhouse through the fear-driven aura of the closing scene. Leading up to the final scene of the play, Alina, the caretaker, switches off the lights, and while silence fills up the place, the two siblings start bursting out in fear, as they always do when the night falls. In the meanwhile, they start hearing people trying hard to get into the house (or they are just imagining as they are used to), but we are in a way made to think that these people are the sibling’s dead parents:

*Sussie:* Can you hear them, Boetie?

*Frikkie:* Sussie...you mustn’t.

*Sussie:* They want to get in. They want me to open the windows and doors. They can’t do it by themselves.

*Frikkie:* But you...won’t.

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<sup>357</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 71.

<sup>358</sup> De Wet, 71.

Sussie: No, I won't. I promise.

(*Short silence*)

What do you think, Boetie? Are they still the same...or have they changed?

Frikkie: Maybe they've changed. Maybe they're...different now.

(*Short silence*)

Sussie: They're waiting for us, Boetie. Out there. (*She sits up*). They are waiting for us.

(*Frikkie gives a choking sob*).<sup>359</sup>

Or is one to interpret this strange unexpected visitation as the new norms and realities which came to the scene with the abolition of the apartheid state and the imposition of a new social order? Can it be seen as a fear of the Afrikaner community to meet the unknown and the Black nanny as the new South Africa? The siblings start calling Alina for help and protection, they beg not to be left alone or abandoned. Alina responds to their request not in words, but with a song in her Sotho tongue, to help her master's children sleep in peace: "*eou eou eou eou/eou eou eou/Tula tula tula/Tula tula tula/Etse ke etela/Mphorane ngoana' me/ka fumana ngoana mokhotse/A kula ngoana me/...etc.*"<sup>360</sup> In *GH*, the final scene closes while preparations for the burial of the mother are going on with Tommie portrayed to be instructed by the ghostly spirit of Baby to sit at the open window for it is the best place where he can talk to his recently deceased mother. In a gloomy aura, Tommie promises his mother to stay that straight and obedient son the way she raised him, and that he will keep cleaning his bed and polishing his shoes, and never put the candle light down for her to be able to visit him and help him sleep at night.

One may see in these scenes an indication that the world left behind at the closing of both plays is one reflective of the same world and reality De Wet is responding to in her dramaturgy. She is reacting to a transitional South African nation, in a critical moment of its history, driven mostly by the ethnic propensities of its many cultural groups, with each uncertain yet of what to make of the newly emerging South Africa. Frikkie and Sussie are portrayed in a fearful mood

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<sup>359</sup> De Wet, *Plays Two*, 72.

<sup>360</sup> In the play, the playwright provides the translation in English: "the words of the lullaby are in Sotho and mean: "you are lost children who have wandered far away from home. Now you are in a strange place. But I will look after you and comfort you." De Wet, 73.

and expecting a visitation from which they seek protection; something which can be interpreted to refer to the anxieties with which Afrikaners received the post-apartheid world, the legacy of which they can't expect, apart from the hurtful past crimes and injustices which keep hunting their present.

The last song of Black Alina in *AG* is both ironic and tight-fitting when we read it in the context of transitional reality in South Africa during the first years of the abolition of the Apartheid regime. When she declares: "you are lost children who have wandered far away from home," it can be read to be reflective of the entire Afrikaner community which, due to the way it was molded according to exclusive and segregationist ethnomania and racial discourse, wandered far away from the culturally diverse realities surrounding it. It was equally alienated from its true historical path which brings it closer to other related histories in a heterogeneous social fabric.

The analysis of both plays in view of the context to which they respond clearly shows that Afrikaners, the way De Wet approaches them, were drawn into a plight plagued by contradiction. A contradiction between an identity they stuck to, supported and defended for two centuries, and later upheld during the apartheid decades, and this same Afrikaner identity which grew into a source of collective trauma. An identity which the new Afrikaner generations wanted to get over due to the feelings of blame, shame and guilt the end of the apartheid state and the new move into democracy spawned. Uriel describes this clashing predicament which is well expressed by the characters in both plays, set against the new ambiguous realities and challenges brought by the abolition of the apartheid state and the demise of Afrikaner power, as an "ontological insecurity" and a "re-deepening of the 'abyss within'" in relation to the double struggle the Afrikaner community faced during the transitional period: the struggle to maintain its "collective political future" and to "tend the scars of the past."<sup>361</sup> The way the

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<sup>361</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, 295.

siblings in *AG* and the sisters in *GH* oscillate between past and present in fractured series of desires, nostalgias and aspirations reveals how the “abyss within” stands, as the playwright seems to tell us, in the face of reconciliation as planned for by the architects of the new government. The new challenges are seen as a “cultural trauma” through which Afrikaners have to “confront emotions of loss, guilt, shame, and (injured pride).”<sup>362</sup> The ‘ontological insecurity’ Uriel speaks about generated a number of questions as to how reconciliation is to be imagined while the past needs to be yet addressed. He asks:

This fundamental ontological insecurity nourished numerous, moral quandaries: Is Afrikaner identity essentially positive? Should the community feel shame or pride in their founding past? Should they preserve their heritage (for better or for worse) or try to bury it? Without any chance of gaining power, would they not be better off relinquishing their ethnic uniqueness and assimilating into the patriotic civil array of the new South Africa?”<sup>363</sup>

Whether the community should feel ‘shame or pride in their founding past’ as the quote asserts runs through the lives of De Wet’s characters in both plays. While they act with dissent against the ways of the community and the resultant seclusion they had to endure, they equally live through many nostalgic moments where the past emerges as a source of unity and protection from other more undesirable surroundings. As such, as “once-exalted people” but “now fallen from grace”, transition into a new reality where multiculturalism is acknowledged as a virtue and where the previously marginalized cultural ‘other’ is now recognized as equal in rights and privileges, Afrikaners perceived themselves as the “Rainbow Nation’s new underclass.”<sup>364</sup>

This indecision about how the past can be overcome so that post-apartheid Afrikaners can successfully reconcile with the ‘cultural other’ afflicts even the new discourse put forward by many Afrikaner intellectuals who, according to Andrew Nash in his article “The New Politics of Afrikaans,” oscillate between a renewed defence of Afrikaans language and culture on the one hand, and a desire to join in the effort of theorizing about the possibility to engage in support

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<sup>362</sup> Jacob R. Boersema, *Afrikaner, Nevertheless: Stigma, Shame & the Sociology of Cultural Trauma* (PhD Dissertation. University of Amsterdam: Amsterdam, 2013), 404.

<sup>363</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, 295-296.

<sup>364</sup> Lewis, *Performing Whiteness in the Postcolony*, 3.

of the aspirations of the previously ‘oppressed majority’, on the other. Such a normative standing, as explained by Nash, faces the post-apartheid Afrikaner community with an ethical question; whether or not there is a will to hold responsibility for the wrongs of the past. He asserts:

The new politics of Afrikaans seeks to continue a tradition of dissident solidarity which never treated the individual as responsible for their own acts alone, but always sought to recognize their co-responsibility for the processes which formed them. But it relies on that tradition only insofar as it applies to the apartheid past. In the context of the new South Africa, *the defence of Afrikaans more often rests on denying the possibility of collective responsibility for the past, or on the view that "what is past is done with"*. Those defending Afrikaans have not done so by seeking, as Afrikaners, *to develop a common project with other South Africans, nor do they seem set to do so.*<sup>365</sup>

The resolution lies, in Nash’s assessment, in a “simple normative choice,” which guarantees that “the "sins of the fathers" would not be visited upon the generations to come.”<sup>366</sup> In relation to this normative choice, Nash quotes Breytenbach (one of the central figures in the postapartheid Afrikaner dissent) who thinks that reconciliation or resolution lies in “the dialectic between the "own" and the larger togetherness;” “a process of becoming other which is illuminated, step by step, by an awareness of differences.”<sup>367</sup> Saying so, one might wonder whether assuming moral responsibility for the past, and being illuminated or ‘aware of the differences’ can help in leading to the reconciliation different parties have called for after the abolition of the Apartheid regime. How are postapartheid Afrikaner generations to assimilate and reconcile if we know, as Uriel emphasizes, that the demise of “apartheid resolved Afrikanerdom’s political crisis of legitimacy,” yet it “engendered an Afrikaner identity crisis of legitimacy.”<sup>368</sup>

Related to Uriel’s and Nash’s arguments is Annie Coombes who, in her study of the legacy of apartheid on the identity and consciousness of South Africans and the trauma which the pressure of transition generated, comments that any engagement with the new realities or any theorization about reconciliation has to consider how the apartheid regime gave rise to a

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<sup>365</sup> Andrew Nash, “The New Politics of Afrikaans,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 19 (4), 2000: 348, (Emphasis added).

<sup>366</sup> Nash, “The New Politics of Afrikaans,” 346.

<sup>367</sup> Breytenbach, B. *Dog heart* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1998), 186, quoted in Nash, 358.

<sup>368</sup> Uriel, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations*, 295.

“dissolution of [the] self,”<sup>369</sup> and that “any effort at building a more inclusive society must redress that dissolution.”<sup>370</sup> Coombes’ statement resonates with how the playwright views reconciliation as one which has to start with the self, its accumulated traumas, past repression, and the way it continues to be trapped within an interplay of mixed feelings of nostalgia, memory, and an inability to forget. This “dissolution of the self” and alienation with ‘self’ and ‘other’ are well addressed in the two plays with stories of repression and the long claims to racial superiority and idyllic domesticity which become a testimony to this need for recollection and redress if ‘building this inclusive reality’ can be possible. Therefore, reconciliation with self (as a reference to Afrikaners reconciling themselves with their past, trauma, and history) rests upon the following beliefs: the ability to reveal the truth and speak openly about the past and its secrets or traumas, and an ability to get over restorative nostalgic memories about this same past.

Even though she inserts Old Alina, in *AG*, as a representative of the cultural ‘other’ and one who knows more about the world outside, De Wet seems to suggest that reconciliation with this cultural or racial ‘other’ (as aimed at by the TRC and the newly emerging nation) can work only when the ‘self’ reconciles with its past, memory and the fact that the perpetration of the past should act as a lesson for the future. Both forms of reconciliation (with the one which works from within the Afrikaner culture itself emerging more clearly from De Wet’s both plays) are mutually inclusive and one necessitates the presence of the other as a close reading of the two plays clearly shows.

In reading both plays, one ends up with questions more than answers or resolutions. De Wet doesn’t provide any resolution at the end of the plays and this might indicate that reconciliation, as she thinks of it, remains trapped within the confines of the consciousness of

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<sup>369</sup> AE Coombes, *History After Apartheid* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9, quoted in Lisa Propst, “Reconciliation and the “Self-in-community” in Post-transitional South African Fiction,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 1-15, 2015: 1.

<sup>370</sup> Propst, “Reconciliation and the “Self-in-community,”” 1.

her characters, as part of their dreams and desires but rarely as an actual engagement with the 'other' or recognition of oneself as 'perpetrator'. Images of the siblings digging for water on a dry farm, waiting for the rain, and the constant dreams the different characters hold about the future (however fluctuating with memories and nostalgias about the past and its atrocities) can reflect De Wet's envisioning of a new order where old ways, and manners, nurtured by both religion and a strong ethnomania, are replaced by new, more inclusive farm life (or South Africa). The siblings waiting for the rain after the long period of drought may also be read as a longing for something new, for a new time where land can give its riches again.

Revealing the truth about the self or one's past was seen as essential to first achieve remittal, and then to be able to reconcile with the Other. This seems to be De Wet's attitude in the plays examined where she highlights her Afrikaner characters in positions where they are forced to lay open the wrongs of the past and the complexities of the ethnic identity which defined them for decades. She sees this as a step towards reconciliation with the other when the self can understand its faults and legacy of destruction. She seems to argue that reconciliation in the new South Africa can't be achieved outside the contours of the self or the South African subject which has to be able to come to terms with his or her true reality. As earlier indicated, De Wet's vision of reconciliation has drifted from the propositions of the TRC which confined it to the trajectories of confession and truth telling. As the two plays demonstrate, truth telling and unveiling the past and its secrets help the siblings and the two sisters release their repressed/long hidden emotions, yet, fear of opening up to the wider realities surrounding their farm life and their entrenchment in the past have to be overcome if reconciliation is to take place. Desmond Tutu, the religious voice of the reconciliation committee, kept reminding his fellow South Africans that "being reconciled" is not about:

pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in

the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing.<sup>371</sup>

Similar to Tutu's statement that reconciliation starts with exposing the 'awfulness' and 'abuse' that individuals or groups commit against each other, or the abuses through which the apartheid regime maintained its domination is Williams' argument that for a hegemonic system (especially one which is in the phase of falling apart) to deal with its faults, it has to mend its past lapses. As such, according to Williams, it might be able to give way to a new form of society or social order, through "a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in actual societies and actual situations in the past," but experiences which are still relevant and significant in the present for "they represent areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize."<sup>372</sup>

For De Wet, reconciliation doesn't start only with forgiveness, confession, and telling the truth publicly, but one which can take place when the "perpetrator" or "wrongdoer" can recognize the contradictions and falsifications which dictate his or her behavior for a long time. When he or she can fathom the outcomes of hatred and exclusion of the 'other' when this same self understands that the tales and myths about superiority and distinctiveness are but justifications put forward due to an idyllic aspiration towards self-maintenance. Reflective of this attitude is Antjie Krog who, in her famous *The Country of My Skull*, seen as both a personal narrative and a record of the TRC's actions, reiterates the complexities surrounding this act of truth-telling with herself seen as one of those who should confess, who are expected to help in the process of reconciling victim and perpetrator. As a White Afrikaner holding the pain of the country's bloody past and human rights violations, Krog communicates the psychology of the

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<sup>371</sup> Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 206.

<sup>372</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 123-124.

nation and the process of ‘aspired to’ reconciliation which she sees as “the lesser of two evils”<sup>373</sup>:

The dictionary definitions of “reconciliation” have an underlay of restoration, of reestablishing things in their original state. The Oxford says: “to make friendly again after an estrangement; make resigned; harmonize; make compatible, able to coexist.” The Afrikaans dictionary says: “weer tot vriendskap bring [to restore to friendship], accept; not resist”...but in this country, there is nothing to go back to, no previous state or relationship one would wish to restore. In these stark circumstances, “reconciliation” does not even seem like the right word, but rather “conciliation.”<sup>374</sup>

In this quote, Krog’s hopeless attitude towards how reconciliation was theorized about and undertaken in the post abolition period is reflective of an entire society’s inability to handle the new policies brought about by the first democratic government and its “truth telling and forgiveness” rhetoric. A rhetoric which circumvented the importance of dealing with the past and its atrocities especially in the absence of, and as Krog observes, a “previous state or relationship one would wish to restore.”

In retrospect, through highlighting the difficulty of her characters in dealing with issues of memory and nostalgia and the ambivalence with which they seem to deal with the present, De Wet points out the necessity to get over these issues as a step towards reconciliation. De Wet presents her views about reconciliation while emphasizing rather the opposite scenario by driving us into the details of its un-achievability (feelings of irreconcilability). This resonates with an earlier suggestion I made that reconciliation is about imagining an alternative reality rather than a construction of one in works of literature. De Wet seems to say that one way to reconciliation is for people to ‘heal’ and be able and engage in a new reality, but they should not block the memory from contemplating the mistakes of the past. And as Ricoeur tersely argues about it, between a ‘blocked’ and ‘obligated’ memory’, between the attempt to forget which lingers between ‘traces’ of the past and their ‘effacement’, there is that ‘return to the self’ or its absence. The interplay of these manifestations of memory and forgetting in both of De

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<sup>373</sup> Antjie Krog, *The country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 152.

<sup>374</sup> Krog, *The Country of My Skull*, 153.

Wet's plays testifies to her awareness of the need to consider them if we are to think about how reconciliation can be imagined in post-apartheid South Africa. In *AG*, the siblings, in unexpected interrupted moments, in flashbacks and present reminiscences, move back and forth between a repressed past, yet with elements of it which are worth keeping and retrieving, and a present/future which is full of desperation, yet one which holds some signs of hope according to how the siblings view the farm and its importance to their being and identity. In hindsight, I agree with Krueger who, in his study of many plays produced in the aftermath of the apartheid regime seeing them as experiments in freedom, asserts that the "*double hope for integration with Africa and liberation from repression* sustains Reza de Wet's oeuvre, making her one of the most stimulating playwrights of the post-apartheid era."<sup>375</sup>

If De Wet visualizes reconciliation as one which has to take place with both the 'self' and the 'other, the next chapter considers how Karnad imagines it through the trajectory of inter-caste, and inter-religious compromise and reconciliation.

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<sup>375</sup> Krueger, *Experiments in Freedom*, 220. (Emphasis added).

## Chapter IV

### **"One's Caste is Like One's Home-meant for One's Self and One's Family": Scenographies of Intra/Inter-religious and Inter-caste Reconciliation in Girish Karnad's Plays *Talé Danda* and *Bali: The Sacrifice***

If you truly desire your own welfare,  
Then in unison, O children of Bharat,  
Keep chanting with one voice,  
Hindi Hindu Hindustan.<sup>376</sup>

In Karnataka, as elsewhere in India, a man has only to open his mouth and his speech will give away his caste, his geographical origins, even his economic status.<sup>377</sup>

India is God's chosen land; it's the abode of Hindus.<sup>378</sup>

This chapter looks at Girish Karnad's plays as aesthetic spaces where he addresses his vision of reconciliation against the background of a violent and exclusive contemporary Indian history. While Karnad's dramaturgy has been studied mainly for its epic and mythical aspects, I herewith suggest that the playwright envisions a different Indian society where the issues which motivated the Mandal Mandir conflicts, for instance, and many other similar traumatic events can be obviated through understanding, dialogue and reconciliation. I approach Karnad's plays as texts where different religious and caste groups can come to terms with their wrong approach towards the religious, ethnic, or communal other.

Previous scholarship about Karnad's dramaturgy settled on questioning his corpus as both a modernist and postcolonial investigation of individual and social relationships. Some approaches took a more holistic look at many of his texts locating them historically and mythically to establish an association between premodern and postcolonial Indian life (Mukherjee Tutun, 2006), extrapolating the existential bent emerging from his plays (Pandey Poonam, 2010), or deconstructing the mythical world of his plays (Nada Kumar, 2003).<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Chandra, *The Oppressive Present*, 141.

<sup>377</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 3.

<sup>378</sup> Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 45.

<sup>379</sup> Full bibliographical details are provided in the bibliography.

Others examined themes like, among others, national identity, sexuality, the gender question in Indian culture, domestic violence and political leadership. Some of these critical insights into Karnad's drama reflect upon the issue of caste and religious extremism and how Karnad invests with tradition and local knowledge to take part in political debates. Yet, no critical research is devoted to the idea that Karnad, in some of his plays and especially those written in the aftermath of ethno-religious and inter-caste disruption, envisions an 'alternative order' to the chaotic situation to which Indian life was reduced over the pace of long decades since independence. And even though some critics make the statement that Karnad is critical of the Hindutva ideology and its extremist and ethnically driven discourse, they don't hint in any way to the fact that literature, according to Karnad, is a space to both criticize and imagine alternative forms of societies. Literature as a space to remind his society that the violent present and the ideologies underlying it are both a legacy of 'insufficiently questioned past', and continuous denial of a present political elite whose discourse on nationalism, belonging and democratic ethos is still very much mobilized by narrow ethnic and religious loyalties.

My approach to Karnad's dramaturgy in this dissertation, then, tries to fill this gap by arguing that Karnad, as far the texts in this study are concerned, writes back to his culture, society, the political elite, and its ethno-religious discourse, to imagine new possibilities towards reconciliation or dialogue. He does so, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, though first; locating his texts within larger debates on caste and religious fundamentalism in modern India. Second; through defying the hierarchies and othering ideologies emerging from the contexts informing his two plays, and how they are supported by both myth and ideology which divided Indians into fit and unfit socially and religiously. Third; through showcasing how, to get his ideas about reconciliation out, he invests the worlds of his plays with characters in a compromising mood and creates characters who can speak to truth and reason; characters who assume a liminal context between religiously extreme philosophies. The chapter argues that

Karnad's plays forward a reconciliatory ethic which is made clear through employing/deconstructing past mythologies, tales, memory, and histories to reflect upon an Indian contemporary social scene; a scene which seems in no way different from the inter-religious and intra-religiously divided Medieval, pre-modern or early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian society. Karnad thinks that reconciliation can take place only when knowledge and truth replace the religiously and personally motivated social discourse. He sees a possibility of different groups coming to terms with different historical truths when they consider the historical particularities and circumstances which brought them together. For Karnad, investing with the diverse religious and sectarian nature of Indian society is a possible, more compromising, trajectory to maintain social harmony. He thinks that considering India as a socially homogenous, mainly Hindu, nation would deprive the country of its rich diverse history, and a means to deny many disadvantaged groups their Indianness.

The two chosen plays, *TD* and *BS*, offset scenes of inter/intra-religious confrontation where religious/caste fundamentalism emerges as a conflicting factor in society and where each section is attached to its beliefs with little room left for reconciliation or compromise. With very clear references to Indian history and mythology, the playwright focuses on the drastic results of religious orthodoxy in a multi-cultural and heterogeneous country like India. In a country like India, with competing religions and cultures, religious, even though difficult, compromises, Karnad observes, are required and inevitable. Religion and caste are used inter-relatedly in this chapter because caste is thought of by many scholars as an ethnoreligious category that derives its laws and principles from the different laws maintaining the religions themselves, be they institutional, theological, or mythological (i.e., in the forms of invented traditions).

### **1. Reconciliation in *Talé Danda*: Inter-caste/Intra-religious Exclusion and Basava Compromises**

In *The rejection of jati? A poem from the twelfth century*, Basava says:

God, O God, mark my prayer:  
I shall call all devotees of Śiva equal,  
from the Brāhmaṇa at one end  
to the lowest-born man at the other end;  
I shall call all unbelievers equal,  
from the Brāhmaṇa at one end  
to the untouchable at the other end;  
this is what my heart believes!  
In saying this – should I have any doubt,  
be it so small as a sesamum bud,  
O Lord of the Meeting Rivers,  
chop off my nose so that the teeth stick out!<sup>380</sup>

In *TD*, Karnad reenacts the past to reflect upon a contemporary distorted reality. In this play, the playwright “reminds us that the religious and socio-political tensions of Basava's day carry within them the implicit violence of contemporary India.”<sup>381</sup> After going through a detailed reading of the context which informs both plays in the second chapter on casteism and religious fundamentalism, the next sections will delve deeper into exploring how Karnad presents his view of reconciliation, either inter-religious, intra-religious, or inter-caste. First, there is an argument that Karnad communicates his approach to reconciliation through recalling the historical Basava movement with a focus on its social and religious reforms in favor of the lower castes/untouchables and the harsh social divisions to which people are exposed. There would be an emphasis on how the playwright constructs his play around the movement and its revolutionaries as a strategic step towards subverting the ‘unquestioned, blindly followed and unjust’ traditions which regulate the land and its laws. Basava and his Sharannas present the society of their time with alternative views, demystifying and demythologizing the strict social lines which demarcate sects and tribes; social divisions which are/were (since the play enacts a true historical event which took place in 11<sup>th</sup> century India) supported by the Vedas, myths, invented traditions, and royalty. Second, there is an argument that Karnad violates the boundaries between various castes through structuring the play around the issue of an inter-caste marriage by which Basava and his followers try to convince people of the futility of the

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<sup>380</sup> Basava, “God, O God,” quoted in Hirst and Zavos, *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia*, 148-149.

<sup>381</sup> Julia Leslie, “Understanding Basava: History, Hagiography and a Modern Kannada Drama,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 61; Iss. 2, (1998): 228.

rigid caste system they inherited over the ages, however damaging, as we will see, this marriage issue becomes at the end.

Third, I further argue that, added to Basava's reforms and the inter-caste marriage, Karnad gives importance to the issue of language and how Basava insists that leaders and kings should speak to the people in a language they understand, breaking down, therefore, the sacredness and immunity of Sanskrit as the property of the king, his court and religious advisors. For people to be able to converse with their upper-class rulers in a language as common and simple as their social status or caste is a positive step towards, as Karnad, through Basava, sees it, bridging the line between castes, between ruler and ruled, and between various caste/religious communities. Fourth, there will be also an indication that Karnad goes on with his task of subverting old hegemonic structures and hierarchies through using the king's character in a way that contradicts with the actual historical Bijjala; one who was known for violence and repressive policies towards those who were considered a threat to his laws in the kingdom. The play's Bijjala is rather open to change, accepting of difference, and receptive of Basava and his reformist movement. This section, as such, explores Karnad's imaginings of reconciliation in a context where religion and caste play a major role in dividing people, causing traumas, and promoting violence. Karnad's treatment of these issues in this play makes us understand that ancient Kalyan, with its Kshatriya/Brahminic rigid hierarchies, is not different from the religiously/caste-led communal frenzy of post-independence India.

#### **a. Basava, the Sharannas and their *Virashaivism***

The society Karnad portrays in *TD* is one where "one's caste is like one's home meant for one's self and one's family" and where a "cobbler" cannot "rub shoulders with a Brahmin."<sup>382</sup> As earlier mentioned, the events of *TD* take place in the ancient city of Kalyan; a city which is ruled by a caste called *Kshatriyas* who came to power after a rebellion they held against their

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<sup>382</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 23.

rulers. Due to the harsh caste order imposed by the Hindu Orthodox doctrine in the region which is constructed around a mythological discourse, there emerges an anti-Brahminic sectarian reform movement called *Virashaivism*, also known as *Shaivism*, led by the *Sharannas* or *Bhaktas* (i.e.; Lord Shiva devotees) with their apotheosized leader, Basavanna.<sup>383</sup> Inspired by Basavanna's sainthood and devotional ecstasy, this group of devotees, poets, and mystics preach for a casteless society, anti-ritual spirituality, gender equality, social inclusion, and inter-religious tolerance. These *Bhaktas* support marginal groups in society and speak in the name of the downtrodden like peasants and lower castes like the untouchables. In his note to the play, Karnad describes them as follows:

During the two decades ending in AD 1168, in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries, and philosophers. Together they created an age unmatched in the history of Karnataka for its creativity, courageous questioning, and social commitment. Spurning Sanskrit, they talked of God and man in the mother tongue of the common people. They condemned idolatry and temple worship. Indeed, they rejected anything static in favor of the principle of movement and progress in human enterprise. They believed in the equality of sexes and celebrated hard dedicated work. They opposed the caste system, not just in theory but in practice. This last act brought down upon them the wrath of the Orthodox. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed<sup>384</sup>.

As the quote indicates, historically, Basava's movement emerged at a time when social reform or change was needed. Comprising of devotees who belong to different social strata, the movement incites the "wrath of the Orthodox" and, as the upcoming lines will explain, it ends in bloodshed. Regardless of the dramatic culmination of events, however, Basava and his followers have succeeded in shaking peoples' consciousness towards many of the inequalities forced upon them by their political and religious leaders.

One of the play's central issues, one which brings the characters' tragedy at the end and which Basavanna's efforts prove insufficient to prevent, is the issue of a marriage between Kalavati (a Brahmin girl) and Sheelavanta (a Panchama or low caste boy) which, at the end, culminates in the bloody frictions between the Orthodox Hindus, supported by the king's son, and the Sharannas. Commenting about the seemingly impossible marital link (as he expects the

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<sup>383</sup> This reformer and ascetic was known as both Basavanna, or in a short form as Basava.

<sup>384</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 2.

degree of confrontation this inter-caste marriage would entail especially on the boy and the girl), Basavanna says: “the Orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of the varnashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads.”<sup>385</sup> Subsequent doubtful and irritated comments from the bride’s mother and other Sharannas erupt as: “rivers of blood will flow if the marriage takes place,”<sup>386</sup> and “how many more generations have to roll by before a Cobbler marries a Brahmin?”<sup>387</sup>

Despite these views towards how the caste structure intervenes in people’s destinies as a factor of social division, the previously mentioned Hindutva advocate M.S. Golwalkar repeatedly argued that “there is nowhere any instance” that the caste system “hampered the progress or disrupted the unity of society. It, in fact, served as a great bond of social cohesion” and that “even during the past one thousand years when our nation fell before foreign onslaughts, there is no instance on record to show that caste distinctions were at the root of our national disunity.”<sup>388</sup> Speaking positively about casteism and disapproving the role of caste-related prejudices in dividing people and spreading hatred reflects the exclusionary views Hindutva supporters hold either towards the untouchables or outcasts and those whose faith is thought to be foreign to the land of the Hindus.

In that sense and according to the Indian social structure which still maintains most of its traditional features and as Karnad clearly explains through the play, and as pointed out in an earlier section, inter-caste marriages are much criticized while endogamy is imposed as a way of life and a means to preserve the caste system. Endogamy is more established, by law and tradition, compared to exogamy (inter-caste or out of clan marriages), even though amalgamation between neighboring groups was proved to occasionally take place in some

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<sup>385</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 45.

<sup>386</sup> Karnad, 45.

<sup>387</sup> Karnad, 45.

<sup>388</sup> Golwalkar, M.S., *Bunches of Thought* (Bengaluru, India: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana,2000), 98.

Indian regions. As a “self-enclosed unit” which “naturally limits social intercourse,”<sup>389</sup> casteism was always regarded as a preordained structure and a divine dispensation of social organization which has been primordially issued on the land, yet being subject to constant political and communal mobilization.

In the play, while the Sharannas openly support the marriage and push Basavanna to acknowledge the betrothal (whose hesitation is bound by the fears he has about what would happen if the inter-caste marriage is consummated), the Orthodox camp, headed by the king’s son Sovideva and his followers, see in the marriage an assault against old age traditions which regulate the rules of inter-caste behavior. Damodara, a Brahmin priest and one of Sovideva’s companions, makes this clear when he references the Rig Veda<sup>390</sup> addressing Indrani, a courtesan who sees nothing wrong in this marital union. In an exchange between the priest, Indrani (who keeps pointing out how positively Basava’s movement and the Sharanas has changed the plight of many vulnerable social groups like women, the poor, the underrepresented, and the untouchables), and a congregation of other court leaders, we are made to understand how defensive the Brahmins and other upper-caste religious sects are to the caste structure, and how inconceivable to them is the marital link the two families are about to form:

*Indrani:* Honestly, it is beyond me why this little wedding should send the world into hysterics!

*Damodara* (gently, sadly): Indrani, the Rig Veda tells us that the four varnas flowed out of the Primordial Man: the Brahmin from the head, the Shudra from the feet. So, what we have here at this wedding is the desecration of the body of that Purusha. How horrifying! What’s worse, the person behind this crime is not an insolent Shudra or a rebellious untouchable-but a Brahmin, endowed with youth, erudition, eloquence, and intelligence! What perversity drives him to this sacrilege- this profanity?

*Indrani:* but the *sharannas* have done so much to the downtrodden and the destitute. For women like us.

*Damodara* (incensed): (...) *One’s caste is like one’s home, meant for one’s self and one’s family.* It is shaped to one’s needs, one’s comforts, one’s traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. *And even those said to be its victims have embraced its logic of inequality.*<sup>391</sup>

Distressed by the fact that it is a Brahmin (with the different privileges this status might infer on its people) who is the leader of the movement, Damodara’s tone in this exchange speaks of

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<sup>389</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (Patrika Publications, 1916), 06.

<sup>390</sup> One of the five sacred texts in Hinduism.

<sup>391</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 62-63. (Emphasis added).

a solidly established tradition which should not be challenged. A tradition, according to its architects and upholders, which regulates the land. Relying on the Hindu sacred texts to justify the caste structure is emphasized by the playwright on several other occasions throughout the play; something which the BJP, as earlier explained, equally does to advance its Hindutva ideology which nurtures on the acrimonies it creates between different ethnicities, religious communities, and classes in contemporary India. So, as the exchange reveals, even the person responsible for kindling Sovideva's desire for violence against Basava and his followers is a priest, an exponent of the Vedas. This shows how the playwright touches upon all sections which are directly or indirectly involved in the faith-based and inter-caste conflict in the play, and how, in most cases, political leaders need supporters from the religious camp to reinforce their ideologies.

Therefore, to undermine the caste structure in the land and "to sever the Brahman-imposed tie between birth and occupation, and hence between caste and occupation,"<sup>392</sup> Basava's reformist movement seeks to both reform and replace the old order of society. Replacing an old social order which associates between caste and one's social merit, and one according to which one's caste determines a person's rights and privileges, therefore putting an obstacle in the face of social mobility of lower classes. This new social order is called *Lingayat* or *Jangama*.<sup>393</sup> According to this *Lingayatism* and its *Jangama* social order, caste should not determine one's occupation but his or her skill. This new order which the historical Basava envisioned and put into action in ancient Kalyan (even though it culminated in destruction when opposition from the Orthodox camp grew in intensity) can be reflective of Karnad's vision of reconciliation and the kind of contemporary Indian society he tries to speculate through this play:

Basava rejected one of the roots of the caste order, occupational hierarchy, and, in its place, established the principle of occupational equality through the notion of *kayaka*. The *saranas* hailing from different parts of the land freely chose their occupations, and thus brought about occupational mobility. This made possible a

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<sup>392</sup> Ishwaran Karigoudar, *Speaking of Basava: Lingayat Religion and Culture in South Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992/2019), 92.

<sup>393</sup> *Jangama* (in Kannada) translates into English as mobility, "moving or dynamic."

dynamic (Jangama) social order. Ideologically and institutionally, Basava severed the traditional tie between occupation and caste. Underlying this process was the vision of the individual as a free person, free to choose his occupation. Therefore, Basava and his sarana colleagues proclaimed that one's chosen occupation is kayaka, and kayaka is kailasa. This was an ideal that appealed to the learned as well as the unlettered.<sup>394</sup>

The quote above refers to one of the aspects of Basava's new order which has to do with occupation and how the old social structure puts an obstacle to people's ability to change their condition. This rigid social stratification serves the interests of upper castes and their supportive religious leaders and assures that rebellion does not take place.

Additionally, in the play we are told that Basava and other Sharannas launched an *Auubhava Mantapa* (a spiritual hall for gatherings) which is intended as a social bridge to give a chance to people of different sects, castes, beliefs, men and women to take part in limitless enlightening talks about pure faith, life and the path towards nirvana.<sup>395</sup> According to the caste structure in Kalyan, people belonging to different castes should not share in festivities, read the same religious books, engage in marital relationships, or perform the same jobs. For Basava to bring together people, both illiterate and lettered, Brahmin and untouchable, Kshatriya and Sudra, is seen as rebellious and revolutionary in view of the fact that people in his society are obedient to the rules that govern them and their liberties, despite deprivation and injustice. What is also special about Basavanna and his reformist *Virashaivism* or *Langayatism* is the syncretic character of his initiated Sharanna tradition, an aspect much emphasized by Karnad in the play. The movement is not only a plea for devotion and spiritual engagement wherein its leaders brought different Hindu traditions or creeds together; a step intended to limit the scope of faith-based confrontation among its various factions. This is the case because Brahmanism grew as a challenging sect within Hinduism, fighting for its self-structured (caste-based) superiority; a motif that led Jainism and Buddhism to emerge as separate caste-free doctrines out of the

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<sup>394</sup> Karigoudar, *Speaking of Basava*, 79.

<sup>395</sup> Basavanna's deeds and revolutionary reforms are told in a 13<sup>th</sup> century epic poem entitled *Basava Purana*, first composed by the Telugu language writer Palkuriki Somanatha, then in Kannada to be later translated from Telugu into English by Velchern Narayana Rao and published by Princeton University Press.

original Hindu tradition. As such, inter-religious animosity grew with time with Hinduism taking the lead of trying to bring people back to the original faith.

In the mouth of Basava and his followers, therefore, one can easily trace Karnad's pronouncements against intra-religious violence and ethnic or inter-caste exclusion. Many scenes in the play refer to the desire of Basava and his movement to change the course of events and impact change in favor of those who have been historically denied a voice or thrown to the margins of society as outcasts or low born. Basava's reaction, for instance, to the transgressions committed by his followers against Jains in a neighboring region demonstrates the non-violent approach, mainly dialogue, Basava chose to embrace in carrying out his reformist actions in society. In her article, "Understanding Basava: History, Hagiography and a Modern Kannada Drama," Julia Leslie explains that "Karnad recreated the world of historical Basava in his play *TD* with reference to many details about the movement and its leader, the inter-caste marriage and the uproar it generated at the time, the king's court and its divided inclinations among other elements as having been chronicled in the Lingayat<sup>396</sup> tradition."<sup>397</sup>

Because "the mixing of races (*varnasamkara*) is repeatedly referred to as a threatening phenomenon"<sup>398</sup> by many proponents of the caste structure of Hindu society, Karnad, in *TD*, deploys the Sharannas represented by Basavanna as the voice of reason and as mediators between the various castes and their violent eruptions in the play. As Lord Shiva devotees, they repudiated all ties with whatever caste and chose a path of righteousness. The king and many people of Kalyan saw in Basavanna, his followers, and their ways a threat to the Hindu Orthodoxy they uphold and the privileges associated with it; an orthodoxy which kept feeding on a long tradition of inter-caste and inter-religious elimination. However resentful at the

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<sup>396</sup> Leslie, "Understanding Basava," 245.

<sup>397</sup> Sharanna or Virashaiva tradition; Basava's reformist philosophy.

<sup>398</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), 359.

impacts of Basavanna and his fold on the city's ways and old traditions, Bijjala, king of Kalyan, acknowledges:

Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste structure, wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the varna system. What a vision! And what prodigious courage! And he has the ability. Look at those he has gathered around him: poets, mystics, visionaries. And nothing airy-fairy about them, mind you. All hard-working people from the common stock. They sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth, or station. And all this is happening in the city of Kalyan- *my Kalyan*.<sup>399</sup>

And he says addressing his wife Rambhavati, "You know that verse of Basavanna's?

Do not steal

Do not kill

Do not ever lie

Do not rage... and so on. It's not, as you can see, an ethics designed for rulers. Worse still is their *bhakti*, their relentless devotion, their incessant craving for the Lord's grace. I've built temples to keep my subjects happy. But the one truth I know is that I exist and God doesn't.<sup>400</sup>

To highlight this point further and to show that what was written in the Vedas, or at least the way people came to interpret it, can be reformed, Karnad, and in the mouth of king Bijjala, questions the validity of the caste structure as one determined by birth and inheritance. In the play, we are told that the king and his ancestors were born 'barbers' (Kalachuryas) which is a low caste category, and that only through war and rebellion, his family could ascend to the upper Kshatriya caste status. "They married into every royal family in sight," and "bribed generations of Brahmins with millions of cows," to have the caste of "Kshatriyas branded on their forehead."<sup>401</sup> This means that the inter-caste rigid structure could be defied through war and violence and that the sacredness accorded to it by the priests appeals to custom and human manipulation more than to a historical written decree, and as a myth or an invented tradition, rather than a law to abide by. Here again, we come to understand how Karnad treats the issue of caste with fluidity, rendering it as something the legacy of which can be questioned, and why not reformed. And as we have seen, he inserts the story of Basava and his followers, who willingly abandoned their upper-caste status and mingled with the masses as devotees to justice,

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<sup>399</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 21. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>400</sup> Karnad, 21-22.

<sup>401</sup> Karnad, 21.

to say that while some people strive for an upper-caste status and they are prepared to give everything for it (the case of the king and his family), others are equally willing to divorce the prejudices associated with their caste, to choose rather a life of devotion to a more noble cause (the case of Basava and his followers).

Additionally, in the play, the playwright invests the character of the King with a level of resilience and sympathy towards Basava's movement, his followers, and their principles. This might suggest that Karnad thinks that political leaders and elites ought to work towards accepting their counterparts from the social fabric and engage in dialogue with them for the better of all. King Bajjala, in the play, entrusts Basava with the Kingdom's treasury and some other advisory tasks however contradictory the change Basava is calling for is to the ideals and beliefs of the king. Also, Bajjala's firm stance against his son's constant accusations of Basava and his conspiracies against the court and especially when he could understand the threat they shape to the stability of the city is a clear sign that the king is prioritizing his kingdom's safety over his concerns and interests. This attitude is in no way reflective of the Indian government's approach towards the communal, religious, and ethnic frenzy which was, for decades and still, subject to hot debates. Karnad's intention becomes clear when we come to know that he reverses the character of the original Bajjala as documented in the different Kannada literary and historical sources in an attempt to serve his vision of reconciliation in society. According to history, Bajjala who ruled over the historical city of Kalyan at the time Basava's revolutionary movement took place was known for his harsh temper and explosive nature towards those who stand in opposition to his beliefs or social policies. What might have softened the king's attitude towards Basava is the way, as he acknowledges to his wife, Basava and his men treated him despite being aware of his true caste, reflecting the sense of equality the movement was trying to preach among the people: "in all my sixty-two years, the only

people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the Sharanas: Basavanna and his men.<sup>402</sup>

Equally relevant to Karnad's view of inter-caste reconciliation is the fact that he does not exempt the followers of Basava from his criticism for he thinks that for a reformist movement to yield in a positive change, it has to free itself from the seeds of violence. Throughout the play, the hasty and violent propensities, how much avoided by Basava himself as the leader of the movement, by some of his Sharana followers complicate the task of Basava in his attempt to find a middle way to prevent the violence which was expected to erupt against both the king's son and other upper-caste Brahmins who openly opposed the inter-caste marriage. Jagadeva, the closest of Basava's companions, represents this impulse when he, hastily and unquestionably, proposes to forcibly bring under the wings of Basava's movement the Jains of a neighboring city. Whereas Basava believes in non-violence and that no one ever needs to perform a sacrifice in the name either of the movement or any other cause, Jagadeva, joined by some other Sharanas, justifies his call for violence by referring to the fact that words and preaching cannot convince people of the need to change. He further claims that because people are used to violence exercised on them on the part of their rulers and religious leaders, they will end up joining the movement and supporting it when they are treated with violence. Thus Karnad uses "Jagadeva to demonstrate how the mystic's vision may have been transformed into terrorist violence, and how it still may be today" and that the play might be a "conscious reflection of late-twentieth-century religion and politics."<sup>403</sup>

Added to the belief in the need for violence to carry out their reformist plans, some of the Sharannas are portrayed in instances where they seem to be still attached to their Brahmin upper caste prejudices even though their teachings call for a casteless society and social equality. Guddevva, one of the Sharannas, says addressing Basavanna when he invites him for a home

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<sup>402</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 21.

<sup>403</sup> Leslie, "Understanding Basava," 252.

visit, with several other followers: “No, thank you. You collect all *those low-caste people in your house, don’t you, even the untouchables? I’d rather not rub shoulders with them*”. Laughing, Basavanna replies: “they’ll be there, certainly. But you can choose where you want to sit.”<sup>404</sup> Pointing out this irony throughout several other scenes too makes it clear that the playwright is trying to unveil the double standards and contradictions in both the reformist Sharannas and their Orthodox counterparts. It can also mean that he thinks that the principles of justice and reconciliation Basava’s movement stand for can’t be expected to accumulate in a positive change (and this is what happens at the end of the play) as long as the long-held convictions about caste are still part of his follower’s beliefs and that his followers are falling prey to the evil they stood out to fight when they decided to join Basava’s movement.

This, again, relates to what I discussed before concerning the idea that casteism did not survive as solely a mythically crafted structure that had to be imposed on the people, but it grew to be part and parcel of people’s identities and behaviors, and that it became entrenched in a way that it was not easy for people to act outside its prescribed norms. Reconciliation, Karnad seems to posit, starts when the seeds which inform othering, exclusion, and inequality in society are overcome or at least reformed because people will not be able to move on without fully understanding the wrongs which ushered in their present predicament. Reconciliation is not only about dialoguing with those who are ethnically, communally, or religiously different, but resides in the ability to get over one’s prejudices and misconceptions, Karnad seems to tell us.

And just like any other hegemonic order which “tends to efface anything which does not fall within its own orbit or appear consonant with its own interests,”<sup>405</sup> Sovideva and Damodara and those who followed them from the Orthodox camp see Basava’s movement as a call for conformity, and this, according to them, goes against the Vedic tradition which is built on a “logic of inequalities;” an inequality which is necessary to maintain order and balance. They

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<sup>404</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 23. (Emphasis added).

<sup>405</sup> Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 61.

understand their tradition the way it remained unchallenged since time immemorial as one able to “absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari,”<sup>406</sup> and that any attempt at reforming it would bring just chaos and conflict. They think that Basava has failed to understand the purpose behind the social hierarchy which was imposed on the land, and see that a “hierarchy which accommodates difference” is more relevant and “humane than an equality which enforces conformity.”<sup>407</sup>

### **b. De-Sanskritising<sup>408</sup> Language, Sanctifying Knowledge**

Similar to Medieval western religious reformers who advocated for Christianity to be taught and preached in European vernacular tongues to reach the hearts of the masses and who called for a ‘priesthood of all believers’ as a reaction to the Catholic church’s monopoly over reason and thought, the Sharannas in *TD* preach for temple-free worship and address the people in local Kannada. In the play, Basavanna, in response to the king’s desire to instill more inscriptions glorifying his titles and achievements in Sanskrit which most commoners don’t understand, favors the use of the mother tongue. He insists that the king’s “glory would have been better served if there had been a little less Sanskrit,”<sup>409</sup> and mockingly says addressing the king: “if your majesty’s titles continue to proliferate at this pace, I fear that all the rocks in our kingdom stacked together will not be enough to contain them.”<sup>410</sup> He goes on to say: “A new rock inscription. And to justify it, a new campaign. A dozen battles. A hundred new hero stones,

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<sup>406</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 63.

<sup>407</sup> Karnad, 64.

<sup>408</sup> *Sanskritisation*, a concept first made popular by the Indian social theorist Srinivas M. N. in her book *Caste in Modern India*, is used to explain caste mobility in Indian society and refers to “a social process by which castes placed at the bottom in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes.” (In Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, 28). However, the way I am using it here does not in any way imply this meaning. I personally use it in reference to Sanskrit as a language to explain how Karnad, by introducing the *Sharanas* and their vernacular *vacanas*, aims to de-stabilize the sacredness usually attributed to Sanskrit. De-sanskritising, as such, means ‘subverting/challenging the sacred authority of Sanskrit.’

<sup>409</sup> Karnad, 24.

<sup>410</sup> Karnad, 24.

to be greeted by the wails of a few thousand fresh widows and orphans. And then to finance this senseless self-indulgence, another wave of taxes, demands, and extortions.<sup>411</sup>

Then, he elaborates in a way that alludes to the importance of knowledge and learning, meaning in a way that knowledge and the ability to think beyond the confines of religious scriptures and sacred texts would give people a chance to understand their inheritance and question the laws of the kingdom: “inscriptions need eyes to decipher them. Panegyrics need tongues to sing them. Meaning is generated by this moving body and it is this human body that should be our primary concern.”<sup>412</sup> In discussing the life of the historical figure Basava and his reformist tradition in ancient Kalyan (a historical record from which Karnad seems to have extracted the major incidents inserted in the play), Karigoudar Ishwaran, drawing on a number of other historical accounts, points to the importance Basava and the Sharannas accord to knowledge over religion even though they were known as Shiva devotees.<sup>413</sup> Knowledge for Basava meant breaking down the sacredness people usually attach to traditions and customs as supported by sacred texts. For Basava, as clearly hinted upon through many of his statements throughout the play, people in his society unquestionably accepted the strict and oppressive varna system imposed upon them for centuries because they thought that challenging the varna system meant challenging the religion itself.

The previously mentioned exchange between Basava and the king about language alludes also to the importance of addressing people and communicating teachings in the language of the people, which is a clear reference to the fact that religious status is often supported by ownership over the means of communication. Writing, preaching, and speaking in the language of the masses is at its very nature revolutionary as it was an attempt on the part of Basava and other Sharanna saints to dismantle the superiority and privilege usually associated with

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<sup>411</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 24.

<sup>412</sup> Karnad, 24-25.

<sup>413</sup> Karigoudar, *Speaking of Basava*, 80-81.

Sanskrit; the language of Brahmanism, the Vedas, and nobility. Opposite to Basava's desire to bridge the gap between classes through the use of common language (Kannada in the context of the play), Damodara, the court's chief Brahmin priest, considers it a "pure flux," one which changes from "mouth to mouth, caste to caste, from today to tomorrow," as one suited to communicate the anguish of beggars and prostitutes, and one which the Sharannas found accessible to "pimp for their vulgarities."<sup>414</sup> On the other hand, he holds Sanskrit, mastered by him and those who could have access to it, with high esteem as one "engraved in diamond," "unchanging" and "austere," and in whose "immutability" are "eternal truths" captured.<sup>415</sup> This pronouncement about the language's 'immutability' is in itself metaphorical as it reflects that this language is static and inappropriate to communicate the interests of a movement that is calling for change. The truths Damodara refers to are those according to which mundane laws about class, caste, faith, and origin are issued. Again, and as understood by Basava, language is used as a tool to subjugate people who don't understand it, especially when their sacred texts are written in this very language.

Just like the way Karnad treats the Vedas with doubt and with a revisionist impulse, as I noted in an earlier section, Basava and his followers rejected and rebelled against the authority of the Vedas and the Brahminic claim to possession over their sacredness. Basava thinks that these texts legitimize and impose a system of social inequalities on people which lead to the exclusion of many to the benefit of the few. In her account of the role of Dalitbahujan scholarship (whose leaders and reforms can be seen in the light of Basava's Sharanna movement in this play) in deconstructing Indian historiography considering it as a "weapon of the other", Kancha Ilaiah emphasizes the role of Hindu Brahminic scholars and nationalists in constructing an idea of a nation through their hegemony over writing, language and nationalist discourse:

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<sup>414</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 64.

<sup>415</sup> Karnad, 64.

The brahmanic tradition represents a small part of the Indian population. But most of the Sanskrit texts in the ancient and medieval periods were constructed around that minority tradition. Quite surprisingly, without any compunction, that tradition was assumed to represent the majority of Indians and Indian nationalism was constructed in the image of that tradition.”<sup>416</sup>

Kancha in this quote emphasizes a point we raised in the second chapter where we pointed out that writing history in India was subject to ‘narrow loyalties’ determined by faith, caste and communalism. This ushered even in a hegemony over who is to be ‘represented’ or ‘spoken for’ in works of literature and who is to represent true ‘Indianness’. Karnad shares Kancha’s view when he argued that “in view of the Sanskrit bias of Brahminism,” it is not “surprising that even folk and tribal material, if studied at all, is studied in the light of Sanskrit texts,” because, according to him, “most of these theorists are Brahmins who, while theorizing, identify Brahminism with Hinduism and then proceed to assume that every Indian is Hindu in thought and spirit.”<sup>417</sup>

Therefore, Basava’s *vacanas* and those of the other Sharannas (which contain the different teachings of their new movement or Lingayat tradition) are composed in the local language of the people, in Kannada, to both have their reforms reach every section of society and to help deconstruct the social boundaries which kept people apart in terms of occupation, privileges, and access to the religious texts themselves. So, again, language is essential to the maintenance of the new social order Basava and his Sharanna fold issued in Kalyan. At the hands of reformers and change makers, in the context of Indian history and the development of Kannada literary culture as Nagaraj, D.R. argues in his essay “Critical Tensions in the History of Kannada Literary Culture,” vernacular becomes “a vehicle of protest and a carrier of inexplicable aesthetic and social energy.”<sup>418</sup> As such, vernaculars grow from a means of communication and

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<sup>416</sup> Kancha Ilaiah, *The Weapon of the Other: Dalitbahujan Writings and the Remaking of Indian Nationalist Thought* (Delhi, Chennai & Chandigarh: Pearson, 2010), xxi.

<sup>417</sup> Karnad, “Theatre in India,” 338 -339.

<sup>418</sup> Nagaraj, D.R., “Critical Tensions in the History of Kannada Literary Culture,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed., Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003), 349.

a medium which accommodates the needs of the masses, to “appropriate to themselves the role of Sanskrit, in its claim to speak with ultimate authority.”<sup>419</sup> Language becomes a counter discourse and a means of resistance which can exert its own logic of hegemony. In the context of the play, Basava and the Sharannas in ancient Kalyan spread their reformist impulse and break rigid social limits from within their “internal spaces,” because it is in “the vernacular, that radical groups now conducted their struggles.”<sup>420</sup>

Here, I have to indicate that the play was originally written in Kannada, the language of Karnad’s home city Karnataka, and translated to English by Karnad himself. So, it is expected that the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of the text itself and the pronouncements made by the different characters belonging to different castes would have been more profound and contextualized in Kannada how faithful to the original meaning the English translation tries to be.<sup>421</sup> As such, in keeping the sacred texts from the untouchables and other ‘avarnas’, the Brahmins confine both the sacred text and readers from other castes to the interpretive authority of the religious class and its supporters from the ruling class. Therefore, Karnad undermines the authority accorded to Sanskrit and the Vedic texts through introducing an alternative; the *Puranas*, which are composed by the Sharannas or Shiva devotees in the common language of ancient Kalyan. The *Puranas*, with their accessible language and clear teachings about equality and the way to God, act as a challenging counterpart to the Vedas the access to which other social groups are deprived of.

The playwright, allegedly, does this not only to minimize or challenge the authority of the Brahmins, or to give ultimate authority to the lay reader (the other citizens of Kalyan from lower classes), or even to the Sharannas’ *Puranas*. Instead, he does this (which seems to be

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<sup>419</sup> Nagaraj, “Critical Tensions,” 349.

<sup>420</sup> Nagaraj, 349.

<sup>421</sup> Basava’s devotional poems (known as *vacanas*), speeches and sermons, as those of his companions, were composed in Kannada, the language of the people of Karnataka or ancient Kalyan. For further insights about this and other forms of literary production within the Kannada literary tradition, see Nagaraj, D.R., “Critical Tensions in the History of Kannada Literary Culture,” 323–383.

Basava's pathway in his reformist movement too) in support of a proper practice of religion which promises freedom of faith, or as Basava describes it in the play, a path towards the "linga", listening to the "inner self" and following its "dictates"; a path towards "spiritual brotherhood"<sup>422</sup> which submits neither to the whims of politicians nor to that of religious zealots. We might then assume that the playwright subverts both the religion's authority and the sacredness attached to the religious text and its language, as he does with the caste system and its 'logic of inequalities'. This can be read as one of the most profound of Karnad's visions of religious/interreligious reconciliation in the play.

### **c. Basava Compromises Towards Faith and Caste**

Therefore, the inter-caste equality Basava is calling for both through asking for the king's approval to have the marriage consummated, and through accepting different castes to join the Sharanna movement (knowing that both Basava and many among the Sharannas are of an upper-caste Brahmin origin), gives insights into how the playwright is trying to break the boundaries which distance castes from each other. He also reflects the attitude that nothing has changed since Basava's and the movement's time during which people's ethnic, class and faith identities became the target of fanatics in the likes of the king's son and his priestly congregation, in 12<sup>th</sup> century Kalyan, and the BJP and its supporters in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century India. Reading the present through unveiling what happened in the past creates an effect of alienation and presents the reader/spectator with a reality that calls for contemplation and questioning. This is similar to the Brechtian, and in a similar tone with De Wet, the technique of distancing the events of a text historically to instigate an aura of speculation which invites the reader to think of the gravity of human life.

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<sup>422</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 75.

When asked about the impact Basava's reformist philosophy could create in a society that follows the separation of castes for centuries, and what kind of misunderstanding it would bring to those who have accepted to follow his movement, Karnad explains:

Basavanna is fully aware that his ideals have triggered off that marriage and that there would be dire consequences as well. The people involved in this marriage do not know this. He knows that the movement he gave rise to would go out of hand, victimize himself. He is a sharana (devotee), a householder, and a pragmatic character. This rare combination makes him a great subject for the play.<sup>423</sup>

Basava's movement can be then conceived as anti-elitist in spirit for it was issued primarily as a reaction to the court, its advisors, and the corruption of the religious leaders. In his attempts to support the caste system and as a response to Basavanna's argument that "a person is born truly only when the guru initiates him into a life of knowledge," the king says:

That's what you believe. You tore up your sacred thread and ran away from home. Birth, caste, and creed mean nothing to you. But don't you delude yourself about your companions, friend. If you really free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles, and second cousins, and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sands and die!<sup>424</sup>

Here, the king alludes to the fact that Basava's is a compelling task because convincing people away from their caste attachments would result in chaos and further division and that his belief in a casteless society is to survive as ideal teaching in the land, like a guru's inscrutable scripture.

In the exchange that follows, which takes place between Basava, some of his Sharana followers, the parents of the bride and groom, and some other witnesses, we come to understand the way Basava adheres to peace, reason, and dialogue in trying to find a way out to the inter-caste marriage issue and the issue of caste in general in his society. We encounter a different tone on the part of his followers in calling for change and action:

*Basavanna:* Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this, this is real. The Orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of varnasharma dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads.

*Madhuvarasa:* So be it. Like Lord Shiva himself, we shall drink that venom and hold it blocked in our throats!

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<sup>423</sup> Anantha Murthy Prasanna, Girish Karnad and Sukanya Chandrashekara, "Girish Karnad, the Playwright: A Discussion," *Indian Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (169) (Sept - Oct. 1995): 130.

<sup>424</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 27.

*Basavanna* (angry): This is no time for pretty speeches! It's a question of life and death for these children. From tomorrow, the wrath of the bigoted will pursue them like a swarm of snakes, to strike as they pause to put up a roof or light an oven. Who will protect them then? Elementary prudence demands that\_

*Haralayya*: So, you don't approve of this alliance! I knew it, Kalyani. So, what if it's the saintly Basavanna or the revered elder Kakkaya? Let a cobbler rub shoulders with a Brahmin and the sharannas will be the first to object.

*Basavanna*: Someday, this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison-house of varnasharma, will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being. As a *bhakta*. As a *Sharanna*. That is inevitable. But we have a long way to go. You know the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of sanatana religion.

*Madhuvarasa*: Then let me say this: I shall not hesitate to sacrifice my daughter's life to forward the cause of our great movement

*Kakkayya* (horrified): Madhuvarasa!

*Basavanna*: No one has a right to sacrifice anyone, not even himself.

*Haralayya* (to Madhuvarasa): The word 'sacrifice' strikes terror in me. Too long have my people sacrificed our women to the greed of the upper castes, our sons to their cosmic theories of rebirth. No more sacrifices, please.<sup>425</sup>

The tone of some of Basava's followers in this conversation is full of dissatisfaction and uncontrolled propensities, and their call for action is disrespectful to the principles according to which the movement was originally founded. Basava's approach, however; is that of reflection, and prudence for he foresees the intensity to which the debates over the intercaste marriage might escalate to if he chooses direct confrontation with the king and his religious fold.

As noted in the title of this section, Karnad envisions reconciliation in the play through retrieving and inserting Basava's reform movement highlighting both the orthodoxy associated with the rigid caste structure and the violence it ushered in at the time. Specifically, he focuses on the reconciliatory and compromising aspects of Basava's teachings which he sees relevant in their attempt to bring into communion conflicting parties in the face of the atrocities committed by the traditions they cling to despite inequality and oppression. Therefore, Basava's compromising teachings appear in several ways throughout the play. First; even though he puts much effort into consummating the inter-caste marriage between two people from entirely distinct castes, he advocates for a compromising approach towards the marriage to prevent

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<sup>425</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 45-46.

friction for he wants to do it through the king's agreement and not through revolt or inter-caste clashes.

Second; contrary to both some of his followers and the king's son, Basava kept faithful to his conciliatory approach in regards to bringing other people under the wings of the movement which was done through violence and the shedding of blood by some of his followers. Even though he refused "to compromise with his ruler and the social order he upheld,"<sup>426</sup> it is worth noting that, as historically evidenced, "it is alleged that Basava made no rupture with Brahmanism. On the contrary, he rejected the old order ..., and attempted to replace it with a new one."<sup>427</sup> So, despite his reformist movement which tried to challenge the inequalities based on caste exclusion and privileges, Basava had a compromising attitude even towards Brahmanism. This implies that his reformist tradition which aimed at replacing the old corrupt and unequal social order with the new one as part of his version of change, is inserted by Karnad as part of his belief about reconciliation through replacing old ways with new ones and the importance to learn from the past. Remembering that Basava's task was to address the fallacies of "the ideology and institution of group exclusivism based on birth,"<sup>428</sup> his reconciliatory attitude towards casteism and its legacy of oppression can be seen, in the play, through the way (s) he works to satisfy all castes in his gatherings through insisting on knowledge and the futilities of the varna system.

Besides bringing them together in his house to discuss different matters, Basava collects people belonging to various castes in his haul of gatherings which I earlier mentioned. In his meetings, Basava teaches people (who are sharply divided by a rigid social structure) about issues that can bridge the caste gap and bring people closer. Issues like the practice of

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<sup>426</sup> Karigoudar, *Speaking of Basava*, 57.

<sup>427</sup> Karigoudar, 57.

<sup>428</sup> Karigoudar, 45.

*Dasoha*,<sup>429</sup> non-violence, inner religiosity, equality based on one's merit and intellect, community service beyond one's caste identification, and the importance of engaging with the social 'other' without referencing any caste or religious category which usually impose obstacles to communication at least as far as his society of the time is concerned.

One might argue that the fact that Basavana's reformist movement ended in bloodshed with him leaving Kalyan and returning to his spiritual quest in the company of his 'lord of the meeting rivers' is a clear indication that compromise, dialogue, non-violence, and change which are at the heart of his reconciliatory philosophy and that of the writer remains an aspiration in many conflict-ridden post-trauma societies. Returning to what we said earlier about the Mandal-Mandir issues and the incident in Ayodhya, clear connections are to be made between the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 11<sup>th</sup>-century politico-religious auras. Sovideva and his camp can be seen as the modern BJP and its supporters, Basava and his followers as the many reformers, critics, writers who stood in criticism to the present government's policies towards different religious and caste minorities. Basava's followers who chose to opt for violence and blood to execute their plans and bring people under the wings of the movement by force can be seen as all those zealots who belong to different ethnic groups who seem to view themselves and their demands as more righteous than others, or those who think of dialogue as an ineffective path towards achieving change.

In the way Karnad ends his play there is also an indication that the fiercely rising Hindu nationalism, with its caste and religious exclusive discourse, thinks of social reformers, free speech supporters, intellectuals, and writers as a threat to its ideals and nationalist rhetoric. Towards the end of the play and after the eruption of bloodshed in Kalyan, the king's son

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<sup>429</sup> This concept, which is considered as one of Basava's anti-caste teachings, refers to the idea that serving others means serving both God and the community. Referring to himself who served as the king's treasury advisor, Basava maintains that being in service to those who are superior in caste is not an acknowledgement of their superiority, but it is a service which supports "interdependence and mutuality of interest between the individual person, God and society/community," therefore, breaking class rigidity. Karigoudar, 152-153.

declares that “from this moment, all *Sharanas*, foreigners, and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death,” and that “women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they’ll suffer like dogs.”<sup>430</sup> As such, change-makers are either to submit their will to the government policies against which they are revolting or they are to suffer threats, exile, or death in some cases. Keeping in mind that “Hindu militant nationalism thrives on a sharp distinction between “we” and “they”, and that it “identifies and defines the other against which it struggles and in relation to which its identity is shaped,”<sup>431</sup> one can understand the dynamics of exclusion of the other based on both caste and religion. In the play, it manifests through the king’s son and his fellow supporters among both the political and religious elite’s resort to violence and bloodshed to eliminate Basava and silence his reformist revolution. Violence, thereby, becomes a tool at the hands of those in power to have their plans both accepted by others and accomplished. Resorting to both myth and history to justify violence against what is regarded as an “outsider” to the culture, and one whose features don’t comply with the rest of the nation, whether as a religious or caste community, was always part of the discourse preached by Hindutva ideologists even during the most intense moments of conflict. In one of the speeches she gave in support of the BJP’s claim that resorting to violence seems unquestionable to protect India’s ‘true character’ from being spoiled by foreigners, Uma Bharati asserts:

Anyone who opposes Ram cannot be an Indian. Muslims remember Rahim who longed for the dust of Lord Ram’s feet ... Songs of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood were sung by Mahatma Gandhi. We got ready to hear the Azaan (muezzin) along with temple bells, but they can’t do this, nor does their heritage permit them to do it ... The two cultures are polar opposites. But we still preached brotherhood ... We could teach them with words, now let us teach them with kicks ... Let there be bloodshed once and for all.”<sup>432</sup>

Here is a clear indication that the Indian ruling party, which is still manipulated by the exclusionary discourse of the BJP, is far from being able to reconcile with those who are still

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<sup>430</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 101.

<sup>431</sup> Anantanand Rambachan, “The Co-Existence of Violence and Non-violence in Hinduism,” *The Ecumenical Review*, 2003 Vol. 55; Iss. 2: 119.

<sup>432</sup> Rambachan, “The Co-Existence of Violence and Non-violence in Hinduism,” 120.

seen as cultural others or socially inferior (in the case of Dalits). As it means that opening the door for dialogue between all the religious and ethnic groups making up the modern Indian nation is still regarded as a threat to the Bharat or ‘spirit of the nation’.

In his seminal text *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee, drawing his conclusions from South East Asian and African experience of colonialism and forms of nationalism, thinks that nationalist thought emerging from these regions was imagined within a ‘spiritual sphere’, and that the idea of the nation was envisioned as one which is shaped by local determinants like religion, caste, social class or margins. Drawing primarily on the Indian experience, Chatterjee thinks that the ‘spiritual realm’ was mobilized by the figures of the nationalist struggle, laying claim over its various dimensions, and used it to contest the ‘material sphere’ of hegemony which, according to Chatterjee, was owned by the imperial discourse of power and domination.<sup>433</sup> Linking this to what Karnad has perceived as the politicization of the religious in postcolonial India, we can see how and why the religious and the social continued to serve as tools at the hands of political groups against religious minorities and the socially disadvantaged like the Dalits, however different in intention the BJP’s exclusionary ideologies are from the nationalist ideals of the nation’s founding fathers. While the spiritual realm was used as a counter-discursive dynamic against imperial control, this same dimension polarized into a strong force to exercise a different form of hegemony over those who seemed to be unfit within the new conceptualization of Indian national identity emerging since independence.

In the poem inserted at the beginning of this section, Basava is depicted to be praying to his ‘lord of the rivers’ for ease to carry his reformist task, and promising him that he will act according to the path Lord Shiva devotees are supposed to follow, one of justice and righteousness. This poem can be read as a summary of what the whole Bhakti movement is about: striving for equality between castes and sects whether of a Brahmin or an untouchable

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<sup>433</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1-5.

denomination; treating people whether they joined the rank of the movement as Shiva devotees or those who preferred to remain religiously different on equal terms; and rejecting *jati* or race (a term which is sometimes used to refer to caste and social class too) as a source of judgment.

## **2. Ahimsa, In-betweenness and the Violation of Boundaries: Inter-religious/ Inter-caste Reconciliation in *Bali: The Sacrifice***

In *BS*, Karnad reflects upon the issue of violence as informed by both religion and caste. Accordingly, he addresses the need for reconciliation through, first; evoking the non-violence ethics or *ahimsa* as espoused by Jainism, second; through emphasizing the role of the king as a voice of compromise and in-betweenness in the play and, third; through investing a low-caste character, the mahout, with the power of reasoning and wisdom to reverse that old age tale about upper-caste superiority and caste-related prejudices. Like *TD*, this play ends in bloodshed motivated by violence in both intentions and actions on the part of the two most central and action-moving characters, the Jain queen and the Hindu queen mother. In service of his reconciliatory attitudes in the play, Karnad tries to create a meditative space where faith dictated ideologies and propensities clash, recoil, and try to dismantle each other in the belief that the more roots lying at the heart of various conflicts are exposed, the less likely they are to be avoided or secretly manipulated.

Although the play is often studied as a “philosophical exploration of love, jealousy, desire, betrayal, and violence between men and women who are bound by the ties of blood and marriage,”<sup>434</sup> I intend to read it as a space through which the playwright is able to communicate his concern over Indian’s violent cultural scene, whether ancient or contemporary, where division is nurtured by faith and social class, and one which kept incarnating over time. My approach to the play excludes not the fact that some previous studies of the play have targeted the non-violence ethics which Karnad seems to be working out in the play. This section,

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<sup>434</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, xxxiii.

therefore, looks at the reconciliatory rhythms Karnad brings to the play however implicit the representation of reconciliation in the world of the play is. Keeping in mind the socio-historical background to which Karnad retorts, we can say that both inter-religious (Hindu-Jain) and inter-caste (Kshatriya-Untouchable) identities emerge as social “others” which Karnad wants to bring closer through *ahimsa*, compromise, and dialogue. This play, as Karnad notes in the preface to the first volume, is “a tribute to the astuteness and sensitivity of Mahatma Gandhi” who “saw so clearly the importance of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India.”<sup>435</sup>

Evoking the *Yashodhara Charite* epic, which is itself based on a 9<sup>th</sup> century *Yashastilaka* Sanskrit epic, supports Karnad’s belief in the relevance of tradition and the past in contemplating issues of contemporary concern.<sup>436</sup> Like the 12<sup>th</sup> century historical incident on which *TD* is based and which communicates issues related to intra-religious and inter-caste violence, the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Yashodhara Charite* epic draws our attention to the issue of violence as justified by both custom and belief. This Jain epic tells the story of king Yashodhara, his sexual violent propensities, and his struggles towards attaining liberation from the cycle of death or *Moksha*. In the story, to make the journey between life and death possible and successful, the king, espoused by his mother, plans to sacrifice his two sons to his Hindu god. Hesitant and out of pity towards his sons, the king, instead, announces the practice of human sacrifice of other beings, releasing his two sons from paying such a price. At the same time and within the same story, and according to the epic, the king finds about an illicit union between his wife and a low-born boy, a *mahout*. To purify the queen of her sin and, therefore, redeem the royal court from the repercussions of divine anger, the king engages in a sacrifice in the form of a rooster made of flour to appease the gods. The rooster, however, turns alive at the exact moment of the offering, reversing the intention of the king and resulting in bloodshed.

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<sup>435</sup> Karnad, “Note on *Bali: The Sacrifice*,” in *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 316.

<sup>436</sup> Karnad, 317.

The king and his mother paid the price for this transgression for they didn't attain the Moksha for which the sacrifice was offered, to be reborn, instead, like animals.

In Karnad's adaptation of this original epic, it is the Jain queen (supportive of non-violence) who pays for the final sacrifice, and the king is portrayed, instead, as a peace seeker and one who suffers spiritual chaos between what he inherited from a mother who believes so ardently in the necessity of sacrifice and violence as dictated by the Hindu tradition, and his wife's Jainism to which he converted, seeing in it a path towards love and serenity, however overweening the two ideologies turn to be as the events unfold in the play. On the recreation of myth and epic in Karnad's plays and their contemporary relevance, Aparna Dharwadker comments:

Karnad's ability to contend with the 'timeless and the temporal together' is clearest in his juxtaposition of myth and history, in the simultaneous embrace of the ahistorical and the historical. The plays based on myth and folklore evoke a chronologically indeterminate (but unambiguously premodern) realm of kings and queens, goddesses and concubines, horses and elephants, bullock carts, and country fairs. They create character types rather than individuals, but give them memorable voices, along with a local habitation and a name.<sup>437</sup>

Conflict in *BS* (a one-act play), therefore, emerges due to the presence of two different religious beliefs within the ruling family with each being fiercely supported by its upholders. While the queen mother believes in Hinduism with its sacrificial rituals as advocated by the Rigvedic text, the queen believes in Jainism and its philosophy of non-violence, and the king who, attracted to his wife's Jain non-violence beliefs, became a Jain after he renounces the Hindu tradition of his mother and forefathers. About the crux of the play, Karnad comments: "It deals with the idea that violence is pervasive, lying just beneath the surface of our everyday behavior, and is often masked by a conscious effort... *It debates the Jain notion that intended violence is as condemnable as the action itself.* The mere thought of bloodshed or brutality can condemn one as much as the deed would. *The play debates the conflict of faith.*"<sup>438</sup> The play's main

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<sup>437</sup> Dharwadker, "Introduction," in Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, x-xi.

<sup>438</sup> Mukherjee Tutun, ed., *Girish Karnad's Plays* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006), 33. (Emphasis added).

discussions (or dilemma) evolve around the King's confused sentiments (even though he embraces his wife's Jainism out of conviction) between the principles of the two religious ideologies in his court and the attempts of each faith's representative, either on the part of the mother or the queen, to show the righteousness of what they uphold. The play opens up and ends with two songs; the first sung by the queen and the last by both, the king and queen. The two songs summarize the general aura of the play and its clashing temper between two faiths, two cultural perspectives, and/or ideologies. The world of the play as the first song tells us is "divided in two robs," "one lit up by the sun" and the other "hid in the shade," one "of the spirits that adore the blood and gore" and the other of "the bright, shining blade, slicing smoothly through the lamb."<sup>439</sup>

As the events of the play develop, and as a step towards breaking the line separating the upper and low castes in a society espousing the caste structure, we get introduced to another character in whose arms the queen seeks communion and solace, the mahout, the King's elephant keeper. Attracted to his songs and voice, the queen so often visits the mahout in a ruined temple next to the castle to share her frustrated thoughts and secrets. He responds to her with an open spirit and a cultivated attitude towards various issues. While her courtly life faces her with the mother's insistence on tradition, sacrifice, pregnancy, and the way this influenced her son, the king, the queen's admiration for the mahout deepens for the simplicity of his approach, unlike the anxiety she feels when surrounded by her husband's family and court life. The smoothness of the mahout's voice emerging from the corners of the temple, during the stillness of the night, becomes the queen's refuge despite the danger expected from such secret meetings; a danger of breaking the rule defining the caste structure for she is royalty and he is of low status and the danger of committing adultery in the King's house and under peoples' gaze.

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<sup>439</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 189.

Found out with the low caste mahout by the King and his mother, the mother orders for a sacrifice to be carried out in the form of a hundred fowl but the queen, being a Jain and strong believer in non-violence, refuses this kind of blood-shedding sacrifice. In response, the mother suggests, instead, a cock of dough to be offered as a sacrifice but the queen remains assertive of her opposition to the sacrifice. The King intervenes to convince the queen of the fact that there is no violence or blood to be shed in sacrificing a cock made of dough against which she objects. After the queen agrees to take part in the sacrifice, suddenly, the cock of dough intended for the sacrificial act turns alive. Feeling guilty that she participated in a violent act of sacrificing a cock of dough which turned alive, the queen, at last, and out of remorse, pays the price herself through giving her life for the sacrifice, overwhelmed by the pain that she betrayed her faith which prohibits sacrifice of all sorts and calls for non-violence. The last song, performed by both the dying queen and the king, gives us a clear idea about the kind of world which is to be left behind:

In the world once divided into two robs,  
 One lit up by the sun,  
 The other hid in the shade,  
 The orb in the shade  
 Opens itself to the light  
 And warmth of the sun  
 Night gives in to day.  
 Death yields to life.  
 Like monsoons piled on monsoons  
 So life follows life.  
 And through the days,  
 Through endless rainy nights  
 Through life after life  
 We hear the cock crow.<sup>440</sup>

#### **a. Ahimsa, Anekanta and Religious Intolerance**

In *BS*, similar to the nonviolent reformist approach of Basava in *TD*, Karnad evokes the non-violence or *ahimsa* associated with the Jain religious tradition in the character of the queen. Regarded as an anti-Brahminical ethic, the Jain idea of non-violence suggests the abstention of its followers from any kind of violence be it anti-human or anti-animal. Rooted in the *anekānta*

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<sup>440</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 241.

doctrine<sup>441</sup> and its philosophical takes on the self-other relationships where it professes “toleration, understanding, and respect for the views of the others” and one which cultivates in its followers the desire to look beyond their attitudes into questioning their counterparts “as to how and why they hold a different view and how the seeming contradictions can be reconciled to evolve harmony.”<sup>442</sup> This is true for the issue of sacrifice too where Jainism stands in a critical stance to the Hindu Brahminical idea of blood sacrifice. In the play, the queen finds herself caught in an in-between context, in a “spiritual rift” between “her Jainism-which aligns itself with compassion, mercy and non-violence- and the traditional Kshatriya ethos of her husband’s family.”<sup>443</sup> In a conversation, which takes place between the queen, the mother, and the king, while the mother deems the blood sacrifice necessary for her son to achieve atonement and as a gesture of gratitude to her gods for blessing the court with the queen’s pregnancy as advocated by the Hindu religious tradition, the queen clings to her Jain upbringing and her non-violence convictions:

*King:* Mother will not agree to give up her practices. You know that. She feels she owes it to our ancestors. We’ve been through all this before.

*Queen:* But now it concerns our child. What offerings will be considered worthy of royal birth, do you think? They say when you were born, every inch of the earth for miles around was soaked in blood.

*King:* people exaggerate.

*Queen:* Yes, you are right. Shouldn’t be complaining about the scale. Just the thought. Of bloodshed. Even a single drop of blood. I don’t want it. Not in the name of our child.

*King (calmly):* I know how you feel. But look at it this way. She has accepted the fact that we will not be party to her violent rites. And she carries them out in her own separate shrine. In her shell. Let’s leave it at that.

*Queen:* I don’t want to hurt her. She can live by her beliefs. But we are Jains. Our son will be a Jain. He will have to uphold the principle of compassion for all living beings, of non-violence. Should we allow a blood rite to mark his arrival? It would be wrong. Terribly wrong!<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> In Jain philosophy of life, *anekānta* doctrine, or *Anekantavada* as it is popularly known, refers to the multiplicity or multi-sidedness of human experience, excluding, therefore, any absolutist understanding or interpretation of the world. According to this principle, which is similar in essence to other Jain principles like *Ahimsa*., the world cannot be confined to the explanation of this or that worldview holding it as the “truest”, the most “relevant” or “complete”. It, instead, teaches that ‘one-sidedness’ leads to extremism and violence where every worldview thinks it holds the absolute truth. This worldview favors interaction, dialogue and openness espoused by a plurality of perspectives, which ensures religious tolerance and embrace of opposites. For further insights about this principle and others within Jainism, check Bimal Krishna Matilal’s *The Central Philosophy of Jainism* (Ahmedabad: L.D. Institute of Indology, 1981)

<sup>442</sup> Matilal, *The Central Philosophy of Jainism*, 6.

<sup>443</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, xxxv.

<sup>444</sup> Karnad, 213-214.

This exchange shows that the queen, while eagerly defensive of the Jain non-violence philosophy, overlooks the Jain teaching which calls for embracing an ‘anekanta’ (or non-one-sidedness) view as previously explained. From the Jain perspective, once extremes in a worldview or an understanding collide, ‘non-one-sidedness’, as a syncretic non-dogmatic inclination, should be espoused. In the play, this attitude is presented by the King or husband. Even though he accepts his wife’s Jainism and favors it as a doctrine according to which he intends to raise his expected son, he shows resilience to both his wife’s and his mother’s views concerning the required blood sacrifice:

*Mother:* You are denying me the right to my worship!

*King (firmly):* No, Mother, I’m not.

*Mother:* You’re treating my goddess as though she were a cheap, tribal spirit. And you are cutting off my path to her.

*King:* Try and be sensible, Mother. No one is stopping you from worshipping your goddess or from your own form of worship. But I am a Jain. My son will be a Jain-a Jain King. I cannot have his birth greeted with the infliction of death.

*Mother:* You were not born a Jain. You were born my son. But you betrayed me and my faith. Instead of choosing the woman and bringing her to your faith, you chose hers.

*King:* I accepted the faith because I found truth in it and compassion for the world in pain. I don’t want to add to the pain. I will not let anyone do it. Certainly not in the name of my son.<sup>445</sup>

The conversation goes on, then the mother decides to leave the house and live in a cottage to have freedom to excise her devotion to her goddess. She says: “my gods have already been expelled from this house and live, shunned and starved, like outcasts. I should have followed them out. But I was blinded by my love for you.”<sup>446</sup> Through confronting the mother and queen and their respective beliefs, Karnad intends to showcase not only “the cracks in religions” but also wants “readers to realize the futility of observing certain rites merely for the continuance of an old practice set perhaps in ignorance.”<sup>447</sup> Using flashbacks to trace the development of events between past and present in the play can be reflective of Karnad’s tactic of bringing past and present in one text to emphasize the continuous legacy of history, mainly violence which

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<sup>445</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 214.

<sup>446</sup> Karnad, 214.

<sup>447</sup> Binod Mishra, “Girish Karnad’s Bali: The Sacrifice: A Voice of Reason against a Saga of Myth,” in., *Thunder on Stage: A Study of Girish Karnad's Plays*, Chhote Lal Khatri, Sudhir K Arora, eds. (Book Enclave, 2008), 92.

is committed in most cases, as far as Indian society is concerned, in the name of one's varna and one's religious identity. The following exchange refers to such a conflicting temper and faith-motivated hatred between the queen and the mother:

*Queen:* you have hated me from the day I stepped into this house.

*Mother:* the only relationship in the world which does not wither and fade away is that of hate. That'll keep us together- at least so long as my son remains a Jain.

*Queen:* I refuse to discuss my religion with you.

*Mother:* I couldn't care less about your religion. It is my son's that concerns me.

*Queen:* You brought up your son drenched in bloody sacrifices, bile, and gore. In violence. He was bound to turn away. He's a good man.

*Mother:* What do you know of violence? Or of pain? You seem so averse to blood that I wonder you didn't prefer to remain a virgin.<sup>448</sup>

For the mother here to allude to the fact that what binds her to her Jain daughter in law is the fact that her son chose to convert to Jainism is an indication that faith plays a major role in governing domestic relationships, and how much one's identity is defined by what he or she believes in, rendering precarious any beholder of a different religious doctrine.

Despite the non-violent teachings of her religious faith, the queen falls prey to the rivalries emerging from the court, leading, at the end, to her own demise. In his readings of Gandhi's concept of non-violence or *ahimsa*, Joan Bondurant states that the "full force of ahimsa means action based on the refusal to do harm," as it infers the "renunciation of the will to kill or to damage."<sup>449</sup> In Gandhi's paradigm of nonviolence, then, there is a dimension of the interdependence of humans into it and, as Anthony da Silva asserts, "Gandhi's emphasis on societal interdependence and coresponsibility enabled him to draw out the value of ahimsa in human society," as it gives a possibility to conflicting parties to mend and repair their "broken human relationships."<sup>450</sup> *Ahimsa*, in that sense, can be understood to cover other values besides

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<sup>448</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 231.

<sup>449</sup> Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 23-24.

<sup>450</sup> Anthony da Silva, S.J., "Through Nonviolence to Truth: Gandhi's Vision of Reconciliation," in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation*, eds. Raymond G. Helmick et al. (Philadelphia & London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 311-315.

the abstention from doing violence like coresponsibility, love, and readiness to cooperate with the 'other'; values which the queen in the play could not succeed in abiding by.

Recalling the queen's behavior towards the mother's Hindu practices, we might say that despite the positive and humane features associated with the Jain approach to non-violence, the playwright assesses some of its teachings. Even though he inserts the Jain idea of *ahimsa* to communicate the understanding that non-violence is essential to mutual understanding and, therefore, reconciliation, Karnad seems to criticize the Jain perspective towards violence which deems an act as violent both in action and intention, viewing it as an obstacle to reconciliation. To judge an act or behavior as violent without it actually taking place, according to Karnad, closes the possibility towards reconciling with the religious 'other', seeing it as a way of "shutting oneself up in a solipsistic world, a bleak, guilt-ridden existence with no hope for absolution."<sup>451</sup>

Additionally, if one is to interpret the harsh behavior of the queen mother towards her daughter-in-law, one might question its real drives as to whether they are motivated by the mother's concern over her son's future kingdom and his reputation among his subjects, or to be seen as one motivated by the fact that her son's wife comes from a Jain background with the king himself converting to Jainism because of her, as far as the mother understands it. Upon knowing about the adulterous behavior of the queen and that her pregnancy is but a story made by the wife to both appease her husband and avoid the harsh criticism she receives from both the mother and the court members daily, the mother comments: "throw her bones to the dogs. She has betrayed you. You are not bound by your vows now. All this nonsense about non-violence. It had to go. Let it go."<sup>452</sup> As the mother's reaction reveals, her words are directed first towards the need to abandon the belief in non-violence as espoused by Jainism, for this illicit relationship, as she argues, needs to be cleansed only through the shedding of blood.

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<sup>451</sup> Karnad, "Note on Bali: The Sacrifice," 317, in *Collected Plays*: vol. 1.

<sup>452</sup> Karnad, 223.

While this is the mother's approach to the incident, the queen thinks that her plight is generated by divine anger which seems to fill the corners of the court due to the mother's insistence on her ancestors' ways and traditions. She says addressing the king: "and I suppose that is why I haven't become pregnant since then. Your mother's goddess in her wrath has made me sterile."<sup>453</sup> Similar to the mother's reaction, the queen relates what came of her predicament in the court to her mother-in-law's gods, for she has always associated the mother's beliefs with blood, anger, violence, and pain.<sup>454</sup> If we are to relate the queen's comment to the principles of *ahimsa* and *anekanta* as I previously demonstrated, we are to see that she is alienated in her attitudes from the true teachings of her Jainism, especially the principle of 'non-one-sidedness' or the need to consider the world as one which is shaped according to the interplay of diverse or plural perspectives, with each to be respected as complete in its own right, because resolution lies at the heart of this multiplicity. Karnad's treatment of the inter-religious debate in the play emerges, and in many instances, through the different confrontations at the domestic level. Here again, and in a similar fashion to the previous play where he inserts an inter-caste marriage as a site to reflect upon the caste question in ancient Kalyan, Karnad sees in people's psychologies and desires a fertile soil through which he can explore what lies behind as ideologies, religious drives and othering inclinations each holds against the other. The personal and political seem to intersect in the worlds of both plays.

After her many attempts to convince the mother to change her opinion towards the sacrifice she wants to perform, the queen gets convinced that in a court where she is regarded as a danger to customs and laws, and due to which she is seen as a 'religious other' who recoils from accepting the ways of the court, that a "tradition can be given" or "at least changed" if people

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<sup>453</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 230.

<sup>454</sup> In the play, we are told that the queen has gone through many false pregnancies and miscarriages; something which is used to despise her for what she is and what she believes in, and one which has become a subject of concern to many in the royal court. Incessantly mocked by the mother for having a "fickle womb", the queen is driven step by step away from the peaceful and non-violent principles of her Jainism.

are willing enough to challenge their prejudices. The queen thinks that even the king's resilient attitude towards the presence of two opposing religious doctrines in his court won't save things from ushering in havoc.

Linked to the idea of *ahimsa* that the playwright evokes in the play with an emphasis on both its reconciliatory and unreconciliatory tropes is also a suggestion that the king's conversion from Hinduism to Jainism is inserted by the playwright with a dismantling purpose. He does so not just to emphasize the non-violence ethics of Jainism, but also to show, as we have seen with Mohan Banerjea's conversion story in the second chapter and the dramatic events it ushered in within his family, to challenge and destabilize the authority of the mother's Hindu hotheaded compulsion against the non-Hindu 'others' in the court. In different instances in the play, we are led to witness how the king is constantly reminded that he betrayed the old ways and allowed in to the court, in the mother's words, "demonic forces" and wickedness. To relate this incident to the religious history of India as we have demonstrated in the second chapter, one might assume that Karnad is critical of the way Hindu ideologists forced (usually through violence) converts back into the religion as both an act of punishment for challenging the authority of the Hindus and the Vedic texts and a purification of their souls.

For the king to decide to convert to Jainism is to be read as another step which the playwright takes to obliterate the lines which separate people and to emphasize, instead, the mutability of religion and an attack against the rigid structures imposed on court life and the relationships of people inside it. The king's behavior can be seen as a rebellion against tradition and the ways of the court. Critical of his mother's behavior (yet not of her religion per se), the king alerts the mother to the danger of some extreme practices of her faith through constantly reminding her of the sense of compassion he could find in Jainism. As such, it is the mother's (at least partially) own extreme and dominating ideas which overturned her son away from the ways of the ancestors and the court's religious beliefs. Reminiscent of Williams' and the

cultural materialists' view of dissidence against hegemony, and mainly Sinfield's idea that hegemonic systems 'harbor' the faults of their own dismantlement, I would say that the king and the new ideas he stands for act as, and as a cultural materialist reading of the play would also suggest, a "true mark of an ineradicable 'difference'," which "prevents power from closing the door on change;"<sup>455</sup> a change in the form of opening the door to religious pluralism and acceptance of the 'other' within the confines of the king's Hindu dominated court.

In the introduction to the play, Aparna Dharwadker links the play to Karnad's so-oft made statement that the play is a commentary about faith-based violence and its legacy of destruction and asserts that Karnad "chooses to address the public and political carnage of war and conquest (which led, for instance to emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism), but the legitimization of violence in ritual practices that individuals (such as the queen mother) regard as private acts of faith and worship."<sup>456</sup> And in relation to how the queen-mother conflict in the play transcends the domestic and its marital intricacies (which is the main focus of many earlier approaches to the play), Dharwadker further comments that "what alienates" the queen mother from "the barren and unfaithful queen is not only a mother's possessiveness and anger, *but fundamental differences of belief that insert larger cultural questions into their personal antagonisms.*"<sup>457</sup>

We might then suggest that, despite the resilience of the king and his openness towards his mother's Hindu doctrine with its demanding sacrificial rites, and his wife's Jainism, violence and friction could not be avoided due to the less compromising attitudes of the upholders of the two faiths. The uncompromising unfolding of the play's events may also be understood to be related to the king's unclear position and his wavering attitudes where, even though he planned to embrace the non-violent Jainism of his wife, his conversations throughout the play say the opposite. In many instances, the king seemed liable in front of his mother's strong attitude,

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<sup>455</sup> Selden et al., *A Reader's Guide*, 184.

<sup>456</sup> Dharwadker, "Introduction," in Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, xxxv.

<sup>457</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, xxxv. (Emphasis added).

leaning, more than once, towards her desire to perform a sacrifice as an atonement for his wife's sins.

### **a. The Mahout, a Voice of Mediation**

In addition to pushing the two religious worldviews in the play into an aura of friction as part of his tactic to pull out the best and worst in them, Karnad violates the boundaries of caste and class by driving the queen and a low caste servant into an illicit relationship. Like *TD*, *BS* is not exempt from inter-caste confrontation and exclusion. The mahout, like a low-born, is given voice and load by Karnad in the play to emphasize the fact that caste might define one's position in society as dictated by custom and tradition but it can in no way reflect the individual's wisdom or capacity for reflection and reasoning. In the play, while the mahout is constantly reminded of his low status, especially on the part of the king, he feels no pain or burden to acknowledge this for he thinks that a social structure can't be defied but it cannot be taken as a reference to judge one's intellect. He says addressing the queen: "I 'll accept I am not good at certain things like counting. I was lucky I was born in my caste. We only have to deal with elephants-and the elephants don't mind an ugly, misshapen man who can't count."<sup>458</sup> At the queen's surprise, he goes on claiming: "People mock mahouts. Call us "low-born". But where would all your princes and kings be without us, I want to know. What would happen to their elephants? No elephants, no army. No pomp, no splendor. No processions. No kings! Ha!"<sup>459</sup> In an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad comments about the mahout's character and place in the play saying:

The mahout is the catalyst that releases the repressions of the different characters in the play, especially the Queen... She is seduced by his music and in forgetting all inhibitions and barriers of decorum, commits adultery in thought even before their physical union. Likewise, she is shocked to realize that, not necessarily through explicit behavior, one can be violent in intent or thought.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 195.

<sup>459</sup> Karnad, 196.

<sup>460</sup> Mukherjee, *Girish Karnad's Plays*, 50, quoted in Mudasir Ahmad Shah, *Cultural Retrieval as a Dramatic Strategy: A Study of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq, Tale-Danda, and Bali-The Sacrifice* (MPhil, University of Kashmir, 2012), 125.

As this statement attests, the mahout is inserted by the playwright to act as a voice of mediation, a moving motif of each of the characters 'thoughts and desires vis a vis different issues from the queen's repressed emotions for she is seen as an outsider by the court and queen mother, and the king's restless temper after he finds out about the queen's adulterous behavior. As the play shows, the mahout smoothly develops from a despised, ugly and excluded character in the eyes of his Kshatriya masters into a 'catalyst' which "releases the repressions of the different characters" as the playwrights asserts above.

As such, besides *ahimsa* and the Jain-Hindu debate, Karnad seems to be accommodating to the Jain views towards the varna system or casteism which are different from Brahminism. According to the Jain view of society, inter-caste differences are merely "cultural, not natural, and have been imposed by human agency in response to human needs."<sup>461</sup> Therefore, according to this view, "social arrangements as such do not bear sacred values," arguing that "true Brahmanhood is a matter of knowledge and right conduct, not birth."<sup>462</sup> Arming the mahout with the capacity to argue and the power to convince both the king and the queen of the futility of their disagreements over the blood sacrifice reflects this Jain attitude of the importance of knowledge over birth or status. Therefore, the mahout, even though of a low-born caste, is inserted by Karnad as a voice of meditation during moments of friction.

To further reveal how the mahout is treated as one who can never be equal either to his Kshatriya king or those in the court is the idea that when the king finds out about his wife's, the queen's, adultery in the middle of the night, he shows resilience towards his wife even though she is the one to blame because she chose to take solace in the arms and songs of the mahout, without him recognizing who she was, at first. The mahout is shown to be deprived of the right to defend himself through the way he was continuously interrupted by the king. Just after the abrupt visitation of the king, who becomes a witness of what the mahout calls "a sin in the inner

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<sup>461</sup> Lawrence A. Babb, *Understanding Jainism* (Edinburgh and London: Dunedin Academic Press, 2015), 132.

<sup>462</sup> Babb, *Understanding Jainism*, 132.

sanctum,”<sup>463</sup> and without being fully cognizant of what happened, the king directs his anger and insults on the mahout since what is sinful and undignified is expected to come from those who belong to lower classes. Even the mahout to stay and sleep in an old ruined temple inside the court is emblematic here. As we have indicated in the second chapter, *avarnas* or outcastes are forbidden from entering temples or reading the sacred texts. As long as the temple is ruined (like the ruined nature of low castes which needs to be reformed), it is suitable to house the mahout and other *untouchables* in the play.

So, even though the king is portrayed as one who is trying as much as he can to reconcile the continuous conflicts between his Jain wife and Hindu mother, he fails to control his othering attitudes towards his mahout and subject. Because “the essence of caste resided in the structured opposition between ranked groups which perceived one another both hierarchically and holistically,”<sup>464</sup> the difficulty the King finds in communicating easily with the mahout reflects the social distancing practice of casteism which does not only favor some sects over others in terms of rights and privileges but does also dictate the behavior of the socially different towards each other. The inability to lead a normal conversation due to the feelings of inferiority-superiority each feels towards the other is clear in an exchange between the king and the mahout during which the mahout tries desperately to convince the king to listen to him, and he is shown to be begging for his life under the king’s sword: “If I shut up, your majesty, how will you know? I mean...you must hear me out. You could have me beheaded. Cut to pieces. Tramped under an elephant’s foot. But that would be wrong, sir. Very wrong. I didn’t do anything.”<sup>465</sup>

The mahout’s fear of being eliminated by the king develops into a fear of losing one’s voice, something which the mahout sees as important as existence itself. While he is deprived of a decent and respectful social position, the mahout sees in losing his voice a loss of the only

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<sup>463</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 201.

<sup>464</sup> Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India*, 307.

<sup>465</sup> Karnad, 204.

thing that gives him merit in life: “What’ ll happen to me, if I lose my voice? I have nothing else...only my songs. Please, please, don’t destroy me by taking them away.”<sup>466</sup> The social discrepancy as informed by rigid caste laws becomes clearer every time a conversation takes place between different characters in the play. So, added to the fierce antagonism between the upholders of Jainism and Hinduism in the play with each trying to show his or her faith to be more righteous compared to the other, there is a harsh caste question the rigidity of which Karnad tries to violate and destabilize.

Against this conflicting aura and as the play develops, nevertheless, the voice Karnad grants to the mahout starts to slowly emerge out of its repressed realm, mediating, where he starts reminding the king of his Jainism which preaches non-violence and condemns the shedding of blood. The king, then, feels compelled to reconsider his stance towards violence. Through this incident, the writer aims to test the King’s views towards violence and whether his continuous criticism of his mother’s attachment to her Hinduism’s sacrificial rites stems really from a true belief in the ethics of his adopted faith. This is the case because according to the Jain principle of *ahimsa*, an action can be accounted as violent whether it has taken place or not as long as it was intended as a resolution or thought of as a possibility. Speaking to his mother, the king justifies his choice to adopt the Jainism of his wife by referring to its “truth” and “compassion for the world in pain.” While the mother thinks that he chose to be a Jain to show his allegiance to his Jain wife, the king keeps referring to the principles of Jainism which attracted his attention.

Karnad explores the way low-caste subjects relate to their upper-caste rulers through digging deeper into the domestic and intimate intercourses both sides engage in. In the scene in which the king finds his wife in the company of the mahout in the temple, we get to know what is expected to take place between two people from two different castes and how the caste

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<sup>466</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 221.

structure itself intervenes to dictate the behavior and expectations of each character. The mahout declares to the king: “your majesty...I swear to you I won’t breathe a word of this to anyone. Who will believe me anyway? They’ll laugh at me...”<sup>467</sup> Here, we can understand the prevailing mindset that a low-born is not expected to befriend or engage in a sexual relationship with an upper-caste individual. As the play’s events develop, however, we come to see that Karnad grants the mahout voice not just to defend himself but, also, to unveil the contradictions lying at the heart of the king’s and court’s life. Step by step, we come to sense that the mahout is used as a tool for judgment in the play, and one through which the writer tries to break down the prejudices driving the attitudes of the royal court’s members whether how they understand their social positionality towards those inferior to them and how they should act accordingly, or how they perceive those who identify differently in terms of faith. Therefore, the playwright creates a stark opposition between the king and his elephant keeper in both attitude and behavior to further emphasize the idea that the four characters in the play maintain their existence and survival through the distance they insist on keeping between them and those whom they consider their ‘others’.

Added to the previous insights, we might also assume that for the playwright to grant a low caste character the ability to play fine music and the power for sound judgment in the midst of his Kshatriya masters is in tune with the anti-upper class/anti-nationalist revisionist arguments put forward by Dalit Studies scholars we discussed in the first chapter. Like many of the issues addressed by this group on how body shape, physical form and blood purity have been central to many discussions about the status of different castes in Indian society, in *BS* also, we see that many of the exchanges which take place between the mahout, the queen and the king turn around body shape and its relation to both ugliness and purity. In order to protect and defend himself in the face of the death threat under the king’s sword, the mahout insists on

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<sup>467</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 204.

pointing out his ugliness (something which has been emphasized by the king when he keeps calling him “savage ape”, “ugly beast”<sup>468</sup>) as a defensive move, yet, something which defines his identity vis à vis his rulers. The starting point of this group, hence, is to reclaim voice to the muted untouchables whose predicament has always been determined by more powerful hegemonic forces in the history of Indian society. Similar to the playwright’s way of treating the low castes in both of his plays, this group (along others with interest in subaltern consciousness, hierarchical discrimination and ‘histories from below’) sees that “caste and subaltern consciousness were specifically concerned with questions of bodily and ritual purity and sought to challenge the dominant groups’ “use of dharma to claim authority,” and through which caste “subjectivity comes into existence.”<sup>469</sup>

Just like the concern driving the scholarly engagement of Dalit scholars who aim to bring to center stage the “untold narratives” of untouchables and other unrecognized castes as “active participants in the project of imagining new visions of modern India,”<sup>470</sup> in this play we notice the playwright, towards the end of the play, reclaims the voice of the mahout not only through inserting him as a voice of reason, but also through charging him with the urge to stand in the face of his master’s continuous insults and denigration. In a scene towards the end of the play during which the preparations for the sacrifice take place, the mahout is shown to be standing under the king’s sword and death threat, waiting for what might happen to him:

*(The Mahout, has been, until now, sitting and watching in a kind of alcoholic stupor. He can barely understand what’s going on. How he reacts.)*

Mahout (*roars*): Enough!

*(Gets up.)*

Enough, I say. I’ve had enough. I won’t put up with this anymore. The insults. The abuses, no more. I’ve had enough. Now pick up that toy of yours and get out of here. Out! You may be the royalty. You may cut me to pieces tomorrow. But tomorrow’s tomorrow. But now I tell you what to do. Pick that up and get out of here.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 237.

<sup>469</sup> Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, 13-14/4-5.

<sup>470</sup> Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, 17.

<sup>471</sup> Karnad, 237. (Emphasis in original.)

The mahout's reaction to the continuous abuse gets in intensity as the conversation develops and he even resorts to the use of threats the way his master does. This outburst reveals another side in the mahout's character. While he is at first receptive of orders and one who starts defending himself in fear of losing his voice (for a crime which is not his), he changes tone in effort to regain his dignity as a human being and not just his voice.

We have noted earlier that the queen's illicit sexual behavior with the mahout is viewed as a violation of tradition and the caste laws governing the kingdom and inter-class relationships. Yet, and in front of the king, the queen acknowledges: "I do not regret anything that has happened. I will not disown him or anything he gave me."<sup>472</sup> This testament clearly explains that however rigid the caste structure is, there is room for fluidity and despite the fact she is royalty, still, she sees no wrong in being in intimacy with a low born. Just like king Bijjala and his family in *TD* who became rulers through usurping the power from their upper caste superiors in an act of war, here also, we attest to how caste rigidity can be violated to satisfy one's sexual drives. Religion, myth and tradition which have for long supported casteism, as such, prove irrelevant as long as caste can be violated for different reasons and according to peoples' whims.

One of the songs which is performed twice in the play (by an anonymous singer) can be read as an interpretation of what Karnad wants to achieve through addressing the inter-religious and inter-caste question in the play, that of reconciling divisions through creating a space for dialogue. The song says: "memories slide/meld and fuse/discrete moments/get flung together/strung in a single moment."<sup>473</sup> This talk about sliding, melding, and flinging together memories can be seen as a call for unity, harmony, and dialogue. Sung while the most intense of the play's events are unfolding, these words tone down the already troubled waters of

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<sup>472</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 1, 234.

<sup>473</sup> Karnad, 205, and again in 209.

division and exclusion, and are a sign of hope amidst the fissures cracking the social world of the play.

### **3. Exclusion/Othering and Reconciliation: An Appraisal**

Be it as it may, the Indian nationalist and/or national reconstruction discourse has been for a long time governed by the politics of communalism, minorityism, casteism, and religious exclusion. As demonstrated in this chapter, both *TD* and *BS* offset scenes of inter-caste, inter-religious and intra-religious violence, as they communicate Karnad's views towards reconciliation in contemporary Indian history.

Reflecting Karnad's own criticism of the Hindutva ideology and the caste system in both classical and modern India, Basava and his Sharannas in *TD* speak in the name of the downtrodden and people whose position is/was circumvented by the hegemonic and exclusionary practices of Brahminism and the Kshatriya classes. To reverse this order and shake it from within, the reformers, among a number of other initiatives, make an inter-caste marriage between a lower and upper caste possible, defend the right to religious freedom, and speak in the language of the masses (Kannada) to challenge the privileges associated with Sanskrit (owned by the Brahmins as the sole exponents of the sacred texts). In *BS*, the silenced and muted voice of the low caste mahout is granted space by Karnad to speak for himself and is inserted as a voice of mediation in the midst of conflicting religious beliefs in the play.

In both plays, Karnad can be said to be imagining an Indian society where multiculturalism can be cherished as an ethic, where people come to be treated based on merit, and where 'difference' is celebrated, rather than challenged or silenced. Because caste and religion are still a reference in explaining the contours of identity construction in contemporary India, Karnad seems to be critical of the Indian political leadership since independence for he thinks that it failed to absorb the different cultural and social others over which it ruled. The government's aspiration at establishing a modern democratic state continues to fall short for the communal

propensities of some of its leaders whose view of the nation is molded according to the whims of some separatist parties like the BJP, and that its debates about social justice are very well driven by caste, religion, and ethnicity. *TD* proves that history repeats itself and that Indians didn't learn from the mistakes of their violent past, and that 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian society is no way differed from ancient Kaylan. *BS*, similarly, communicates the idea that 'non-violence' the way Gandhi and the founding fathers of the modern Indian nation thought of as a basis for the newly aspired to India, remains an idealistic venture. This is the case because reality provides many instances where faith and caste motivated conflicts define people's daily lives in many regions across India and prove that violence against untouchables, Dalits and Muslim minorities have aggravated over the years.

In his *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism*, Partha Chatterjee questions the possibilities towards and the obstacles facing the modern Indian state's democratization process. He addresses the pathways the Hindu Right has taken in order to impose its notion of 'national culture'. It uses, Chatterjee asserts, the "ideological resources" of the state to "lead the charge against people who do not conform to its version of the 'national culture', as it embraces the "arguments for interventionist secularization to promote intolerance and violence against minorities."<sup>474</sup> As such, the Hindu Right pushes for its version of the nation, according to Chatterjee, through eliminating and marginalizing that which contradicts with its "homogenized content to the notion of citizenship."<sup>475</sup> Chatterjee seems to ask that, in the face of a confining notion of nationhood and citizenship at least since the partition of 1947, how is the state to maintain its multicultural character and push for any possibilities towards reconciliation of its past and contemporary realities, or reconciling its cultural (ethnic and religious) differences for the good of all?

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<sup>474</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 230.

<sup>475</sup> Chatterjee, *A Possible India*, 230.

Likewise, I argue that the playwright, in his plays, inveighs against a “Vedic”, “Brahminic”, and “Kshatriya’ imagined kind of community where caste, social class, faith, inheritance, and birth are the determinants of one’s worth. He is trying to shake the firm foundations which were supported by both faith and myth for centuries, and the repercussions of which still define the contemporary Indian socio-cultural scene. Against a background of inter-religious, intra-religious, and inter-caste othering practices, exclusion and violence, Karnad sees a possibility for progress in the liberty of religious identity, class justice, and caste consciousness. This attitude is reflected by Basava and his followers in *TD* for they also could see the impacts of a caste beholding oppressive society on the lives of many who are victims to structures and ideologies they inherited but unquestioningly followed for a long time. In both plays, the fear of crossing the border between castes hunts the speeches and actions of many characters. In *TD*, as we have seen, different people in Kalyan seem to have a say in why or why not inter-caste marriage should take place. While some expect that this marital link would soften the rigid laws determining relations between people and classes in the kingdom, and as the first step towards a change in people’s exclusionary attitudes, many others, whether those representing the Orthodox camp from both royalty and Brahmins or the common people, see in this marriage as a call for chaos, a violation of the sacred texts and, thereby, an instigation of unnecessary violence in the city.

As earlier indicated, through his reformist movement, Basava “made no rupture with Brahmanism” but “rejected the old order” and attempted to replace it with a new one; with his Lingayat/Jangama order whose call for equality and religious/caste tolerance stands in opposition to the rigid hegemonic structures of the old order. Viewing Basava’s revolutionary movement in line with Raymond Williams’ earlier raised views on the “dominant, residual and emergent”, we can say that Basava’s movement (considering also the consciousness it instigated in his society) is both residual and emergent. Residual in the sense that it molded

itself in ‘opposition’ to the dominant Varna system and Brahminic tradition investing with its prejudices and contradictions, and ‘emergent’ because it seeks to introduce an ‘alternative’ order to the prevailing one; that is the Lingayat/Jangama order (reflecting the playwright’s own vision of an inclusive, multicultural and non-exclusionary Indian society, or an alternative reality/social world). While Williams sees the ‘emergent’ in the light of “the formation of a new class, the coming to consciousness of a new class, and within this, in actual process, the (often uneven) emergence of elements of a new cultural formation,”<sup>476</sup> in the play, I see it through the emergence not of a new class, but of a consciousness towards the injustices of casteism; a consciousness which motivates people of different creeds and social groups to join the movement and support it, however traumatic and ambivalent the play’s closing flareups are. Basava and his *Sharanas* aspire for a new ‘cultural formation’; that “someday, this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison-house of varnashrama” will fall down.<sup>477</sup>

The Jain-Hindu debate in *BS* and the inter-caste marriage and the reform movement whose goal is to bring people belonging to different social classes and who are followers of different religious beliefs under its wings in *TD* can be seen as a clear reminder of what happened in India since independence. Both plays can be read as a testimony to a traumatic history of exclusion and violence which, even though noted to be part of Indian life for centuries, seemed to accumulate during the last three decades or more. In Karnad’s many plays and mainly the ones which are centered around questions of identity, religious fanaticism, and inter-caste exclusion, change or reconciliation as I see it emerges as an aspiration towards a change in the predicament of the contemporary Indian individual whose identity, sense of belonging and a desire for a better future seem to crash under the divided whims of politicians and religious leaders. Relating this to the earlier discussed Mandal Mandir issues and more precisely to the Hindu Muslim debate in Indian socio-political discourse, I agree with Priya Kumar when she

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<sup>476</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 124.

<sup>477</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 46.

argues that “the pervasive content of majority religions is *thus rendered transparent and invisible*, whereas minoritarian religious beliefs and practices are *constructed as threatening and hyper-visible*. In the Indian landscape, the Muslim becomes the site or the repository of this “excess” —and hence is constituted *as the stranger within the nation*.<sup>478</sup>

So just like the objective of the social order envisaged by Basava and the Sarannas which is “to create a new society, a liberated society, in place of the existing social order in which the poor were oppressed by the rich and the common folk were controlled by the priestly class,”<sup>479</sup> I think that the kind of Indian society Karnad seems to imagine is one which accommodates differences through respecting each of them as it is and not as it should be according to whims of the political and ethnoreligious nationalist politics. He argues for “an idea of India” as an “assimilative, tolerant, multiform political entity” which was supported by “the nationalist thinking that emerged under the leadership of Gandhi, Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, and others during the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>480</sup>

In many of his speeches and essays, Karnad seems to align voice with the “anti-caste” theorists and the previously mentioned architects of the nation who valued the “importance of probing and critiquing the phenomenon of caste.”<sup>481</sup> Also, in his stance against Hindutva ideology and the caste-informed hierarchy in modern Indian socio-cultural discourse, Karnad can be said to be supportive of the upholders of the Dalitbahujan thought which developed as a reaction/revisionist trend of the previously mentioned ideologies; a movement which “provides an alternate Indian intellectual tradition based on egalitarianism along the axes of both caste and gender.”<sup>482</sup> The ideas brought by Dalitbahujan critics and those communicated by Karnad

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<sup>478</sup> Priya Kumar, *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 31. (Emphasis added).

<sup>479</sup> Karigoudar, *Speaking of Basava*, 144.

<sup>480</sup> Dharwadker, “Introduction,” in *Karnad Collected Plays*, vol. 2, xxi.

<sup>481</sup> Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India*, 154.

<sup>482</sup> Maia Ramnath, “No Gods, No Masters, No Brahmins: An Anarchist Inquiry on Caste, Race, and Indigeneity in India,” in *No Gods, No Masters, No Peripheries: Global Anarchisms*, Barry Maxwell and Raymond Craib, eds., (California: PM Press, 2015), 46.

in both plays intersect in their criticism of caste, Hindutva and the ‘narrow loyalties’ driving scholarship in contemporary India. While we earlier pointed out that *BS* is written as tribute to Gandhi’s ethics of non-violence, still; much writing on caste discrimination in Dalit and Subaltern criticism targets how Gandhi and other nationalist leaders have treated the untouchables and the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) as subjects in need of ‘reform’:

The hegemony of the Harijan<sup>483</sup> perspective is one explanation that helps account for the absence of systematic engagement with Dalits as political and historical actors. It represents Dalits through the powerful stereotype of the *bhangi* (scavenger) figure and stigmatized victim in need of reform from above. Removing other more prominent forms of Dalit lives from discussion, the scavenger figure became the dominant trope through which questions related to Dalits were discussed and debated in the nationalist discourse. Gandhi played a prominent role in creating this discourse when he idealized the scavenger figure and sought to ennoble the occupation of scavenging. Gandhian discussions of reforming Hindu society relied heavily on the reform of untouchables’ impure occupation of scavenging.<sup>484</sup>

A statement as such alerts us into the fact that the stigmas associated with the figure of the *untouchable* or *Harijan* are but an accumulation of competing hegemonic ideologies which emerged as a result of the continuous attempts to define both Indianness and the Indian nation. This echoes a comment made by Chatterjee I earlier inserted which asserts that a fight against a colonial hegemony developed into a ‘hegemony from within’ after independence (Upper classes as regards Dalits and other OBCs and Hindus as regards other religious minorities, exclusively Muslims). As the quote above also approves, while Gandhi’s non-violence or *ahimsa* ethic is geared towards tolerance of difference and refraining from violence, it contradicts itself when we know that a large part of the Indian population is removed into the margins of both scholarship and social privileges. This paradox develops into a “civilizational violence” which “renders the untouchable also as unseeable, unapproachable, and incapable of communicating,” as Gopal Guru asserts in his essay “The Indian Nation in its Egalitarian Conception.”<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> *Harijan*, a term coined by Gandhi, translates as ‘Children of God’ and is used to refer to *untouchables* who need to be saved and reformed of their impure nature. (Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, 9). Even though Gandhi is known for his fight against *untouchability*, his initiatives have often been criticized by leaders within Dalit studies.

<sup>484</sup> Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, 9. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>485</sup> Gopal Guru, “The Indian Nation in its Egalitarian Conception,” in Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, 38.

This chapter, hence, sheds light on Karnad's views towards reconciliation and in what ways he sets out to approach it in his two plays *TD* and *BS*. The historical and social background in the second chapter gives a clear understanding of how questions of religion, casteism, communalism, and race do interplay when approaching the contemporary Indian nation. Whether ancient or modern, as history tells us and as Karnad wants to show through his dramaturgy, both caste and religion remained a source of social oppression, exclusion, and othering, and grew to be a tool at the hands of both political and religious leaders in the post-independence era to espouse ethnic discourses about national identity and belonging. Finding an outlet in ancient myths and histories, Karnad makes associations between the way violence was committed in the past in the name of one's caste and religion, and how the social structures and laws which instigated these ancient incidents (which historical references keep tracing throughout more than a thousand years) keep being part and parcel of the contemporary Indian life.

While Karnad offers no resolution at the end of both plays apart from the seemingly "torn into pieces" conclusions of the plays, this can be interpreted to indicate Karnad's conviction that a new form of an inclusive Indian society which nowadays Indians aspire to see would remain within the confines of an 'imagined community' as long as the ills and laws which led to oppression in the past are still very well present. Notable in this regard are the recent nationwide protests due to the atrocities committed against the Dalits (a refined untouchable category) and the new citizenship act issued by Narendra Modi's government (which targeted the Muslim minorities as unfit nationals within the new definition of the Indian nation) which make our discussion on themes of violence and exclusion and Karnad's attempts at addressing them in his drama relevant as never before. Linking both plays to the Mandal Mandir incidents earlier discussed and how the current government (BJP led) is further instigating violence through lines of religion and caste, we come to see that the Brahminic orthodoxy in *TD* and the

Jain Hindu antipathies in *BS* depict so well the dangerous extremes driving contemporary Indian history. In her recently published book *Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction*, the acclaimed Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy, and in her scathing criticism of Modi's present government and its extremist/marginalizing policies against religious minorities, explains: "For the RSS to portray what it is engineering today as an epochal revolution, in which Hindus are finally wiping away centuries of oppression at the hands of India's earlier Muslim rulers," is part of its "fake-history project. In truth, millions of India's Muslims are the descendants of people who converted to Islam to escape Hinduism's cruel practice of caste."<sup>486</sup>

As such, I hereby agree with David Ludden's inferences in his study of the driving impulse of research which focuses on marginalized groups and different 'histories from below' in contemporary history. He asserts that writers, critics and historians "stand together against colonial modernity to secure a better future for subaltern peoples, learning to hear them, allowing them to speak, talking back to powers that marginalise them, documenting their past," and who speculate about "a liberated imagined community" which "can only come into its own," in this view, "in subaltern language and memory, which historians can strive to recuperate, however partially and tentatively."<sup>487</sup> The task to recuperate marginalized histories can be very well done through literature or the aesthetic which stands on its own right when it 'speaks truth to power' and takes part in urgent political debates. In India and since the partition, questions of caste and the rights of religious minorities remained in prominence, and with the recent governmental laws, we come to sense the role writers can play in alerting their societies to the gravity of many issues they take for granted. India's path towards democratization is still hotly debated, yet, few writers devote their literary loci to mediate on how inter-caste or inter-religious reconciliation is to take place.

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<sup>486</sup> Arundhati Roy, *Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2020), 74.

<sup>487</sup> Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 20.

Reconciliation for Karnad, therefore, remains an “unattainable utopia” as long as religion and caste are not “prevented” from “becoming the primary basis of nationhood.”<sup>488</sup> Karnad thinks that societies that are “experimenting with democratic structures”<sup>489</sup> have to consider the potential of investing with a difference and cultural diversity. Therefore, he retrieves the pre-modern Indian world, with its complex histories of warfare, violence, religious and ethnic exclusion, to cast an ironic reading of a postcolonial Indian society. A society whose past seems to be not so much different from its present, and one which has failed to come to grips with its multiculturally diverse character, and one whose vision of reconciliation seems to be engrained within a desire to satisfy a ‘mythically and ethno-nationalistically’ view of a nation. In his recently posthumously published personal memoir (Karnad died of a stroke in June 2019) written by himself, and in an afterword by his children, we are told:

So, for one generation he was a prodigy, for another a heartthrob, for a third, a part of their intellectual upbringing, beamed into homes on *Turning Point*. For even younger Indians, he may be remembered as an anchor against a bleak tide pulling at their country for the past decade. As one Gen-Z reader described him: ‘Part of India’s intellectual legion that guards its boundaries of dialogue and peace and narrative.’<sup>490</sup>

As this tribute asserts and as we have demonstrated throughout this chapter, Karnad’s clear stance in what concerns the need for dialogue and border crossing between religious and class identities in contemporary India remains a milestone in his literary engagements with the predicament of the modern Indian individual.

In hindsight, the playwright offers no resolution to the complex debates which he brings to both plays. The world left behind at the closing scenes of both plays is one featured by chaos and instability, and one which holds little hope for the future. Yet, despite the gloomy and bloody endings of the plays, for people, in *TD*, of various castes to join Basava’s movement, share in the discussion in his initiated haul of gatherings and for an inter-caste marriage between an untouchable and a Brahmin girl to take place, besides the resilient attitudes of the king

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<sup>488</sup> Dharwadker, “Introduction,” in Karnad *Collected Plays*, vol 2, xxi.

<sup>489</sup> Dharwadker, xxi.

<sup>490</sup> Girish Karnad, *This Life at Play: Memoirs* (India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2021), 324.

towards the change Basava calls for are to be seen as profound signs or symbols of reconciliation. In *BS*, for the low caste mahout to be a refuge to the queen and source of judgment in the play, despite the ridiculousness anticipated from his relationship with the queen, can be seen as a change in attitude and the way upper classes view their outcaste servants. As the play unfolds, we become witnesses of how the mahout and his Kshatriya king exchange thoughts as counterparts rather than as part of a hierarchical dichotomy.

The next chapter leads us, again, to Gambaro's post-proceso Argentina with the purpose to showcase how she communicates her vision towards reconciliation given the violence, trauma and authoritarian repression against which both *SN* and *LM* are written.

## Chapter V

### **Remapping Social Borders in Gambaro's Post-Proceso Plays: Bridging Central and Peripheral Narratives in *Del sol naciente* and *La malasangre***

The esthetic act has to awaken us, has to sensitize us to all the false information, the deformation of feelings and ideas upon which our society is based.<sup>491</sup>

Every play is a *settling of accounts*, an immediate confrontation with society.<sup>492</sup>

“Argentina is seismic as well as schizophrenic. From night to day, things can change drastically owing to causes below the surface, behind the screen that's offered up as reality,”<sup>493</sup> so says Griselda Gambaro when she was asked about the social and political situation in Argentina during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gambarian dramatic corpus was mainly a reaction to ‘these causes below the surface’, a portrayal of the interwoven social dynamics which featured late modern Argentinian history. Gambaro’s thematic concern over the decades proved so relevant to reflect upon issues like state repression, the interplay of the domestic and political forms of violence, memory politics, exile and censorship, history and its recurring cycles of violence, among many other issues. Whether during the early and most repressive Proceso years which led to her forced exile to Barcelona, during the transitional move into democratic agendas in the ’80s, or her most recent years, Gambaro’s plays received much critical acclaim, identifying her drama as one where “individual and collective identities are articulated and discovered,” and where “repressed narratives are unleashed.”<sup>494</sup> Having an overall look at Gambaro’s work makes it clear that her preoccupation with themes of violence

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\* All translations from Spanish to English throughout the chapter are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>491</sup> Gambaro, quoted in Annette H. Levine, *Cry for me, Argentina: the Performance of Trauma in the Short Narratives of Aída Bortnik, Griselda Gambaro, and Tununa Mercado* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 75.

<sup>492</sup> Griselda Gambaro, “Algunas consideraciones sobre la crisis de la dramaturgia,” in Diana Taylor, ed., *Ensayos críticos sobre Griselda Gambaro y Jose Triana* (Ottawa: Giro! Books, 1989), 26.

<sup>493</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz in an interview with Griselda Gambaro, in., “Argentina: Two Writers Griselda Gambaro and Angelica Gorodischer”, *BOMB*, No. 32 (Summer, 1990), 52-55.

<sup>494</sup> Levine, *Cry for me, Argentina*, 76.

(both state-imposed and domestic), perpetrator-victim relationship, official and unofficial power narratives, social exclusion, and marginality, which are of major concern in this dissertation, are weaved within other social dynamics like gender, economic discrimination, and identity construction in Argentina and the continuous interaction between mainstream and marginal power structures. As such, Gambaro's deep and overt entanglement with the different aspects of Argentinian society define her work's identity and its connection with society's changing realities.

In her *La Escena de poder: El teatro de Griselda Gambaro* (2007), Susana Tarantuviez targets the different representations of power which emerge from Gambaro's plays. She discusses the absurdist dimension of Gambaro's dramaturgy or what she calls "Gambarian absurdity" and how she employs it to address issues beyond violence, dictatorship, and institutional repression which many other critics discussed when it comes to Gambaro's theatrical preoccupation. She, instead, addresses themes like gender issues and the place of women in Argentinian society, added to the plight of other poor and marginal classes and how Gambaro gives them space in her works. She also digs deeper into the stylistics of narrative and intertextuality which bring together history, politics, and memory in one theatrical space.<sup>495</sup> Equally relevant is Diana Taylor's profound study about the drama of both Griselda Gambaro and José Triana where she points out that discussing the layers of power games in Argentina under state gaze for the last four decades is of central importance in both Gambaro's and Triana's work. In her *Ensayos críticos sobre Griselda Gambaro y José Triana* (1989), Taylor calls Gambaro's drama a 'theater of crisis' and juxtaposes the way both dramatists bring to their texts both domestic and political forms of violence in a way that alienates the reader from tracing the real intention behind both setting and characterization. As far as Gambaro is concerned, this relates to the Brechtian influence on her drama and the way she believes in the

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<sup>495</sup> Susana Tarantuviez, *La escena de poder: El teatro de Griselda Gambaro* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2007)

relevance of historical analogy to her treatment of power and repression in post-proceso Argentina. Sharing perspective with Taylor, Brenda Werth, in her discussion of theater and memory politics in Argentina where she reads through some of Gambaro's plays like *Antigona furiosa* (*Furious Antigone*, 1986), *La malasangre* (*Bad Blood*, 1982), and *Atando cabos* (*Loose Ends*, 1991), categorizes many of Gambaro's plays to be among those texts which try to address and "reconstruct the past", dramas which "negotiate between private and public histories, and to imagine a present and a future that is informed but not overshadowed by the past."<sup>496</sup>

This chapter, therefore, adds to this scholarship by highlighting Gambaro's contribution to this remapping of social borders through her interest in domesticating disempowered margins, or those intentionally excluded due to state repression. There is also an assumption that Gambaro's drama aims, first and foremost, at, as she states it in the last epigraph above, a 'settlement of accounts' where she grants the victimized or marginalized a space to speak out against atrocity and oppression. This, according to Gambaro, can channel a possibility towards reconciliation between 'victim and perpetrator', however irreconcilable their stories or narratives seem to be.

As this chapter sets out to explore through a close analysis of the two plays, reading them in the social, historical, and political contexts which shaped them, there is an argument that in *la malasangre*, the patriarchal narrative of power (representative of the authoritarian discourse in the domestic arena) is defied and challenged by the daughter's rebellious nature and her different view of the world, while in *Del sol naciente*, the victim's or the margin's narrative/logic of power shakes and defies the oppressor's or the perpetrator's. In the case of both plays, I would argue that, against the background of a decade of repressive power politics, Gambaro is trying to create a space for communication, for opening up, and she uses the one who has been denied voice and place as a starting point to this attempt at reconciling accounts

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<sup>496</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 2.

and wounds. However impossible or difficult this reconciliation or communion seems to be whether in some Gambarian earlier texts or the ones considered in this study, the playwright envisions its happenings in an “epic theater” fashion. Her plays constitute a bridge between the national official narrative and the way it constructed facts according to what it perceives as right and wrong during the repressive years, and a narrative that comes from the margins which were previously denied agency and freedom. In this sense, the official discourse which was backed up by a politics and mechanics of repression is faced with its atrocities, transgressions, and the gap it creates between past and present, through injecting the repressed and the victim with power and voice to claim its pain, loss, troubled memory and connection with the past.

What emerges from these texts then is a desire to channel the position of the victim through filling that of the perpetrator with doubt, hesitancy, evasiveness, denial, and an inability to stand up in defense of its position. Even though other Gambarian plays like *Antígona furiosa*, *Atando cabos*, *La casa sin sosiego*, and *es necesario entender un poco* address similar themes of state-imposed violence and its workings through the domestic arena, the plays chosen for analysis in this dissertation stand out due to two things. Due to both their historical analogism and the way the writer makes associations between past and present forms of violence, and the way both texts give deeper insights into how Gambaro is trying to ‘imagine a social world’ different from the one that was created and propagated for by the repressive state.

As such, this chapter looks at Gambaro’s two plays *Del sol naciente* and *La malasangre* to showcase them as projections of social mechanisms of victimization that arise in the framework of opposing discourses in the sociopolitical realm. In both *SN* and *LM*, as we will try to demonstrate in the coming sections, Gambaro embarks on a ‘settlement of accounts’ (or central/peripheral narratives) and a remapping of social borders where she tries to defy the boundaries or hierarchies of power which distance those with power (using it to victimize and suppress others) and victims, through injecting them with the power to speak and rebel, turning

them into equal players within the power games controlling the everyday life of individuals. About this, Amy Kaminsky, in her *Argentina: Stories for a Nation*, says: “the monopolizing narrative crafted and propagated by the state to the exclusion of all others creates the conditions for not-knowing and at the same time reinforces them. The voices of dissidents from within the nation are not only suppressed, they are vilified and ridiculed.”<sup>497</sup> It is against this vilification of ‘dissident voices’ that Gambaro envisions a different social order where the ‘victimized’ can rise beyond their subjectivity and claim position through speaking against their ‘victimizers’. This is, wherefore, Gambaro’s view of reconciliation.

### **1. “Y ahora, de muertos, quieren tener voz”<sup>498</sup>: Marginalization, Machismo Tyranny and the ‘Reconciliation of Accounts’ in *Del sol naciente***

“¿Es que la historia es esta reconciliación absurda y miserable?” (*Is history really this absurd and miserable reconciliation?*), Elisa, in Gambaro’s play *Atando cabos* (1991), incredulously asks.<sup>499</sup>

This section aims to read through Gambaro’s play *SN* as a space through which she tries to reconcile victim-victimizer, center-periphery, and oppressor-oppressed narratives. It showcases the way (s) she confronts characters from the supposedly ‘military ruling elite/state’ with their hegemonic repressive ideologies represented through the character of Oban, and the Argentinian individual who is repressed and victimized through the characters of Suki, Ama, the beggar, and the injured foot soldier. Here, the reader becomes a witness of two largely distinct worlds, desires, and versions of reality where victim and perpetrator become both voices of what state violence and repression Gambaro is writing against have done to human relations, and how the individual relates to both the public sphere and the state itself. Turning between the power discourse of the state and the way it is reflected in Oban’s machismo tyranny, and the marginalized status of the other characters, we come to see how *SN* creates a

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<sup>497</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *Argentina: Stories for a Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 159.

<sup>498</sup> “And now that they are dead, they want to have a voice,” Griselda Gambaro, *Teatro I: Del sol naciente* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1984), 150.

<sup>499</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 55.

space for communication, where the victim's account and version of truth try to shake and meddle in that of the perpetrator. 'Self' and 'other' in this play manifest through victim and perpetrator, where each sees his or her conversant as his social 'other'. Gambaro, in the play, I argue, to reconcile victim and perpetrator accounts, gives voice to Suki and the other characters she seems to represent, in the face of Oban's presumed authority discourse. She has also created a space for communication between the victims themselves, in a 'subaltern solidarity' fashion, whose sense of sympathy towards each other and whose realization of the importance and necessity of joining their forces against their victimizer, helps in changing (however slightly) their predicament towards the end of the play. The play, then, can be seen as a form of "theatre during the late dictatorship and the early years of the transition" which often "replicated what Stanley Cohen has termed the "atrocities triangle"—the relationship between *victims, perpetrators, and observers.*"<sup>500</sup>

In the aftermath of the disruptive historical realities discussed in the second chapter, a move to talk about 'national reconciliation' came to feature the post-Dirty War period, which was backed up by the new leadership's 'Nunca mas' report as I previously specified. While the leaders' version of reconciliation was imagined through the trajectory of truth-telling and open trials of those involved with the atrocities, a counter-discourse emerging mainly from the intellectual circles argued for the importance of social inclusion and the recognition of the place of those who were excluded and othered in the 'national identity' rhetoric which shaped the ideals of the repressive state itself. This was the case because the architects of the military state aimed at crafting a 'national identity' which necessitated ridding the nation of its undesirable enemies. This, as many critics suggested, led to the social 'othering' of many "dissidents and possible dissidents" including "students, trade unionists, psychiatrists, writers, and artists,"<sup>501</sup> among others, who didn't comply with the new idea of the 'community' as imagined by the

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<sup>500</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 17. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>501</sup> Kaminsky, *Argentina: Stories for a Nation*, 159.

dirty war perpetrators. The kind of 'other' the new military junta wanted to "exorcise the "national spirit" of its ghosts," with its proceso de reorganizacion, is the one who emerged as a 'social other' which "has been excluded, that which has been done violence to by the very identity that is claiming legitimacy."<sup>502</sup> In questioning the nature and limits of 'reconciliation' in post-proceso Argentinian political and cultural discourse, Di Paolantonio further adds:

If there is anything that the "dirty war" finally brings to the surface, it is how any attempt to represent a national identity will be constituted against an excluded other; how no story can claim to reverberate through the imagined community without being haunted by its victims, those others who cannot easily be incorporated or reified through a common language, past, or project.<sup>503</sup>

Even though Gambaro has molded her plays within the conflicting dialectics of the proceso years, they can be seen to be transmitting her thoughts about reconciliation, proffering more transitory revisionist overtones. *SN* published in 1984, and *LM* (to be dealt with in the next section) published in 1982 respond to this literary desire at trying to make sense of the new realities which are perceived to be still hanging between past traumas and a present difficulty to fathom the meaning of reconciliation and the way it is seen as a viable way to deal with the past. In tandem with this, I view (and intend to analyze) Gambaro's two plays as texts which, as Graham Jones thought of the texts written in response to the proceso years, "went beyond their Proceso counterparts' representations of violent repression and its unmasking" stepping up, instead, into "historical revision, building upon examinations of extant power and mytho-historical structures," into a new era of a "self-interrogative analysis of the individual's role within society and discussion of individual and collective responsibility."<sup>504</sup>

Gambaro's play *Del sol naciente* (translates as *From the Rising Sun*, 1984) takes place in a distant Medieval Japanese social context with unspecified time and place settings. Situating the play's events in a Medieval Japanese house setting relates to Gambaro's use of allegory,

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<sup>502</sup> Mario Di Paolantonio, "Argentina after the "Dirty War": Reading the Limits of National Reconciliation," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1997), 335.

<sup>503</sup> Di Paolantonio, "Argentina after the "Dirty War"," 335.

<sup>504</sup> Graham Jones, *Exorcising History*, 125.

symbolism, and the Brechtian technique of distancing a dramatic text historically to reflect upon and discuss issues of contemporary social relevance. In a typical Japanese house, *Del sol naciente* dramatizes the story of the young prostitute/geisha Suki, dressed in a courtesan outfit and playing the "biwa"<sup>505</sup>, who uses her beauty and lives on receiving clients, helped to maintain the house by her maiden servant, Ama. They are visibly poor and live on rice due to the small number of visitors to the house. This tedious way of life changes abruptly when Oban, a strong warrior and military figure, visits the house. Attracted to Suki's beauty, Oban soon starts exercising his protective authority over the house thinking that Suki is unable to protect herself and her servant. He starts to perform the role of savior, making orders and issuing rules in the house. He controls Suki's desires to only match his own and no other. To make his orders work on those beneath his authority, Oban uses threats and promises violence in case his orders are disobeyed. While the maid positively and unquestioningly responds to the orders, Suki resorts to her compassion and engages in helping the city's needy and poor like a beggar and a foot soldier. Suki exploits Oban's absence in war to exercise her voice and desires in things more appealing to her personally other than satisfying a man's desire. In her comment about the play's theme and choice of a historically distant setting, Gambaro says in an interview:

Por qué no aprovechar lo que me brindaba el sueño, las imágenes, la posibilidad de inventar en otro espacio, en otro lugar, en una época cualequiera, que no era ésta, y sin embargo, iba a ser éste lugar, ésta época, ésta circunstancia. Como era el mes de abril y se recordaba guerra de La Malvinas, yo me sentía muy presionada por todo lo que escuchaba y por mi propia memoria. Y de pronto, mi sueño « japonés » y la guerra se unieron y así surgió *Del sol naciente*.

[Why not take advantage of what the dream offered me, the images, the possibility of inventing in another space, in another place, in any time that was not this, and yet it was going to be this place, this time, this circumstance. As it was the month of April and the Malvinas war was remembered, I felt much pressured by everything I heard and by my memory. And suddenly, my "Japanese" dream and the war came together, and thus *From the Rising Sun* emerged.]<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> A musical instrument.

<sup>506</sup> Miguel Angel Giella, "Entrevista: Gambaro," *Hispanérica*, 40, (1985), 42, quoted in Mary A'ness Francine, *Beyond Words: The Theater of Griselda Gambaro* (MA Thesis, Department of Italian and Hispanic Studies, the University of British Columbia, 1994), 100-101.

Seeing an affinity between ancient Japan's "socio-cultural hierarchy of warlords, soldiers, geishas and beggars"<sup>507</sup> and Argentina's contemporary socio-political reality, Gambaro's characters in the play represent different classes and social groupings. They range from Oban, a warrior who represents power and control, to Suki the prostitute, Ama the servant, Oscar the foot soldier, and Tisico the beggar, who represent the most vulnerable, marginalized, and powerless groups in society.

Many critics have established a relationship between *SN* and feudal Japan and how the hierarchical structure of Japanese society depicts metaphorically post-proceso Argentina. Feudal Japanese society, with its power hierarchies, rigid class structure, and warlike practices, resembles Argentinian society under the repressive state of divisions or lines maintained between the rulers and their subjects, and between oppressor and victim. The aura of terror and the continuous urgency to protect the self against more powerful structures make both social realities similar. Feudal Japan acts as a historical referent to which Gambaro resorts in an attempt to communicate her thoughts about a repressed reality, something which she cannot do overtly. On this referencing of a historically and culturally different context to entertain a freedom of expression, Gambaro herself explains:

Pensé que el ambiente japonés me permitiría una gran libertad imaginativa (...) Me sedujo también la libertad que me suministraría el distanciamiento y las situaciones que podría crear a través de cómo yo veía Japón. De ninguna manera pensé en una reconstrucción de época ni siquiera aproximada. Simplemente es mi propio recuerdo de ese Japón a través de alguna película que vi, un libro que leí o, tal vez, de algunas de las estampas de Okusai.<sup>508</sup>

[I thought the Japanese atmosphere would allow me great imaginative freedom (...) I was also seduced by the freedom that it would supply me with the distancing and the situations that I could create through how I saw Japan. In no way did I think of not even an approximate period reconstruction. Simply, it is my memory of that Japan through some movie that I saw, a book that I read, or, perhaps, some of Okusai's<sup>509</sup> prints.]

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<sup>507</sup> A'ness, *Beyond Words*, 101.

<sup>508</sup> Catena, A., "Entrevista. Última pieza de Griselda Gambaro: una nítida metáfora del sol naciente," *El Periodista* 4, 34-35, 1984, 34, quoted in Ricardo Dubatti, "Del sol naciente (1983-1984), de Griselda Gambaro: guerra de Malvinas, dictadura y patriarcado," *Signa : Revista De La Asociación Española De Semiótica*, vol 29 (2020), 277.

<sup>509</sup> Reference to the Japanese painter Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). In Dubatti, "Del sol naciente (1983-1984)," 277.

The 'imaginative freedom' referred to in the quote manifests in the writer choosing to cast Oban (the representative of the proceso ruling elite) as the military chief or the shogun and the other characters as those who should comply with the rules and obey his orders. Similar to Brecht's alienation effect, Gambaro creates an effect of estrangement through choosing another different cultural setting for her play. The playwright's use of classical or historically distanced settings or stories for her plays covers other plays too. A rendition of the Greek Antigone myth in *Antigona Furiosa*, and revisiting the Shakespearean tragic impulse in *La señora Macbeth*, attest to this desire on the part of the writer to address the present and its intricacies through the past and its mysteries.

Another context to which *SN* responds (besides the post-proceso decade) is the Malvinas (the Falklands) war between Argentina and the UK during which thousands of innocent lives were lost while the dictatorial regime was still in hold back home. In the play, different modes of victimization and victimhood intersect, segueing into one reality; that of the lives of those in the margins are lost while those in power maintain their position as long as others, less empowered ones, can pay the price of defending the 'nation' and its ideals. In the play, we see the tidings of both events through the exchanges which take place between Oban (the source of ultimate power in the play), and other less advantageous characters like the foot soldier.

#### **a. Suki, Oban and their Power Logics**

Developing in seven scenes, the play sets its tone by unveiling two parallel settings, one inside the traditional Japanese house where Suki and her servant are portrayed, and an outside setting where war is announced in the village and a group of people no one knows anything about roaming the streets. Oban, the warrior, dressed in a Medieval Japanese warrior outfit, arrives in the house. He starts a series of questionings expressing his opinions about the house and its people with a tone that shows him as superior and more glorious compared to those he encounters inside. The play then moves to talk about the arrival of a beggar looking for food

and help; an arrival which shapes a first shift in how Suki changes in attitude and character. While the news about the war start unfolding, we are not informed where or against whom the war is taking place; something that Gambaro keeps unrevealed even at the end of the play. After long exchanges between Suki and Oban about the war with him defending the righteousness of the war with least concern over the ones who fell dead, Suki keeps insisting on wanting to know what happened to the many who didn't return from the war (which can be read as an allusion to the ones who were kidnapped, disappeared and never returned to their families during the proceso years). The appearance of another character helps us have all of Suki's questions answered. Oscar, the injured/dead foot soldier (portrayed as both dead and alive) recounts to those in the house about the coldness and hunger from which he and the others suffer. While the servant (who is much pleased with Oban's appearance and power logic) is disgusted by the smell emerging from Oscar's body, Suki attempts to comfort him by urging him to speak and say what pains him. As a foot soldier (similar to the Samurai who has to die to defend the land and people), Oscar is portrayed as a living dead, a dead soldier who keeps returning to life, though continuously killed by Oban every time he makes an appearance again.

Suki's long conversation with Oban who keeps describing the ethics of war and the values associated with the battlefield reveals deeper layers of how power works and how repression is defended. With the beggar, Tiscico, knocking on the door looking for food, Suki recalls her conversations with Oban about the ideals and virtues of war and decides to break away from him and his view of the world. Gambaro emphasizes this disparity throughout the play and how Suki shifts in the way she sees things and how she views social relationships, which are in sharp contrast with Oban's. While she views relationships along lines of 'giving and providing for the other', Oban sees them in terms of physical control of the body, domination, and violence. Suki sees in the beggar a humility of character which stands in opposition to Oban's war fetish, and Oban views him as a person whose social position does not give him the right to enter the

house where he is now in charge. The irreconcilability of Oban's and Suki's worldviews to which we become witness as the play unfolds is due to the power space that separates them, and the fact that one is the victim and the other a victimizer, of not just Suki, but of Oscar and Tisicu, each in his or her way. On the other hand, Gambaro shows how the narratives of Suki, Oscar, and the beggar are compatible, reconcilable and have something in common. Ama's complicity with Oban's schemes and power games, nevertheless, reflects Gambaro's attitude about how repression and violence grow in intensity as long as they are constantly supported; therefore, reconciliation becomes difficult.

Through the figure of the destitute foot soldier, Gambaro emphasizes the image of the many people who were sacrificed in the name of the military junta's schemes during the dictatorial decade (like the disappearances and those dragged into the concentration camps), and this covers the beggar also who is forced into the streets to ask for food, but who ends up being punished by his superiors (Oban). Oban, on the other hand, is portrayed as an office military who rarely visits the battlefield, favoring the privileges of issuing orders behind the scene. This adds to the playwright's intention of reflecting upon power and control and how they were maintained either during the proceso years or during the Malvinas war. Oban's inability to identify who is the enemy his country is waging war against (as many of his discussions with Suki throughout the play reveal) is a clear reference to how the repressive state violated the liberties of ordinary citizens by fashioning a 'secret enemy of the state', a threatening 'social other' which should be eliminated. His sadist behavior towards Suki first, and the beggar later, reveal, as I indicated earlier, the reliance on body violence and the erotic to strengthen how power or position vis-a-vis less empowered others can be exercised. In an exchange with Suki who wonders about the cleanness of his hands and clothes for one who was involved in the battle, Oban comments that he can command without being involved, "nieve ni

en el barro”<sup>510</sup> (*neither in snow nor in mud*). Oban’s answer can be seen to indicate the fact that dictators and generals during the repressive years had their decisions and orders about killings and kidnappings executed, by the many assistants and the accomplices among the ordinary citizens (which emerge in the figure of Fermin in *LM*), without them being publicly seen or directly involved.

Added to the Japanese house and the social hierarchy of Japanese society, Gambaro chooses to cast the events of the play in a climate of war, battle, begging, outside streets full of roaming helpless and injured war returnees. While this setting is read by many as a clear reference to the Malvinas war, it explains the writer’s intention to further emphasize the aura of loss, mourning, and death which featured Argentina during the dictatorial decade. Oscar, the food soldier, whose sense of loss is emphasized through his returning or repeated death, speaks to Suki and her servant of the “mal sepultos”<sup>511</sup> (“badly buried,”) soldiers. This echoes the thousands of disappeared and kidnapped who didn’t receive a proper burial during the military takeover. It can also be read as a reflection of the idea of post-dictatorship ‘national reconciliation’ the new ruling elite proposed in 1983 which showed resilience towards the Dirty war perpetrators, while ordinary Argentinians (headed by the Madres y Abuela de Plaza de Mayo) wanted to honor the bodies and memory of their disappeared children and relatives by burying them. The quote which I inserted in this section’s title is a statement made by Oban exclaiming that “they want to be honored after they are dead.” While Oban means Oscar and his likes, the military junta meant the disappeared and those secretly killed or kidnapped.

Whereas the Malvinas was perceived as an extension of the dictatorial government’s series of atrocities and violence committed against Argentinians, much criticism the play received relates it most directly and only to the war and its effects. In the context of my research, I study it by linking it to the large context of the dictatorship, pointing to the Malvinas as just one of

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<sup>510</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 158.

<sup>511</sup> Gambaro, 158.

the culminations of the regime's atrocities, and not as a separate military venture. The spatio-temporal distance between Medieval Japan and post-proceso Argentina adds to the intensity of the events discussed in the play where the reader is invited to make associations between past and present realities, to further emphasize the recurring cycles of violence and repression which became a defining feature of Argentinian society at the time.

Making it clear that she works with the "sediment,"<sup>512</sup> and as part of her view on reconciliation in a transitional post-dictatorial society, Gambaro brings to her texts the stories and plight of those she regards as lingering in the fringes of society due to the power systems which govern her society. For Gambaro, the 'sediment' refers to the peripheral, disempowered, marginalized social groups and their versions of the truth. Those marginalized may come from the Argentinian indigenous populations who were historically denied voice and place and who are considered a cultural residue. As it refers to the new type of Argentinian social fabric which, and due to different political and historical changes, came to include other social groups like the immigrants, the outcasts, the poor and deprived, beggars and prostitutes among other people whose presence or impact resides at the periphery. Here, it is worth noting that whether indigenous, immigrant, or of a subaltern class, the post-proceso repressive years under the military junta targeted the liberties and eliminated the voice of all those who stood against it. Different groups were moved into the periphery of power, existence, and the hegemonic. This repression of people's voice and agency motivated writers of the period, among which is Gambaro, to resort to the domestic enclosed aura of the house to reflect upon what is publicly/politically forbidden or abhorred. Gambaro's interest in addressing the concerns of less empowered groups in society was probably inspired by the surroundings where she was born and raised as a child to an immigrant family.

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<sup>512</sup> Sebastian Doggart, *Latin American Plays: New Drama from Argentina, Cuba, Mexico and Peru* (London: Nick Hern Books Ltd., 2017), 110.

With her low status as a *cortesana japonesa*, Suki's way of thinking about the world, the social 'other' and human relations comes to light every time she converses with Oban. In many of his pronouncements and speaking from a superior position, Oban, as a reflection of the military ruling elite, communicates the attitude that those in power perform the role of saviors and protective agents, ones who are needed by everyone below them. The following exchange between Oban and Suki refers to this attitude:

*Obán*: Vengo de cerca. Nunca me alejo de quien me necesita.

*Suki* (intrigada): ¿Y quién te necesita?

*Obán*: Sin vanidad, creo que todos.

*Suki* (suavemente): Sin vanidad, creo que nadie.

[*Obán*: I come from nearby. I never leave those who need me.

*Suki* (intrigued): And who needs you?

*Obán*: Without vanity, I believe everyone does.

*Suki* (softly): Without vanity, I believe no one does.]<sup>513</sup>

In this exchange, the writer shows that, from Oban's point of view, there is always that disparity between those with power who take hold of the center and its narrative/power discourse and those who are pulled into the margin and who, therefore; need the center to protect them through controlling/presiding over their desires and aspirations. In relation to how this self-contradictory, manipulative and presumably protective, yet repressive, logic of the ruling elite manifested during the *proceso* decade, and which Oban clearly enacts in the play, Tylor asserts that the elite's real intention was to "atomize the victimized population and to preclude the possibility of solidarity and mobilization; everyone was vulnerable, the unexpected attack could come anytime, from anywhere."<sup>514</sup> This explains why Oban, and in many instances throughout the play, seems to be rather yielding and resilient towards Suki (which is partly driven by a sexual-physical attraction to her), while he excludes the servant, the beggar and the soldier from his caring protective logic. An act as such perpetuates division among the victims and, as Tylor asserts above, 'precludes the possibility of solidarity.'

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<sup>513</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 60.

<sup>514</sup> Tylor, "Theater and Terrorism," 166.

Before moving on to reflect further on how Gambaro thinks of reconciling ‘victim and victimizer’ accounts (or showing their irreconcilability), I would like to first briefly link her view towards what she regards as the ‘sediment’ and ‘marginalized’ in Argentinian society to Rama Angel’s text *La ciudad literada* (The Lettered City, 1984). Angel’s text offers deep insights on how the Latin American city under military authoritarian regimes can be seen to be modeled after the 19th-century colonial city. A colonial/early nationalist city where ‘self’ and ‘other’ (while perceived according to a racial mindset and an imperialist othering discourse) wore the coat of victimization at the hands of the new ‘fathers of the nation’ through violence and repression against less empowered individuals and those who were seen as ‘enemies of the state’ from the masses. Rama’s text “affords the possibility of grasping margins, supplements and residues from Latin American cultural history to question that privilege generally reserved for literary masters as the only story worth retelling or deconstructing.”<sup>515</sup> Angel refers to the fact that the contemporary Latin American city or socio-cultural space (modeled after the colonial one) tends to erase voices coming from what are considered to be margins, essentially poor social groups, lower-class citizens like natives, Africans, non-Latin immigrants, and the assimilation of which, he thinks, is a necessary step towards more inclusive and egalitarian societies.

Angel’s reveries on the issue of power relations and cultural discourse in Latin America are useful here because they help us understand Gambaro’s plays as post-trauma/post-dictatorial hegemony deconstructive spaces. Gambaro, especially in the plays under examination, inveighs against a center-periphery duality that became a defining feature of contemporary Argentinean reality. She has always maintained that in her dramatic textuality and in “every piece of theater,” she has the intention towards “an adjustment of accounts, an

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<sup>515</sup> Román De La Campa, “The Lettered City: Power and Writing in Latin America,” in *Latin Americanism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37, quoted in Cora Gorman Malone, “Epistemology and The Lettered City: Ángel Rama, Michel Foucault and Ibn Khaldun,” *Mester*, 39 (1), 2010: 135.

immediate confrontation with the Society.”<sup>516</sup> This reconciliation or adjustment of accounts which Gambaro aims at eking out targets, as I see it and try to discuss it throughout this chapter, the integration of the marginalized accounts which emerge from subaltern sections in society because the marginalization or exclusion of which, she opines, deprives the society of the possibility to maintain a smooth transition from the proceso decade and its atrocities into a kind of society where reconciliation and healing can be possible. Edward Said, in his essay the “Clash of Definitions”, calls these marginalized narratives or stories and the groups representing them as

dissenting or alternative, unorthodox, heterodox cultures that contain many antiauthoritarian strains in them in competition with the official culture. *These can be called the counterculture, an ensemble of practices associated with various kinds of outsiders—the poor, the immigrants, artistic bohemians, workers, rebels, artists. From the counter-culture comes the critique of authority and attacks on what is official and orthodox.*”<sup>517</sup>

This means that culture from mainstream to marginal entails dissemination of thoughts and ideas other than those usually seen or encountered in the mainstream/dominant, politically supported discourse. It also means a deconstruction of class rigidity where border crossing between what he calls an ‘official’ or ‘canonical’ culture as usually championed by “priests, academies, and the state”<sup>518</sup> and the alternative narratives emerging from other dissident groups or ‘outsiders’ can manifest.

Angels, like several other critics who supported the ‘la ciudad literada’ thesis, seems to argue that the contemporary Latin American city is fashioned after the colonial model of hierarchies and privileges, and where power and control are maintained through language and discourse. In the context of Argentina under the 1930’s military regime, during Peronism and after its fall and during the post-proceso years up to the first years towards democratization, this hierarchy emerged in the form of a rising military elitism which ignored the relevance of the

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<sup>516</sup> Graham Jones, *Exorcising History*, 20.

<sup>517</sup> Edward Said, “Clash of definitions,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Publications, 2000), 465. (Emphasis added).

<sup>518</sup> Said, “Clash of definitions,” 465.

“history from below” in shaping the national narrative, the way the indigenous, Blacks, criollos and mestizos were denied agency by the colonial enterprise. Approaching *SN* in line with Angel’s reasoning, one can argue that Gambaro tries to dismantle the hierarchy which defines the way different characters relate to each other. Oban sees himself as the voice of power and an upper-class authority, and the other characters as ones lying beneath him, and as ones whose social position does not suffice to challenge his dictates. Thinking of exclusion and othering or negating voices of the margins as practices implemented by the colonial project with the city as its locus, similar forms of negation and elimination developed and became part of the Argentinian socio-cultural discourse over time. The successive dictatorial regimes survived on this idea of the need to eliminate and keep a firm hand over any potential threat or claim to rights or position emerging from the periphery. Related to this and similar to Angel’s theorization is philosopher Rodolfo Kusch’s (whose criticism of Argentinian historical and cultural discourse came to prominence during Peronism and the subsequent repressive decade) perception of the Argentinian sociocultural discourse as one which extracts its validity or legitimacy through continuous negation of that which is perceived as the ‘other’.

According to Kusch, this idea of negation in the Argentinian popular thinking is a culmination of a long history of the center and periphery hierarchy, hegemony over thought and language, and exclusion as a mechanism of subjugation. In his *La negación en el pensamiento popular* (1975), Kusch asserts that “vivimos en Argentina una crisis cultural y política, que no es de ahora, sino que recién se manifiesta. . . . Irrumpe una nueva, o mejor, una muy antigua verdad,”<sup>519</sup> (*In Argentina, we live in a cultural and political crisis, which is not of now, but one that manifests recently. . . . a new, or rather, a very old truth breaking out as new*). This ‘old truth’ which ‘manifests recently’ and ‘breaks out as new’ relates to the continuous legacy to the present of the colonial past and its hegemonic/othering ideologies. While Kusch’s and Angel’s

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<sup>519</sup> Rodolfo Kusch, “Prólogo,” *La negación en el pensamiento popular* (Buenos Aires: Cimarrón, 1975), 2.

pontifications on power and politics have not been inserted as such in explaining the dictatorial regime and its power dynamics, I see their relevance in the context of my research especially when we consider how Gambaro revisits the past, 19th century Argentina, and the image of the 'the fathers of the nation' to emphasize the idea that violence and trauma as bred by power have always been part and parcel of Argentinian sociopolitical scene. Negotiating with Angels here supports my argument that power is about language and mindset, as it is about power, physical torture and repression.

To further highlight the different facets of Oban's power logic, the playwright (as she does with Beningo and his assistant in *LM*) emphasizes his machismo inclinations and behavior towards other characters. Many of Gambaro's texts, like others reflective of the dictatorial period, invest with both the physical and emotional affliction of pain as perpetrated by those in power over less empowered and vulnerable people or what they perceive as state enemies. Drawing both authority and pleasure from the infliction of pain and humiliation of others is often defined as 'somasochism' or, in a Latin American context, as machismo. Machismo/somasochism, while it was first used to theorize about how pain and violence are associated with intimate sexual relationships, shifted in meaning to be even linked to how power and authority in a more general (political) sense can also be imposed through the affliction of physical pain.

While this tendency persists in most cultures and societies, reflecting upon it, mainly in works of literature, is seen to feature mostly writings emerging from Latin America where the militarization of life (led by powerful, tyrant male figures or fascist caudillos) has defined Latin American societies for long decades. In Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, among other countries, literary representation of a machismo form of power is motivated by the recurring cycles of dictatorial regimes and their use of both physical and verbal pain against their 'enemies' or 'social others' among the people. Tylor, through her reading of Klaus Theweleit's *Male*

*Fantasies* and in a comment about one of the book's arguments, says that "violence is intimately linked to desire; torturing and destroying others is not a symbolic act but rather, what the fascist really wants to do."<sup>520</sup> Thus, machismo tyranny (oppression, associated with feelings of pleasure and empowerment riveted from the physical/emotional infliction of pain) emerges as a form of fascist violence that implies submission and unequal sharing of pleasure and authority, something which repressive regimes cannot survive without.

Machismo tyranny, as I understand it working through Gambaro's two texts, functions through both the domestic and public spheres of power: publicly or politically through the pain and repression exercised by the authoritarian state against its subjects in the form of underground torture and secret kidnappings, and domestically or intimately through the physical and emotional pain imposed by patriarchal fathers or men within the family on vulnerable people like daughters, wives, and servants. This machismo aura emerges as a central trope in many treatments of the issues of power, the state, and the intersectionality of the personal and political in Latin American socio-cultural discourse. The feeling of the need to empower oneself through inflicting pain on the other, whether men as regards women or those with authority over less empowered people is inserted by Gambaro in both texts.

In *SN*, it is Oban who, as the conversations which take place between him, Suki, and her female servant show, seems to act according to his physical impulse especially in front of a beautiful (yet victimized) woman who has revealed a stronger side of her character as the play develops. His desire (as a representative of the oppressive power elite) to impress her develops into a machismo tyranny that tries to prove the legitimacy of his actions and views especially as related to war and how he sees it as a right cause. In *LM*, as we shall see in the next section, it manifests through the figure of the father (and to a lesser extent, the assistant Fermin) who fortifies his authority through the physical/emotional violence to which he subjects those he

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<sup>520</sup> Tylor, "Theater and Terrorism," 166.

keeps inside the enclosed space of the house, and through terrorizing them with words and manners, especially when his authority is challenged on the part of any of those kept inside.

**b. Victim and Victimizer: A ‘Reconciliation of Accounts’**

In this play, as indicated in the first chapter, Gambaro is envisioning a different Argentinian society or social order as part of her reconciliatory vision in a dictatorial/postdictatorial Argentina. To do so, she reverses both social ethos between those lived and communicated by a repressed and corrupt Argentinian society, and those she wants to make possible in the world of the play. Through injecting the ‘victim’ or ‘oppressed’ with a sense of solidarity, empathy, and justice, the writer reverses the logic of power which brings the victims closer to their oppressors. In the play, it manifests in Suki, the prostitute, who sacrifices her initial admiration for the general, defies his orders, and who cherishes a sense of solidarity towards the repressed ‘other’ when she decides to help the tubercular beggar and joins in the effort of helping the city’s poor and injured soldiers.

Towards the end of the play, Oscar asks for help and calls Suki, “madre”. While Suki is young to be a soldier’s mother, and whereas other readings of the play associate this act with the mothers of the soldiers who returned from war, I see her as a representation of the mothers of the disappeared, those women who decided to cry out in public asking for their children back. I also see it as a reflection of how Suki changes into a compassionate character towards the poor, and other oppressed people she sees around, just like the actual mother who plays the role of protector or provider during times of need and crisis. Suki’s compassion (which would later help in creating a sense of ‘subaltern solidarity’ between her and other victims) and her drifting away from Oban and his wicked nature can be further revealed through an exchange which takes place between her and Oscar when she advises him to speak to take his cold away (the cold here refers to the soldier’s seemingly freezing body and emotions):

*Oscar:* Senora. .. ¿les verdad que el señor nos odia ?

*Suki*: El orden dice que todos tenemos un lugar, de vivos y de muertos. Una rosa no crece en el agua ni un loto en la tierra. (Sin convicción) ¿Por que habría de odiarte?

*Oscar* (sonríe): ¿Verdad? ¿Por que? Si usted lo hubiera visto... ¡en la guerra!

*Suki*: ¿Quieres hablar? Te separaron de tu madre y de tu comida caliente como si fueran cosas vergonzosas. ¿Quieres hablar? A veces las palabras nos quitan el frío.

*Oscar* (con una sonrisa malevolosa): ¿"Mi"... frío?

*Suki*: El tuyo, el mío, el del Ama.<sup>521</sup>

[*Oscar*: Ms. ... is it true that the Lord hates us?

*Suki*: The order says that we all have a place, the living and the dead. A rose does not grow in water, nor does a lotus grow on earth. (Without conviction) Why should he hate you?

*Oscar* (smiles): Right? Why? If you had seen him ... in the war!

*Suki*: Do you want to talk? They separated you from your mother and your hot food as if they were shameful things. Do you want to talk? Sometimes the words take away the cold.

*Oscar* (with a malicious smile): "My" ... cold?

*Suki*: Yours, mine, Ama's.]

Suki calling the soldier her 'brother' indicates the smooth change in her character as she grows to be more human and considerate with time. Her asking him to speak out to lessen his cold can be read as a reference to how the intellectuals, writers, and other combatants were forcibly silenced under the dictatorship and how speaking out at the time was understood as an act of uncovering the hidden, and a warming of the cold in the hearts of those seeking truth and justice.

Suki's decision to seek out into the public realm where other more visible forms of oppression take place echoes the Argentinians, who lost family and relatives under the proceso regime, who decided/were able to transfer their agony from the private and home confined postures of mourning to the public sphere, to the Plaza de Mayo, under the gaze of state forces. Such a brave move shows how the domestic or private space is infiltrating out into the public, political or social realm. This border crossing from domestic (previously silenced and repressed) to the public (presided over by free moving perpetrators and state agents, and those in charge of the concentration camps and underground testimonial areas) emerges in several forms in Gambaro's both plays. In *SN*, for Suki to decide to go outside and take part in helping the poor and injured, leaving behind a house which she thought, for long, to be her only refuge, is a sign of her wanting to be in direct contact with both oppressor and oppressed and claim her position and space outside the social border which was imposed on her. In *LM*, Dolores' decision to

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<sup>521</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 158.

break the patriarchal authority of her father when she decides both to escape with her tutor lover, and when she screams that she will not be silent again can be read as Gambaro's view towards reconciliation as one which starts with a rebellion on the part the margin and its decision to claim its space within the abode of the oppressor/center.

With "Survivors" meeting "their torturers on the street, in the subway, in the buildings where they live,"<sup>522</sup> victim and victimizer languages, desires and hearts intersect in a way that allows for both a remembrance of a traumatic past and a desire for healing and release (however reluctant to engage with this act of healing/ rapprochement or reconciliation were many at the end of the dictatorial decade, just like Oban and the submissive Ama in the play). Gambaro's approach to the question of the repressed freedoms of the Argentinian subject under dictatorship seems to draw "its potency from the margins, from the rejected anachronisms and the socially anomalous,"<sup>523</sup> which resonates with Franco's description of the literature of the period. Since speaking overtly to the military elite and those who were in charge of the public sphere was rather precarious, Gambaro resorts to the life and plight of the victimized and oppressed namely those who were pulled into the margins of society and were denied a voice. She depicts a picture about how the society she belongs to is one where victims are afraid to speak up, and therefore her plays are spaces where they can have a chance to break the silence and set free of self-remorse. Spaces where their 'accounts' and those sharing their predicament can reconcile.

The following exchange between Oban and Suki explains how, faced by Oban's discourse on land and possession as defined by his impulsive views towards domination, Gambaro shows how the oppressor and the oppressed perceive life and reality differently, each according to his or her position in the scheme of things. Here, we come to see the space which separates the two groups, even in terms of the language used:

*Oban:* ¡Basta con ellos! La tierra es nuestra y seguira siendo nuestra. Eso es lo que vale. Asi dijimos y seguiremos diciendo. La tierra es nuestra.

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<sup>522</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 4.

<sup>523</sup> Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, 216.

*Suki*: La tierra no existe.

*Oban (rie, golpea el suelo)*: ¿Estoy parado sobre la nada? (*Con ternura*) ¡Mi bella estúpida!

*Suki*: La tierra no es mas que lo que somos, mi señor. Si vive por su cuenta no sabemos lo que vive. Podemos sospechar que quizás a la tierra le guste mas tener arboles y flores que crateres y muertos. ¿Que habia en esa tierra?

*Oban*: ¿Que hay? Viento y frio y riquezas.

*Suki*: Hombres que nos odiaban. Usurpadores que se sentian usurpados. Hubiera sido bueno ganarlos de otra manera, por esto que somos. Atraerlos con esto que somos.

*Oban (burlon)*: A los guerreros nunca se los atrae con esto que somos. (Toca su espada) Sino con esto, que es tambien lo que somos.

[*Oban*: Enough with them! The land is ours and will continue to be ours. That is what matters. So we said and we will continue to say. The land is ours.

*Suki*: The land doesn't exist.

*Oban (laughs, hits the ground)*: Am I standing on nothing? (*Tenderly*) My stupid beauty!

*Suki*: The earth is nothing more than what we are, my lord. If you live on your own, we don't know how you live. We can suspect that perhaps the earth likes to have trees and flowers more than cracks and dead ones. What was in that land?

*Oban*: What's up? Wind and cold and riches.

*Suki*: Men who hated us. Usurpers who felt usurped. It would have been good to win them in another way, because of what we are. Attract them with what we are.

*Oban (mocking)*: Warriors are never attracted to what we are. (Touches his sword) But with this, it is also what we are.]<sup>524</sup>

In the exchange above, we witness Suki's ability to converse with Oban about matters of war and politics in a language that reveals her awareness of how those above want or desire to make their decisions or laws work on others, is a step towards creating a space for communication between victims and their oppressors. With Suki daring to say that society is reduced to turmoil because of "hombres que nos odiaban" and those "usurpadores que se sentian usurpados" is a sign of change in her attitude towards those whom she, and those she speaks on their behalf, have always feared.

In the play, also, we become witnesses of how silence and passivity in the face of tyranny, reluctance to accept the truth, and denying it to feel safe are common, leading therefore to strengthening the authority of the victimizer whose power feeds and grows, generally, through the complicit behavior of others. This issue of passivity in front of tyranny is emphasized by Gambaro in both texts for she sees it as an obstacle towards transition, reconciliation, or change in a predicament. Ama, in the play, personifies this attitude through her blind service of Oban and even her willingness to go against the will of her mistress to win his satisfaction. Lured by

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<sup>524</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 135

his physical look (something which explains that those in power do generally proffer a kind of overt prestige, while carefully hiding their true intentions), Ama responds to Oban's orders with fear and passivity. In the following exchange between Suki, Oban, and Ama, (just shortly after Oban's arrival to the house) we come to see how, while Suki asserts her position, dares to question Oban about the war and responds to his comments with a loud voice, Ama is silenced through insults and keeps it that way:

*Oban:* Excesivo. Imprudente. ¿Como vas a quedarte sola con esta bruja?

*Ama:* ¡Mi señor!

*Oban:* ¡Falta algo! Solemnidad, reverencia. (Suki se inclina delante de él) No. "Yo" debo inclinarme. (Lo hace) Ganaremos la guerra. Te lo prometo.

*Suki:* ¿Quien te pidio esa promesa? ¿Que guerra? ¿Contra quien?

*Oban:* Señora, ¿que importa contra quien? Siempre hay alguno que nos ofende, que nos quita lo nuestro. Lotu yo.

*Suki:* ¡Callate! (a Oban) ¿Y que es mio? (Senala a su alrededor) Facil de reemplazar, ¡Y nadie me quito nada!<sup>525</sup>

[Oban: Excessive. reckless. How are you going to be alone with this witch?

Ama: My lord!

Oban: Something is missing! Solemnity, reverence. (Suki leans in in front of him) No. "I" should bow. (He does) We will win the war. I promise you.

Suki: Who asked you for that promise? What a war? Against who?

Oban: Ma'am, what difference does it make against whom? There is always some that offends us, that takes away what is ours.

Suki: Shut up! (to Oban) And what is mine? Easy to replace, and nobody took anything from me!]

Oban's claim that "there is always some that offends us, that takes away what is ours" reflects any repressive regime's constant speculations about potential threats coming from the social fabric, and which necessitate, therefore, the use of force and violence to secure the regime's safety.

Towards the end of the play, we see that the marginalized characters join forces; with Gambaro emphasizing their shared humanity and sense of solidarity which could slowly form a crack in the oppressive power of the system. Reconciling the voices of those pulled into the margins, and ones who were not able to have one unified voice is Gambaro's view of how repressive systems of power can be dismantled from within. In this sense, the irreconcilability of oppressor and oppressed is substituted by a reconciliation of voices among the oppressed

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<sup>525</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 119.

themselves. Even though she tries to create a space for communication and tries to settle accounts between victim and victimizer, it seems to be difficult to bridge the gap that puts both sides of society apart. Seen through the lens of the 1980s Argentina; a society living in the aftermath of a decade long dictatorship and one on war with the British, one can see in the transformation Gambaro brings to her victimized characters at the end of the play as a sign of hope that the passivity with which Argentinians responded to their oppressors and victimizers during the repressive years can possibly come to an end.

Suki's decision to defy Oban's authority and choose a life of love and compassion, and her decision to join the camp of the beggar (before he is murdered by Oban), Oscar and the other war returnees, can be seen as one of the ways through which Gambaro attempts to open up a possibility towards reconciliation in this play. It means defying the source of violence and oppression, a change in perspective, and last, reconciling one's voice with other victims and marginalized individuals. Reconciliation, in this sense, means a move towards a change in predicament and openness towards the 'other', and an understanding of the importance of communication and compassion. Rejecting the power and authority of Oban means Suki's shift towards reconciling her character with what is right, and with another more viable source of power which is love/understanding. While Oban's sense of honor and pride is associated with his sword, military prowess, and his ability to keep control over those beneath him in rank, Suki's is clear through keeping firm against her oppressor and her ability to break away from his authority, and her courage to convince the others (like the submissive Ama and Oscar) to challenge him. Oban's sadism feeds upon his hegemony over those inferior to him like Ama and the beggar, to a lesser extent, and this explains how the repressive state maintains its power through the hegemonic politics with which it tries to handle its matters.

In this play, also, we see that the military dictatorial logic is defied at the end of the play by a different kind of logic; one which absorbs its power from schemes and ideas opposite to

those usually maintained by the repressive regime. Suki's rebellion and her new account of truth and life breaks through that of the oppressor, shaking its logic of power, and substituting it with a rhetoric of compassion and open understanding towards the victimized and vulnerable 'other'. Therefore, one can say that through the figure of the 'courtesan' (a figure which is usually pushed into the margins of society) and her ability for rebellion and transformation that Gambaro both addresses and defies the power structures or hierarchies she brings to the world of the play, represented by Oban and supported by figures like Ama. Suki's questioning of war and its motifs, the plight of the soldier, and her concern over the scarcity of food, the people roaming the streets, and the returning dead, helps us understand Gambaro's tactic of re-assessing the historical and socio-political realities in Argentina, the context against which she wrote the play. It is through Suki and her confrontation with death, violence, and power that we come to understand how dictatorships unfold, function, and survive over time.

## **2. “¡Yo me callo pero el silencio grita!”<sup>526</sup>: Unleashing the Repressed, Domesticating the Disempowered in *La malasangre***

Argentinean theatrical texts, especially during the early, and most repressive, Proceso years, were encoded to escape the censor's gaze, primarily through the countercensorial use of such rhetorical figures as metaphor, allegory, and analogy, and the reappropriation of cultural codes already in place in the Argentine theater. In the plays of this period, *family dynamics functioned as a metaphor for multilevel power relations, and paternalism reached authoritarian extremes while the offsprings' immaturity symbolized a national state of arrested infantilism. The enclosed space of the home effectively, and frequently, represented the country under dictatorship.*<sup>527</sup>

Gambaro's second play *LM* presents another dramatic space where violence, oppression, and exclusion are worked out through the enclosed space of the home. The symbolism of the home as an enclosed domestic space of relationships, intimacies, and struggles, is used by Gambaro as a realm that extrapolates various forms of oppression, and one which cannot be easily defied or bridged, unless a firm will to change one's condition and break free emerges from within the house itself. This section starts by pointing out the different manifestations of violence and

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<sup>526</sup> “I may be quiet, but silence screams,” in Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 109.

<sup>527</sup> Graham Jones, *Exorcising History*, 21. (Emphasis added).

oppression (in the form of domestic or family power relationships micro scoping the public or national space) both verbal and physical (two forms usually used by the repressive power systems), then moves to demonstrate how and in what ways Gambaro tries to give voice to the voiceless through juxtaposing victim-victimizer, individual and society, past and present. In this play, Gambaro unleashes the repressed as an act of empowerment and domesticates the disempowered margins through reconciling their desires and versions of truth the way she does with the victimized in *SN*.

*LM*'s setting goes back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina and the year 1840, telling the story of a family made up of three members: Benigno, the father, cruel and despotic, an unnamed mother, submissive and resilient, and their daughter Dolores portrayed as rebellious and impulsive in both character and behavior. Other two characters, Fermin, the father's associate and henchman, and Rafael, a tutor who is assigned by the father with the task to instruct Dolores in different subjects at home. Another character, Pedros de los Campos Dorados, Dolores' suitor, grows antagonistic and rejecting to the idea of a tutor teaching his future wife, suggesting, instead, that Dolores' education is both meaningless and needless and that this task of educating her can be perfectly performed by him. Rafael, suffering from a spinal deformity, is chosen on purpose by the father, Beningo, to exclude any possibility that his daughter might feel sexually attracted to or fall in love with him as she did with other previous tutors. Against the father's expectations, however, Dolores, and after her initial resentment towards Rafael, develops feelings for him, to secretly plan, against the will of her father, to elope with him to the city across the river. Finding out about his daughter's escape plan, the father orders Rafael's murder, an act to be carried out by his assistant and right hand, Fermin. "In a thinly veiled allusion to the disappeared in Argentina,"<sup>528</sup> Dolores, towards the play's ending, is portrayed to be sitting on her knees in front of Rafael's dead body, crying, mourning her loss, and screaming, with

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<sup>528</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 105.

words like “salvaje” (savage), “¡Llanto hipócrita! (Hypocritical sobs!), against the cruel act of her father. Commenting upon the play’s closing scene and the family setting in general, Brenda Werth says, “this powerful end scene of *La malasangre* showcases some of the main trends and impulses in national memory discourses that would be influential in the following decades and, above all, highlights the polarization and explosive juxtaposition of these coexisting discourses.”<sup>529</sup>

In the play, Gambaro takes us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to the time of the Rosas regime which is historically classified as violent and repressive, as previously noted in the second chapter. Similar to the previous play which has a Medieval Japanese setting, Gambaro chooses to distance the setting of this play to a different historical era to establish associations between two different eras in the history of Argentina but ones which don’t differ in the power games and state-imposed discourse of violence and social exclusion. The reader is implicitly driven to establish resemblances and contrasts, to sense the present through the rhythms of the past. At the time of the play’s publication, many commentators whether within the literary circles or from the performing arts, thought of the play as a shocking portrayal of a postdictatorial transitional Argentina where the military ruling party is likened to the notorious Rosas regime. The parallels that Gambaro establishes between the Proceso years and Rosa’s regime are communicated through mainly the setting and the different pronouncements made by the characters. Past figures and atrocities make a “ghostly return” in Gambaro’s texts and performances, so comments Werth about Marvin Carlson’s idea about “ghosting” in drama or theater which refers, as Werth states, to “the identical thing previously encountered by audiences, though in a different context.”<sup>530</sup> This can be seen in analogy with Greenblatt’s wonder effect and Brecht’s estrangement principle which, even though it works through a

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<sup>529</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 105.

<sup>530</sup> Werth, 102.

defamiliarising dimension as previously explained, creates a déjà vu effect which helps readers or audiences make sense of what is being revealed before them.

One of the repressive venues of an authoritarian regime is control over body, movement, and desire. The incident in the play about Dolores' and Rafael's desire to flee to the other part of the world (the city across the river) to restore their dignity and free themselves from the father's (state's) control over their bodies is inspired by an infamous incident in Argentinian history which took place during the authoritarian regime of Rosas in 1840. The incident is about a 19 years daughter of a local governor, Camilla O'Gorman, who fell in love with a local priest, Uladislao Gutiérrez. In reaction to this, and surprisingly, the father sought the help of Rosas asking him to punish the couple. While the couple escaped to a village where they started a new life as teachers, the dictator intervened by executing them despite Camilla's pregnancy at the time.<sup>531</sup> This incident was re-enacted many times in both literature and cinema to recall the atrocities of the past and regimes (supported by religion) in confining the individual's body and passions.

Thinking that Gambaro was inspired by this incident "at least partially" especially given her interest in the power games during Rosas' regime, the theater critic Ana Elena Puga thinks that this incident and many others like it are but a reflection of the fact that "certain private passions may prove so threatening to the state (and to the church)" and therefore, "they must be eliminated."<sup>532</sup> It is not only about love or sexual passions, other passions also are feared by repressive regimes like the passion to rebel, break free, write and perform, and above all, the passion to criticize and satirize falsity and corruption.

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<sup>531</sup> This incident is reported in John Lynch's *Argentine Caudillo: Juan Manuel De Rosas* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 124, quoted in Ana Elena Puga, *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony in South American Theater: Upstaging Dictatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 176.

<sup>532</sup> Puga, *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony*, 176.

### **a. Beningo, the New Rosas/Caudillo**

Reminiscent of Rosas, therefore, and symbolic of the military leaders during the proceso years, Beningo (as both father of nation and family) exerts his power on both the public and the domestic spheres. In the Argentinian popular imagination (or at least the way this was propagated for in literature and history), Rosas was always seen as the symbol padre de la patria<sup>533</sup> and his legacy survived over the decades, with a number of the successive leaders of the nation choosing to emulate his example. In the play, Gambaro incarnates his character and deeds through the figure of Beningo. She reinforces this image by showcasing Beningo as keeping watch over the house from the outside, beheading any strange undesirable elements from getting in, and while inside, he keeps a firm hand over those who try to challenge his authority, namely the mother, the daughter, and Rafael. In line with Kusch's and Angel's arguments about how the authoritarian city in the Latin American context can be understood to be fashioned after the colonial city and its hegemonic power discourse, in this play too, we see that just as Rosas who "inherited his style of rule from the colonial period," "instead of deferring to Argentina's new constitution,"<sup>534</sup> Beningo (symbolizing Rosas) rules over those beneath his authority through traumatizing/subjugating them in many ways. Just like the colonial power's reliance on force to squash rebellion and resistance, Beningo controls the liberties of the victims inside the domestic arena in a way that limits their capacity to fight back. Therefore, the space through which the 'other' can strike back is restricted through both emotional and physical torture.

To reduce the mother (as a representative of any voice which tries to challenge the authoritarian regime and its policies) into a status of a motionless inferior object, Beningo, as the ultimate source of power, resorts to both linguistic and physical or erotic violence to have

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<sup>533</sup> 'Father of the nation'.

<sup>534</sup> Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory*, 103.

his orders and desires implemented without questioning.<sup>535</sup> Just like the verbal threats usually used by a repressive regime, Beningo keeps calling the mother *putta*<sup>536</sup> to show his superiority as a decision-maker and one who chooses how everyone else in the house should behave. Just like the state's patriarch who surrounds himself with right-hand assistants, Beningo assigns some of his tasks to Fermin who has his share of oppression inside the house. In the following exchange between Beningo and the mother at the opening of the first scene, we come to observe the patriarch's capacity to marginalize and belittle the mother, and subsequently other characters too, in an authoritative voice:

Madre: Aca esta el vino. (*Con un sonrisa timida.*) Te lo qui se traer yo.  
 Padre: Te lo agradezco. (*Una pausa. Secamente.*) ¿Por que dos copas? ¿Quien bebe conmigo?  
 Madre: Pensé...  
 Padre : Mejor que no pienses. (...). Ninguno me gusta. Ninguno me gusta de todos ésos. No hay uno que valga nada. Creen que van a venir aca y que soy ciego y tonto.  
 (...)  
 Madre : (*Pierde seguridad.*) Va e estar en la casa.  
 Padre: Si. ¿Y con eso?  
 Madre : (*Timidamente.*) Es mejor que sea agradable.¿no?  
 Padre : Si. Y tambien parece inteligente. ¿no?  
 Madre : (*Insegura.*)No sé.  
 Padre : ¿Y qué otras condiciones tiene ? Mi mujercita sagaz.  
 Madre : (*Se aparta.*) Beningo, por favor.<sup>537</sup>

[Mother: Here is the wine. (*With a shy smile.*) I wanted to bring it to you.  
 Father: I appreciate it. (*A pause. Dryly.*) Why two glasses? Who is going to drink with me?  
 Mother: I thought ...  
 Father: You better not think. (...). No one appeals to me. I don't like any of these things. There is not one that is worth anything. They think they are going to come here and that I am blind and stupid.  
 (...)  
 Mother: (*Loses confidence.*) She's going to be in the house.  
 Father: Yes. And with whom?  
 Mother: (*Shyly*) It better be nice, right?  
 Father: Yes. And it also seems smart. no?  
 Mother: (*Unsure.*) I don't know.

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<sup>535</sup> Beningo is inserted by Gambaro as a reflection of state mechanisms of repression, as an epitome of the 'father or padre of the nation' who grows in power through the victimization of others. This way of thinking about how states maintain their hegemony over 'dissident voices' and margins from within the social fabric is clearly explained by the Marxist critic Louis Althusser in his key text *Lenin and Philosophy*. In an essay entitled "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," Althusser distinguishes between two forms of domination as exercised by the state; the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and argues that the former apparatus of domination relies on "the use of threat of violence to maintain order through police or army," while the second relies on "the construction of social norms and parameters through the material institutions of education, religion, politics and so on." (Quoted in Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, 26-27). The kind of domination which Gambaro is critical of in many of her post-proceso texts is the one which applies violence and victimization, mainly through kidnappings, disappearances, 'state terrorism' and the 'cult of personality' as explained in the second chapter. Beningo is the embodiment of this form of repression from within the domestic space which Gambaro chose as a setting for the play.

<sup>536</sup> *Prostitute.*

<sup>537</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 57-58.

Father: And what other conditions does she have? My sagacious little wife.  
Mother: (*Stands away*) Beningo, please.]

In this exchange, the mother (who is supposed to play an equal role inside the house) is objectified by Beningo when she is reduced into an unthinking being (*Mejor que no pienses*) because, as long as no one around him is worth anything (*No hay uno que valga nada*), Beningo is the one to think in the name of everyone else. This is similar to the way repressive regimes try to manipulate the attitudes and opinions of the masses through the use of language, speeches, and threats. The mother's uncertainty, timidity, and insecurity when addressing Beningo reveal the aura of fear which prevails inside this domestic family space. It is, therefore, a space that is suitable for Gambaro to reflect upon larger dynamics of control and subjection which equally prevail outside the house. Just like *SN* where a machismo tyranny is imposed as a sign of power and a way to inflict pain on helpless people both emotionally and physically, here, we encounter a similar scenario where the father, the patriarch (reflective of the nation's patriarch who inflicts pain through oppression) uses his power to terrorize other people in the house in a language which is wrapped in loud laughter and the expression of delight on seeing others' fear and desperation:

in *La malasangre*, much of the oppression and violence carry sexual, erotic overtones and borders on violation. The patriarch, the father, specifically employs erotic gestures to reduce his victims (male or female, political or interpersonal) to the (perceived) state of mindless, physical objects. He accomplishes this principally by the (mis)use or (mis)appropriation of ostensibly normal gestures that may not be immediately identifiable as oppressive.<sup>538</sup>

Beningo's use of 'erotic gestures' consolidates his already violent and oppressive nature. In the play, the mother is portrayed in a way that can tell much about how the male authority within the family, whether coming from the father or his right-hand assistant, is reflective of how language went hand in hand with the physical affliction of pain.

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<sup>538</sup> Sharon Magnarelli, "Authoring the Scene, Playing the Role: Mothers and Daughters in Griselda Gambaro's *La malasangre*," *Latin American Theatre Review*, Spring 1994: 7.

The influence of the ‘theater of cruelty on the way Gambaro thematizes power and oppression in society is visible in her use of violent language and imagery. In both of her plays, we encounter verbal violence with erotic overtones, characters killed, dead and unburied bodies, blood, physical torture, among other aesthetic effects. Added to the house’s walls which are painted in red and heads intruding the inner space, both Beningo and his assistant resort to various types of violence, both verbal and physical, to have their orders obeyed, with this violence culminating in the ending scene where we become witnesses of murder on stage. In his *Argentina: Un siglo de violencia política: 1890-1990*, Marcelo Larraquy asserts that: La violencia, la idea de la violencia como modo de resolución de un conflicto, social, económico, político, o antagonismos de intereses o de poder, fue una opción recurrente a la que apelaron distintos actores, con distintos fundamentos y modalidades, y marcó a fuego el siglo XX argentino, la historia del país.<sup>539</sup>

Seen as “a metaphorical work that sends a clear message denouncing repression and authoritarianism,”<sup>540</sup> *LM* reenacts different forms of violence, however reflective of the political or state repression, which is communicated through the closed realm of the house, of the domestic. In the play, we are introduced to a house setting with characters who do scarcely come in or move out, all wearing red, and the house (or the inner space in which Gambaro brings together her characters) is also painted in red, ‘the color of blood. What adds horror to the setting is the bloody heads and figures from outside the house, infiltrating the inner space, trying to terrorize those who are locked inside. This constantly supervised enclosed space where the individuals inside are subject to receive orders but never act as subjects of communication or expressing rejection is slightly similar to what Foucault terms a ‘panoptic schema’; a

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<sup>539</sup> [Violence, the idea of violence as a way of resolving a conflict, social, economic, political, or antagonisms of interests or power, was a recurring option to which different actors appealed, with different foundations and modalities, something which marked by fire the Argentine twentieth century, the history of the country.] Marcelo Larraquy, *Argentina: Un siglo de violencia política: 1890-1990* (Argentina: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial Argentina, 2017), 13.

<sup>540</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 100.

“segmented, immobile, frozen space,” where “each individual is fixed in his place,” and, “if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life.”<sup>541</sup> Like Benigno’s power logic, in this schema or ‘panoptic modality of power’(as Foucault describes it), “the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded.”<sup>542</sup>

As the events develop, we are led to imagine how this inner space, while carefully enclosed for a long time and one which is being constantly watched over from the outside, starts slowly changing, to finally open up and break out of silence, when Dolores decides to speak out and announces that “el silencio grita”. In his approach to this step of Gambaro giving voice to Dolores, against the authority of the father and other males in the house, seeing it as a step towards reconciliation and change in a predicament, Gail A. Bulman sees it as Gambaro “nos propone una nueva vision de la "historia" a traves del “otro,”<sup>543</sup> where she reverses the source of power, and where “el ‘Yo’ puede crear otro espacio para escapar de la invasion del “Otro.”<sup>544</sup> Such a move can be seen as Gambaro’s major step into addressing reconciliation through reversing the source of power between ‘self’ and ‘other’.

While it is Benigno, the father, who is “fashioned after the nineteenth-century caudillo figure and dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas,”<sup>545</sup> one can also notice the configuration of state power games and its resort to repression and violence both emotional and physical (through torture and kidnapping) through other forms of power relationships emerging from the internal space. Here, Gambaro puts the domestic and public in interplay, setting both against the historical incarnation of authoritarianism. The Brechtian effect of alienation is also visible because even though the reader is made to understand the play’s setting and time to be referring

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<sup>541</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd edition, translated from French by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195.

<sup>542</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 197.

<sup>543</sup> Gambaro “provides a new version of ‘history’ through the ‘other’”, quoted in Gail A. Bulman, “El Grito Infinito: Ecos Coloniales en La Malasangre de Griselda Gambaro,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 48 :4, (1994): 272.

<sup>544</sup> The “‘I’ could create another space in order to escape the invasion of the ‘other’,” in Bulman, “El Grito Infinito,” 274.

<sup>545</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 100.

to Rosa's regime, we are made to "interpret the anti-authoritarian message within the more immediate context of the dictatorship."<sup>546</sup>

The enclosed space of the home, representing the "country under dictatorship", shelters the hidden, the secret, denial, repression, and is employed by Gambaro much earlier in other texts which have more forward and politically explicit statements. Two plays to mention in this regard are *Las paredes* (The Walls, 1966) and *El campo* (the Camp, 1967). While in the first play the setting is a group of walls set one after the other to form separate rooms and with physical torture taking place in a bedroom, in the second, the play's action takes place in a concentration camp with the protagonist turning into a servant for the camp's owner while he was supposed to serve as an accountant inside the camp. Both plays, like *LM* which was published more than a decade later, allude to the way Argentinian society was imprisoned under successive military regimes.

The two worlds or realities which Gambaro juxtaposes in this play are the 'inner space' and the one which appears from outside the window, with the father, of course, having access to both spaces. The inner space produces the same intensity of horror as the outside space with little room left for questioning or rebellion. This deep intersectionality of the domestic and the public or political arenas emerges as Gambaro's assessment of the workings of power in Argentina under dictatorial leadership. The domestic, with its intimacies and authoritative patriarchs, and the public, with its disappearances and discourse of terror, meet in such a way that tension becomes the moving motif of the characters' behaviors:

La idea de la casa en *La malasangre*, este espacio interior, es contradictoria a lo que se piensa; esta casa no es ningun lugar de paz, de proteccion de seguridad. Con sus paredes rojas, que huele a sangre, produce el mismo horror que el mundo de afuera. El uso de la "casa," espacio familiar, cotidiano, seguro, crea ambigüedad y tension entre lo que "es" y lo que deberfa ser.? De esta manera se borra la frontera entre el interior de la casa y el espacio exterior. No solamente entran melones/cabezas ensangrentadas en la casa, sino tambien el padre aterroriza a los habitantes dentro de ella.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 100.

<sup>547</sup> Bulman, "El Grito Infinito," 274.

[The idea of the house in *La malasangre*, this interior space, is contradictory to what is thought it is; this house is no place of peace, of protection, of security. With its red walls, it smells of blood, it produces the same horror as the world outside. The use of the 'house,' family space, quotidian, secure, creates ambiguity and tension between what it "is" and what it should be. In this way, the border between the inside of the house and the outside space is blurred. Not only do melons / bloody heads come into the house, but also the father who terrorizes the inhabitants inside it.]

Linking this thinking about the border which is created between the inside and outside spaces to Marguerite's argument that the "terrorist state created two worlds: one public, one clandestine, each with its encoded discourse,"<sup>548</sup> I would argue that Gambaro tries to expose the ambiguities and injustices of the public space through investing with the clandestine, one which can cover both those trapped within their enclosed spaces, and those performing the ideology of the state in very elusive destructive means including kidnappings and underground torture. Still, she does so in an ironic allegorical way through choosing the domestic space, with its various power dynamics represented by patriarchal fathers and submissive mothers, to communicate her message about oppressors who resort to both physically and emotionally destructive means to subjugate those who are unable to speak or stand in the face of injustice. Gambaro's plays, in this sense, are said to be tracing the rhythms of the "grotesque, the absurd, or cruelty," because they consistently generate "discomfort in readers and spectators, and we are often unsure how to react to or what to do with it," and that Gambaro has always chosen to deal "with the "unspeakable"- topics and relationships that we do not normally talk about", as she brings before us a "world that differs significantly from what we think the world is or should be, from how we have been taught to perceive it."<sup>549</sup>

The father's ultimate authority in this inner space (a house where, besides Dolores' family, there is the teacher and the father's immediate assistant) directs the actions and reactions of all those around, like the military figure who seems to grow in power through the obedience and submission of those beneath him. Added to the aura of violence imposed by Beningo, even

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<sup>548</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, xii.

<sup>549</sup> Sharon Magnarelli, "Staging Shadows / Seeing Ghosts: Ambiguity, Theatre, Gender, and History in Griselda Gambaro's *La señora Macbeth*," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3: 367.

Rafael's physical deformity is equally symbolic here. In works of literature, writers usually insert characters with physical deformities to allude to other forms of deformities, whether social, ethical, or political. Rafael, murdered at the end, reflects the state of the nation, whether from the inside in the form of divided and unharmonious families, or the outside in the form of a nation's unstable history which kept falling prey to successive repressive regimes which disrupted the natural evolution of the Argentinian individual whose relationship with both past and present seems deformed and disrupted.

Whereas Rafael's deformity is reflective of the nation's disrupted memory, lack of resonance with the past, and one which was mutilated due to successive decades of dictatorial rule, silencing him through killing him can be read as a silencing of the entire nation, and mainly, its righteous conscious and dissident voices. Voices coming from the side of those whose anger because of the 'disappearances' grew intense with time and from the side of writers and intellectuals who were silenced through either exiling them, censoring their writings and performances or burning their books for they were seen as a source of awareness, as Gambaro indicates in an earlier mentioned interview. Even the patriarch's name Beningo is inserted with an ironic tone. While it translates as 'blessing/merciful or benign' in English, the character, philosophy, or behavior Beningo personifies are the total opposite, they are ones which are cruel and wicked.

#### **b. Dolores, Rafael and the 'City Beyond the River'**

That being said, we may wonder how Gambaro reverses the power dynamics in the play to serve her purpose of reconciliation, especially in the way she thinks of it as 'empowerment of margins', 'giving voice to victims', and how she thinks of it as a 'settlement of accounts'. Outside this enclosed house, there lies an outside world: both an immediate one which is full of people forming a queue just outside the house wanting different kinds of services/help from the house where Beningo is in charge, and a city located just on the other side of the river; one

which we are made to think of as one where the evil of tyranny or repression does not exist, one which is portrayed as an idyllic city.

Since I am exploring the ways the three playwrights do envision or imagine alternative social worlds to those surrounding them, I think that the city, which seems promising and lying to the opposite side of the actual city where the events of the play take place, and to which Dolores and her lover want to escape, is Gambaro's 'alternative', 'imagined' or aspired to version of her society under dictatorial repression. In the following exchange between Dolores and Rafael, Dolores tries to convince Rafael to flee with her to the other side of the river by tempting him in her description of how the other place is so different from the cruel place where they are confined under her father's authority. We are invited to imagine what kind of world the two characters want to see, and how they imagine the social reality lying beyond the river:

Dolores: Nos iremos juntos.

Rafael: ¿Dónde?

Dolores: Afuera. (*Se abre la puerta, Dolores aparte rápidamente la mano. Entra Fermín, con una bandeja, la jarra y una sola taza. Deposita todo sobre la mesa, los mira curiosamente y sale. Dolores*)

[Dolores: Let's run away.

Rafael: Where?

Dolores: Away. (*The door opens. Dolores quickly pulls back her hand. Fermín enters, carrying a tray, the pot, and a single cup. He puts it all down on the table, looks at them curiously, then leaves.*)

Dolores goes on and replies:

Donde nos sirvan dos tazas de chocolate y podamos beberlas juntos. Donde no griten melones y dejen cabezas. Donde mi padre no exista. Donde por lo menos el nombre del odio sea odio.

Rafael : Es imposible.

Dolores : Tenés miedo.

Rafael : No tengo miedo. Pero sé que es imposible. No podremos ocultarnos. Mi joroba hablara.

Dolores: Es que no vale la pena?

Rafael: Vale la pena. (*Extiende la mano, apierta fuertemente la de Dolores. Entra Fermin y Rafael aparta rápidamente la mano.*)<sup>550</sup>

[Where they'll bring us two cups so we can drink together. Where they don't shout "Melons!" and leave heads. Where my father doesn't exist. Where at least the name for hate is hate.

Rafael: It is impossible.

Dolores: You are afraid.

Rafael: I'm not afraid. But I know it is impossible. We will not be able to hide. My hump will speak.

Dolores: Is it not worth it?

Rafael: It's worth it. (*He extends his hand, holds Dolores's hand tightly. Fermin enters and Rafael quickly removes his hand.*]

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<sup>550</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 103-104.

Despite Rafael's indecision, Dolores goes on describing the kind of world she expects/wants to see on the other side, in a way that reflects Gambaro's vision of a society where reconciliation, maybe/can be aspired to. She imagines a house (nation) of "*paredes encaladas*" / whitewashed walls instead of the red ones she and the others are trapped within, and "*una mesa de pino, de roble y sillas de paja*"<sup>551</sup> / a pine, oak table and chairs made of straw; because they come from the heart of nature must give warmth and stillness, unlike the harsh antagonistic house environment. Together with Rafael, she imagines a place where "*no tendremos nada rojo, nada que huela a sangre*" / we will have nothing red, nothing that smells of blood, and "*todo blanco hasta en la oscuridad*"<sup>552</sup> / everything white even in the dark. What remains from this section will be devoted to seeing how Gambaro tries to dismantle the dictatorial authoritative order in her plays to give more space to the repressed 'other' or victim to tell his or her version of the story. There will be an attempt to showcase how Gambaro uses the world of the play to defy the boundaries of power, unleash the repressed, and reconcile, if possible, victim/victimizer accounts or victim/victim solidarity.

Just like Suki in *SN*, here also, Gambaro decides to reverse the line of events and authority to the side of the 'oppressed and victimized' when she injects Dolores with the power to speak and the ability to finally say no to the continuous terror to which she has been a witness for a long time. In a chapter she devotes to Gambaro's dramaturgy and which she entitles "Griselda Gambaro: Abstract Allegory and the Duty to Conceal," Ana Elena Puga reads Gambaro's symbolic treatment of events and characters as an "abstract allegory" through which "subversive meaning is decipherable to the alert spectator but more difficult for would-be censors to identify and punish."<sup>553</sup> Distinguishing her texts from being 'national' and 'dialectical' allegories as thought of by several other critics, Puga explains that Gambaro's

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<sup>551</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 112.

<sup>552</sup> Gambaro, 114.

<sup>553</sup> Puga, *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony*, 139.

plays offer “multiple meanings in a nonrealistic system of representation,” and just like an “abstract painting”, her plays serve to “disguise political dissidence.”<sup>554</sup> Seeing this through *LM*, Puga argues that through both setting and characterization, Gambaro avoids any “realistic representation” of events which allows for “multiple chains of metaphors”<sup>555</sup> to emerge.

And just as I have seen a possibility towards reading *SN* as an implicit reference to the legacy of dictatorship while much criticism insists on reading it in the context of the Malvinas, in this play too, multiple layers of meaning add to the complexity of the play. In her comment about the play’s structure, Puga further adds: “The play’s structure allows for the image of the tormented family to connect the domestic abuses of patriarchy with both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century regimes, showing how history repeats itself in domestic and public spheres.”<sup>556</sup> But instead of a divided structure, Gambaro pushes us to imagine the workings of repressive power both past and present through one single image, that of a divided family in an enclosed house setting with a rebellious daughter wanting to break free.

Therefore, Gambaro imagines a new Argentina where there is no ‘bad blood, but one where compassion and tolerance prevail. In such a world, Gambaro seems to argue, there will be no lovers sacrificed to satisfy a national cause or victims who can’t break away from their victimizers. This attitude is supported by Puga’s analysis of the play locating it within a larger national rhetoric of nation-building. She says: “instead of encouraging further bloodshed for the chimera of national unification, the play metaphorically proposes the construction of a completely different kind of nation, one in which no blood is spilt either for or because of one’s country.”<sup>557</sup>

Likewise, Gambaro, like *SN*, revisits the issue of passivity in this play, seeing it as an obstacle to both challenging the oppressor’s authority and achieving reconciliation with self

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<sup>554</sup> Puga, *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony*, 142.

<sup>555</sup> Puga, 145.

<sup>556</sup> Puga, 169.

<sup>557</sup> Puga, 169. (Emphasis added).

and others. The mother's character in this play is willing to learn the ways of the oppressor in the belief that this might either protect her from being further victimized or yield in her gaining power and strength. The passivity to confront her oppressor, Beningo, makes her complicit in the repression committed by the father against Dolores and her tutor. In the play, we are told that it is the mother who reveals to the father Dolores' secret plan to escape to the other side of the river with her tutor. In this way, she does not only betray her daughter but closes the door in the face of her freedom from her father's tyranny inside the house.

The mother, in this sense, turns into a perpetrator herself when she plays the role of victimizer against another already victimized character. While she thinks that she can confront her oppressor by speaking out, by saying something, she ends up inflicting pain on other powerless victims; she ends up aligning her attitudes with those of the oppressor thinking that she would break free that way. This can relate to, as Gambaro tries to showcase, to all those who were complicit with the regime during the proceso years, either through keeping silent in the face of atrocity and trauma exercised by the state against many innocents or through joining the efforts of the state in pinpointing those accused of plotting against it. Here, Gambaro highlights the role of victims in the drama of their demise through their silence:

Gambaro's work has captured the constants associated with sociopolitical and personal collapse, as well as the changes in perspective that lead to an understanding of what crisis means and whose interests it serves. *The perspective from which her characters view their predicament develops from a passive acceptance of catastrophe in the 1960s to the acute awareness in the 1980s that their passivity had disempowered them, that they had contributed to their annihilation.* This awareness permits the characters to oppose those in power and fight back."<sup>558</sup>

This awareness which helps the characters rebel and fight back is shown by Dolores and, to some extent Rafael, while the mother is the one who harbors a 'passive acceptance of her condition which leads to her continuous oppression. Here, again, Gambaro creates parallels between the public and intimate forms of power of violence as she drives us to comprehend

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<sup>558</sup> Diana Taylor, *Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 97. (Emphasis added.)

how those with the capacity to victimize implement their violent strategies by taking us into the very details of the intimate and domestic. While the mother shifts slowly from victim to victimizer, Dolores grows in strength to a point where she could challenge the authority of Benigno. This reversal in roles and predicament is part of Gambaro's mechanism of creating transformation/envisioning reconciliation and explaining how rebellion is central to liberation: "Gambaro's characters are types, often defined more by their role in society than by any individual psychology. The two most obvious roles in Gambaro's plays are those of the victim and the victimizer; however, these two roles are frequently exchanged in a seemingly arbitrary fashion among the characters."<sup>559</sup>

On this tendency of writing about the public and the political through investing with the domestic and the intimate in Latin American writing, Doris Sommer, revisits the way Fredric Jameson reads many 'Third World texts' as 'national allegories' as there is according to him always an 'inevitable political meaning behind the personal accounts or the texts.'<sup>560</sup> She links this to Spanish American writing and explains the confluence of the personal and political referring to it as "dialectical" allegory, which simply tells one (private) story to refer to another (public) issue. In this case, the text emerges as a "narrative in which the erotic is coterminous with politics in an interlocking, rather than parallel, relationship."<sup>561</sup> Seen as such, in texts like the ones by Gambaro, there is a clear interplay between the domestic (family/love relationships or forms of power) and the political (the repressive state and the public sphere through which it operates), where "one level represents the other and also fuels it."<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> Boling, "Reenacting Politics," 6.

<sup>560</sup> Doris Sommer, "Allegory and Dialectics: A Match Made in Romance," *boundary 2*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 1991): 72.

<sup>561</sup> Sommer, "Allegory and Dialectics," 74.

<sup>562</sup> Sommer, 79.

The world left behind at the end of the play is one of ruin, one that ostensibly holds little hope for the future. It is a world that tells us that “not enough has changed in Argentina since the nineteenth century,” nothing:

not the false dichotomy between civilization and barbarism; not the misguided desire to cleanse the polity of “deformities,” whether in terms of ethnic origins, religious beliefs, or political affiliations; not the inability to choose your leaders; not the status of servants and mothers, who must cower and manipulate those more powerful than they to survive. The violence of the streets remains mostly unseen and off-stage, in the classical tradition, an ostensible contrast to the plush drawing room interior setting.<sup>563</sup>

It is an irreconcilable collapse that covers the “family, national history, and national present,” as Gail A. Bulman and Natalie Joy Woodall explain as regards the play and its final aura.<sup>564</sup> We come again to wonder what kind of reconciliation is Gambaro envisioning in this play.

We might also see in the play’s ending scene an ambiguity about the future and whether it holds any possibilities towards reconciliation. After the murder of Rafael and the failed escape to the city across the river, Dolores declares that silence speaks and that she will never be silent or afraid again. At the same time, however, we know that it is Beningo who pronounces the final words of the play (expressing his rejection of Dolores’ cries) and we are left disillusioned, wondering about what has happened to Dolores and whether she has also been murdered and silenced forever like Rafael. This can be further interpreted as Gambaro’s skepticism about the kind of reconciliation, transition, or individual emancipation during these last years of the authoritarian regime and amidst a national fury over the need to address the past and its atrocities and reclaim the lost lives/bodies as a step towards ‘national reconciliation’. Can reconciliation be yet thought of while the wounds of the past are still open/manipulated and archived? Linking this to Ricoeur’s idea about ‘blocked memory’ and the challenges it imposes in the face of one’s (society’s) desire to reconcile, I would say that Gambaro weighs individual vision of reconciliation against that of the nation (the way it was planned for by the Nunca mas committee). She does so because, I presume, she thinks that while both individual and collective

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<sup>563</sup> Puga, *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony*, 170.

<sup>564</sup> Puga, 70.

forms of trauma and memory of the past are still central to any debate about the transition into a post-dictatorial reality, reconciliation has yet a long way to endure. This is the case because, as Gambaro seems to suggest, the authoritarian monopoly over identity politics, the different untold stories of the previous decades, and the continuous personification of the ‘father of nation’ pomposity through its supporters in every era, people seem to be unprepared for this step towards reconciliation. Collective memory is not able to transcend the past because it is constantly reminded (through different means and scenarios) of this past through new ideologies or transgressions.

The critic Tulio Halperín Donghi thinks that *LM* holds little hope for the present and that the way it reincarnates a controversial national figure from the Argentinian distant past is but a reminder of pain and atrocity. He argues that what Argentinians need at this critical moment in their history is “innovative, constructive approaches to the relationship between the past and the present, and not the predictable return to the period of the Rosas dictatorship and the accompanying discourses, such as caudillismo, barbarism and civilization, and liberal versus revisionist versions of history.”<sup>565</sup> Donghi’s comment can be said to resonate with the general aura of desperation in the years following the dictatorial decade, and it seems relevant in view of Gambaro’s reliance on violence and the tragic tropes of the theater of cruelty in dramatizing repression. Yet, I would argue that Gambaro’s vision of reconciliation (the solution to move forward according to the new regime and the inconsistencies of which Gambaro seems to assess in this play) rests upon the individual’s, or society’s, ability to sense the legacy of the trauma and comprehend the power dynamics which generated it as an important step towards reconciliation of past and present, or individual and society. Viewing “history as a cycle in which the brutality of the past returns in the present,”<sup>566</sup> leads us to assume that reconciliation

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<sup>565</sup> Halperin Donghi, “El presente transforma el pasado: El impacto del reciente terror en la imagen de la historia argentina,” *Ficción y política : La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*, ed. Daniel Balderston (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1987), 74, quoted in Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory*, 25-26.

<sup>566</sup> Puga, *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony*, 139.

the way Gambaro imagines it is not only a matter of healing, catharsis, or reparation as preached by the state. It is one that derives its power and meaning from the ability to understand the cycles of violence which kept repeating over time and one which can possibly take place in the future if the transgressions which inform them are not adequately addressed through a more comprehensive approach to violence and trauma.

Despite this ambiguity about the closing scene and the play's violent aura, we can trace some glimpses of hope for a reconciliation between a traumatic past and a grimy present. Just like the transformative journey of Suki in *SN*, here also, the hope lies in Dolores' ability to scream and resist, her ability to mobilize the passion and regrets/sympathy of those inside the house witnessing the atrocity revealed before them. When the play was performed in 1982 as part of the anti-government teatro abierto cycle of performances, spectators became conscious of the gravity of the issues presented on stage. What was astonishing at the time is that the audience was divided between those who saw in the play an attack on the country's historical memory, and perceived the recreation of Rosas on stage as an insult against the nation's first architect (a group of people led mainly by the pro-Rosas National Movement of Restoration), asking for the immediate censorship of the play. On the other hand, and as Osvaldo Pellettieri mentions in his account of the reception of *LM* and many others that incited public outrage at the time, another form of consciousness and involvement with the violent aura of the play which emerged from the camp of those who were immensely moved by the last scene and the performativity of death on stage.<sup>567</sup> In a Brechtian spectator rhythm during which witnesses become part of the performance, anti-regime denunciatory sentiments brought people together as silenced victims just like Dolores and Rafael, in a collective consciousness which recalled the trauma of the past and the lives/bodies whose dignity was never reclaimed. This leads us

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<sup>567</sup> Osvaldo Pellettieri, "Introducción: para una historia del teatro argentino en Buenos Aires," *Historia del teatro argentino en Buenos Aires: El teatro actual, 1976–1998*, ed., Osvaldo Pellettieri (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2001), 17-18, quoted in Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory*, 100-101.

again into an understanding of how Gambaro emphasizes the issue of ‘passivity’ in the face of oppression and the way she sees it as an obstacle in the way of reconciliation. For a pro-Rosas group to emerge from a ‘traumatized social reality’ to claim the legacy of a dictator is conceived by Gambaro as a clear indication of continuity in the cycle of repression. It also means that a clear theorization about ‘national reconciliation was doubted by the Argentinians after the end of the repressive decade; during which the seeds of the past continued to pose further difficulties in the face of healing and catharsis. Gambaro seems to question the achievability of reconciliation while the past and its trauma are born again in the form of a further schism in sympathies and loyalties. This further reveals a “breakdown in the uniform notion of “nationness” imposed under dictatorship and a pronounced conflict of interest in the imagination of the nation, as enacted by the pro-Rosas nationalists and the onstage actors.”<sup>568</sup>

### **3. Marginality/Repression and Reconciliation: An Appraisal**

With her concern being how related political and domestic forms of violence are, Gambaro presents her readers with plays and fictional pieces where both spaces intersect. She makes us understand the workings of the political or public forms of power and repression by taking us into the very details of the domestic. In both plays chosen for analysis in this chapter, we are driven into the darker sides of human psychology as seen through the behavior of authoritarian fathers, passive or silenced mothers, rebellious children, unstable servants, simply into an enclosed realm of carefully locked desires and aspirations. Projecting the political through family dynamics embodies some of her plays, like many other plays by other writers of the period, who tried to escape the gaze of the state and censorship through wrapping their criticism in funny or comic, yet complex and tragic, family and street settings.

In this chapter, I have examined how Gambaro embarks on an empowerment of margins and victimized people as a response to the proceso years of repression through a ‘settlement’

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<sup>568</sup> Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, 102.

of victim and perpetrator accounts, and through reversing the source of power in a way that gives the victimized space for communication and a voice to speak out against pain and trauma. Relating this to an earlier mentioned statement by Werth where she asserts that Gambaro imagines “a present and a future that is informed but not overshadowed by the past,”<sup>569</sup> we can assert that the playwright revisits the past to emphasize its atrocities and the way it keeps shaping the present through its recurring transgressions and cycles of violence.

As the analysis of the two plays demonstrates, *SN* and *LM* represent two illustrative spaces where the playwright works out her reconciliatory vision through setting accounts in confrontation. Gambaro shows the marginality of the characters and the power dynamics which make some voices dominant and heard and others marginal and muted through pointing out the extent to which the accounts of oppressor and victim, of center and periphery, of patriarchal fathers and children, of official and unofficial narratives are irreconcilable despite readiness on the part of the perpetrator to yield into the victim’s demands (as far as *SN* is concerned). Convinced that “Cualquier obra de arte, aunque hable del horror, no transmite horror sino una especie de reparación” [*each work of art, although it may speak of horror, does not transmit horror, but rather a kind of reparation*],<sup>570</sup> Gambaro understands the post-Proceso Argentinian social and political reality as one of ‘denial’, ‘exclusion’, ‘marginalization’ and ‘irreconcilability’ according to which victims (those target of marginalization) and perpetrators (official power/domestic power agents) appear as its main actors. Even though she communicates this aura of irreconcilability in violent language and imagery, there lies a hope for ‘reparation.’

Another aspect of Gambaro’s view of reconciliation is that characters or individuals should reconcile with their true nature or reality, mostly their passivity and they should recognize that

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<sup>569</sup> Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory*, 2.

<sup>570</sup> In Verónica Pagés, “El horror detrás del horror,” *La Nación*, June 17, 2007, quoted in Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory*, 60.

they are complicit in creating their predicament. In this case, according to the playwright, change or transformation does not possibly take place only when victim and victimizer reconcile their antagonisms or when victims themselves join forces against oppression as I previously explained, but action needs also to be taken at an individual level. This multidimensionality in creating resolution is one of the aspects of the *grotesco criollo* mode of writing which dominated Argentinian literary production for decades. As I earlier noted, Gambaro, thinking of herself as both non-absurdist and non-realist, was influenced by local forms of theatricality especially those made popular in the 1920s and '30s by writers like Armando Discépolo. This theater mode satirizes the plight of the victim and focuses on stressing “the inability of characters to know themselves” with a “lack of resolution of the dilemma.”<sup>571</sup>

Likewise, reconciliation in Gambaro’s two plays emerges when a border crossing takes place; crossing the border between the space of the victimized to understanding, freedom, and accomplishment. Defying the power borders as established and reinforced by the regime or the state outside and the patriarchal order inside and crossing them through challenging them, seeing them as flexible, malleable, and never fixed. This means that ideologies and repressive politics survive as long as people support them and as long as they are never defied. Once voices get alert to the power games, the rigidity of the border and the laws maintaining it weaken accordingly. In *SN*, Suki’s and Oscar’s consciousness of the rigidity of the system imposed upon them helps them reclaim their humanity at the end and reconcile themselves with compassion, while Ama’s incessant submission to her oppressor’s authority leaves her trapped in her confined vision of the world, as one who is not able to reconcile with the social ‘other’ which shares her predicament. In *LM*, and towards the end of the play, Dolores declares: “jamás cerraré los ojos! ... voy a mirarte siempre despierta, con tanta furia, con tanto asco!”<sup>572</sup> (“I will

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<sup>571</sup> Boling, “Reenacting Politics,” 8.

<sup>572</sup> Gambaro, *Teatro I*, 122.

*never close my eyes! To look at you always awake, with so much fury, with so much disgust!*”).

This means that “instead of the univocality of power”, in both plays and as the writer tries to showcase, “all voices are heard” and “stories are rehearsed and (re)presented so that the nation’s memory cannot be bastardized or erased.”<sup>573</sup>

As such, reconciliation during the transitional period from an authoritarian regime into a democratic rule as aspired to by Argentinians was different from the one which the new regime wanted. The regime’s version of reconciliation was crafted after the image of the past and was driven by a desire to construct an ‘imagined community’ which draws its strength and potency from national collective memory and shared history. This dream, however, was lost amidst, as De Mario argues, the traumatic transgressions of the successive decades of oppression culminating in the proceso decade.<sup>574</sup> Therefore, in Gambaro’s plays and relating them to what I thought about reconciliation as ‘non-restorative’ but one which imagines ‘a different social reality,’ we can trace this sense of liminality between a vaguely understood traumatic past, an inability to forget or forgive, and a present condition which is being defined according to the terms of those who are trying to justify the past through their amnesty rhetoric. In his study on the traumatic memory of the Argentinian Dirty war and its impacts on the process of nation building, national reconciliation and democratization, Antonius Robben states that:

The forgetting of violence is inextricably linked to the remembrance of violence because traumatic experiences are characterized by the inability to be either completely recalled or completely forgotten. It is precisely this obstruction to either total recall or total erasure, and the unending search for comprehensive understanding, that makes trauma so indigestible and memory so obsessive.<sup>575</sup>

Between ‘total recall’ and ‘total erasure’, as Antonius asserts, lies people’s powerlessness to deal with the new realities which came to replace decade long atrocities. With thousands among those who lost children and relatives to the junta rejecting the new regime’s version of

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<sup>573</sup> Boling, “Reenacting Politics,” 17.

<sup>574</sup> Di Paolantonio, “Reading the Limits of National Reconciliation,” 334.

<sup>575</sup> Antonius C. G. M. Robben, “How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina’s Dirty War,” *Cultural Critique*, 2005 / WIN Iss. 59: 122.

reconciliation, we can understand, for example, why Dolores in *LM* refuses those surrounding her in the house to sympathize with her plight or shed tears over Rafael's dead body. She can be seen as a reflection of that large portion of Argentine society which was unwilling to accept reconciliation as a possible solution to remedy the grave injustices committed during the dictatorship.<sup>576</sup> In *SN*, which is a microcosm of an entire society's bewildering condition, contrary to the passivity and indifference of citizens towards the atrocities committed by the regime during the proceso years, Suki moves from rebellion against Oban's authority into action when she decides to join the rank of the victimized to help, protect and save. While Suki could, at last, achieve reconciliation with values of compassion and solidarity, others, like the servant and Oban, have failed to see the other version of reality which lies beyond their confined understanding of human relationships and how the 'self' can relate to the 'other' through openness and sympathy. They have remained trapped within their version of the world, and their logic of life, despite the pain and loss to which they are witnesses.

As such, we can say that the two plays do not only communicate the playwright's imagining of an alternative reality to the one imposed on people by the repressive regime, but also her own assessment of the post-proceso state's version of reconciliation and how it has failed to meet the aspirations of the population. She wants to emphasize that a move towards a new democracy requires a serious engagement with the past, mending its wrongdoings and revealing its silenced stories. Antonious agrees to this attitude when he asserts that the new government's "master narrative failed to convince the Argentine people" not only "because it was blatantly untrue (corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power soared under the military, and state terror was policy)," but because "the fate of the disappeared was of an overarching public concern. *The dirty war had not truly ended as long as the suspicion remained that the military still held people in secret detention.*"<sup>577</sup> It is, then, possible to argue that Gambaro's vision of

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<sup>576</sup> Werth, *Theater, Performance and Memory*, 105.

<sup>577</sup> Antonious, "How Traumatized Societies Remember," 131. (Emphasis added).

reconciliation lies in her attempt to give voice to the voiceless, grant the victim a chance to speak against atrocity and victimization, and pull both victim and perpetrator into dialogue and communication (something which was absent and made to be absent during the repressive years of the dirty war). Also, through considering national narrative as a story to be told by all characters/Argentines, and where what is generally considered as central or official, with its hegemony and sense of power, comes in direct contact with the repressed and marginal.

In thinking that society is “modifiable, changeable,”<sup>578</sup> the playwright negotiates the possibilities towards reconciliation through invoking the impacts of violence on vulnerable victims, and through giving voice to the victim to rise above his or her passivity. While at the national political level, reconciliation has been approached through the spectrum of forgiveness and reparation, Gambaro sees it through investing with the ‘repressed individual’, through a ‘settlement of accounts’ and ‘unleashing the repressed’ into a position where they can claim their voice within the larger scope of power. How much reconciliation at the individual level can give way to reconciliation at the national level depends on, as many argue, how much those in charge of the reconciliation project in the decades following the *Guerra sucia* are ready to lay open the hidden, to make it easier for people to comprehend the past and face its unwelcome truths in the present; hidden truths which distorted their sense of trust towards both their governing bodies and their fellow Argentines. A resolute openness towards the past is essential because, as Hayner argues in the context of societies which have moved from periods of conflict into new phases of nation building, “debunking lies and challenging dishonest denial can go far in allowing a country to settle on one generally accurate version of history.”<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, eds., *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York: Beech Tree, 1987), 195.

<sup>579</sup> Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 163.

While this is the aspiration, many obstacles still lie in the face of this ‘wished for reconciliation.’ Antonius Robben, in his article, “From Dirty War to Genocide: Argentina’s Resistance to National Reconciliation,” exposes these obstacles as follows:

The military’s unwillingness to clarify the disappearances of the 1970s, their impunity in the late-1980s, and the revelation of systematic baby thefts in the late-1990s provoked the human rights movement into pursuing a relentless memorialization and seeking alternative ways of legal redress that turned the Argentine people against the government’s reconciliation measures and resulted in the prosecution of more than one thousand perpetrators by the late-2000s.<sup>580</sup>

Whereas the ‘legal redress’ to the atrocities which have taken place over the repressive decade remained oblique, both simple citizens and writers alike are seeking ‘alternative ways’ to redress the traumas of the past. Sin duda, Gambaro’s view of reconciliation survives at the intersection of a national remembrance of trauma, a past that is not forgotten, an inability to step up into a new reality and, a hope for a more inclusive future.

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<sup>580</sup> Antonius Robben, “From Dirty war to Genocide: Argentina’s Resistance to National Reconciliation,” *Memory Studies*, 5(3), 2012: 306.

## General Conclusion

In his correspondence with the Indian philosopher Anindita Balslev, Richard Rorty has contrasted a "culture of endurance" and a "culture of social hope"; ...the culture of endurance assumes that "the conditions of human life are and always will be frustrating and difficult" whereas the culture of social hope "will center around suggestions for a drastic change in the way things are done—will be a culture of permanent revolution."<sup>581</sup>

The above quote which is taken from Miroslav Volf's book on *Exclusion and Embrace* puts in a nutshell what I set out to explore in this dissertation. Between incessantly evolving conditions of social disruption and frustration, and a desire to revolt, there lies hope for change, a culture of 'permanent revolution,' and along with it, a desire for reconciliation and dialogue. By trying to understand the different representations of reconciliation in De Wet's, Karnad's, and Gambaro's playtexts, this thesis demonstrates how their plays address different patterns of reconciliation emerging through the intersectionality of the domestic and the political. Through the analysis of the six plays and reading them against the socio-cultural and historical realities which shaped them, I have delineated an argument that reconciliation the way it emerges from the texts examined refers to an attempt "to subvert/dismantle hierarchies and hegemonic systems, and imagine alternative realities" in works of literature. Literature, thought of in this research as a space to address trauma and social disruption and an abode to imagine and envision alternative or more inclusive forms of societies, proves relevant in addressing different forms of social disruption, as it helps us make sense of the different reconciliatory patterns the three playwrights have brought to their texts.

To build on what was discussed over the five chapters, I would say that in every play I have selected for analysis in this thesis there is that aura where individual and community, self and other, center and margin, among other social constructions, lurking between the layers of the plays. In each text, the playwright's vision of nation or community as imagined through the

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<sup>581</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 16.

line of reconciled antagonisms and responds to a fertile soil of violent disruptions as instigated by stigmas related to religion, caste, ethnic identity, power, and class. In the context of my research and as I have aimed to address it, reconciliation works collectively and intimately, across lines of differences, across seemingly irreconcilable narratives, it manifests through exclusion as much as it works out a path towards understanding.

In each of the previous chapters, I have examined various forms of hierarchies and forms of social othering, group fantasies about cultural distinction, purity, superiority, fear of the 'other', power, and repression, in trying to understand how each of the playwrights deconstructs these social constructions in a way which can give a possibility for reconciliation. While reconciliation is usually defined or "hypothesized to contribute to democratization"<sup>582</sup> and nation-building, I wanted to remove it from the confines of this political charting and see how it is aesthetically represented or imagined through characterization, an invocation of history and myth, through a reworking of the past and a critical engagement with the present, through a deconstruction of hierarchies and crossing borders between different 'others.'

That being said, directing their gibe against a fertile soil of repression, violence, and exclusion, leading in most cases to conflict and trauma, De Wet, Karnad and Gambaro write back to *topsy-turvyness*. Through investing with the domestic to launch their criticism against more complex processes of social disruption, and in thinking rhizomatically in a way that tries to defy hierarchies and othering beliefs, the three playwrights write back to their societies through questioning the different racial, religious, and political ideologies which lie at the heart of recurring cycles of trauma and violence. As such, the three playwrights share the way in which they subvert the dominant systems they write against in their texts. Karnad introduces a reformist movement which shakes the sacredness accorded to the religious text, Sanskrit and their Brahminic interpretations; Gambaro destabilizes the repressive regime's/the patriarchal

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<sup>582</sup> Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid*, 5.

authority's logics of power; and De Wet propagates the hidden histories of repression' and reveals the contradictions of the presumed ethno-racial distinctiveness of the Afrikaner nation and its ideology of Afrikanerdom.

The chapter on De Wet's plays, there has been an attempt to examine how the playwright's anti/apartheid drama provides deep insights into the traumatized Afrikaner past and psyche. As the second chapter of this study has shown, De Wet's two plays *African Gothic* and *Good Heavens* situate themselves within a rising concern over how we are to perceive contemporary identities in South Africa and to what extent an understanding of reconciliation as based on truth-telling and confession is relevant to healing the past and mending its fractures. As opposed to the political approach to reconciliation in South Africa and in a slightly different trajectory from her counterparts, De Wet addresses/envisions reconciliation as one which starts with the self. She suggests reconciling with the racial 'other' and actuating a possible pathway towards a new multicultural democratic reality necessitates assuming one's role as a perpetrator. It also implies a critical engagement with the past and its atrocities; and above all, overcoming feelings of restorative nostalgia about the past and allowing memory to assume its 'ethical responsibility towards both 'self' and 'other'.

Karnad's dramaturgy, as the fourth chapter demonstrates, responds to a cultural scene that is invested with conflict and exclusion as motivated by caste and religion. While ethnoreligious othering ideologies like Hindutva keep mobilizing people's social and religious liberties in the service of a 'Hindu nation' aspiration, the violence ushering out of them is one that keeps escalating into traumas like the Mandal Mandir of the 1980s and 1990s. Through evoking ancient histories and myths about inter-religious conflicts, inter-caste exclusion, and communal frenzy, Karnad's two plays provide us with scenes where 'one's caste' and 'one's religious identity' remain strong determinants of how the 'self' is to relate to the 'other' in contemporary Indian history. Since "the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Hindu nationalists has come to consolidate

a kind of popular common sense among many Indians,” where Muslim minorities are “constructed as the nemesis of the benign and tolerant Hindu nation,”<sup>583</sup> the continuous eruptions of similar forms of interreligious and inter-caste frenzy, according to Karnad, are but a testimony that his society did not learn from the transgressions of the past, given more recent destructive scenarios of religious conflict and the government’s political manipulation of religious and ethnic identities.

The same thing goes for Gambaro’s plays. With its Artaudian, neo-vanguardist, and Brechtian theater tropes, Gambaro’s post-proceso dramaturgy negotiates with state repressive policies and engages in a ‘settlement of accounts’ between center and margin, state and individual, past and present and victim and perpetrator as part of her imagining of reconciliation in transitional post-Dirty War Argentina. As demonstrated in the last chapter, Gambaro envisions this ‘reconciliation of accounts’ through giving her characters a chance to cross the border from their “victimized state” into a more defined authority laden position, both as rebels against oppression, and even as victimizers through learning the ways of the oppressive ‘other’. Suki’s transformation from victimhood and passivity which feature her behavior at the beginning of the play, into a position of authority and an attitude of compassion, love, and humanity towards the end of the play clearly shows that reconciliation according to Gambaro can manifest through ‘sharing’, ‘the ability to communicate’ and ‘healing through giving’. In the case of Dolores and Rafael in *LM*, reconciliation meant breaking through the authority of the oppressor in a way that creates a change in their predicament. While Rafael is murdered for his rebellion against the house’s patriarch, Dolores screams high that she will never be silent again.

Reading my texts in the light of the earlier discussed insights on dissidence, subalternity, untouchability, caste and ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’, I would further say that, in their reaction

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<sup>583</sup> Priya Kumar, *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiv.

to the Kshatriya/Brahminical hegemony and oppression, the Sharannas and the other low castes in Karnad's *TD*, for example, join the reformist revolutionary movement, craft a 'milieux of dissidence' (to use Sinfield's words), and engage in a 'subaltern cosmopolitanism' to overthrow the forces which have oppressed them for a long time. The same goes for Gambaro's characters who, towards the end of both plays, decide to stand up to the victimization and power logic of their perpetrators through deciding to speak, abandon their passivity, and harbor a sense of agency to reclaim their silenced voices. They engage in what I would call a 'subaltern solidarity' where they slightly (the way Gambaro portrays them) move from their status as 'peripheral subjects' into characters who can scream against repression, defy orders, break pre-set rules of social conduct and, above all, attain a sense of empowerment that allows them to challenge the patriarchal forces which oppress them and confine their liberties.

Taken collectively, the three playwrights in this study imagine reconciliation as 'longed for but never realized'. The ending scenes of their plays give little hope for the future. While in De Wet's plays, there is a desire on the part of the siblings in *AG* and the two sisters in *GH* to get over the past and step up into a different reality from the one which repressed them for decades, feelings of nostalgia mixed with constant fears of exposure stand on their way to achieving both self-reconciliation and reconciliation with the social 'other' (referring to the larger realities surrounding them). In Karnad's plays, at the beginning, many people from different castes decide to join Basava's *Sharanna* movement, welcoming its critical stance towards religion and caste, and showing readiness to engage with the caste 'other' through accepting the intercaste marriage Basava wants to make possible; readiness to "escape from the coils of caste," and "face the consequences."<sup>584</sup> However, many end up more faithful to their caste identities, leading therefore to the failure of the movement and the eruption of bloodshed. Whereas Gambaro's characters break through the forces which oppress them and end up

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<sup>584</sup> Karnad, *Collected Plays*, vol 2, 53-54.

understanding the ‘ways of the oppressor’, passivity at the macro collective level, however; remains an obstacle in the face of a real change of predicament or reconciliation with one’s desires and aspirations.

The analysis of the plays shows that even though the three playwrights embark on what they think of as possible trajectories towards reconciliation in the divided hierarchic worlds they bring to their texts, there is that feeling of irreconcilability looming large in the views and behaviors of the characters, rigid structures which can’t be easily penetrated, and borders which can’t be bridged. This is to reveal that reconciliation survives as an ethic, a vision, and a dream in the minds of both writers and characters. In each of the plays discussed, we are to be aware of the way writers fail to lead their characters and the worldviews they hold about both self and other to a point of resolution. Still, the ambiguity and disruption with which the playwrights chose to close the last scenes of their plays make our assessment of this achievability of reconciliation rather challenging. We might interpret the closing scenes as holding the seeds of hope within the layers of the violence they proffer. As we might see them as clear references to the actual social and cultural distortions which inform the background of the texts themselves; as ones which are still very well beleaguered by the same old violent eruptions, and that literature can only intervene in addressing them or imagining alternative or more harmonious realities but cannot change the realities themselves if they don’t change from within. This suggestion resonates with a statement made by Alan Sinfield that a text is “always a site of cultural contest,” but it is “never a self-sufficient site,” because “independently of context,” nothing can “be said to be safely contained.”<sup>585</sup>

Bringing together the forms of reconciliation which emerge from each of the texts, it becomes clear that, just as other critics who engaged with the theme of reconciliation analyzing its imaginings in different works of literature came to recognize, reconciliation remains

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<sup>585</sup> Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 49.

“elusive, imagined in strongly *optative* terms,”<sup>586</sup> and “just as the horrors of the past can never be undone,” reconciliation on its part remains “devoutly wished for and persistently fantasized about,” and “ultimately beyond the reach of individuals, and beyond the reach of literature.”<sup>587</sup> Related to this belief in the elusive nature of reconciliation (a concept which is usually perceived in relation to other aspirations like dialogue, communication and social inclusion) is Volf’s remark that even though “the history of modern democracies is about progressive and ever expanding inclusion,” the question which remains hanging aloft is “how adequate is the modern story of the inclusion's triumph?”<sup>588</sup>

In this case, reconciliation remains confined within the aspirations and vision towards society every playwright holds and remains trapped within the divided inclinations and psychologies of the characters themselves, and one which survives as part of their consciousness. Each of the playwrights in this study uses his or her texts to both address and deconstruct the borders, divisions, and hierarchies that keep individuals and groups apart through creating space for communication and pulling characters into situations where they consider their mistakes, wrongs, and transgressions (seen to be reflective of more complex socio-cultural realities). Literature, in view of that, remains a locus for the imagination of alternative realities, as a space to address injustices and traumas, and a realm to negotiate history and exorcise it. But the question remains: “what kinds of resolution”, or as Franz describes as “redress” in his literary account of reconciliation, can be presented by literature “in the face of the massive wrongs of the twentieth century”<sup>589</sup> and the ceaselessly interrupted gestalt of late modernity.

Considering that the plays examined in this dissertation were produced in the aftermath of growing traditions of exclusion and that writing back to one’s culture means putting oneself at

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<sup>586</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, *A Literary History of Reconciliation*, 152. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>587</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, 152.

<sup>588</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 38.

<sup>589</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, 152.

the forefront of both individual and community partialities, one might wonder what kinds of public reactions the performances of each of the plays would instigate after approximately three decades of their first publication/appearance. How would the South African public now, under the current troubled situation related to Land Acts and a continuous talk of an ‘impoverished whiteness’, react to a public performance of De Wet’s *African Gothic*, for example? Would the public, which back in the 80s saw in De Wet’s plays an attack on her Afrikaner people’s cultural values, have the same reaction now, or they would rather look regretfully at the kind of legacy they are trying to survive after decades of repression and segregation? Would the attitudes of the present generation approve and defend the ideals of the Apartheid state the way their forefathers did?

Under the current citizenship law of Modi’s government (inspired yet by the BJP’s Hindutva ideology) with its amendment bill which strengthens earlier laws associating faith with citizenship; the recurrent popular campaigns against love Jihad; interfaith or inter-caste romance; and laws banning interfaith marriages and veil wearing especially in BJP run states like Karnataka, would Karnad’s *Talé Danda* and its disparaging closing scenes incite any consciousness? Or it would be thought of as sympathizing venture (the way Basava’s reform movement was perceived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD) with a religious ‘other’ and ‘outsider’ who should conform to the Hindutva ideology of the government to qualify as ‘fit’ and ‘relevant’. Would Gambaro’s *La malasangre* again create the same effect of frenzy among the spectators when we view them in the image of many from the social fabric who are currently campaigning against the Argentinian state and the Catholic Church’s discourse on abortion and individual liberty? Or we would again witness other pro-Rosas from within the people who still cherish the ideals of a repressive past and a present, along with it.

Investigating reconciliation in this research as one which takes the form of a ‘deconstruction of hierarchies and an imagining of alternative realities’ in works of literature

makes me wonder how this understanding of it would possibly emerge from other texts representative, for example, of other cultural contexts and other forms of social disruption. We would, for example, want to read about how the Serbian writer Ivo Andrić bridges the religious and ethnic divisions which pull apart his Muslim, Bosniac, Serb characters in his *The Bridge on the Drina*. Whether we will see some hope for reconciliation emerging from the dialogues along the river in Višegrad or we are to see a hope for reconciliation circumvented by an asymmetry of views and hostilities. One would also want to delve deeper into its imaginings in German post-holocaust writer Hubert Mingarelli's *A Meal in Winter* whose three Nazi characters, after their irresistible hatred towards their Jewish prisoner, decide to share their bread with him, therefore, putting their views towards the 'other', life, and humanity itself into harsh scrutiny. The author puts her characters in a position where they are forced to revisit their prejudices and notions about the 'other'.

One may also be interested in understanding how Scholastique Mukasonga's *Our Lady of the Nile* deconstructs the ethnic borders between her Tutsi and Hutu characters in a way that can drive them into understanding the fact that they belong to one social reality. What kind of reconciliatory rhythms would emerge amidst the social ruins of a bloody past and a present replete with uncertainties on identity and belonging? These texts, like many others, pull us into their aura of exclusion and othering, fermented by various motifs like religious animosity, nationalist ideologies, and racial differences, and equally lead us through moments where we become witnesses of a change in human character and a hope for reconciliation lurking somewhere between the layers of the characters' intimate whispers. Even though the texts I have listed here were not approached as ones which can divulge any forms of reconciliation, they can be read as such if we think that wherever there is exclusion and violence, there is that aspiration for things to change, for reconciliation to take place. Saying so, there is a hope that this research would open the door for further studies on reconciliation or irreconcilability either

the way I wanted to give it shape in this dissertation or the way other scholars wanted to do it when they focused on the domestic small-scale aspects of violence and exclusion, and on ‘forgiveness’ as a trajectory.

While I am cognizant of the fact that it would have been more eclectic and enriching to my approach to reconciliation if I have opted for texts from both drama and fiction, I ended up choosing only playtexts because the Indian playwright Girish Karnad and his dramaturgy were the first case study I thought of analyzing when I embarked on the topic. Also, because most previous studies about reconciliation in literature gave more attention to address it as it emerges from fictional narratives whether novels or short stories, I have decided to shift focus to drama and see how it is represented in other plays by other playwrights besides Karnad. A future expansion on the scope of this study might move to consider how reconciliation the way I approach it in this research can be seen through the social worlds of other narratives.

I may then, *in medias res*, suggest that this research can be seen as one of the very few studies yet to be undertaken about how reconciliation is viewed, imagined, or represented in literature, whether fiction or drama. Saying so, there is a hope that the arguments and patterns which emerge from this dissertation can offer new insights towards understanding the role of literature and its positionality in societies where different forms of conflict, exclusion, trauma, and violence exist. I believe that my study carries with it new perspectives about how to view reconciliation and unveil its imaginings in different texts, and how writers, informed by certain socio-cultural and historical realities, address it as a prerequisite for democratization, dialogue, stability, and nation-building.

My journey towards accomplishing this research was full of fluctuations and hesitations about what should be put in and what should be left out and the dissertation kept polarizing like a fresh clay pot trying to take shape in the face of a lack of scholarship on the theme of reconciliation in literature. Yet, I landed on an open shore where I came to understand that a

work's value rests on its ability to channel new possibilities for continuous research and its power to titillate the human faculty of crossing borders between disciplines, subjects, regions, languages and cultural loci. I ended up coming to terms with what Zora Neale Hurston meant by saying that doing research is "poking and prying with a purpose," especially with the thought that, aligning voice with other critics, and however one approaches it, there is always "something elusive and utopian about reconciliation more broadly."<sup>590</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> Van Dijkhuizen, *A Literary History of Reconciliation*, 20.

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