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Dystopian future visions in Afrikaans novels published after 1999: A relationship between past and future

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Viljoen identifies an engagement with history and “dystopic views” as separate trends in recent Afrikaans literature. In investigating characteristics of recent Afrikaans dystopian futurist novels it becomes apparent that the past also plays an important role in the visions of the future that is created. The past is an important premise in dystopian literature in general. It can be linked to the protagonist’s search for identity and meaning in the dystopian space. This article explores the relationship between the past and future in Afrikaans dystopian futurist novels published after 1999. Specific reference is made to the following dystopian novels by established Afrikaans writers: *Oemkontoe van die nasie* (2001) by P.J. Haasbroek, *Raka die roman* (2005) by Koos Kombuis and *Horrelpoot* (2006) by Eben Venter. The self-published dystopian novels *Die Nege kerse van Magriet* (2006) by Barend P.J. Erasmus and *Beslissing in die Karoo* (2011) by Sebastiaan Biehl, which lie outside the mainstream of Afrikaans literature, are also discussed. These novels by Erasmus and Biehl are written from an extreme right-wing perspective and differ from the more mainstream novels in their portrayal of a future South Africa. In this paper I explore the role of references to South African history in the construction of the future in the Afrikaans dystopian novels published after 1999. I discuss how the Afrikaner characters use the past in their search for identity in a postcolonial and post-apartheid context. **Keywords:** Afrikaans literature, dystopia, post-apartheid literature, white male Afrikaans novel characters.

Introduction

Historically, Afrikaans literature has been imbedded in the South African socio-political context of the time in which it appears. Smuts (9) and van Coller (“Tussen nostalgie” 198) argue that, in the early 1990s, the focus on the present in Afrikaans literature shifted to a preoccupation with the past. According to Smuts, Afrikaans writers turned to representations of the past as a departure from the political novels written during the struggle, and it became a new way of giving social commentary (8-9). Viljoen also considers an interest in history as one of “the most prominent trends” in Afrikaans literature since 1990 (463–64). She describes how South African history is critically revisited, archived and dissected in novels such as Karel Schoeman’s *Hierdie lewe* (1993; trans. *This Life*, 2005), Christoffel Coetzee’s *Op soek na generaal Manneljies Mentz* (“In search of General Manneljies Mentz”, 1998), Ingrid Winterbach’s *Niggie* (2002; trans. *To Hell with Cronjé*, 2002) and Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (1994) and *Agaat* (2004; trans. *The Way of the Women*, 2008) (Viljoen 464–66).

Viljoen identifies texts with “dystopic views on post-apartheid South Africa” as a further trend in Afrikaans literature in the period after 1990 (463–64). The definition of a literary dystopia is a “society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (Sargent 9).

Extremely pessimistic reflections on the new democratic South Africa began to emerge after 1994, but became especially prevalent after 1999. André P. Brink’s novel *Donkermaan* (2000; *The Rights of Desire*, 2000); an anthology of poetry entitled *Nuwe verset* (“New resistance”, 2000), compiled by Daniel Hugo, Leon Rousseau and Phil du Plessis; and Abraham H. de Vries’s collection of short stories *Tot verhaal kom* (“Recovering your wits/story”, 2003) are only a few examples of Afrikaans works published after 1999 reflecting negatively on the New South Africa (Jacobs 4; van Coller, “Op soek na Afrika se hart” 11; Viljoen 469; Wasserman 4). Many of these works seems to have been influenced by J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) (Viljoen 469), which Gerwel describes as the pinnacle of a sharply critical view on the South African society after the transition to democracy (2).

Many consider 1999 as the end of the “honeymoon” phase of the New South Africa: Nelson Mandela’s presidency came to an end, and the country was faced with the challenges of a developing nation. Overseas (and local) confidence in South Africa declined due to the high crime rate, corruption and the handling of the HIV/AIDS issue. The worsening situation in Zimbabwe also created fear that the same could happen in South Africa.

The Afrikaans novels published after 1999 mentioned above are all more or less set in the time in which they appear. A subset of novels within this body of Afrikaans works that display disillusionment with post-apartheid South Africa are dystopian Afrikaans novels set in a future beyond the time of publication. Novels sketching a future South Africa marked by extreme social and moral decay, political unrest and deterioration include some by established Afrikaans writers, for example: *Oemkontoe van die nasie* (“Umkhonto (Spear) of the nation”, 2001), by P. J. Haasbroek, *Hotel Atlantis* (2002) and *Raka die roman* (“Raka the novel”, 2005), by Koos Kombuis, and *Horrelpoot* (2006; trans. *Trencherman*, 2008), by Eben Venter. Other dystopian novels published in this time are *Miskruier* (“Dung beetle”, 2005) by Jaco Botha, and *Wederkoms—Die lewe en geskiedenis van Jannes Hoop* (“The second coming—The life and times of Jannes Hoop”, 2009) by Louis Krüger. Depictions of a dystopian future South Africa can also be observed outside the mainstream of Afrikaans literature in the self-published novels *Die nege kerse van Magriet* (“The nine candles of Magriet”, 2006) by Barend P. J. Erasmus, and *Beslissing in die Karoo* (“Decision in the Karoo”, 2011) by Sebastiaan Biehl. These novels by Erasmus and Biehl are written from an extreme right-wing perspective and, as will be discussed, differ from the more mainstream novels in their portrayal of a future South Africa.

Viljoen (464–66, 468–70) discusses an engagement with history and “dystopic views” as separate trends in recent Afrikaans literature. However, in investigating characteristics of the Afrikaans dystopian futurist novels published after 1999 it becomes apparent that the past is also an important premise in the visions of the future that is created (compare Barendse, “Geskiedenis, geheue, verantwoordelikheid” and “Die miskruier, hoop en die verlede”).¹

The function of the past in dystopian literature

The connection between past and future is a central theme within dystopian literature in general. Baccolini (115) shows that this theme is already present in classic dystopian works such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). This trend continues in later dystopian works, most notably in feminist dystopias such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991), Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Ursula Le Guin’s *The Telling* (2000) (Baccolini 130).

Baccolini (115) points to dystopian literature’s intricate relationship to history. She links her discussion to Pfaelzer’s statement that the dystopia is often located in a space which is regressive rather than progressive:

Rather than represent the revolutionary tendencies of capitalism and technology, dystopians portray a historical collapse, a regression to an era—often conceived in Jeffersonian terms—which is pre-industrial, pre-immigrant, and pre-urban. Reversing the central utopian axiom, they assert that history is not inherently progressive (Pfaelzer 62–63).

According to Baccolini dystopian literature shows that the future does not necessarily lead to progress: that the present can develop negatively. The terrible futures portrayed in dystopias thus serve as warnings of the possible outcome of society’s actions in the present. She argues that the dystopia negates history, but at the same time depends on history (Baccolini 115).

In dystopian literature there is a preoccupation with the past, with a focus on the control of history (Baccolini 115). Baccolini shows that in typical dystopian novels the oppressors often control and manipulate history in order to maintain power over the citizens of the dystopia: “History, its knowledge, and memory are [...] dangerous elements that can give the dystopian citizen a potential instrument of resistance” (115). Therefore, in dystopian literature the protagonist’s “quest for identity [is often] rooted in knowledge of history [and] memory” (Baccolini 114).

In dystopian literature the future therefore cannot be disconnected from the past, and the past is often used to give insight into the dystopian future that is portrayed. A society with no recollection or acknowledgement of the past has no hopes for the

future, since the silenced history of oppressed and marginalised groups is denied. Historical amnesia leads to an anti-utopia,² which, along with nostalgia, creates the assumption that the past was a better time (Baccolini 119). Memory is central to the processes of change, action and empowerment, since the reconstruction of the past shapes the present and the future (Baccolini 119; see Geoghegan 54).

In this paper I explore the role of references to South African history in the construction of the future in a selection of the Afrikaans dystopian novels published after 1999. I discuss how the Afrikaner characters use the past in their search for identity in a postcolonial and post-apartheid context.

***Oemkontoe van die nasie* (2001) by P. J. Haasbroek**

In P. J. Haasbroek's dystopian satire *Oemkontoe van die nasie* (hereafter referred to as *Oemkontoe*), published in 2001 and set in 2005, South Africa's struggle history is already evoked in the title of the novel: "Oemkontoe" refers to Umkhonto weSizwe, translated as "spear of the nation", which was the military wing of the ANC during the struggle against apartheid. The main character, a writer and Afrikaans teacher called Faan Starck, is portrayed as a new struggle writer in post-apartheid South Africa. He gets into trouble with the local authorities because he criticises the new rulers in his writing. Recalling apartheid-era censorship, the office of the newspaper that he writes for is burnt down in what looks like an act of sabotage by the government (37, 41, 49).

Faan goes into self-imposed exile with a group of Afrikaners who move from Nylstroom to Cape Town. The group undertakes what they call "the great trek back" (41). The Nylstromers have heard rumours that Western culture is still maintained in Cape Town (105). It is a reversal of the original Great Trek that took place in the 1830s and 1840s, when Afrikaners moved from the coast to the interior of South Africa to gain independence from British rule. The use of this image from South Africa's history implies that the Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa, like their ancestors, have to trek across the country to find a place where they are free to practise their culture. Upon reaching the Cape they find that conditions are similar to those in the interior. The group disperses and Faan ends up in a boarding house situated on a smallholding in Paarl. The "great trek back" leaves the Afrikaners displaced and without hope. It is a regression to the past, rather than a critical re-evaluation of history. Although Haasbroek satirises the Afrikaners' obsession with the past, it is never acknowledged in the book that aspects of Afrikaner history are at least partially responsible for the dystopian future that is portrayed.

At the end of the novel it is suggested that Faan might have some success in his role as new struggle writer. He starts the rebellion of the ones who laugh—writers like himself (and by implication Haasbroek) who expose the wrongs of the new rulers

through satire. According to Roos, in *Oemkontoe* the pen is identified as the most effective *umkhonto* or spear against the injustices of the new government (“Joiners, AWOL en Umkhonto” 73). Despite the references to South Africa’s struggle history, the character Faan does not use his knowledge of the past in his new struggle. He therefore risks repeating the mistakes of the past (see Barendse, “Gesiedenis”).

***Raka die roman* (2005) by Koos Kombuis**

Kombuis refers to N. P. van Wyk Louw’s epic 1941 poem *Raka* in the title of his satirical dystopian novel, *Raka die roman*, published in 2005 and set in 2008. By parodying a pivotal work in Afrikaans literary history, Kombuis critically explores the South African past in his representation of the future.

According to van der Berg and David, the cover of the novel, a picture of a 1950s Dutch Reformed Church steeple against a new South African flag, reflects an intertwining of the past and the future. They argue that the steeple in the picture is overshadowed by the flag, and that this shows that the Dutch Reformed Church’s authority is fading in the New South Africa (55). To add to van der Berg and David’s interpretation of the cover, I furthermore view the two irreconcilable images as the Oppermans’ (the family in the novel) inability to adapt to the New South Africa: they are stuck with symbols from the past that no longer have relevance (see van Coller and van Jaarsveld 124–25).

In Kombuis’s novel, the Opperman family is trapped in a colonial and apartheid mind-set. The surname “Opperman” literally translates as chief or supreme commander, and the family considers themselves superior to other groups in South Africa (see Roos, “Onweerswolke oor die Wes-Kaap” 124). At the beginning of the novel it does not seem as if the transition to democracy has had any effect on them. They use derogatory terms to refer to their domestic worker, and lead a quiet, unreflective middle-class life (81). Their peaceful existence is disturbed when, as Roos shows, the patriarchal family unit, the basis of the Afrikaner culture, starts to crumble (“Onweerswolke” 126).

The Afrikaner patriarch is represented by Theunis Opperman, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. Theunis loses control over his children. They spend their days with their friends in the Oppermans’ basement, smoking pot and playing music (10, 22). Theunis becomes a ridiculous figure when he tries to assert his authority over them. One evening, dressed only in his sleeping shorts, he accidentally exposes his penis to them when he goes to tell them to be quiet (23). The children respect him even less after this incident, which portrays the Afrikaner male as a disempowered caricature (see van der Berg and David 55). Theunis’s downfall comes when he has an affair with his sister-in-law. He loses the status he had as a religious leader in the community and as possible future rector of Stellenbosch University (220).

Van Coller and van Jaarsveld argue that Louw's *Raka* was initially analysed from within a colonial framework. Raka, the ape-man, was seen as an evil force threatening Western culture in Africa (126). More recently, however, the poem has been analysed within a postcolonial and psychoanalytical framework. Within this framework, Raka is interpreted as the Jungian shadow aspect: the dark side of the individual that is essential in the search for the self (van Coller and van Jaarsveld 125, 127). At first it looks as if the problems in the Opperman family began on what is described as the day the "ondier", which can be translated as the "monster" or "beast", arrived (9). On this day, a black man knocks on the Oppermans' door to conduct an opinion poll (15). It is not revealed at this stage what the poll is about. Jozi, the youngest Opperman son, dismisses the man by telling him that they don't have opinions (15). As in the interpretation of Louw's poem in a colonial framework, the ruin of the Opperman family at the beginning of the novel is ascribed to a dark outside force. At the end of the novel, the black man once again knocks on their door. He has his doctoral dissertation (for which he was conducting the poll) with him. It is entitled, *Between fear, loss and change: Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa Part 1* (222, my translation). The title of his dissertation shows that the root of evil lies within the Opperman family: they need to recognise the darkness in themselves in order to create a new identity in post-apartheid South Africa. This time around, Jozi lets the man enter, and it seems that the Oppermans might start to reflect critically on their position.

The satirical portrayal of the Afrikaner characters in *Raka die roman* suggests that their fears are ridiculous. They almost cause their own demise by their unwillingness to change. Should they choose to adapt to new circumstances and let go of their past, there is hope for them in the New South Africa.

***Horrelpoot* (2006) by Eben Venter**

Ampie Coetzee (55) and van Coller (*Laat Vrugte*, 5) show that the farm played a central role in shaping Afrikaner culture, with the traditional farm novel supporting Afrikaner ideology in the first half of the twentieth century. The preservation of the farm is linked to the continued existence of the Afrikaner. According to J. M. Coetzee, for the Afrikaner, "the loss of a farm assumes the scale of the fall of an ancient house, the end of a dynasty" (83).

From the 1960s to 1980s, the traditional Afrikaans farm novel was frequently adapted, undermined and parodied as part of the struggle literature of the time (Pordzik 179; van Coller, "Die Afrikaanse plaasroman" 26). In the early 1990s, novels set on the farm, such as Etienne van Heerden's *Die stoetmeester* (1993; trans. *Leap year*, 1997) and Eben Venter's *Foxtrot van die vleisetters* ("Foxtrot of the meat-eaters", 1993), also undermine the traditional farm novel by reflecting the Afrikaners' uncertain position with the

transition to democracy. More recent novels, such as Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) and Eben Venter's dystopian novel *Horrelpoot* (2006), are once again inversions of the traditional farm novel.

In *Horrelpoot*, set in an unspecified time in the future, Marlouw, his sister Heleen, and her husband JP emigrate from South Africa to Australia shortly after South Africa's transition to democracy. After living in Australia for twenty years, Marlouw returns to his former family farm, Ouplaas (tr. "Old farm"), in South Africa. The farm was given to the black farm workers by Marlouw and Heleen after their father's death. Marlouw's mission is to find Heleen's son Koert, who has taken a trip to his parents' country of birth, and to bring him back to Australia. Marlouw finds Koert on a run-down Ouplaas: all the trees that were planted by Marlouw's family have been chopped down, the wind pumps have stopped working, and the cattle are dying (118, 165). In the traditional farm novel, cultivated trees represent the succession of generations (van Collier, "Die Afrikaanse plaasroman" 24). The devastation of the farm consequently symbolises the destruction of the white Louw family's legacy in the country. In a misguided attempt to regain his family's rights to the farm, Koert has become a neo-colonial oppressor ruling over the people of Ouplaas. He gains power in the district by running a meat monopoly from the farm. However, by the time Marlouw arrives on the farm, Koert has no resources left and is gravely ill.

Even though Marlouw has willingly given up the farm, the primal fear, the fear of his forefathers that their land will be taken from them, haunts him in his dreams. The fact that his ancestors constantly had to defend the land they had claimed as their own, suggests that it never rightfully belonged to them. At the beginning of his journey, Marlouw nostalgically recalls fond childhood memories (72, 117). As his journey progresses, his interaction with history becomes more constructive as he starts to make a connection between the past and the dystopian space he finds himself in. He starts to question the presence of Western culture in Africa and the position of the white man in colonial and postcolonial South Africa (158, 163).

There has been much debate about the portrayal of the degradation of the farm under black management in the novel, with some readers and critics considering it racist (see Grant-Marshall 5; Liebenberg 18). Riet de Jong-Goossens sees the farm workers' willingness to bow under the power of Koert as a return to apartheid, since they rely on the white man to help them (35). I do not view the representation of the black people as racist, but rather as an expression of the impact of the past on the dystopian future that is depicted in the novel. Rather than "saving" the farm, Koert contributes to its demise. Marlouw tried to suppress the wrongs of the past by handing over the farm to the workers, but in the novel it is shown that a history of colonial and apartheid oppression and displacement cannot easily be undone.

Die Nege kerse van Magriet (2006) by Barend P. J. Erasmus, and *Beslissing in die Karoo* (2011) by Sebastiaan Biehl

Outside of the mainstream of Afrikaans literature, the self-published novels of Erasmus and Biehl also draw from the South African past in their depictions of the future. Like Venter's *Horrelpoot*, Barend P. J. Erasmus's *Die nege kerse van Magriet* (2006, hereafter referred to as *Nege kerse*) is a take on the traditional farm novel. In Venter's novel there is a critical reflection on the Afrikaner's past, and complex issues surrounding the influence of the colonial past on postcolonial South Africa are raised. This is lacking in *Nege kerse*. The novel stretches over the period from 1985 to 2030. It is presented to the reader as the tale of the Jansen family from Aasvoëlkrans ("Vulture cliff"), a farm in the Gamka Valley. As in the traditional farm novel, the Jansens are portrayed as a hardworking Afrikaner family with a proud lineage. As mentioned, the traditional farm novel has completely been undermined in the Afrikaans literature of the past decades. In *Nege kerse*, however, the Afrikaner nationalist ideology and the patriarchal values associated with the traditional farm novel are confirmed, rather than questioned.

Grandmother Gertruida Jansen reflects on the "good old days" on the farm in the stories she tells to her grandchildren (56–57). In other recent Afrikaans novels, such as Ingrid Winterbach's *Niggie* (2002) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004), the customs of the past are also archived, but as part of a critical engagement with history. In *Nege kerse* it is mere nostalgia.

Nege kerse provides a very different interpretation of South Africa's colonial history than *Horrelpoot*, for example:

In the nineteenth century, the doctrine of conquest and occupation was a perfectly respectable and universally accepted tenet of international law. Acceptable in the case of the US, Canada, Australia and New-Zealand (sic), but apparently not in the case of my people. [...] In fact, mine is the only country in the world where an established victorious people were forced to surrender everything unconditionally and become no more than what we call bywoners—share-croppers—in a country they—most certainly not the indigenous people—have built. (390)

In this passage, spoken by the character Anneke, a third-generation Jansen, the oppression of the indigenous people in the colonial and apartheid past is ignored. Anneke makes use of the typical terminology of the traditional farm novel of the early twentieth century by describing the Afrikaners' position in the New South Africa as that of *bywoners*. Ampie Coetzee shows that, in the traditional farm novel, the "by-woner" is characterised by displacement and degeneration (96). These people have no identity and future because they have lost their land. In *Nege kerse* it is implied that the Afrikaners are an oppressed and dispossessed group in post-apartheid South Africa. Unable to come to terms with a changing society, the identity of the Afrikaner characters in the novel is regressively tied to the past.

In Orania resident Sebastiaan Biehl's *Beslissing in die Karoo* (2011) (hereafter referred to as *Beslissing*) there is also no place for Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa. A race war breaks out in the country after the character Moronge, who is clearly based on Nelson Mandela, is assassinated. A large group of Afrikaners flee to Eendracht, an Afrikaner nation state situated next to the Orange River in the Northern Cape (67, 118). After a long battle, the South African government declares the area an independent Afrikaner republic called Oranjeland ("Orange land") (215). The novel suggests a return to a form of apartheid to escape from the dystopian future that is portrayed, and the mistakes of the past are repeated as a result of historical amnesia.

Conclusion

The Afrikaans dystopian novels published after 1999 are part of a development in Afrikaans literature since 1990 in which the South African past is recalled and examined. In the discussion of the five Afrikaans dystopian novels above it is shown that, depending on the underlying ideological perspective of the novels, references to South African history are treated in different ways. In *Oemkontoe*, *Raka die roman* and *Nege kerse*, the Afrikaner characters seem to be stuck in the past. The element of satire in Kombuis's and Haasbroek's novels differentiates them from Erasmus's novel, in which Afrikaner nationalist sentiments are confirmed rather than questioned or satirised. In *Nege kerse* the suffering of the oppressed groups in South Africa's apartheid and colonial history is overlooked, and the focus is only on the supposedly marginalised position of the Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa.

In *Raka die roman*, the old Afrikaner structures are crumbling, but it is suggested that Afrikaners can create a new identity in post-apartheid, postcolonial South Africa if they overcome their fear of change. Although there seems to be a possibility for change at the end of *Oemkontoe*, the influence of the past on the dystopian future that is portrayed is never acknowledged. A regressive return to the practices of the past is sketched in *Beslissing*. Like *Nege kerse*, *Beslissing* is characterised by historical amnesia. In *Horrelpoot*, the position of the Afrikaner in post-apartheid South Africa is explored along with a critical reflection on the country's colonial history. Marlouw's occupation with the past furthermore leads him to take responsibility for the past to a certain extent.

Although the engagement with the past is more constructive in some of the Afrikaans dystopian novels than in others, as in dystopian literature in general, history becomes an important tool in the characters' search for identity and meaning within dystopian circumstances in all the novels.

Notes

1. This trend can also be seen in English South African dystopian futurist novels published in this time. For example, in Robert Kirby's satirical dystopian novel *Songs of the Cockroach* (2002) references

are made to the Great Trek. Lauren Beukes draws from South Africa's apartheid past in her portrayal of the future in her dystopian novels *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010).

2. Sargent defines an anti-utopia as a "society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism" (9). In an anti-utopia there is no hope.

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