Abstract

Examining the preoccupation with history in contemporary South African fiction, this article focuses on the way André Brink undertook the task of imaginatively rewriting South African past in his first post-apartheid novel, *Imaginings of Sand*. It explores a variety of counter-narratives to the dominant historical discourse of the country’s violent past that the text offers and seeks to inscribe the novel into the wider context of South African literature of transition. Contrary to what a number of literary critics have asserted, the article sets out to prove that far from claiming any form of ideological primacy, *Imaginings of Sand* and its counter-narratives, through a variety of subversive and contestational techniques, not only encourage the reader to deconstruct the dominant historical discourse of South African past but also undermine reliability of any type of historical or literary discourse whatsoever.

Following the final demise of apartheid in South Africa dramatic changes in the political, social and economic sphere have given rise to an urge to reassess the past in an attempt to come to terms with a past identity that no longer fitted the transformed historical context. Whereas on the socio-political level the task of critically engaging with history was undertaken by the hearings conducted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in the socio-cultural sphere it was literature, among many other forms of cultural production, that played this crucial role of rereading and rewriting the country’s traumatic past. As André Brink asserts, “the need to revisit history has both accompanied and characterised the literature of most of
great ‘thresholds of change’[...], those periods in which, in Santayana’s words, ‘mankind starts dreaming in a different key”’ (1996: 230). Indeed, obsessive preoccupation with the past, constructed nature of history and narrative and their contribution to the processes of formation of personal and national identities permeates much of Brink’s oeuvre published both at the time of transition following de Klerk’s famous speech on 2 February 1990, which initiated the destabilization of apartheid, as well as in the post-apartheid years. Both his novels and critical essays of this particular period clearly exhibit his invested interest in the past and the forms it may assume in literature. In his seminal essay, *Reinventing a Continent*, recognising the recent prevalence of postmodernist perception of the world, he observes:

> Within historiography itself there has been a move away from the approach of the past as a set of ‘data,’ a ‘reality behind the text’, towards the open-ended perception of history itself as text and as narrative. This move has accompanied the shift in the novel, from the realism of the nineteenth century [...] to the constructions and inventions of modernism and postmodernism. (1996: 231)

Stating later in the same essay, “we experience our own lives as a compilation of narrative texts and this approach [...]introduces history into the whole collection of narratives that constitute us, both as individuals and as a community” (246), he clearly foregrounds incorporation of historiography into contemporary literature, thusformulating his revised notion of the politics of the novel in the post-apartheid South Africa. From now on, Brink claims, “story and history should not be read as choices in an either/or equation, but as markers on a scale” (1998: 17). Simultaneously denouncing various South African novelists who had hitherto never questioned the status of history as a mere “collection of facts”, he stresses the need to subvert “the underlying ideological assumptions of history as a representation of the real” (1996: 232). He seems to emphasize that history is not reality, rather a type of discourse, “an extended metaphor” that, in Hayden White’s terms, “tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about events with different emotional valences. The historical narrative does not *image* the things it indicates; it *calls to mind* images of the things it indicates, in the same way that a metaphor does” (White quoted in Brink 1996: 235). It is precisely this discrepancy between the true nature of the things represented and their image constructed by historical narrative that constitutes one of the primary concerns of Brink’s writings. History conceived as representing easily verifiable, factual events runs the risk of claiming primacy, imposing itself as the only possible discourse, thus acquiring the status of a master narrative. Exposed as synonymous with unquestionable truth, it discards any possible contradictory or alternative mode of belief. Brink’s preoccupation seems to
be with “those excluded from traditional master narratives” (Dixon 2004). Seeking to render voice to those who have been denied any means of identification within the dominant historical discourses over the centuries of colonial and later apartheid rule, Brink endeavours to “address the silences of the past” (1996: 231).

Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the writer’s first post-apartheid novel, *Imaginings of Sand* (1996) sets out to bring to light the whole repertoire of female narratives of Afrikaner women whose stories have been long neglected, forgotten or misrepresented in the patriarchal historical discourses. In one of his recent interviews Brink admits:

There are other forms of oppression apart from racial. In South Africa the oppression of women still goes on in black, white and Indian society. In one form or another it has always been there and that fascinated me.  

(Wroe 2004)

In another interview he explains:

In a climate of apartheid it was not possible to seriously debate the oppression of women. Now it can be explored and a writer can portray women’s experiences without feeling that the main struggle is somehow being ignored.

(Keenan quoted in Kossew 1997: 122)

Quoting after Edward Said, literary texts are always “worldly”, as being necessarily determined by the “circumstantial reality” of the moment of their production, they need to be read and interpreted contextually (1983: 34). Bearing in mind the ‘worldliness’ of *Imaginings of Sand*, it seems appropriate that the novel is set at the time leading up to South Africa’s first democratic elections which were held on 27 April 1994. It is a crucial moment in South African history, later renamed a ‘reshuffling of the cards’, which constituted “the watershed between Old and New South Africa [...] a unique coincidence of the utterly personal (my vote, my choice, my conscience) and the public (participation in the ‘political process’)” (Brink 1994 quoted in Kossew 1997: 114). Similarly, the main protagonist of the book, Kristien Müller, appears to be at a turning point in her life. Forced to return from a self-inflicted exile in London to her family ancestral farm called Sinai, she finds herself confronted not only with the responsibility to take care of her dying grandmother whom she has not seen in years but also with a nation at a very turbulent moment in history. The Bird Place, as the farm is sometimes referred to, has been allegedly firebombed by MK terrorists belonging to the armed wing of the African National Congress. As a result, Kristien’s grandmother, centenarian Ouma Kristina, is severely injured and being afraid she will soon die, she summons her favourite granddaughter to her bedside. Kristien’s homecoming
at the moment when South Africa is on the verge of dramatic change will prompt her to revisit, reassess and come to terms not only with her personal past, but also the one of the country as a whole.

In this process of self-discovery crucial role is played by the stories recalled by Ouma Kristina in her explorations of personal and collective identities of her and her granddaughter’s female ancestors. Initially reluctant to come, Kristien admits that what persuaded her was her sister, Anna’s words: “she has stories to tell you”. Indeed, stories have always lied at the core of the special bonding between the two women. Kristien admits that her grandmother’s “stories always resolved everything, without disturbing the miraculous nature of the world. Which was why I could never have enough of them” (IS 5)\(^1\). Now as the inheritor of this ”leaving treasury of stories”, “the one elected to take over [...] the burden-or the delight [...] of the family’s memories, recollections, fantasies” (IS 8), in an internal monologue she reaffirms, “I’ll listen to every single story you wish to tell me: don’t let them die with you” (IS 5). She accepts the role of the guardian of the family’s accumulated stories forming part of the history of the nation and vows to “prevent their getting lost along the way” (IS 86). Thus, in the presence of somebody to pass on this precious repository of the collective memory of their family's matriarchal lineage Ouma sets out to “give [Kristien] back [her] memory” (IS 58). The grandmother acts as, in Brink’s own words, a “mouthpiece of a long line of silent and/or silenced women in South African history” (1996: 243, 244). Her recollections render voice to the heroines of her ancestry, endeavour to redress the unjust patriarchal accounts in which women were ignored, sidelined or erased. Having listened and transcribed all her grandmother’s stories, Kristien resolves:

> Centuries and centuries of struggling and suffering blindly, our voices smothered in our throats, trying to find other shapes in which to utter our silent screams. Dragged across plains and mountains – just like those others, the nameless dark servants- barefoot, helping to preserve the tribe, loading the guns, healing the sick and wounded, fighting and dying alongside the men, then returned to the shadows while the men assumed what glory there was [...] To suffer, to cry, to die. Theirs the monuments for the ages; ours, at most, the imaginings of sand. (IS 332)

Ouma’s reconstructions of the ancestral heroines’ past seek precisely to confront those silenced spaces in history that are “no longer claimed by the living but the dead” (Knapp 2006: 43) and in doing so subvert the long tradition of white women’s oppression in South Africa. As such her female rememberings can be regarded as counter-narratives to the dominant patriarchal discourses of South African past. Far from accepting the official version of South African colonial history, Ouma’s stories address a whole
range of different forms of female agency, those “other shapes in which to utter our silent screams” (IS 332). As Dixon notes:

[Female] acts of interpretation and expressions of identity and experience range from the artistic paintings of Rachel (Brink, Imaginings 8, 84, 88–89, 107) to the prophecies of Petronella (Brink, Imaginings 101), the musical talents of Louisa (Brink, Imaginings 116) and the healing capabilities of Wilhelmina. (2004)

Paradoxically, even Kristien’s sister, Anna’s choice towards the end of the book’s narrative to kill herself and wipe out her whole family can be seen as yet another form of assertion of women’s rights addressed by Brink’s novel. Entrapped in an oppressive marriage, her husband personifying the male chauvinistic tyrant, reduced to the roles of housewife and mother, Anna is disallowed a voice of her own and feels deprived of right to make decisions concerning her life. In such circumstances, her suicide and the murder she committed symbolically incarnate the act of reclaiming the fundamental right to decide for herself and can be interpreted as rebellion against patriarchal society. As Kristien marks:

[her only power was the power to destroy herself [....] If your tongue is cut out you have to tell your story in another language altogether. This carnage is the only sign she can leave behind, her diary, her work of art. She couldn’t have done it alone. Countless others have converged in her to do this, to articulate this. (IS 333)

Narrative being equally informed by its exclusions and absences, as it is determined by what it includes, it is equally noteworthy to direct our attention to the her-story of Kamma/Maria, a reinterpretation of the mythical figure Krotoa-Eva. A former interpreter, language being not only her professional tool, but also the very foundation of the special status she enjoyed among the Afrikaners and the indigenous Khoikhoi, she is rendered inarticulate, her tongue being cut out. In her insightful study examining the ways post-apartheid narratives treated women, Meg Samuelson contends that this act of “dismemberment” of Kamma/Maria “potentially mutes what the text ostensibly aims to reveal – namely, the historical positioning of women as silenced sources and empty vessels” (Samuelson quoted in van der Vlies: 953). Samuelson has also pointed out that historical Afrikaner discourses traditionally positioned women as mothers, reducing their role to that of a reproducer or, metaphorically speaking, to the role of a ‘Womb’ (Samuelson quoted in van der Vlies: 951). Stander and Willemse further note that:

the role of the Afrikaner woman was central to the survival of the Afrikaner volk. Reproduction was her primary duty[...] Destined to be the bearers of culture and
civilization, Afrikaner women were supposed to ensure that the racial purity of Afrikanerdom was preserved[...] Such virtues constituted the framework of a sexist ideology that was invented by the Afrikaner patriarchy and perpetuated by Afrikaner nationalist and women’s organisations.

(quoted in Kossew 1997: 121)

Incorporation of Kamma/Maria’s narrative into the matriarchal genealogy of Kristien’s family clearly sets out to challenge this myth of racial purity on which Afrikaner national identity and apartheid were based. Casting light on yet another unchartered territory of the family’s past, it reveals a long hidden secret, that of miscegenation, tracing the family genealogy back to an indigenous Khoikhoi woman.

Thus it seems natural that seeking to debunk those traditional beliefs that surrounded Afrikaner identity and history, Ouma’s stories should include the Great Trek, this “heroic endeavour of the Boers which lay the foundation-stone for their nation and provided divine justification for their presence in southern Africa (and their ownership of the land)” (Petzold 2007: 117). Ouma Kristina’s reinterpretation of the Great Trek is enacted by the herstory of Wilhelmina, one of her female ancestors who took part in this historical event. Far from representing an ideal meek Afrikaner woman, Wilhelmina is strong and stubborn. Self-reliant and non-conformist, she defies all claims of male domination. She is also friendly towards blacks which eventually puts her at odds with the Afrikaner community. Wilhelmina’s narrative is also employed to subvert the myth of the religious calling of the trekkers. Admitting that Wilhelmina’s and her husband’s “main motive for joining the Trek was the prospect of becoming a religious leader among the emigrants” (IS 274), the narrative draws a parallel between religion and self-interest, thus exposing hypocrisy surrounding the construction of this national myth (Petzold 2007: 127).

Unmasking and subverting core myths of Afrikaner identity: patriarchal set-up of society, racial purity of Afrikanerdom, female agency reduced to motherhood and the biblical status of the Great Trek myth, Ouma’s stories seek to destabilize received notions of history and identity and as such constitute a perfect example of a counter-narrative, whose primary aim is to retrieve female voices and her-stories suppressed by official male-oriented historiography. Ouma’s memories and imaginings fulfill the need to bear witness to the silences of the past, fundamental during those turbulent years of transition in South Africa.

It could be claimed that such a representation of the Afrikaner identity is problematic and bears features of a rather atavistic approach concerning issues of Afrikaner identity and feminism. In her insightful article, *Reinventing History; Reimagining the Novel: The Politics of Reading André Brink’s Imaginings of Sand*, Sue Kossew asserts:
[i]t could be argued that this reimagining of history is also a process of re/presenting a past for Afrikaners (or for Afrikaner women at the very least) which is more palatable and more congruent with the idea of the new South Africa, thus (unwittingly?) implicating itself in the messy politics of representation by seeming to be a justification and a realigning of Afrikaner history, writing the Afrikaner back into the landscape of Africa.

Kossew states that rather than interrogating and renegotiating all possible versions of history, Brink’s novel sets up recovery of this limited set of national herstories “as an alternative to his-tory” (117), thus privileging one version of history over another. According to Kossew refusing to problematise, the narration projects this alternative version of history as the only acceptable one, and in doing so, it imposes a new meta-narrative. Such positioning of the problem runs the risk of consolidating the foundations of the very myths and images surrounding Afrikaner national history that the novel sets out to destabilize. She criticizes the manner in which “women’s lives themselves have become inscribed on the land, still readable as features of the landscape and therefore not subject to erasure” (120). This inherent linking of Afrikaner women with the African land implies their innate right to the land and only solidifies the legitimacy of their stay in Africa. Similar role is played by the insertion in the assemblage of her-stories of the indigenous figure, Kamma/ Maria. Establishing ancestral links with Africa, Brink’s novel seemingly denies the indigenous people’s right to their homeland and as such might be seen as re-colonising and re-appropriating South Africa, participating in “potentially oppressive reinscription of the Afrikaner as belonging to South Africa” (Dixon 2004).

Kossew also traces yet another problem implicated in the politics of reading Brink’s novel. Setting out to address suppressed voices of South African women in their entirety, white female characters in Imaginings of Sand unalterably:

claim solidarity with Africa [...] in a narration which could be said not only to be reinserting the silenced voices of Afrikaner women into South African history but also to be deproblematising the nature of these voices, which, after all, have a complex history of complicity in constructing the apartheid state.

Kossew’s claim is that in failing to acknowledge the white women’s implication in the long history of human rights violations under colonial and apartheid rule, the her-stories of Imaginings of Sand produce a vision of history, which turns out to be as selective as the one endorsed by male-centered historiography. Thus, the narratives which conceive of women as
mere victims of the patriarchal system only reiterate the authoritarian discourse that they seek to subvert. Kossew notes:

The Afrikaner women in Brink’s novel are imaged as rebels, as victims, as “sisters” of their black servants rather than as complicit in the discourses and myths of Afrikaner nationalism which made them such potent symbols of white tribalism.

(121)

She also points to the novel’s “emphasis on a shared experience of gender oppression” which only contributes to elide fundamental differences between the experiences of indigenous and white women in South Africa “thus replicating rather than resisting the exclusionary practices of South African historical discourse” (123). Therefore, what Kossew sees in Imaginings of Sand is precisely this kind of white feminism that has been rejected by African-American or Black British women for failing to recognise the specificity of a woman’s positioning as determined to the same extent by her gender as by her race.

Furthermore, as Shelley Dixon notes in her essay, Stories or History: Female Counter Narratives in André Brink’s Imaginings of Sand, such prioritisation of female narratives and utter silencing of male voices in the novel might raise “questions as for the validity and sustainability of inverted authoritarian relationships” (Dixon 2004). Quoting Toril Moi, she warns that such gender-based privileging of one narration over another “runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism. It does so by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places” (Moi quoted in Dixon 2004).

Does Brink’s novel truly reiterate and consolidate the very authoritarian and oppressive modes of discourse it sets out to debunk? Does it only succeed in setting up a new version of inverted sexism or a moderately revisioned form of the nationalistic Afrikaner myth, thus only perpetuating the well-vested stereotypes? Isn’t it more than just an inversion of the binary male/female opposition that has dominated centuries of South African history? And most importantly, do the matriarchal her-stories evoked by Imaginings of Sand set out to claim primacy over other forms of narratives, imposing themselves merely as rivals to original patriarchal discourses and positioning themselves as a new ‘grand narrative’? Do they truly bring into being a new ‘totalising’ counter-narrative that in turn produces its own silences, “its own marginalised Other” (Knapp 2004: 54)? Drawing to an extent upon Shelley Dixon’s analysis of female counter-narratives in Imaginings of Sand, this essay sets out to prove that far from asserting any form of ideological supremacy, the text, through a number of subversive and
deconstructive techniques, successfully encourages the reader to dismantle not only the patriarchal historical discourse but any type of discourse whatsoever, including the matriarchal her-stories denounced by Kossew.

First of all, it needs to be stressed that any attempt to challenge or ‘unwrite’ the archives of an oppressive system must be understood as an act of appropriation, or more precisely counter-appropriation, rather than mere recovery of retrieval of the forgotten past (Lazarus 2011: 123). As Ranajit Guha, founder of ‘subaltern studies’ historiographical project, asserts:

The appropriation of a past by conquest carries with it the risk of rebounding upon the conquerors. It can end up by sacralizing the past for the subject people and encouraging them to use it in their effort to define and affirm their own identity...[T]he appropriated past [comes] to serve as the sign of the Other not only for the colonizers but, ironically for the colonized as well...History [becomes] thus a game for two to play as the alien colonialist project of appropriation [is] matched by an indigenous nationalist project of counter-appropriation.

(Guha quoted in Lazarus 2011: 123)

Part of the complex positioning of the Afrikaners lies in the fact that they can be seen as representing both the colonized and the colonizer. This problematic situation is only aggravated by the fact that throughout the apartheid rule many Afrikaners felt divorced from their roots, which often found expression in exile like in Kristien’s case, and thus defied any form of identification with their nation. Furthermore, patriarchal oppression taking form of a modified colonization, we can thus expect the Afrikaner women to assume the role of the colonized. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that an attempt to revisit and rewrite the Afrikaner women’s history will initially seek to re-appropriate the traditional patriarchal discourses and replace them with an alternative version of history. As Neil Lazarus has rightly pointed out, “the desire to speak for, of, or even about others is always shadowed – and perhaps even overdetermined – by a secretly or latently authoritarian aspiration” (146). In the case of Imaginings of Sand such impression might be only strengthened by the author’s appropriation of female voice through his two women narrators, Kristien and Ouma Kristina. In an interview, Brink acknowledges that “there is always a suspicion that a man will patronize or misrepresent a woman’s view” (Keenan quoted in Kossew 1997: 122). However, if Brink does to some extent superimpose his own, necessarily male-oriented, cognitive map over female experiences in South Africa, the contestational framework within his novel simultaneously works to dismantle the very cognitive constructions it has put in place. Furthermore, it may be argued that in the case of the novel’s matriarchal narratives the position of the newly imposed discourse as the dominant one is occupied only
temporarily. The act of assertion of authority by this matriarchal version of history is rather symbolical and serves as a mere demonstration that such alternatives to received power structures exist and can be explored. As Dixon affirms:

The next stage in the resistance to authoritarianism must be an acknowledgment of the undesirability of any singular master narrative, and the need for a more diverse and pluralist model. Inversion is, therefore, merely the initial stage in a continual challenge to dominant discourses. It is the ongoing nature of such discursive challenges that [...] Brink emphasises in his claims to narratorial Truth. (Dixon 2004)

In Imaginings of Sand the portrayal of white women’s oppression is articulated almost exclusively from the female perspective. Seeking to deconstruct the master narrative of patriarchy, the novel comprises a series of female narratives that defy linearity and any sense of closure. Ouma asserts, “Let’s keep the men out of this. They came with verse and chapter. Our story is different, it doesn’t run in a straight line, as you should know by now” (IS 174). Ouma’s resolve to non-chronological modes of narration is initially opposed by Kristien who seeks to locate a precise point of origin for the ancestral her-stories. Nevertheless, such a possibility is quickly rejected by Ouma. She retorts, “[a]nd what do you think is the very beginning? [...] No one knows where we began. We go back to the shadows. I think we have always been around “ (IS 174). The adoption of this non-linear, open-ended mode of narrative is also exhibited through the deployment of two-fold narration. Whereas the first-person narration by Kristien focuses to a similar extent on the present events taking place during the week leading up to the country’s first democratic elections as well as on some flashbacks on her life during apartheid years, Ouma’s Kristina narrating voice seeks to retrieve memories of the bygone days of colonial past. This polyphonic narration foregrounds the ubiquity of the past. Presented in a non-chronological manner and narrated as they are required by the novel’s plot, the past episodes intertwine and merge with the present ones, which only further serves to disrupt the linear set-up of a traditional narrative. Instead, an alternative cyclical form of historical narration is proposed. When reflecting on her country of origin and its resistance to any received model of interpretation, Kristien notes:

[It is a] space impervious to chronology – or, rather, tuned in to a different kind of time, not that of days or weeks or years, appointments or contingencies, but a cyclic motion, summers that blend and merge, that repeat one another without ever being exactly the same, the kind of time that sculpts contours and moulds hills and gnaws away at ridges. Ouma Kristina’s landscape. This expanse, this
Metaphorical remnants of the past are also present in the form of ancestral ghosts that are not only evoked by Ouma’s narratives but also physically dominate the present story level. Kristien affirms, the house is a “place where anything and everything was possible, might happen, did happen. At night it was visited by ghosts and ancestral spirits – I know, I’ve heard them, felt them, seen them, believe me” (IS 9). Similarly the continuing appearance and disappearance of the birds which are seen to be “the spirits of dead women” (IS 239) at the hospital, in the house and at the graveyard serve to link the narrative to the past and in doing so foreground the dissonance between appearance and facts, the real and the surreal. Dixon notes:

the ghosts of the past fulfill several interrelated roles in the novel. They ensure that both temporal linearity and dichotomous relationships such as ‘real'/unreal pairings are subverted within the text in order to present the possibility of alternative accounts. They also act metaphorically, representing the manner in which past events affect present and future experiences and identities, and in this manner foreground the role of memory. (Dixon 2004)

Indeed, the novel continuously opposes the reductionist tendencies of the factual conceptualization of reality. The plot’s reliance on facts as ‘reality identifiable outside the discourse itself’ (van Wyk Smith quoted in Brink 1996: 244) is contested and the status of facts as a means to discover truth is challenged. “My memory doesn’t depend on dates and places”, Ouma Kristina asserts. Similarly, this perception of facts as an inadequate mode of expression of one’s life experiences, of what ultimately genuinely matters, is voiced during Kristien’s visit at her parents’ grave. She notes, “[i]t is unnerving to see their lives reduced to these spare facts; perhaps that is why I find it so hard to relate to them” (IS 40).

Instead, as in many of Brink’s writings, memory and narration are proposed as alternative modes of cognition and are clearly privileged over factual evidence (Dixon 2004). Kristien’s homecoming becomes “a journey that confirms memory, yet allows space for new discovery” (IS 60). In his collection of essays entitled Writing in the State of Siege Brink quotes Milan Kundera’s statement that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera quoted in Dixon 2004). Remembrance is therefore opposed to conformism, to the passive acceptance of one’s marginalisation, subjugation to oppressive apparatuses of power. Memory is the only means of regaining one’s dignity and reasserting oneself in the new reality. This redeeming nature of memory is also emphasised by Dixon, who claims that:
Re-membering attempts to bring together different members or parts to form new wholes. The collation of memories allows the past to live on, enabling one to interpret the present with a fuller awareness of one’s origins. Nonetheless, Brink never permits a simplistic view of memory as a means to gain ‘truth’ to obscure its problematic nature; in his novels doubt and unreliability consistently counter access to ‘truth.’

(Dixon 2004)

Indeed, not on a single occasion do *Imaginings of Sand* foreground memory and its scattered acts of remembering as invested with authority, constituting final repository of truth. In fact, any attempt at constructing one singular version of events, totalising ‘truth’ is exposed as futile. When referring to her stories, Ouma remarks “No one will ever know for sure [...] The means and coincidences are not important. Only the story. And that goes on” (IS 113). When Kristien protests: “I thought you were going to tell me the truth”, Ouma retorts: “No. I asked you to come so I could tell you stories” (IS 114). Similarly, the multiplicity of different, often contradictory versions of the same story that permeates Ouma’s narratives only foregrounds the equal status each of these stories enjoys. When reflecting on a variety of stories Ouma Kristina has passed her on, Kristien admits that she has now heard “old ones, new versions of old ones, new ones”. Equally, commenting on the narrative of one her ancestors, Lottie’s past, she reveals that “[i]t was a story I had heard before, in one form or another” (IS 302). As the stories occupy the same narrational space, none of them is granted precedence over the other. This plurality is most evident in Ouma’s differing accounts of her juvenile love affair with Jethro and the history of the mysterious painting of a naked man she held so precious. According to one of the versions, her love affair took her on an adventurous trip to Bagdad, another one locates their blissful ‘honeymoon’ in Paris, whereas according to yet another one they have never left South Africa and right from the outset did not get on well. As Dixon hints:

Truth, it is suggested, is not singular, linear or fixed, but rather lies in endless re-narration and in the celebration of multiple alternatives to any hegemonic discourse in operation.

(Dixon 2004)

Ouma Kristina’s stories’ reliability is continuously questioned, thus exhibiting the constructed nature of the novel’s narrative, only strengthened by the fictionality of literary discourse as such, outlined earlier in the essay. Acknowledging her status as an untrustworthy narrator, the grandmother says: “I’m not asking you to believe me, Kristien. I’m only asking you to listen to me” (IS 109). She also goes on to admit: “I have an amazing memory. At
times I even surprise myself. I can remember things that never happened” (IS 4). As Dixon points out:

Her comment is also suggestive of a paradox reiterated throughout the novel: memory is both endorsed as a precious repository of Truth and undercut by questions regarding its reliability and addressing its limitations.

(Dixon 2004)

Evidently, Ouma’s memory is positioned as an unreliable source of information. But so are the source materials matriarchal her-stories draw upon. Kristien’s mother diaries turn out to be mere wishful thinking, a demonstration of her unfulfilled dreams and no more than “the truth masquerading as so many sad lies” (IS 126). Brink notes that “the compulsively narrating grandmother [...] no longer relies on evidence’ or ‘references’ of any kind: her narratives are their own raison d’être” (1996: 244). When referring to the sources he resorted to when constructing the novel’s plot, he equally draws our attention to their plurality and subjectivity. He admits that they were either “informal by nature, like the Great Trek diaries of Susanna Smit” (the wife of the historical preacher Erasmus Smit), “subjected to transference, as happens in the case of the well-known seventeenth-century figure of Krotoa” or intertextual, and thus fictitious by nature, as evidenced by one of the crucial episodes in the family’s history, which is borrowed from yet another of Brink’s novels, An Act of Terror (1996: 244).

Brink only expands on this image of ephemerality in his choice of the novel’s title. Imaginings seem to be “the imaginative reconstructions of the past which are written, not in stone or on paper, but in sand, a shifting medium under constant threat of change or erasure, and subject to the particular point of view of the story-teller” (Kossew 1997: 116). Memory, being privileged over other modes of cognition, an yet, simultaneously, being continuously positioned as an extremely subjective, mutable and transient medium withstanding any attempt of objectification, its reconstructions, the fugacious imaginings of sand’ can hardly be expected to be working to impose a new ‘totalising history’.

What is even more striking with regard to the novel’s self-contestational, deconstructive framework is its playful intertwining at the same narrative level of easily verifiable facts, episodes, which through their self-reflexivity reveal their fabricated nature, though they remain within the confines of the ‘historically probable’, as well as magical elements belonging purely to the realm of surreal.

What is more, this incorporation of fantasy into the plot is not only confined to the past, it equally permeates the present story level. The actions performed by the omnipresent birds, ancestral spirits materializing at the graveyard and at Ouma’s bedside as well as the paintings reappearing in the
mansion’s basement all culminate in Ouma’s disappearance after her death and her transformation into a bird with “an unusual appearance: owl-like, but elongated, with legs like a flamingo or a crane and a peacock’s tail, the feathers streaked with strange colours, like one of the figures on the wall (IS 344–345). Application of magical realism as the novel’s narrative strategy can serve different purposes. As Marita Wenzel has pointed out, magical realism actually assists the process of creatively re-imagining the past:

[The] juxtaposition of past and present, real and surreal serves to emphasize the relativity of context and intimates the possibility of hope for the future.

(Wenzel quoted in Knapp 2006: 47)

It can be also seen as representing amalgamation of Eurocentric Afrikaner and traditional African belief systems. To grasp this point, it seems crucial to point out that the task of critically interrogating history has never been undertaken uniformly by South African writers at large. Prior to the demise of apartheid, white writers expressed tendency to postmodernist modes of historical narration, black writers, on the other hand, embraced neo-realist techniques of representing the past (Attwell quoted in Barker 2008: 5). The debate about the suitability of each narrative form might have continued up-to-date (and to an extent it does), were it not for the increasing employment of magic realism as contemporary South African writings’ narrative strategy. Straddling both contentious narrative strands, relying heavily on African oral traditions, while reconciling the realism’s faithfulness to the socio-political context and the postmodern devotion to formal experimentation, syncretism and metafiction, magic realism not only constitutes a point of confluence of black and white writing, but it also epitomises reconciliation of Western rationale and African tradition. “Thriving on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity” (Cooper quoted in Barker 2008: 10), particularly skillful at thematising collision of contradictory ontologies, this mode of writing proves exceptionally useful for the task confronted by Imaginings of Sand, the one of contestation of primacy of any grand narrative both in the past and at present.

Therefore, quoting after Warnes, that “[t]he key defining quality of magical realism is that it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth” (Warnes quoted in Barker 2008: 4), it might be argued that, thanks to its deconstructive framework, Imaginings of Sand represents an exemplary model of magical realism.

Indeed, Africa is often conceived of as retaining magic. Thus, the dream-like, fantastical occurrences are perceived as naturally pertaining to the continent. Kristien seems to be subscribing to the same belief:

this surge of the imagination which links us to Africa, these images from a space inside ourselves which once surfaced in ghost stories and the tales and jokes and
imaginings of travelers and trekkers and itinerant traders beside their wagons at night, when the fantastic was never more than a stone’s throw or an outburst of sparks away? How sad – no, how dangerous – to have suppressed all this for so long. (IS 97)

Yet another link with Africa is provided by the novel’s persistent reliance on orature. Part of African performative traditions, oral story-telling is brought to the limelight by Ouma’s matriarchal narratives. On the other hand, though, Kristien’s modern education, her life in Europe positions her as a representative of western values. This becomes obvious through her obsessive desire to write down, register on paper her grandmother’s accounts. The act of transcribing the narratives is exhibited as an appropriative act, but it also provides means of interpreting life experience. Kristien notes, “I must try to catch hold of it all; to grasp it before it totally eludes me and recedes into nightmare” (IS 329). She also affirms, “I have listened to her, I have written it all down, I’ve appropriated it, claimed it as my own” (IS 126). The urge to reconcile western and traditional African values is also expressed by Ouma Kristina, who presses her granddaughter: “[y]ou must write it all down before I go [...] It’s my testament”.

Nonetheless, the grandmother’s words referred to earlier in the essay, “I’ll give you back your memory” (IS 58), suggest that the primary function of the narrative that will follow is not the one of merely registering the silenced voices of female ancestors but rather helping Kristien to reconsider her roots in her homeland, South Africa. Thus, the protagonist learns to acknowledge “the irrevocable ties linking personal identity and ancestral identification” (Dixon 2004). Gradually Ouma’s stories gather into her past. At her grandmother’s bedside, Kristien notes:

I think, from the simple fact of being here, at last, alone, with her, with all the memories contained and defined by that meagre little bundle of skin and bones and tendrils of hair. I know the extent of my responsibility, and what it means to be exposed here to past and future alike, conscious of possible origins and possible endings. (IS 59)

She assumes the role of interpreter of those forgotten voices and in the process discovers her own position in the country’s future. Recognising her responsibility towards the silenced women of the past as the guardian of their narratives and their perpetuator for the future generations, she simultaneously grows to acknowledge the possibilities of her own narratives and, in doing so, she learns to embrace the role she is about to play in this country on the cusp of profound change. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Kristien asserts:
For too long the women of my tribe, of all tribes, have been forced to suffer and to rebel in the small private space allotted them by the powerful males who rule the world; I do not intend to run off in search of a shadow, or to change myself into a tree, or to be buried in shit, to embroider my name on a sweet little cloth, and especially not to vent my rage by wiping out my family with myself [...] What I want to undertake is much less spectacular. To work with others, to bring about a world – slowly, gradually, but surely, I swear – in which it will no longer be inevitable to be only a victim [...] There are points of no return that mark the beginning, not the end, of hope. (IS 350)

The narratives of the past, her-stories of Kristien’s female ancestors, paradoxically, provide her with a link to her country’s present and possibly with its future. Thus, the past, the present, the future, memories and stories become closely interrelated:

What used to be stories has suddenly begun to coalesce into a history, hers, ours, mine [...]. And the stories, history mingle with the stream of events that has carried me through the past day [...]. A whole country in the grip of madness, drifting like flotsam on a churning flood towards that event, mere days away, which may seal our collective fate? And what am I doing here, in the midst of it all, drawn into the vortex of a history I’d prefer to deny? (IS 126).

As Kossew remarks, Kristien’s “linguistic progress from ‘hers’ to ours’ and then ‘mine’ parallels her progressive involvement” (119). From her initial reluctance to return to her grandmother’s bedside, to her gradual development of ties and identification with the ‘collective fate’ and her final decision to stay and try to settle down in the new South Africa. Towards the end of the novel, she admits:

There is a difference between taking a decision because it is the only one, and doing it because you would have chosen it from any number of others had they been available. I have chosen this place, not because I was born here and feel destined to remain; but because I went away and then came back and now am here by choice. Perhaps for the first time in my life it is a decision that has not been forced on me from outside, by circumstances, but which has been shaped inside myself, like a child in the womb. This one I shall not deny. It is mine. (IS 349)

My claim is that it is this ultimate possibility of choice, of being given a chance to reinvent oneself through narrative, the existence of a whole array of alternative scenarios to one’s future that Imaginings of Sand sets out to celebrate. Commenting on the function Ouma’s stories perform, Brink notes that “her narratives are their own raison d’être and derive from the
individual’s need to assert her/himself, through storytelling, within the larger contexts of space and historical continuity (1996: 244). It is therefore stated that this urge to rediscover oneself through story-telling is inherent in human nature. To quote Russel Hoban’s famous dictum, “[w]e make fiction because we are fiction” (Brink 1996: 244). Thus, this possibility of regaining one’s voice seems not to be confined to the marginalised Other of the forgotten past, it is now the right of all South Africans to assume their voice and most importantly their responsibility in this personal and collective reinscription of nationhood. After all, isn’t it the primary function of literature of transition?

In Brown’s and Van Dyk’s perceptive study, *Exchanges: South African writing in transition* published in 1991, three years before the final demise of apartheid, Kelwyn Sole prophetizes:

> It [literature] is the way in which a new South African identity will be formulated and reformulated; it is a way in which common bonds and differences can be celebrated and understood; it is a way in which pleasure, love, pain, and discontent can be communicated; it is a way in which we can dream the future we are striving towards.

(Brown & van Dyk quoted in Kossew 1997: 123)

Brink may be criticized for the affirmatory tone of the message he conveys, characteristic of many writings of transition, but he cannot be blamed for celebrating a mere inversion of traditional historical discourse. Far from seeking to replace one dominant discourse with another meta narrative, he rather foregrounds the inversion of discourses performed by his novel as an initial stage, a marker on an never-ending scale of contestational practices instigated by the demise of apartheid. Running the risk of dogmatising the country’s past, he simultaneously realises that the only possible recourse would be a refusal to represent and he excludes such a possibility. Instead, in order to foreclose any future misappropriation of his discourse, he resorts to a number of subversive techniques, such as “a postmodernist resistance to categorisation, dichotomies and factuality” and prioritisation of multiplicity, which all set out to position Truth as a process of ongoing contestation (Dixon 2004). In her famous contribution to a collection of essays examining memory and trauma in the transition, when commenting on the outcome of the hearings conducted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ingrid de Kok notes that:

> [It was] in the multiplicity of partial versions and experiences, composed and recomposed within sight of each other, that truth “as a thing of this world”, in Foucault’s phrase, [would] emerge.

(1998: 61)
Brink’s novel seems to demonstrate that sometimes “stories that [do] not necessarily claim final authority [...] might be greater in the sum of their parts than any putative historical whole” (van der Vlies 2008: 950). It is through its recognition of the fact that truth can only be acquired by means of ongoing contestation of any received narrative discourse that Brink’s novel seems to be perfectly fulfilling the role assigned to literature in the times of transition.

NOTES

1 All quotations taken from André Brink’s *Imaginings of Sand*. London: Minerva, 1997, will be henceforth referred to as IS.

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