

Interspersions of fragmented living in André Brink's *The Ambassador*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study André Brink's *The Ambassador* from the perspective of fragmented lives. André Brink is a prominent and most important writer of South Africa. Brink moved to Paris, a place which was comfortable to him and which figured centrally in *The Ambassador*. It deals with the theme of separateness, apartheid and it is based on Lawrence Durrell's "love is a form of metaphysical inquiry" (61). Brink, at that stage, was a dynamic translator of classics and children's books into Afrikaans, his native language (Lelanie De Roubaix 201:1). Since the nineteen-sixties, he has translated various works – more than sixty in total – of different genres into and from Afrikaans. And for Brink, love is a form of revolution as well as destruction. In the novel, it begins with the third Secretary, Stephen Keyter, at South African Embassy in Paris. He is not attractive but ambitious, self-pitying, resentful and sex-starved pipsqueak. He is after Nicolette, a feather-brained Parisian stripper. Even though he uses African products, his life is fragmented. The Ambassador, Paul van Heerden, has an affair with a young girl, Nicolette. Ambassador, his wife, Erica and his daughter, Annette lead fragmented lives in Paris. They often face the problem of identity and alienation and become frustrated at the end.

Key words: fragmented living, separateness, love, alienation, sense of self.

Introduction

André P. Brink's novel, *The Ambassador* is the outcome of first prolonged exposure to Paris as a student during 1959-61 and formed part of the first wave of fiction produced by the 'Sestigers' ('Writers of the Sixties') in South Africa.

That first exposure to Paris was in many ways traumatic for me. After more than twenty years within the comfortable, closed framework of conventional Afrikaner attitudes, values and beliefs the sudden discovery of all the cross-currents of thought and experience in Europe was a cultural shock from which it took years to recover. (*Ambassador* 9)

Most of these works, by young writers who had spent some time abroad, were attempts to emancipate Afrikaans fiction of the time from its colonial constraints by introducing trends of thought and technique then vogue in Europe and by breaking down taboos in the field of religion, ethics, sex and even narrative technique then prevalent in Afrikaans literature. This movement had surprising political side effects, as the questioning of Afrikaner morality and religion contributed towards a breakdown in the stranglehold of the authorities on the minds of the young generation. Isidore Diala states that Brink's insight into the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in the sustenance of apartheid was, however, to lead him to the final disenchantment, atheism. Brink openly confessed that he became an atheist, a critic of religion which is the cornerstone of morality for Afrikaners (Brink, "Interview" 5).

For André Brink this novel was the first expression of a search and an exploration. His Parisian experience gave an opportunity to explore the alternatives to environment in his own country. Brink said that his central character undergoes a crisis of faith, politics, religion and also a cultural crisis (9). He presents the young man's agonized and urgent, romantic vision of the world in Paris and battling to find out or to redefine some values in the wake of the shipwreck of his familiar world. It deals with various themes but separateness, guilt and confession are dominant. Shelley Mary Dixon says that *The Ambassador* introduces a series of themes which continue to permeate the remainder of Brink's oeuvre: the cycle of guilt and confession is central (137).

The Third Secretary, Stephen Keyter begins his narration of environment at South African Embassy in Paris before he could report to the Ambassador to the Department in Pretoria.

No doubt people like Anna Smith, and possibly even Koos Joubert, would read all kinds of personal motives into it: vindictiveness, frustrated ambition, wounded pride, no matter what. Let them. The only personal motives involved (I must stress this) are disgust, and my deep seated loathing of hypocrisy. (13)

All kinds of personal motives of the employees in the Embassy are hinted by the Third secretary like hypocrisy, vindictiveness, frustration, wounded pride disgust, etc. He gives the account of the Ambassador's perfect personality with a flaw as the Ambassador fools about with that little tart Nicolette, while his wife is away on holiday in Italy. Keyter himself appears isolated, remote from that life outside and lives in darkness. He describes Paris as it has monotonous buildings one sees the exposed veins and nerves of the city in all its shameless anatomy of illusion. Sometime he has the impression that the city has served as a catalyst for all that has happened and is still happening. I think of it a law of nature, of heredity, a parental body; and of us, existing inside it, as its turbulent chromosomes alive with genes. The night club culture is very live in front of him. Inside of the club it was smoky and rather tatty; and the naked girls on the stage looked inexperienced and clumsy, a few of them were actually trembling, but whether from the cold or from fear was hard to tell.

Afterwards all possible shade of emotion broke loose inside me: humiliation, anger, resentment, shame. But at that moment, standing there, convulsed, there was only one senseless thought turning over and over in my mind: *Its Sunday night. It bloody well Sunday night again. Paris or Pretoria, no matter, its Sunday night!*(19)

Keyter goes through different kinds of experiences in Paris with prostitution. Even after that Sunday nights he still is caught in that spell and he feels that nothing will ever set him free. He cries for freedom as 'I want to be free! No I don't'. Fragmented life of is resembled through his restlessness. He says that his bachelor life is becoming too much for him. It is really most disturbing. And then, suddenly, Nicolette is there.

"A few hours later it was discovered that the vase had inexplicably been broken" (*The Ambassador* 22).

That was only the beginning of what, in the course of that long evening, would develop into a shameless flirtation: no harm intended, I'm sure, but none the less embarrassing to him. He senses in her a strange compulsion to unburden herself of everything: a miserable childhood of

rejection and rebellion, even physical mal treatment; an orphan youth bleak and utterly joyless. According to David Huddart, 'Such a desire is, according to Sigmund Freud, a central feature of the uncanny' (*Him K Bhabha*52). He utilizes an idea to expound the feelings we get when the repressed experiences of childhood return to disturb our daily life. For Bhabha, it is possible to compare the childhood of an individual with the beginnings of modern Western history: in both cases, something is repressed but inevitably breaks through the veneer of civilization'. (*Him K Bhabha*52)

He gradually comes to suspect that the whole lengthy confession about her unhappy orphan childhood has also been thought up by her fertile imagination. Sometimes she tells him other stories instead of original story that to seriously and confidentially. Despite all her lies about her background, he desires her, and hates her, and pities her, all at the same time. He flirts with Nicolette but she dances in the night club with other men which is the replica of her fragmented living. Keyter feels jealous of it and he couldn't sleep that night but was not able to explain his own feelings. He feels that he was insulted and angry as his most urgent need has been thwarted.

We started talking: the kind of rabbit-warren conversation we so often had full of dead ends. And, as usual, it soon touched on our 'relationship'. I accused her of being obstinate and petulant. Why should she always keep me on a string, playing an inscrutable game, always staying out of reach? After all, I knew exactly who and what she was – that she never tried to hide her numerous flirtations with other men. (*The Ambassador* 43)

After his predictable secure way of life, he feels completely stranded in this bustling city with the Embassy the only island where one could still enjoy the sense of security created by the presence of compatriots. Keyter comments on the fragmented life of Anna Smith as she used to be a school teacher, but then she got into wedlock. Unfortunately, after two years her husband ran off with another woman. Therefore, she ended up in the Foreign Service. She considers herself as one of the 'younger set', although her notions tend to move in an extremely narrow circle.

Keyter gets acquainted with the wife of the Ambassador and his daughter. He tried to flirt with her but she refuses point blank. Then fear engulfs his mind.

I didn't sleep that night. For days I lived in agony. But nothing happened. Gradually I began to relax. So she hadn't told them. She wouldn't. And everything returned to normal. But deep inside me, behind the tidy surface, there remained a scar and the cancer of fear. (55)

He tries to understand Erika, wife of Ambassador as he could see the fatigue she no longer cared to hide behind her make-up, an expression almost of sadness, emptiness and of experiences beyond my horizon. Erika leads a broken life where she conducts herself perfectly with others in hosting parties. She has different view of life in Paris.

'There's city, the whole city throbbing with life. Five million people, behind there light and dark windows, all caught up in the act of living. Does it matter whether they do it gracefully or sordidly?

And here we are – look at us – shut in by our four walls protected from the strange spectacle, life, of which we've heard, but which we hardly know at all. (57)

She feels lonely among the crowd and even in her family and despises the religious system. Keyter moves very close with her and listens to her monologue. It is very confusing, troubles by the after – effects of shock which still has to be absorbed by him. He suffers from loneliness, frustration and loss of contact with Annette. Erika confesses in his presence:

At the same time, I suspect, I also felt a masochistic desire to lick my wounds in public. (Is it an innate urge that drives to one to confession? Is this the true substance of religion?) (61)

She pours out her feelings in her letters to her husband, Paul van Heerden (Ambassador). Perhaps he has never before realized so acutely how much of a stranger she is to him, how impossible it has become to get through to her.

What are trying to tell me, Erika?

She shakes her head. 'I don't know if Italy will help. We've reached a dead end, Paul.' (114)

She says that her life is becoming cold and everything is gloomy, hopeless and completely detached. In order to escape from depression, she goes for a trip to Italy. A 'pilgrimage' she's called it, cynically. There is no any essential difference between her flight and Nicolette's game of ring – a – rosy round a bet. Both boiled down to self-deception, a bit of make belief in order to keep on moving, keep the circulation going, warding off the final cold, a pathetic isolated life.

Stephen Keyter, Third Secretary as a budding young diplomat, miserable bloody failure and forlorn. It's more than a reduction of individuality: it utterly *dissolves* individuality, makes it superfluous compared to this symbiosis which excluded all 'lower' forms of life, all baser instincts. He wants to take revenge for the humiliation by Ambassador. He says:

The Apostle could rely on faith, hope and love to illuminate the darkness of his night. I have no faith in faith and little hope of hope. And of love I seem to know nothing. All I have is my report. I may have failed in everything else: but not in this. (86)

Ambassador feels that the Third Secretary might be the type of person who existed only in terms of extremes: asceticism or debauchery and a wasteland in between.

Through Nicolette, he recollects Gillian, his former love. He says that Gillian belonged to the past, she'd been the sole folly of her father's life. But then the sort of folly which gradually, whether one wanted it or not, grew into the very fibre of one's existence. A growth, a tumour but whether malignant or benign was difficult to say. One day, after her father's death, she cries out that she wants to live, live, live, *live!* Ambassador considers her as a victims of anarchy'

It was a fanatic, fantastic existence, inflamed by this burning desire to live, an urge so ferocious that it seemed to turn everything into its own paradox: thus her passion for life, the need to say 'Yes' to life, expressed itself in practice, in a destructive iconoclasm, ahead-on attack on all conventional values-which turned against herself, made her the victim of her own anarchy. (119).

Ambassador flirts with Nicolette and develops a kind of relationship through which he thinks that he found meaning to his life. But at the same time fear lurks in his mind as if someone finds his secret life, what would be the consequence.

What would happen if someone he knew found him there with her? Everything had air of unreality. At one stage, overcame by something like claustrophobia, he almost got up to escape, back to his familiar world. (129)

He suffers from the unsettling awareness of silence, of isolation, a feeling of being lost in immense space. His marriage and official life fall apart. He fails to end his affair with Nicolette which destroys him. He comes to know Nicolette's worst life of prostitution which frustrates him and he wonders at her life and questions her as how long she continues. He gets the answer like 'as long as I like'. In her company he feels comfortable and says that he has been living among ghosts and illusions for years: nothing has been real, remote and invisible. But she is real to him. And conforms that she is the only *presence* in his world of shadows. He does not understand her and says, 'But when all is said and done, what remains is, simply, *she* – known, unknown, unknowable' (170)

Conclusion

City life and youth for him is hallucinating, terrifying, milling motion without direction, movement without reason, heresy against sense and coherence, a meaningless, aimless rebellion under a heaven without stars, against the large closed doors of the morose church. Every person in Embassy has an uncanny life especially the Ambassador. David Huddart says, "The uncanny and unhomely ways of living is real as well as metaphorical according to Homi K. Bhabha. They have weird view of their lives." (*Him K. Bhabha*53).

Every character in the novel, *The Ambassador*, suffers from fragmented living. Erika loses hope as her daughter, Annette gets deceived by her Italian boyfriend in Italy and she divorces and goes back South Africa with her daughter as she has to be operated to get life for three more months. Keyter, due to his guilt, isolation and depression dies in his house by gas leakage. Nicolette vacates the house and by listening to this news the Ambassador feels lonely and he drifts into seclusion. Most of the characters live in a fragmented life in Paris.

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