
Judith Coullie:
The Closest of Strangers
(Anthology)

Judith Lutge Coullie (Ed.) *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Writing* Johannesburg: Wits University Press 2004

Judith Coullie's *The Closest of Strangers* attempts to portray the intricate relationships that lend meaning to the term “existence” and “womanhood” in South Africa. In her statement of objective for her book Coullie acknowledges the essence of all attempts at the great works:

My hope is that these extracts may teach us how to transcend our own narrow concerns and engage with experiences and truths that may differ from our own, even though such imaginative engagement can only be partial, fragmentary and crude. (3)

The book is divided into nine sections, with each section spanning 9-10 years of history. The book's merit lies in its concentration on stories that denote the 'human angle' to South Africa's frightful history of apartheid and violence. It yields to us the travails of women during the turmoil and turbulence that South Africa had passed through. That the stories and poems are culled from actual biographies, autobiographies and interviews gives the impression of participation on the part of the reader. One feels that he/she is getting the story directly from the narrator. It lends an aura of truth to these experiences. From that perspective too, the

Izibongo(s) (personal/oral praises panegyrics) appear to be appropriately situated within the context of the work.

With regard to South Africa's history and its implication for the citizens, historian Cherryl Walker notes:

[W]omen's sense of community with other women, the basis of their perception of themselves ... was circumscribed by sturdy boundaries of language, ethnicity and the broader race consciousness around which South African society was organized (*Strangers* 1).

Most of the stories (save few) tend to justify this assertion. In this regard, the stories appear to reflect the "... paradox of ubiquitous racism ... (which has) branded all South Africans, in a sense binding them together in their experiences ... of the extremes of segregation" (3).

Although it might appear a bit hasty to conclude that the story of South Africa is that of violence, yet each of the nine sections in this anthology reveals the vicious strings that run through the whole South African debacle. From wars, lynching, mob killings, incarceration, police molestation and forced evictions, to rape, thefts, escapes, forced labour, spurned or thwarted love and family separations, the lives of South African women chronicle two centuries of violence. Projecting from the consciousness of the victims or 'victim witnesses', the nightmarish tales adjust the lens of reality to reveal the universal humanity beneath the events. I believe that this is one of the editorial objectives of this compilation.

The first section of the book is entitled "The Birth of South Africa." Stories in this section detail the bloodbath that preceded

the birth of South Africa from the Anglo-Boer wars. Sarah Raal's story chronicles her account of the many dangers she faced fighting alongside men in the war. The general picture conveyed is that the women suffered and were exposed to even greater dangers than their men during the wars.

“Unions and Divisions” contains four stories out of which only one (Prue Smith's) appears to have relevance to the underlying theme of British racism after the Anglo-Boer wars. Racial discrimination was meted out to non-British nationals including the Dutch. Although this section is preceded by a good introduction, the stories that appear here do not lend it much structural cohesion. Perhaps more stories directly concerned with the basic expositions of the introduction should have featured here to achieve the unity of vision. Prue Smith's account might be seen as a white woman's reaction to entrenched racial segregation. In contrast, she forges emotional alliance with her black nurse upon whom she had depended. Although the story comes to us from Smith's white viewpoint, yet her revelation that the maid's baby was named after her seems to underscore the mutual emotional dependence of two human beings irrespective of the divisions of the society. Mqgwetho's *Izibongo* in this section has very little relevance with the objective. Perhaps its inclusion is simply justified by the period of its production.

“Enfranchisement and Disenfranchisement,” chronicles events that happened between 1930 and 1940. This was the period of great political upheaval especially for blacks and Asians singled for racist victimisations around this period. Then, the main opposing political party, the Communist Party, enjoyed much popularity. It was a period of great trial for this party as its tenets and practices were put to severe test.

One of such tests is that of the relationships between different

racial groups. This is illustrated in Pauline Podbrey's story of the love between herself and her Indian husband. That this story appears in "Foundations of Apartheid" seems to render the structural divisions unnecessary. Indeed but for some few cases, many of the stories would have conveniently appeared as one major section. For instance the stories in "Enfranchisement" and "Foundations of Apartheid" could have conveniently featured as one section with "Apartheid Escalates" or "Winds of Repression."

However, with the preoccupation with 'violence' in the stories, there still appear some ideas of positive dimensions. While Dr Goonam's experience in "Enfranchisement..." captures prevalent gender prejudices, dichotomies and challenges, Katie Makanya's account of her job experience with Dr McCord reveals like Prue Smith, that love, loyalty and dedication transcend the racial boundary. In this guise, Charlene Smith's story of rape, and even more importantly, her 'liberated' awareness which guides her report of the incidence, reveal a quality of awareness that attempts to transcend the confines of environment. Her report admits of success in overcoming racial biases which seem to dictate and muddle our perception of reality. It is significant that her report details a cognisance that insight that although raped by a black man, there lies a deeper understanding of the human nature that drives our predictable reactions:

I cry, "I'm terribly sorry, but he raped me. I don't have my clothes with me".

My white neighbour goes to fetch his wife. My black neighbour leads me gently away.

"Please cut off this masking tape. I can't move properly." I try to move my bloodied hand. My black neighbour gets something and with the

greatest gentleness cuts off the masking tape and
frees my hand. (368)

After this report she observes:

I tell you the race of my neighbours because I want
you to know that rape is not about race, as some
South Africans think. It is not about what men do.
It is about what a few sick individuals do. It has
nothing to do with race or malehood. Indeed, for
most part men treated me better than women that
night. (368).

Smith's traumatic experience, reported in "The New South Africa" nearly deadens the ironical twist of the tale but for her exceptional depth of awareness. Such level of consciousness would readily lend an insight to forging the dream of the new South Africa. Her message of hope seems to proclaim that people need to cross gender and racial boundaries in order to develop the human potential. Smith's report appears to highlight the view that life and existence in the new South Africa can only be achieved when people have a greater understanding of their neighbours (work, home, community) some of whom had been their closest strangers in the past.

One way of achieving this insight appears to be the objective of this anthology. With decades of political, cultural and economic divide officially dismantled in South Africa, individuals are challenged to eschew emotional and psychological attitudes by availing themselves of the opportunity being offered to synergise others' experiences.

It must be observed that the "Izibongo" oral poems do not communicate much of message or art. Their scant yield in meaning

and poetic virtuosity may be attributed to the brevity of their presentation. Also, some of the stories coming as autobiographies have the ring of contrivance. A good example is Winnie Mandela's account of her early relationship with her husband constructed to suit some simply emotional or post traumatic purpose. Judith Coullie's anthology could however be enriched with the experiences of black women in subsequent editions.