



Innovative register and feminist critique in Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*

Edgar Fred Nabutanyi

Innovative register and feminist critique in Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*

Mark Behr's artistic exploration of the horrific legacy of Afrikaner racist and masculinist ideology in *The Smell of Apples* has attracted substantial critical attention. This is perhaps what has elevated his novel to a post-apartheid South African literary canon. While it has been read as an exculpatory narrative—an exploration of how white South Africans disclosed their complicity in apartheid's atrocities and/or a disclosure of how the apartheid system violated their rights—there is critical blindness to other important themes that the novel grapples with. This is why I offer a limited reading of Behr's critique of Afrikaner gender oppression. My exploration, which focuses on Behr's exposition of gender discrimination of upper-middle class women in an Afrikaner society, is anchored on two questions: how does Behr deploy an innovative register—eavesdropping child witness-narrator and a written letter—to unveil the oppression of upper-middle class white South African women in the Afrikaner polity? Second, how does he script the feminist agency of the 'mother of the nation' figure who is muzzled by Afrikaner patriarchy? I foreground Maria Pia Lara's thinking about the liberational potential of literary texts in my discussion of Behr's exposition of the gendered oppression of certain categories of women by Afrikaner patriarchy. **Keywords:** Afrikaner, feminist critique, innovative registers, patriarchy, apartheid, class, race.


Introduction

First published in Afrikaans as *Die reuk van appels* in 1993 and translated by the author into English as *The Smell of Apples* in 1995, Mark Behr's debut novel has secured its place in the post-apartheid South African literary canon. This is perhaps because of its critique of the hypocrisy of the Afrikaner society. Many commentators argue that it exposes how apartheid violated and oppressed even those it ostensibly sought to protect and privilege. The novel employs a double narrative structure to unmask the terrible inequities in apartheid society. The main narrative is set in the 1970s and documents the protagonist's life in the Cape Town of the period. The protagonist's stream of consciousness and dialogue with his best friend Frikkie curate his father's racist justifications of apartheid. Interspersed within the main narrative are war time diary extracts of how a now mature protagonist fighting in the South African border war in the 1980s in Southern Angola, comes face to face with the dire consequences of the system. While a political reading of the novel concentrates on the protagonist's regurgitation of his father's racist comments, I argue that if one were to focus on what the protagonist frames as momentous events that took place in his household one summer in the early 1970s, it can be plausibly argued that the novel also explores other themes such as the oppression of upper-middle class white women.

Marnus (the protagonist) claims that it was that "summer [that] ultimately determined it. Possibly not even the whole summer just that one week in December" (*Smell of Apples* 31). Rita Barnard, David Attwell and Barbara Harlow, Michiel Heyns, Shaun Irlam, and Cheryl Stobie have pointed to the atrocities described in the novel such as the burning of Little-Neville by white men for stealing coal, the rape of Frikkie by Marnus's father, and the sexual indiscretion of his mother with the visiting Chilean General to underline the thematic and plot importance of this summer in the novel. I agree with such readings because this summer is a momentous event in Marnus's life. This is because it brings him face to face with the injustices committed during Afrikaner nationalists' pursuit

Edgar Fred Nabutanyi is senior lecturer in the Department of Literature, School of Languages, Literature, and Communication, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda and Senior Research Associate in the Department of Literary Studies in English, Faculty of Humanities, Rhodes University, Cape Town, South Africa.

Email: edgar.nabutanyi@mak.ac.ug

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8718-1286>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v6i1i.16066>

DATES:

Submitted: 30 April 2023; Accepted: 15 January 2024; Published: 29 April 2024

of racial purity. Furthermore, I argue that the oppression of a certain category of women is another equally important thematic issue that is exposed during this summer which has not attracted sufficient critical attention. This theme—conveyed to readers through the perspectives of prying children and by a written letter—illustrate how Behr’s innovative registers eloquently disclose how an Afrikaner concept of the ‘volksmoeder’ oppressed upper-middle class white women (Hattingh, Jordan, and Economou 120–3). Here, I am interested in how Marnus and his sister, Ilse, after witnessing the quarrel between their mother and aunt on the one hand and reading their aunt Karla’s letter to their mother on the other hand, disclose to the reader how their mother (Leonore) is mistreated by their father (General Erasmus). It is important to note that even if Behr succeeds in exposing the oppression of rich white Afrikaner women like Leonore during apartheid, the novel can be faulted for erasing the intersectional suffering of other categories of South African women such as the poor white, ‘coloured’, and black women. For example, the novel does not pay sufficient attention to the oppression of women like Doreen (the Erasmus’ domestic help), who is simultaneously oppressed as a working-class and ‘coloured’ woman. The novel is also blind to the intersection between class and gender oppression as symbolised by Leonore’s charity towards Zelda Kemp, a daughter of poor Afrikaner family (*Smell of Apples* 137).

Although the novel documents how different categories of South African women experienced gender oppression under apartheid on account of gender, race, and class, my limited reading focuses on the oppression of Leonore who stands synecdochally for upper-middle class white Afrikaner women under apartheid. It is important to note that many readers of *The Smell of Apples* such as Njabulo Ndebele, Jay Rajiva, Cheryl Strobie, Barnard, David Medalie, Kerry Bystrom, and Heyns have offered insightful analyses of the novel. Some of these scholars read *The Smell of Apples* as a confessional tale by white South Africans and argue that Behr uses an innocent child narrator to exculpate his own involvement in apartheid’s crimes as a spy of the Security Police (qtd in Roux 243). For example, Barnard claims that *The Smell of Apples* explores the “banality of apartheid” (207) or “apartheid’s mouldy corpse” (207). She goes on to claim that the novel is characterised by a “moral airlessness” (208) because of the totalitarian nature of Afrikaner racism. Barnard’s political reading of the novel as an excellent dissection of the commonplaceness of the crimes that apartheid committed against all South Africans, including the Afrikaner society that it ironically sought to privilege, is insightful. The adjectives describing a “mouldy corpse” and “moral airlessness” accentuate how the commonplaceness of apartheid horrors and injustices translate into the suffering of many South Africans.

The banality of apartheid’s horrors and injustices are variously depicted in the novel. However, one of its most horrific manifestations is the rape of Frikkie by Johan Erasmus (*Smell of Apples* 174–7). This is perhaps one of the incidents in the novel that prompts Barnard to argue that the novel “flirts with a sensationalism similar to that deployed by the government itself” and that in the “process, [Behr] diverts attention from the crucial political and economic [inequities of the system] to the psychological and sexual dimensions of Apartheid’s power” (Barnard 210). I agree with Barnard’s argument that the revelatory style of the novel mimics a voyeuristically and sensationally intrusive eavesdropping that is commonplace in securitised societies. It is also true to argue that Behr’s technique “places the reader in something of an uncomfortable position [...] with eyes glued voyeuristically, to the convenient hole” in the protagonist’s bedroom (Barnard 210) in a bid to expose the inequities of heteropatriarchal Afrikaner society. While his technique can be discomfiting to some extent, it is significantly evidential and illuminating of the horrible crimes committed during apartheid against the society depicted in the novel.

The centrality of a sensationally voyeuristic style in the novel is confirmed by Behr in his 1997 keynote speech at the University of Cape Town during the “Living in the Fault Lines Conference”. He claims that “*The Smell of Apples* represents, for [him], the beginning of a [self-reassessment with himself for his] own support for a system like apartheid” (Behr, “Living in the Fault Lines” 115). Behr’s confession of spying for the Security Police while a student at Stellenbosch University, because he was seduced by a “system into which [he] had been born and which [he] had supported” (116) has been condemned by scholars such as Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee. These scholars accuse Behr of a disingenuous attempt to escape sanction for his actions. Nonetheless, Rajiva establishes a connection between the former spy author and his deployment of a seductively snooping narrative technique at the heart of the novel’s agenda of disclosing apartheid’s crimes. She maintains that “spying is what binds us to the text—the unease of transgression in watching, of seeing what the text’s participants do not know we see” (Rajiva 85). She goes on to clarify that this stylistic feature empowers Behr to disclose the trauma inflicted on the black body in the novel. While Rajiva argues that Behr’s snooping technique exposes the traumatising of black bodies, I argue that a spying child narrator who eavesdrops on his mother’s and aunt’s quarrel and sneakily reads his

aunt's letter addressed to his mother usefully discloses other crimes committed by the system. The eavesdropping child narrator's ability to tactfully sidestep the power of the family, the church, the school, and the state to keep secret apartheid's crimes is the focus of Medalie's review of the novel. He argues that the novel is a "powerful study of the indoctrination [of children by the system] and what one might call the texture of propaganda" (512) of "Afrikaner supremacy and racist doctrine" (513). Medalie's critique reminds us of the thesis of Marnus's grade three essay: you can learn a lot by "just keeping your eyes open. Open eyes are the gateways to an open mind" (*Smell of Apples* 160, italics in the original). The images of "open eyes" and "gateways", which allude to the peepholes in his bedroom, point to Marnus's ability to bear witness and disclose the crimes of a secretive society.

The discursive power of Behr's narrative technique is the focus of Stobie's exploration of sexuality during apartheid. She argues that the novel "exposes from within the horrors of the interlinked systems of racial oppression, gender oppression, sexual oppression, family violence, fascism, and religious bigotry" (Stobie 70). I agree with Stobie that Behr uses the father/general's bisexuality to expose how apartheid South Africa failed to "live up to the onerous strictures" (81) of its racist ideology. This is what Barnard elsewhere theorises as "a generational violence perpetrated against apartheid's ostensible beneficiaries" (Barnard 208). Although Barnard and Stobie eloquently dissect the political crimes of the Afrikaner society in *The Smell of Apples*, I argue that they are blind to how the novel also centres the oppression of upper-middle class white women. This is particularly significant given that the impunity of the soldier-father figure in the public sphere extends into the home. It is arguable that women are vulnerable to patriarchal violence of fathers like Erasmus whose favourite saying is "*duidelik verstaanbaar*, which means 'clearly understandable'" (*Smell of Apples* 19, italics in the original). Erasmus's authoritarian streak intersects with an Afrikaner sense of exceptionalism to enact the oppression of women in his household. This makes *The Smell of Apples* an example of a liberational fictional text which exposes how certain categories of Afrikaner women were oppressed under apartheid. I argue that the novel enacts "transformations [that] [...] entail a new and novel way of understanding [women's oppression]" (Lara 157). Maria Pia Lara's argument that fiction spotlights societal challenges applies to *The Smell of Apples* in as far as it unveils the suffering of a group of women whose agency and human rights are erased by society. I argue that the novel becomes the new lens of conceptualising the oppression of upper-middle class white women during apartheid and societal reforms needed to end the oppression of this category of South African women.

Behr's feminist agenda in *The Smell of Apples*

The thematic concern of gender-related violation in an Afrikaner heteropatriarchal society is briefly noted by Stobie and Medalie in their analyses of important political themes of *The Smell of Apples*. For example, Medalie (513) notes that "the power of the male at home and the power of the man at war are presented as intimately related, for a pervasive masculinist ethos will not spare the family and certainly not the women and children". Similarly, Stobie (83) argues that Karla offers a "generalised, principled revulsion against systems of domination [and] criticises Dad's patriarchal oppression of Mum and her willingness to sacrifice her singing career and a voice of her own". Both Stobie and Medalie underline how the siege mentality of Afrikaner society during apartheid often translated into the oppression of women and children in domestic spaces. Nonetheless, such readings often do not centre the experiences of gendered oppression and suffering by upper-middle class women in the depicted Afrikaner society. The depiction of the oppression of white women in Behr's text is symptomatic of the erasure of white South African women in binary liberational literature that Ndebele ("Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Essays on South African Literature and Culture" 144) theorises as "the spectacular". According to Ndebele, the South African political writer is interested in exhibiting and displaying the obscenities of apartheid. This is perhaps why Ndebele calls upon South African writers to engage with ordinary subjects such as the ordinary lives of ordinary South Africans living in South African townships and suburbs. These are stories, Ndebele argues, that distil profound insights about the South African condition.

I argue that *The Smell of Apples* extends Ndebele's argument by focusing on the often-unscripted suffering of the Afrikaner figure of mother of the nation in South African white writing. By centring the agency of this South African demographic, Behr's text examines an important aspect of racial and class discussions in South Africa. It can further be argued that Behr's novel extends the important work on the portrayal of the erasure and oppression of white women in South African public discourses (Hattingh, Jordan, and Economou 103). These authors critique the "well-defined feminine Afrikaner identity [that] existed up until 1990 [which foregrounded] a grand narrative formed around political power, the church, membership of the political party and the *volksmoeder* ideology, or

better described as the ‘woman of the nation’” (Saayman Hattingh, Jordan, and Economou 105, emphasis in the original). The essence of the argument of Heidi Saayman Hattingh, Nicole Jordan, and Inge Economou above is that Afrikaner women were deployed as an allegory of domesticity and support for an Afrikaner racist ideology. It is the same point that Azille Coetzee (94) makes when she critiques the “continued subservience of Afrikaner woman in Afrikaner heteropatriarchy” (95). She explains that the subservience of the Afrikaner woman was at the centre of white Afrikaner gendered norms that constituted a “patriarchal nuclear family with the dominant father and subordinate mother” (98). The scholarship on the image of Afrikaner womanhood that emerges in South African discourses cited above underscores the vulnerability of this category of South African to Afrikaner patriarchy. It also showcases the irony of the systematic oppression of this demography by Afrikaner patriarchy. It is ironic that, while a woman like Leonore is convinced that her oppression and suffering is for the good of society, her oppressors oppress her regardless of their so-called ‘duty’ to protect the Afrikaner volk, including its women, against other groups.

It is this ironical vulnerability that *The Smell of Apples* unmasks. This is why my reading foregrounds the irony infused in the olfactory metaphor that is implied in the title of the novel. If, for Stobie (71), the smell of apples is a “symbol of dangerous knowledge, temptation and fall from grace” and for Medalie (513), it is a suggestion of “a fresh or wholesome world”, then it is arguable that it ironically illustrates the hypocrisy of an Afrikaner racist society that is anchored in what Ndebele (“Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of Narrative” 24) has elsewhere described as Afrikaners’ “illusion of [...] historical heroism” and the “burden of being special”. These scholars’ reading of the significance of the title as an elucidation of Afrikaner duplicity is anchored in Behr’s contrastive use of the olfactory image in the novel. While he originally uses it to showcase the supposed Edenic possibility of Afrikaner society, it is later deployed to expose the rottenness of the depicted society. For example, when the protagonist exclaims that he can smell the apples in the back seat of the car on their return journey from his Uncle Samuel’s apple farm near Grabouw (*Smell of Apples* 124), the apples are invested with life affirming qualities allusive of the innocent and pristine world of the Biblical Eden. However, the next time the phrase is used, it is in reference to the foul smell on Frikkie’s hands after his rape (*Smell of Apples* 179). Unfortunately, the Eden that Afrikaners sought to build in South Africa, which in the novel is symbolised by the fresh smell of apples, morphs into a monstrosity that conjures up images of putrefaction. It is arguable that the stubborn, foul odour that cannot be washed away with “Sunlight liquid” or “Dettol” soap (*Smell of Apples* 179) is symbolic of the crimes that Afrikaner society commits against its own people, including the oppression of certain categories of women.

That Behr’s child narrator unveils the oppression of upper-middle class white women during apartheid reminds us of Lara’s theorisation of the liberational power of representations of women in fiction. She contends that fiction is a useful vehicle for disclosing the experiences of women in society. Following Lara, I claim that Behr uses his novel to offer his readers a snapshot of how upper-middle class Afrikaner women were treated during apartheid. This is highlighted by Karla’s accusation that Erasmus oppresses and treads on Leonore (*Smell of Apples* 107). I maintain that Karla, Ilse, and Marnus use subversive discursive tools to expose the oppression of women in the depicted Afrikaner society. While unveiling the oppression of women in the novel does not translate into eradicating the suffering of the victims of Afrikaner patriarchy, it is arguable that it is the starting point of societal self-reflection on how it treats its women. Granted, fictional representations of oppressed women are not representative of the suffering that some women live with. Nonetheless, I argue that Behr’s fictional insights into how different categories of women were oppressed by Afrikaner Patriarchy reminds us of Robbins’ theorisations about the importance of fiction in exposing the oppression of women (Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* 51).

Behr deploys an eavesdropping child narrator and a written letter to bring attention to the lived realities of upper-middle class white South African women during apartheid. Behr’s artistic agenda underlines the question: how can fictional narratives expose the ill-treatment of a particular group of women under Afrikaner patriarchy? I aver that Behr’s technique and the fictionalised activism of Karla and Ilse usefully unveil how the system oppressed and violated Afrikaner women like Leonore. In what follows, I parse Behr’s depiction of Leonore as the poster child of Afrikaner “patriarchal subjugation of the white Afrikaner woman as a site of the production and maintenance of [...] racial categories and hierarchies” (A. Coetzee 94). I argue that she denotes the “volksmoeder”—the Afrikaner mother of the nation—who stays home to mother and nurture children and support her husband and the volk (A. Coetzee 99). For example, Leonore, who left her promising opera career when she married, chauffeurs the children to school, conducts singing lessons, only sings in the shower, and listens to jazz in secrecy. Leonore’s routine described above is what Karla, who is described by Stobie (83) as

“the voice of conscience within [the depicted] community”, condemns. Although Stobie is more interested in the condemnation of all forms of injustices committed by the apartheid system, it is arguable that one of these injustices is gender oppression.

As someone who “reproduce[s] race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity and being home-bound” (A. Coetzee 99), Leonore is forced to abandon her opera singing career by Erasmus. This is scripted by Ilse’s explanation of her mother’s portrait, which was “taken when Mum was Dido in the opera [...] In the bottom corner there’s an inscription in white ink: *To Leonore—lest you ever forget how to use your voice, Mario*” (*Smell of Apples* 45, italics in the original). That she played the role of Dido in this important opera and that her colleagues were nostalgically resigned to her departure underline the domesticating impulse of Afrikaner patriarchy. This point is signposted by one of the most brilliant understatements of the novel. The reader, by means of an eavesdropping narrator, learns from Erasmus’s conversation with the visiting Chilean General that, while touring South African diplomatic missions in the United States of America and Europe, Leonore met Erasmus, “stayed on for a few months [...] and came back to South Africa with [Erasmus once his] course was over [and] tied the knot the moment [they] got home” (*Smell of Apples* 40). Leonore’s nervous response to the Chilean General’s question as to whether she regrets her decision of quitting the opera: “Heavens not! How could I, with everything I have now?” Mum laughs and takes a sip from her crystal wineglass” (*Smell of Apples* 41) tells a different story. The exclamation, the nervous act of sipping at her drink, and the long list of her secret activities unveils the fact that she has not voluntarily abandoned her career for domesticity.

This is perhaps why “when Dad isn’t home, you can hear Mum singing at the piano in the lounge, or in the bathroom. She sings all kinds of stuff from the opera, and I think she might be missing the concerts and the overseas trips” (*Smell of Apples* 45). Marnus also explains that “Mum puts on her dark glasses and turns on the tape player to listen to some jazz. At home Dad doesn’t like us listening to jazz [...] Mum doesn’t want us to tell him about the jazz in the car. Dad says jazz is just one step away from pop music” (*Smell of Apples* 101). Leonore also makes “secret visits [...] to Karla, and [has kept secret] the thing about Karla’s smoking” (*Smell of Apples* 102).¹ Although Leonore’s double life—singing in the bathroom, listening to jazz, and secretly visiting her sister—are incomparable to the suffering of black and ‘coloured’ women under apartheid, I argue that her suffering is also painful. It is also suggested that Leonore is cognisant of the oppression white South African women face and does not always go along with it, because she keeps her sister’s smoking—one of the subversive symbols of women’s emancipation in the 1970s—a secret. I read her actions as a rejection of the insidious power of Afrikaner heteropatriarchal edicts that dehumanised some women.

Erasmus’s banning of Karla from his home because of her progressive views on gender emancipation and racial harmony (*Smell of Apples* 85) is substantiated in Marnus’s understatement that Karla was “saying things Mum didn’t like” (*Smell of Apples* 106). The ‘things’ that Leonore does not like include Karla’s declaration that she:

Would never get married [...] she’d seen enough women who sacrificed everything for their husbands—even their minds. She’d seen enough of how Dad oppresses Mum to make sure she’d stay away from marriage life. She’d never allow a man to tread her into the ground like Dad does to Mum. She’d steer clear of a husband and marriage. (*Smell of Apples* 107)

This eavesdropped conversation allows Behr to critique the widespread ill treatment of “hegemonic white Afrikaner femininity [...] modelled on the nationalist construction of *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation) that served male-centred nationalist politics” (A. Coetzee 99, italics in the original). This is because the phrase “she’s seen enough women” generalises the ill treatment of the alleged ‘mothers of the nation’. It is ironical that Leonore who in the novel stands synecdochally for the ‘volksmoeder’ is oppressed and ‘treaded into the ground’ by Erasmus. The novel questions why some Afrikaner women sacrifice their agency and happiness in the service of their husbands and society.

Karla’s critique of Afrikaner oppression of women is refined in her letter. I argue that the meditative sincerity and reflective character of letter writing coheres with Behr’s snooping style—the letter is read to the readers by Ilse and Marnus—to amplify depiction of the Afrikaner’s oppression of women. She writes that “it is not [your] marriage that I want to criticise—it is every marriage where the potential of a woman is lost because it is the man’s imagined right to be a leader” (*Smell of Apples* 111). Karla’s letter asks Afrikaner women to condemn edicts of Afrikaner society that privileges the rights of a man over those of a woman. In this respect, Behr’s novel contests how “private sexual relationships between men and women reflect the power structure in the world at large” (Robbins, “American Feminism: Images of Women and Gynocriticism” 72). It is arguable that Behr uses fiction

to unveil the task of fighting the institutions and practices “in any given society [that] may have come to be regarded as natural” (Robbins, “Feminist Approaches” 118). Given that culture changes, it can be concluded that institutions that oppress women are “not natural [and can even be] changed” (Robbins, “Feminist Approaches” 118). Ruth Robbins’s argument above is expanded by Behr’s novel which condemns Afrikaner societal institutions that oppress women under the guise of culture.

Behr’s novel ironizes the premise on which Afrikaner cultural institutions that are supposed to protect the Afrikaner polity from the ‘black peril’ and communism are anchored. The novel shows how these institutions traumatise the very people they are charged to protect. This is underlined by the prophetic note on which Karla’s letter ends. She rhetorically asks Leonore what she would do “if one day, one of your children were to think and act differently from you? In closing I must beg you to remember one thing! Our children might laugh at us as we do about the Middle Ages. But possibly, our children will never forgive us” (*Smell of Apples* 111). The fusion of four techniques in the above passage—the rhetorical question, allusion, reflective epistle, and prophetic declaration—helps Behr to question the efficacy of culture and religion to oppress some women in Afrikaner society. If religion and culture of any society change over time, perhaps Karla is justified to worry that future Afrikaner generations might find the current treatment of women embarrassing. Here, it is instructive to recall Robbins’s (*Literary Feminisms* 481) observation that writers should use their fiction to interrogate “seemingly natural signs of male/female differences”. If we were to read Robbins’s observation above as underlining the need to debunk artificial gender binaries in society that are often advanced by patriarchy to subjugate women, then it is arguable that Karla’s letter is Behr’s writerly intervention that calls attention to this vice in the Afrikaner society.

Karla’s letter and its prediction that how Afrikaner society treats women and other races would arouse the anger of ‘their children’ comes to pass because it arouses Ilse’s consciousness on what is wrong in her society, including gender oppression. This reminds us of Stobie’s and Medalie’s characterisation of Ilse elsewhere as the conscience of her community. Although she furiously condemns one of the horrific racist attacks in the novel, her actions can be read as a critique of the logic that Afrikaner society deploys to disregard the rights of some groups.² This logic explains why women like Leonore, who were signifiers of Afrikaner moral superiority during apartheid because they were associated with “feminine subservience, sexual containment, moral sanitation and middle-class domesticity” (A. Coetzee 100), are ironically oppressed by the system that was ostensibly designed to protect and privilege them. This perhaps explains why Behr believes that dismantling the institutions that transmit and reinforce apartheid ideology is important in the fight against discrimination and oppression of some categories of people in Afrikaner society.

This institutional superstructure as portrayed in the novel, which includes the Nationalist Party, schools like Jan van Riebeeck School, and universities like Stellenbosch University, have corrupted the philosophy on which they were established. I agree with Azille Coetzee’s argument that institutions set up to redress the atrocities committed by the English against the Afrikaners during the Great Trek and Anglo-Boer wars are subverted to oppress the very people they were supposed to empower during apartheid (A Coetzee 100). *The Smell of Apples* documents how Afrikaner institutions are weaponised to propagate white Afrikaner patriarchal interests and racist nationalism. This perhaps explains why Ilse’s protest of apartheid inequities is staged at Jan van Riebeeck School and during her installation as the head girl. It is significant that Jan van Riebeeck is one of the “oldest Afrikaans schools in the country” at which the symbol of the Afrikaner paterfamilias in the novel—Johan Erasmus—was “once a head boy” (*Smell of Apples* 13). I argue that while the symbolic significance of the school as a bastion of Afrikaner superstructure is self-evident, Ilse’s action symbolises the protest by a future Afrikaner leader against the misogyny and racism of her society. The fusion of Ilse’s leadership role and the school as a site of nurturing the next generation of Afrikaner leaders underlines the role of fiction in arousing societal consciousness against gender oppression. This is enacted by Ilse’s forcing her fellow students and their parents (the crème de la crème of Cape Town’s Afrikaner society) to sing all four verses of the then national anthem, “Die Stem”. Marnus informs us that:

Just when it seems the headmaster is going to ask someone else to play, Ilse starts the introduction for the third time [...] very few people know the second verse of “Die Stem” because usually we only sing the first, so most of them just repeat the words [...] and Ilse plays on as if there’s never ever been any talk of only singing one verse [...] by now everyone realises we’re going to have to sing all the four verses, so when we get to the third, no one draws out the end. (*Smell of Apples* 145–6)

If the national anthem is one of the key symbols of any nation, the fact that the elite Afrikaners of Cape Town can hardly sing its four verses raises an important question. Does their failure mean that the Afrikaner society is built on a cosmetic and superficial patriotism? This question reminds us of Heyns's ("The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing" 42–3) query "whether and in what sense confessional fiction come to terms with white South African culpability?" If white South Africans were culpable of the crimes of apartheid, then the failure by Ilse's audience to sing the four verses of "Die Stem" is an indictment of apartheid. It is ironic that the symbol of apartheid is incomprehensible to the very people who take advantage of these institutions to oppress vulnerable women and children in the depicted society. Instead, Ilse shows us how the system oppresses those it purports to protect.

The text's desire to expose the horror of how apartheid oppressed a certain category of white women reminds us of Barnard's observation that "Marnus not only dies as a soldier but imagines his death as a consoling embrace of his dad" (Barnard 222). Relatedly, Heyns ("Fathers and Sons: Structures of Erotic Patriarchy in Afrikaans Writing of the Emergency" 94) posits that "the father [has the power] to bully the son into submission and recruit him into the service of patriarchy". These scholars use the experiences of Marnus, who is seduced and coerced into keeping his father's secret and propagating Afrikaner ideology as a soldier in the border war, to underscore the point that Afrikaner patriarchy is inescapable. However, Behr demonstrates the possibility of challenging the system when he depicts Marnus's attempt to refuse the soiled epaulettes from his father after the rape of his best friend. Although he is beaten into submission as indicated by his posture of placing his face on his father's chest at the end of the novel (*Smell of Apples* 198), Behr suggests the potential of the oppressed to regain their agency and challenge the system. If the compromising posture that Marnus finds himself in emphasises the inescapability of the contaminated and corrupted Afrikaner ideology, I argue that Ilse's protest at Jan van Riebeeck High School perhaps shows that societal soul-searching can signal the possibility of reforms that can break the suffering that heteropatriarchal discriminative and oppressive ideologies inflict on society.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that *The Smell of Apples* discloses societal challenges such as gendered violence faced by categories of the population in an Afrikaner polity during apartheid. Behr's use of innovative techniques such as an eavesdropping child narrator and introspective epithet allow him to document the oppression of white Afrikaner upper-middle class women in the depicted society. The novel's use of letter writing and eavesdropped observations of the protagonist exposes how a certain group of South African women were oppressed during apartheid. Behr creates a text that has the power to persuade the reading public to care about the suffering of a group of women who were the ostensible beneficiaries of the apartheid system. Although upper-middle class white South African women like Leonore may have enjoyed certain material and financial comforts provided by an Afrikaner racist society, Behr's novel underscores how this category of South African women suffered gendered oppression during apartheid. Their oppression and suffering may not be comparable to the intersected oppression of some South African women such as black or 'coloured' women who faced multiple forms of oppression from the system as women, workers, and non-white subjects, but explicitly points to the hypocrisy of Afrikaner apartheid society.

Notes

1. It is also important to note that Leonore secretly visits her sister after Erasmus prohibits Karla from putting her foot in his house because "he had had enough of her strange ideas" (*Smell of Apples* 105).
2. It has been argued that it is the burning of Little-Neville that arouses her ire against apartheid because she feared that Little-Neville would "hate white people" (*Smell of Apples* 191) if he were to survive. This fact is not disputed given that everyone in the Erasmus's household is hurt by this racially motivated crime. It is not a "terrible thing [that could] happen to anyone" (*Smell of Apples* 137) as Leonore suggests. Many readers may agree with the visiting Chilean General that he "would kill anyone who did something like that to his son" (*Smell of Apples* 137). There is no doubt that the burning of Little-Neville is portrayed in the novel as a horrible crime committed under the racist logic of apartheid akin to Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics or Judith Butler's thinking around the politics that normalise the exclusion of certain groups from being seen as human.

Works cited

- Barnard, Rita. "The Smell of Apples, Moby-Dick, and Apartheid Ideology." *Modern Fiction Studies* vol. 46, no.1, 2000, pp. 207–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2000.0001>.
- Behr, Mark. "Living in the Fault Lines." *Security Dialogue* vol. 28, no. 1, 1997, pp.115–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010697028001011>.
- _____. *The Smell of Apples*. Abacus, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*. Verso, 2009.
- Coetzee, Azille. "Afrikaner Nationalism and the Light Side of the Colonial/Modern Gender System: Understanding White Patriarchy as Colonial Race Technology." *Feminist Review* vol. 129, no. 1, 2021, pp. 93–108. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/01417789211041677>.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France (1978–1979)*, edited by Michel Sinellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Heyns, Michiel. "Fathers and Sons: Structures of Erotic Patriarchy in Afrikaans Writing of the Emergency." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* vol. 27, no.1, 1996, pp. 81–104.
- _____. "The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing." *Modern Fiction Studies* vol. 46, no. 1, 2000, pp. 42–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2000.0005>.
- Medalie, David. "Old Scars, Old Bones, and Old Secrets: Three Recent South African Novels." *Journal of Southern African Studies* vol. 23, no. 3, 1997, pp. 507–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079708708553>.
- Ndebele, Njabulo. "Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of Narrative." *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, edited by Sarah Nuttall & Carli Coetzee. Oxford U P, 1997, pp. 9–28.
- _____. "Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Essays on South African Literature and Culture." *Journal of Southern African Studies* vol. 12, no. 2, 1986, pp. 143–57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2636740>.
- Nuttall, Sarah. "Telling 'Free' Stories? Memory and Democracy in South African Autobiography since 1994." *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, edited Sarah Nuttall & Carli Coetzee. Oxford U P, 1998, pp. 70–86.
- Rajiva, Jay. "The Seduction of Narration in Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2013, pp. 82–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafriLite.44.4.82>.
- Robbins, Ruth. "American Feminism: Images of Women and Gynocriticism." *Modern North American Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, edited by Julian Wolfreys. Edinburgh U P, 2006, pp. 70–8.
- _____. "Feminist Approaches." *Literary Theories*, edited by Julian Wolfreys & William Baker. Macmillan, 1998, pp. 103–26.
- _____. *Literary Feminisms*. St Martin, 2000.
- Roux, Daniel. "A Post-apartheid Canon?" *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* vol. 9, no. 2, 2000, pp. 243–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/713692719>.
- Saayman Hattingh, Heidi, Nicole Jordan & Inge Economou. "Visualising feminine Afrikaner identity: past and present." *South African Journal of Art History* vol. 35, no. 2, 2020, pp. 102–20.
- Stobie, Cheryl. "Fissures in Apartheid's 'Eden': Representations of Bisexuality in *The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr." *Research in African Literatures* vol. 39, no. 1, 2008, pp. 70–86. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20109560>.