

Sons of Mud.

Johan Vlok Louw.

Cape Town: Umuzi, 2023. 247 pp.

ISBN 9781415210635.

Sons of Mud is an anti-war narrative that uses satire to highlight the brutality of apartheid through the lens of young white males, described by the narrator as “the fruity kids of Cain” (8), who have been conscripted to the South African Defence Force (SADF) to perform military service. Louw provides a historiographic portrayal of the Voortrekkerhoogte military base (renamed Thaba Tshwane in 1998), drawing parallels between it and the Auschwitz concentration camp which reveal how apartheid symbolized horror, genocide, and trauma, particularly for the black victims of the security forces. However, he also suggests that some of the young white males, who are involuntarily conscripted into becoming “killer machines” (42), are also negatively affected, as they are subjected to physical and psychological torture. For example, the young conscripts in the novel are called “little shits” (11), “useless little pustule[s]” (12) and are verbally abused through statements such as: “I pray to God they shoot your cock off in Angola so that no bitch

girlfriend of yours can ever have babies!” (85). These are a few instances which demonstrate Louw’s negative representation of conscription as “the horror”, a phrase repeated throughout the novel.

The aforementioned analogy between apartheid as a crime against humanity and the Holocaust in Germany has been utilized by other writers, such as André Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee, as a way of protesting against the former regime in South Africa. In addition, Louw interrogates the issue of freedom and autonomy in the situation of white male youths who are displaced from their homes and involuntarily recruited into the military service after school, since these conscripts have no choice with regards to their involvement in the state’s response to the political struggle. The stringent laws in place at the time subjected them to imprisonment or exile for resistance.

The title of the novel, *Sons of Mud*, symbolises the young conscripts: “a multitude of heavily tanned faces under floppy bush hats embedded in a sea of South African Defence Force brown. It is difficult to determine where their skin ends and their battle fatigue begins. They’re simply a smelly mud-brown creature” (68). This reifies their abjection and dehumanization as they are turned from “kids [...] into killing machines” (42). However, *Sons of Mud* is also the title of the Dominee’s sermon in the novel, which implies that the church played a significant role in the ideological formation and justification of the system of apartheid, together with its literal defence. However, perhaps one of the critiques that might be levelled against the novel is Louw’s failure to acknowledge the role liberation theology played in apartheid South Africa and faith-based conscientious objection.

The novel is stylistically divided into three parts: “Protectors of the Realm”, “The Skeleton”, and “A Boy of Some Importance”. In “Part I: Protectors of the Realm”, Louw utilizes first-person singular and plural narration, shifting between “I” and “we” pronouns to document the personal and collective experiences of those directly affected by the militarization of white youth during apartheid. In this regard, the narration accentuates the inhumane conditions experienced first-hand by those confined to the “[f]reaking prison dorm” (19), and the physical and psychological abuse and trauma to which the recruited youth were exposed. However, Louw unmasks the discrimination and oppression that were directed at homosexuals in the SADF, as the narrator reveals that “[b]eing a moffie

in the army will get you shock treatment in One Mil’s Basement” (74). The latter statement directly refers to the Aversion project, whereby homosexual conscripts were subjected to torture as a form of punishment and aversive therapy was used to supposedly ‘cure’ their homosexuality. Additionally, those accused of assault, theft and drug abuse were subjected to punitive treatment in detention.

In “Part Two: The Skeleton”, the narrative focus shifts to Riejkardt Jurgens, an Afrikaans conscript, the ‘investigation’ following his assault of three physical training instructors (PTI) corporals, and his detention. The investigator in charge is a character named Colonel, but the reader learns that he is not actually probing the case, as he exclaims: “We’re not [...] investigating. We don’t investigate any-fokken-thing, boet” (144). However, through the assistance of Andrew Howard-Smythe—the narrator and a surfer from Durban who, when conscripted to the army, “feels like a Jew boy heading for Auschwitz” (8)—, Riejkardt’s offence is censored and he is recruited into a special military assignment across the border. This signals the high levels of secrecy and corruption during apartheid. “Part 3: A Boy of Some Importance” tracks Riejkardt’s mission as a henchman. In this part, he is given the title “The Skeleton Keeper” as a result of his involvement in and suppression of apartheid crimes.

Sons of Mud is characteristic of much post-apartheid South African fiction, as it blends English, Afrikaans and Fanakalo to indicate the country’s multilingualism and multiculturalism. Furthermore, there are various references to familiar South African settings, buildings, cars, music, and food, which are utilized to strengthen the realism of the narrative, as well as a repetition of phrases such as “Swapo is cruising for a bruising” (30, 216) and “the past is in the present, there is no escape” (94, 218) to convey the cycles of violence and oppression prevalent in the country. Louw’s narrator also uses wry nicknames for characters in the text: a man who bears an uncanny resemblance to Arnold Schwarzenegger is called “Arnold” and Riejkardt is referred to as the “giant” boy because of his physique, which is described as a cross between a heavyweight wrestler and orangutan.

Ultimately, *Sons of Mud* is an exemplary anti-war manifesto as Louw exposes the ideological pressures for white male youth during the apartheid era due to conscription and highlights the interrelatedness of the personal and the political. Through his use of satire,

he critiques the apartheid political system, but also employs humour to restore agency to the conscripts.

Kimméra Sherrilyn Pillay

Kimmera.Pillay@nwu.ac.za

North-West University

Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6148-2523>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v61i2.19381>