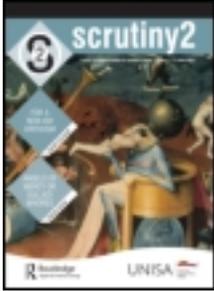


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Reviews

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Reviews

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FOTOTO: A REVIEW OF TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *THE BOOK OF NOT* (2006)

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The much-acclaimed *Nervous conditions* (1988) is the background to its long-awaited sequel *The book of not* (2006). Dangarembga's new novel should be read not only as an answer to unresolved questions raised in the first novel, but also as a new set of questions and confusions to do with growing up black, female and ambitious in wartime colonial Rhodesia and post-colonial Zimbabwe.

The book of not is a novel that engages with the critics of *Nervous conditions* (henceforth referred to as *NC*) in a direct and complex way. In that sense, it is a review of *Nervous conditions*, and consequently, an opportunity to rethink the existing body of critical work on the novel. It is also a novel that overtly inaugurates probing musings that take the shape of cultural philosophy. But ultimately, it is a novel about the experience of living snubbed and stubbed ideals, and hence it is about failure, betrayal and loss. The *phototo* of my title is Shona for 'squashed or deflated'. Ntombi, a schoolmate and dorm-mate, uses it to mock Tambu's projects of self-raising (*NC*: 58).

Some reviewers are happy to describe the new novel as being concerned with the 'return of Tambu', the narrator in *Nervous conditions*. They are justified in saying so, because Tambu did promise a narrative, having told us at the end of *Nervous conditions* that the story we had just read or heard was nothing more than a prologue to what Caroline Rooney (1995: 139) thought of as 'the story of the story, the escape which escapes us, the unwritten which makes for further writing, further departures'. *The book of not* (henceforth *BON*) can be considered as the fulfilment of a narrator's rather than a writer's promise to continue with the story another time. Tambu cannot be held responsible for delaying in delivering the next instalments of her story: she never set a time frame. True to the Shona narrative tradition evident in the two novels, Tambu's *Nervous conditions* engages audience interest and attention, and readies us for the rendition of the next round of the story circle. It is part of the time-honoured narrative ethos of the Shona tradition not to proceed with a story unless someone is listening (in this case, unless someone is reading) and the conditions of telling have been established and agreed.

As parts of a projected trilogy, *Nervous conditions* and *The book of not* work in the same way as Wilson Katiyo's *A son of the soil* (1976), which is broken into three cycles or books: 'in the beginning' (the coming of the white settler);

‘discovering the time’ (of colonisation); and ‘closing a circle’ (of colonial oppression). *The book of not* should be considered as similar to ‘discovering the time’ and ‘closing a circle’ in Katiyo’s novel. In some ways it is a variant of Shimmer Chinodya’s *Harvest of thorns* (1989): the detail on family background, school and war, and the return from war. But unlike the triumphal assertions and symbolism of Katiyo’s closing of a circle, *The book of not* ends with a confused, uncertain and disoriented Tambu, jobless and on the verge of being evicted from a hostel by an old white matron, and ‘wondering what future there was for me, a new Zimbabwean’ (*BON*: 246). That is not the only threat of eviction.

Sister Emmanuel, the headmistress of Sacred Heart, recommends the removal of Tambu from the school because she ‘has a complex’ and an ‘inability to be part of the college’ as well as ‘a supercilious expression’ (*BON*: 89) on her face. Babamukuru disowns and evicts Tambu from his house because she has not passed her Advanced Level examinations, and it is her mother who has caused Babamukuru to be beaten and nearly killed by the guerrillas. Mrs May, the white matron at the single women’s hostel, evicts Tambu because she suspects she is ‘out of sorts’ (*BON*: 243) and ‘miserable’ (*BON*: 245). She has become the hysteric, the alienated, the inconvenient and inconvenienced. She is the one, like Nyasha before her, to be accused and punished, as Babamukuru puts it, for raising ‘eyebrows, at other people!’ (*BON*: 90).

The book of not is a book of the unexpected as well as of dramatic reversals.

It begins with horror, a beating and dismemberment. It ends almost the same way it begins, with an impending sense of an approaching horror of the void, with Tambu herself beaten

by her experiences, and displaced from her job and family. Tambu’s sister Netsai, who has joined the guerrillas, is bombed at a *pungwe* or *morari* (the all-night morale-raising rallies of the 1970s liberation struggle). Her leg, severed from her body, hangs on a tree branch. Babamukuru is accused of being a sellout and is beaten by the guerrillas because his ‘soul hankered to be at one with the occupying Rhodesian forces’ (*BON*: 6), for ‘why would a man select a school for his child where the education was superior to the education given to the children of other people?’ (ibid). In *Nervous conditions* Tambu warns us: ‘Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon’ (*BON*: 203). The bulk of *The book of not* is narrowly focused on Tambu’s experiences at Sacred Heart, where, ‘[q]uietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story’ (*NC* 204). It takes a whole novel, in fact a second novel, to get Tambu to a point when she can fitfully find her bearings, and by the end of the second novel, she hasn’t quite found herself. She is still the same ambitious, naïve, ruthless, self-centred, abused and dislocated young woman. Society is too narrow and too unkind for the sort of dreams she has. She, in turn (as Ntombi, her classmate, notices) is not a fighter, but an ideal victim. Having lost so much to the white Rhodesians, including a sister’s leg, like a true victim she identifies with the enemy and knits gloves and jerseys to keep the Rhodesian army warm. Her education, which is largely through excruciatingly self-denying rote learning, does not equip her with the critical skills to effect a turn-around strategy on her fortunes. Her experiment with the rudiments of Shona cultural philosophy, *unhu/ubuntu*, is no more than tinkering with a faddy Senghorian nativism. It lacks the purposiveness of an Aimé

Césairean 'return to the source'. The source of *unhu/ubuntu*, her family, does not need her, nor does she need them. In fact, as Babamukuru begins to assume the features of her despicable mother, she begins to look more and more like a resurrected version of her dead brother Nhamo, especially because of her misanthropy and hatred of her roots and homestead.

Further, she allows the suave thugs at Sacred Heart, the hotbed of Christian racism, to mug her, and she is too angry to do anything about it. Tracey Stevenson receives an award for best Ordinary Level results that is meant for Tambu. Tracey becomes Tambu's boss at the advertising agency, where again, the annual award for the best advertising campaign is given to Dick Lawson, a senior white copywriter, when Tambu clearly deserved it.

It is not just race that drives Tambu out of a job and shelter: Babamukuru proves to be no better than Tambu's mother in his small-minded plotting and his grudge-nursing crudity. Tambu is his failed upliftment project. His twin persona, as an Abraham-cum-Santa figure, allows him to convert Tambu into a figural version of the biblical Isaac while turning her into an object of charity. The witchcraft of his gifts to her is as powerful, enslaving and dehumanising as the scholarship Tambu receives from Sacred Heart. Her escape from her mother and the one-legged Netsai is an instance of the sublimation of the metaphysical investments in the chains of biology and kin, the same investments that allowed Babamukuru to claim the homestead and its inhabitants as his fiefdom. For Tambu, residing at Babamukuru's mission house or at the rural homestead; attending school at the elitist and racist Sacred Heart; working at the advertising agency; and celebrating the arrival of independence (or black majority rule!) are all no-

win and sometimes life-threatening situations. For instance, Babamukuru, who nicodemously supported the black nationalist struggle, is struck by a stray bullet just when the Union Jack is being lowered and the new Zimbabwean flag is being unfurled. He is paralysed and confined to a wheelchair.

The metaphors of war and dismemberment generated in the first chapter continue to mesh in with Tambu's growing critical consciousness of race, class, family and nation. By the end of the second novel she is the quintessence of the dismembered and unaccommodated woman, almost as paralysed as Babamukuru, and as lifeless as the corpse-like Nyasha. But unlike these two, she is almost a genealogical isolate.

Tambu conjures up the mythical going-nowhereness of Marechera's narrator in his two stories 'House of hunger' and 'Protista' (1978). In *The book of not*, at least everyone else has a home and a place to go to, except Tambu. Nyasha rises from her 'abject and corpse-like' (*BON*: 91) existence and goes back to England on a British Council scholarship for refugees. The paralysed and wheelchair-bound Babamukuru has his silly, highly educated wife to lean on. Tambu's mother, deserted by her daughter and saddled with the hopeless one-legged Netsai, has her tomatoes to sell. Tambu's mother, vile and shrewish as she is, is the first woman in Tsitsi's novels, and in Zimbabwean literature, to consistently denounce the self-importance of the educated elite. She could be Zimbabwe's answer to Okot p'Bitek's Lawino in his celebrated *Song of Lawino* (1972). Her viable self-help project could also be the answer to the vacuous elitist projects of national progress.

Much as Tambu dislikes her mother, and strives to be as different from her as possible, she

must try to return to her in order to understand where she missed her own path. Everyone else at the rural homestead withers away (Jeremiah, Lucia, Netsai), and everyone in Babamukuru's mission house is paralysed and impotent (Babamukuru himself and Nyasha) or simply effete and invisible (Maiguru and the hapless Chido, whom Babamukuru has written off). Babamukuru's education, house and job are gifts from his white patrons. He owns nothing substantial. Tambu possesses an education that ensures that she is systematically conned and stripped of her dreams and creativity. She is, after all, Babamukuru's bungled idea of a good son. His own son Chido and his own brother Jeremiah are caricatures of bankable sonhoods. As an extension of his imperial arm, especially in his designs for the homestead, she is a living metaphor of his disabled ambitions. He uses 'the ragged valley rifted' in his arm 'where the dagger had gouged to slit the artery' (*BON*: 189) to terrorise his wayward victim with memories of his near death at the hands of the guerrillas. His 'This scar came because of you!' (*BON*: 189) sounds uncannily like Tambu's mother's 'You came from a stomach. Do you know that?' (*BON*: 226). Rightly so, as in a magic tale teeming with changelings, Babamukuru metamorphoses into Tambu's mother, and Tambu notices this chilling horror: 'It was very strange to me to hear Babamukuru beginning to talk in a way that was so similar to my mother' (*BON*: 193). He is ultimately just a frustrated and vindictive peasant. His assumed wealth and the cleanliness of his home cannot ameliorate the barren spirit of his house. It is a house in which an only daughter sickens into lethargy, and an only son never really lives. In *The book of not*, Chido is as good as non-existent – something that should worry reviewers who think it is only Nyasha who does not take off from the page. Maiguru,

who teaches Latin, a dead language, and spends time singing stupid endearments to her husband and ladling chicken portions onto his plate at the dining table, finds that no colleague at the school consults her on anything in spite of her MA degree. She is, like Babamukuru at the end of the story, justifiably on her way to irrelevance. Babamukuru himself, a holder of an MA degree, presides over a deplorable school curriculum which he has no power to change. Nor does he actually respect his own profession, which has trapped and imprisoned him (*BON*: 185). He wishes he were someone else, and Tambu seems to be the youthful avatar of his thwarted dreams: 'Shouldn't a child, one who is intelligent, want to become more than her parents?' (*BON*: 185) he asks futilely. It is left to the menacingly ailing Nyasha to pronounce an obituary on this family of lost and confused spirits that have lived 'in missions and not the real world' and who are therefore unable 'to advise anyone about it' (*BON*: 185).

It is only Tambu's mother who remains true to herself when others are floundering, buffeted by the torrid winds of change. No one steals from or cheats Tambu's mother in her self-help tomato business. As the real survivor she should perhaps have penned the story that Tambu possessively claims as her own. The potential of her viewpoint, however unpalatable to Tambu and Babamukuru, has the makings of a torpedo. In some ways she is like Nyasha, a survivor of a horrid campaign against her, who lives to tell the tale and thrives in spite of – or because of – threats to her life. Nyasha survives Tambu's attempts to escape her in two ways: she continues her more robust presence in Ntombi, a fierce critic of Tambu, and a more practical version of what Tambu could have been. Nyasha, consigned to the poorly run mission school and in the grip

of a severe eating disorder, is actually the one who makes it to university on a scholarship, while Tambu, enjoying the privileges that should have been Nyasha's, is the one who remains at the homestead, so to speak. However, one is overwhelmed with a sense of foreboding *déjà vu*, because where Tambu headed for Sacred Heart in her early teens, the heart of white racism that Nyasha suffers from and alludes to, Nyasha herself seems to be banished to England, the place of her original sickness. It is a vicious cycle. Or could it be that in the magic tale of changelings, Tambu has only been wearing the crown of the princess for one short evening? There is a way in which, as Babamukuru suggests ('You are at that school, which truly I did not want to pay for!' (*BON*: 89)), Tambu is where she is because of someone's death (her brother Nhamo) and someone's sad health condition (her cousin Nyasha). Her life story is therefore girded by dramatic contingencies and tragic accidents. It is at the end of *The book of not* that one gets the sense that her luck is running out. Like Babamukuru at the mission, she too has lived in a fairyland, but of pain and chance.

It can be argued that *The book of not* satisfies reviewers who glibly applaud the fact that it is set in a time of war, and that it reaches into post-colonial Zimbabwe. I want to suggest that reviewers who read the book in this way are responding to a critical tropism that reads Zimbabwean literature as history, and history as the war of liberation. This critical tropism overrates the status of war as history, and history as literature. Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga are, however, representative of the few writers in Zimbabwe who have not subscribed to that habitual critical thinking. In *The book of not*, the war is treated as threatening background. Tambu sees in it nothing more than a determined threat to her progress, in the same way as she perceived her mother

and Nyasha. She consistently recalls visions of the liberation movement as consisting of '[t]his fighting, and the limbs and the fluids and the excreta that it scattered over the land' (*BON*: 12). It is a deflating vision of the nationalist struggle. The very ideological confusion that leads Tambu to help the Rhodesian soldiers instead of the guerrillas pursues her into the independence era, where she writes:

Convinced it was not the deaths of Rhodesians that had caused Mr Mugabe and Mr Smith to talk to each other with some degree of sincerity, I assured myself happily that the phenomenon was due to a bigger and better motive on both sides: a desire to desist from chopping away lips, ears, noses and genitals from the bodies of people's relatives by the elder siblings [guerrillas]; a desire to develop a larger, kinder heart on the part of Europeans. (198)

But because for her the Rhodesians had not died 'in sufficient quantities to cause a great blimp in the course of history' (*BON*: 198), they bump her off her set targets and snarl up her life in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The fact that Babamukuru, who supported the struggle even after being maimed by the guerrillas, is struck by a bullet fired by the same cadres who are celebrating independence, seems to suggest that, for Tambu, the war has continued into civil life, and is as threatening as the undying Rhodesians. The vectors of pre-independence violence have not died in sufficient quantities to cause a significant change in the ways Zimbabweans conduct their social, political and economic life. *The book of not*, a novel of tragic reversals and a repertoire of negatives, speaks in chilling tones to the current dispensation in Zimbabwe. It is only possible to speak in this way if one were as passionate, critical and confused, ruthless and ambitious, disowned and disappointed, cheapened and cheated, as

Tambu's experiences epitomise. *Fototo*: the ego and naivety of the new Zimbabwean. One awaits the third book in the trilogy with the desperate optimism of a desert hunter. Or one thinks of a rain bird that warns of tsunamis. Tsitsi.

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THE FAMILY AND THE SEARCH FOR RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A REVIEW OF RAYDA JACOBS' *MY FATHER'S ORCHID* (2006)

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Rayda Jacobs is an award-winning author who is emerging as an influential female writer in

contemporary South Africa. She has won the Herman Charles Bosman Prize twice, in 1997 and 2004, and the Sunday Times Fiction Prize in 2004. These are some of South Africa's most prestigious awards for writers. Jacobs is also a documentary filmmaker. Of all her published work, it is probably *Confessions of a gambler* (2003) that firmly placed her on the South African literary map. Other fiction by her includes *The middle children*, *Eyes of the sky*, *The slave book*, *Sachs Street*, *Postcards from South Africa*, and her travelogue *The Mecca diaries*. Her latest novel, the subject of this review, is *My father's orchid* (2006).

Confessions of a gambler is an outstanding novel that reaches into the lives of a family and a community. It is the story of Beeda, an estranged Muslim woman who gambles at a casino to relieve the loneliness in her life. This is a gripping story in which the narrator opens up to the reader, revealing her own secrets and those of her immediate family; and eventually those of a community and a society. The observant and critical narrator confesses her own weakness for gambling – a practice prohibited by her religion, Islam. The gambling acts as a means of easing the pain of betrayed love and a crumbling family life. Beeda's life symbolically gestures at the lives and secrets of many such women in South Africa today.

The topics of religion and the family are carried on from *Confessions of a gambler* into *My father's orchid*. It seems as if the author is suggesting that the space of the family is key to unravelling many of the social and cultural conflicts and complexes in which present-day South Africa is caught up. Race, place, family, storytelling and religion are all important elements in Jacobs' writing, as has also been noted by John A Stotesbury. In his interview with Jacobs (Stotesbury 2002: 223–

230) the author also acknowledges the influence that her early childhood, family and life in Cape Town had on her writing.

Cape Town, the setting of Jacobs' stories, is important in all of her fiction. The city's significance lies in its place in the constitution of modern South Africa and also in the country's history of racial segregation. The city is home to the majority of those South Africans who were categorised under apartheid as coloureds – an enduring reminder of the inevitability of the miscegenation against which apartheid was formulated. Hence, Jacobs' fiction is placed both in the past and in the present. *Confessions of a gambler* is, however, mainly located in a moment that could aptly be described by the title of Stefan Helgesson's study of recent South African literature (2004), as 'writing in crisis'. On the one hand, current South African writing can be described as being caught in a crisis, but not necessarily one of its own making. The crisis has been conditioned by the proximity of the country's history: does one, in consequence, tell the story of the nation-in-formation by referring to the liberation struggles of the past? Or does one engage with the present and its equally harrowing tales of murder, rape, family violence or post-apartheid betrayal by the ruling class, for instance? Would one be neglecting memory and the archive if one prefers the present to the past? It seems that authors are faced with the daunting task of having to make a choice. South African writing itself is not in crisis, as can be seen from the robustness of the publishing industry and the output of authors, both established and new. The crisis is more or less a factor of the subject matter. The weight of the social crises in the South Africa of today seems almost to obliterate the violence and inequalities of the past, thereby posing a dilemma for the writer. The character of the post-colonial moment in

South Africa is almost completely unlike that of any other place with a similar history. For instance, although described economically as a middle-income country and judged politically by many as a sterling democracy, not only in the global South but also worldwide, with one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, South Africa is also a society weighed down by a set of differences, inequalities and contradictions. The utopian expectation of a rainbow nation, in which multiracialism or nonracialism would be celebrated, has been hard to attain. As Michael MacDonald argues in *Why race matters in South Africa* (2006), the country's democracy and apparent stability camouflage a social space divided by race and socioeconomic differences. MacDonald's argument echoes Thabo Mbeki's claims of South Africa being a country with two nations – one white and economically stable, and the other black and economically disadvantaged. At the macro level, the issue of economic inequalities based on racial differences and history hides other inequalities within the racial divides too – just as there is a large population of poor blacks, there are also a significant number of people of other races who are underprivileged. A consequence of these structural economic inequalities is the much-cited increase in the levels of crime and violence and the breakdown of the family structure. The public as well as the private spaces are hostages to what many perceive as a moral breakdown.

It is this situation of an increasingly cornered family and society context that has generated much moral anguish in South Africa today, with publicly constituted campaigns in the national media to reclaim the eroded moral ground. Rayda Jacobs' *My father's orchid* is placed squarely in the home and the family. The story of *My father's orchid* is one of an alienated family, or families, to be exact. It is the story of Hüd,

born of a Muslim (but also part-Jewish) father and a Christian coloured mother. Hüd, like many other children in apartheid South Africa, starts life as an unacknowledged child – miscegenation condemned many mothers, fathers, daughters and sons to a life of secrecy, shame and hatred. To start with, Hüd does not know his father – in the sense that he has not been introduced to him formally – until well into his adult life. In fact he only gets to know him closely when he goes to live with him during the last few days of the man's life. The newly established relationship between father and son is warm and Hüd looks after his father till the old man passes away. The last days of the old man's life and his subsequent death unravel many little secrets about the complex web of relationships that have bound him to many other people. The story is told alternately through Hüd's own voice and that of an omniscient narrator. It starts with Hüd talking about his birth:

There are two versions of what happened on that day I was born in 1977. According to my mother, Avril, who doesn't lie but leaves things out, I was born at Auntie Lorraine's house – flat and simple. According to Granny Marge, a much more reliable source, she and my mother were on their way home from the market in the bus when the first pains hit. They stopped at Mr Logday's café on the corner. My mother gripped her stomach, and Granny Marge and Mr Cupido, who was in the shop buying birdseed for his budgies, which he kept in a wire cage on the stoep, helped her home. The pains came swiftly. My mother screamed, and I came right out, on the same bed where Auntie Lorraine's two babies, Olive and Joe – ten months apart – slept in the backroom. (9)

The pulling power of the rest of the story rests in this idea of contending narratives of the author's birth. The author establishes a key feature of the rest of the book in this paragraph: the incapacity of any story to provide its own narrative truth,

to fully substantiate itself. The elusiveness of the story not only recalls Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia – the truth about Hüd's birth depended on who is telling the story, where, when, and to whom – but it is also a reminder to the reader to accept the narrator's authority only with a sense of irony. It is not just the story of Hüd's birth that has different versions; the story of his father's late mother Galiema Johnson has different versions too (75). Indeed, the rest of the book, like the narrator's mother, Avril, 'doesn't lie but leaves a lot out.' The leaving out of some truths is what pulls apart the different sets of families in the story, but in the same vein the suppression of other truths about the different relationships within the text is what provides some of the elements that enable the different actors to hold onto the hope of reconciliation. For instance, although one would expect Hüd to be angry at his father for not having acknowledged him during his childhood, it becomes apparent that this is some kind of universal behaviour within the story and that indeed there are other characters in the story who are unacknowledged. Hüd's father has never formally acknowledged his relationship with Avril Vermaak. In turn, the paternal (Muslim) side of his family has never recognised him as one of them. Hüd also has a stepsister, Sawdah, whom he meets only immediately before his father's death. And he gets to know that the woman for whom he has romantic feelings, Aouda, is also related to him, and was sent away in infancy to Australia by her family many years before, in order to avoid familial shame.

It seems, then, that at the heart of the story of *My father's orchid* is one of the post-apartheid efforts to reconcile the nation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was an exercise in both purgation and healing. It offered victims and victimisers during the

apartheid era the opportunity to confront that past in order to attempt a scripting together of a present acceptable to both parties. To use Hüd's telling statement about the different stories of his birth, there were several accounts of what happened in the previous dispensation in South Africa. At the TRC some truths were told. Some lies were also told. Some stories remained untold. What Jacobs offers in the novel is an invitation to readers to engage with the practical and pragmatic understanding of truth. As Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson remind us in their introduction to the collection of essays, *Commissioning the past: understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2002: 1), the search for truth is very much a contested and often a difficult task, both in scholarship and in the public space; both for the group and for the individual. But what was significant in the TRC process was the telling of stories. The hearings afforded individuals the opportunity to lift the lid on what they had concealed as burdensome secrets for years, and to be listened to while also listening to themselves purging their minds and hearts of a violent past. The anticipated reconciliation was as much with the other as with the self.

The capacity to reconcile with the self is at the heart of the story of *My father's orchid*. Several of the characters in the novel are carriers of burdens of the past and of secrets in their lives. Yet few, if any, of them seem to be angry or in search of revenge for the betrayal, violence, desertion or abandonment that others have visited on them. For instance, Avril has not only endured life as a single mother, rearing a child whom the law would not recognise as legitimate, but also has had to abort another child. Mr Johnson (or 'Jissie'), Hüd's father, has led a muddled life. He is a philandering man who has children with

three different women, but at the time of his death he does not live with any of these women or children. His relationships produce a mix of other relationships of their own, mixed births and friendships cutting across race, religion and social class, which go back into history. He himself was a child of mixed parentage and only encountered his father when he was about to get married. Hüd himself ends up in a bad relationship with the woman with whom he has a son – another child who will grow up without both parents. Another of Mr Johnson's probable illegitimate children, Aouda (the relationship is never quite established in the narrative), grows up in Australia and comes to South Africa only as an adult. Even when she is involved in the intrigues before and after the death of Mr Johnson, she does not know that she is directly related to him. All in all, Mr Johnson's family is a mix of individuals with African, European, Asian and Jewish ancestry. *My father's orchid* dramatises the efforts by these disparate members of the extended family to resolve their differences and reconcile: interestingly, not during the life of the man who is the common denominator to all of them, but after his death. Thus, for a man who has lived a life that has been complicated not only by his own irresponsible behaviour – Hüd's grandmother claims that Jissie had too many choices in life and an inability to come to terms with his predicament, but also with the apartheid era law – his life can only be unravelled in death, by his family. It is the orchids in the hothouse that he has so passionately and tenderly cultivated, that emblematically represent the nurturing that, in life, he has failed to provide for his family, his particular favourite being reserved for Hüd.

Although much of the narrative is about the intricate lives of the many people who inhabit

Hüd's world, it is also a story that is told in such a style as to project the intrigues within the family as representative of life in the larger society. Through the spaces of Jissie's house, Avril's suburb and the city of Cape Town, one imagines the day-to-day lives of South Africans. These localised worlds and lives of relatives, friends and strangers struggling with drug habits, exposed to crime, deserted by family, betrayed by relatives and friends and victimised by the overwhelming violence mirror the rest of their society. How does one find peace in such a context? How does the individual become reconciled with such a volatile environment?

In the end, Jacobs seems to intimate that reconciliation is more difficult to attain in reality than in its idealised form. Rather, the onus to reconcile, both with immediate others and society at large, depends on the individual's capacity to continually search for strategies that will ensure the best possible mutual solution. In other words, reconciliation is a personal quest rather than a collective endeavour. But this process can be brought about only through constant dialogue. As Granny Marge, Hüd's Christian grandmother, reminds her daughter Avril when Jissie calls to see Hüd after so many years, 'it's never too late' (69) to make things right.

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