Justice, Genre, and Historical Memory in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*

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Abstract: Sol Plaatje's novel *Mhudi* (1930) forms an ideal setwork for the English curriculum in tertiary education because of the way it interrogates the legal and social injustices of colonialism while also serving as a rich source of historical information on different South African cultures. Through reading the book students gain familiarity with the genre markers of the historical novel, the prose epic and the chivalric Romance. Once this baseline is established, students elevate their critical abilities by learning how the titular heroine Mhudi and her husband Ra-thaga are a synecdoche for the Barolong people. By learning how to correctly identify synecdoche in a novel, students understand how *Mhudi's* central characters represent their people. The injustices the couple experience at the hands of the Matabele during the *Mfecane*, their alliance with the Boers, and Mzilikazi's prophesy that the alliance will result in further injustice and misery for the descendants of the Barolong is a criticism of the Union government of Plaatje's day. Specifically, the unfairness of the 1913 Native Land Act is referenced in the novel's Dedication in respect to the way forced removals led to the death of Plaatje's daughter, Olive. Reading *Mhudi* also provides students with valuable context about the history of racism and colonialism in South Africa, prompting questions about social justice with regards to race and gender. In this article, social justice is understood as redressing that which is lost or taken due to embodied and cultural differences. What's more, teaching the novel offers scope for exploring how unjust systems come about by determining how Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses can be applied in reading *Mhudi*. Steve Biko's concept of Black Consciousness is also explained here for the purposes of contextualising Plaatje's Christianity within a social-justice framework.

Keywords: *genre; Mhudi; redistributive justice; Romance; synecdoche*

Introduction: Justice and Genre in Plaatje's Vision

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's *Mhudi* is the first English book published by a black South African and in addition to that impressive distinction it can also be defined as an epic, as stated in the original subtitle 'An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago' (2011: 1) [1]. Literature acknowledged as truly belonging to the epic genre is rare, because it tasks writers with looking backwards in time to the start of their civilisation while also requiring them to presage its end. Epics are also long poems, which *Mhudi* is not, a fact that Tim Couzens side-steps

[1] All further references to the text will be to this edition. I chose the Lovedale version of the book instead of the Heinemann African Writers Series (HAWS) version as I agree with Brian Willan's article: What 'Other Devils'? The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* Revisited, in which he argues, 'In setting out to rescue Plaatje from the imagined interventions of his publisher, and the pressures supposedly exerted upon him, the end result was a text infused with the literary preoccupations of a later era' (2015: 1345). He is referring to the argument over authorial intention in *Mhudi* started by Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray in their article 'Printers' and Other Devils: The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi*'. They argue that Plaatje had been forced by his editors to excise parts of the original text in order to make it more likely to be published by the missionary Lovedale Press. Couzens' and Grey's argument has been important in Mhudi scholarship. Nonetheless, there is insufficient evidence to prove that Plaatje changed his final draft of *Mhudi* as an act of self-censorship rather than as an exercise in improving the structure and content of his own writing.

by calling *Mhudi* a 'prose epic' (1987: 52). Michael Green calls the difficulty in categorising *Mhudi* 'Generic Instability' (2006: 34). Since there is overlap between the chivalric Romance and the epic, there are a number of Romance genre markers in the work. These include brave warriors, churlish cowards and a storyline that interrogates the political concerns of Plaatje's day by anonymising them and setting them in a hazy and distant past. For Plaatje, the most glaring political injustice in need of redress was the colonial practice of stealing land from black South Africans using the law. By making justice the overarching theme of *Mhudi*, Plaatje's novel questioned the injustices of the historical *Mfecane* in a way that reminds the reader of the unfairness and betrayal of the 1913 Native Land Act.

Here, a useful definition of social justice can be understood as the need to make up for material losses sustained because of embodied and cultural differences due to prejudicial social conditions, such as racism and sexism. Nancy Fraser takes it for granted that redistribution is required of active, restorative social justice when she asks, 'How can one develop a coherent programmatic perspective that integrates redistribution and recognition?' (1998: 10). Cornel West emphasises the need to recognise financial disparity caused by having a black body when he says:

> How one defines oneself influences what analytical weight one gives to black poverty. Any progressive discussion about the future of racial equality must speak to black poverty and black identity. My views on the necessity and limits of affirmative action in the present moment are informed by how substantive redistributive measures and human affirmative efforts can be best defended and expanded. (2001: 99)

In a racist system, being black results in material inequality, and any effort to seek justice must be tangible, with land being a significantly valuable long-term investment that can restore dignity to those who were disadvantaged by that system. At this point, it should be noted that economic inequalities have also applied historically to women, because of sexism, such that material redress is also part of an effort at restitution. West gives the example of affirmative action as one way among many to restore the self-esteem of a systemically oppressed person. Achille Mbembe adds the need for "deracialising the ownership of assets" as essential to South Africa reaching its potential as a non-racial society (2015: 1). In this light, Plaatje's *Mhudi* can be seen as a literary intervention that calls for substantive social justice: the recovery of lost lands, the redress of material deprivation, and the recognition of the dignity of black South Africans.

Foregrounding Injustice: Delayed Publication, and Subtle Resistance

In *Mhudi's* Foreword Plaatje explains that his epic will show that Chief Mzilikazi and his Matabele indunas' violence stemmed from a logical reason: the insult of murdering his representatives who were tax collectors (2011: 11). The book's actual scope is much larger, and its overarching theme is justice. It is about how the injustices meted out against the Barolong by the overzealous Matabele warriors are redressed. While the novel ends on a high note suffused with possibility for the main couple, Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, Chief Mzilikazi's prophesy of doom, which the reader of history knows will come to pass, signals Plaatje's sense of promise denied, and injustice at the Union government's treatment of black South Africans.

Mhudi presents a picture in which the Boer trekkers are already showing signs of treating their black countrymen badly long before the establishment of the Union government. In one instance there is a description of a Khoekhoe slave being beaten with a poker and then having her ear held in a vice. Following this event, Mhudi remarks, 'Give me a Matabele rather. He, at any rate, will spear you to death and put an end to your pains' (2011:126). This is one of the many instances in which the Boers' cruelty and injustice is emphasised in the novel.

As much as injustice was a major thematic concern in *Mhudi* it also shaped the production and distribution of the work. The novel was finished in 1920, although it was published only in 1930 by the Lovedale Press. Plaatje describes the reasons for this delay in his Forward to the novel as 'circumstances beyond the control of the writer' (2011: xi). Tony Voss, in his introduction to the 1989 edition of the text, published by AD Donker, clarifies these circumstances:

> (In Britain) Plaatje gave hundreds of lectures, corresponded widely and lobbied for the cause of justice for South African black (people).… In 1923 he returned to South Africa. He remained active in journalism, in politics, in Tswana language affairs. He translated Shakespeare into Tswana and maintained his correspondence among the most eminent and articulate South Africans. (2011: 15)

In other words, after the 'Union' of South Africa in 1910 paved the way for legal injustice, Plaatje's time was monopolised by his activism. Due to the promulgation of laws such as the Native Land Act of 1913, Plaatje, as an

intellectual, felt he had no choice but to spend his time fighting against ideological and state injustices. Under such conditions, the task of finding a publisher became a secondary priority.

Understanding the circumstances of Plaatje's life, as well as his stated objectives behind writing the book, are relevant to this discussion because they relate to various textual issues that have a direct bearing on the idea of social justice. First, Plaatje's stated intention behind writing the book was:

> (a) to interpret to the reading public one phase 'of the back of the Native mind'; and (b) with the readers' money, to collect and print (for Bantu schools) Sechuana folk-tales which, with the spread of European ideas are fast being forgotten. (2011:11)

The phrase 'the back of the Native mind' is typeset in inverted commas to show that this way of thinking is not his own understanding of the way individual black people thought about the issues in this book at the time. Rather, Plaatje is projecting the tendency of a colonial English-speaking readership to flatten the distinctions between different black ethnic groups. By constructing such a voice, Plaatje was challenging the *status quo* in a manner that was subtle enough to make its point to the readers among the black intelligentsia who would have formed part of his fellow members of the South African Native Convention (the forerunner of today's African National Congress political party) without alienating other English-speaking readers who would benefit from the book's thematic preoccupation with justice. Plaatje's use of subtext is a continual feature of *Mhudi*, and it is explicitly used to critique the racist abuses of power under the Union government, while at the same time making it past the potential prejudices of an English-speaking audience. Any notion of the black peoples of South Africa being generic is undermined by the plot of the book itself.

Epic, Romance, and the Historical Novel: Genre Markers in *Mhudi*

A summary of the plot of *Mhudi* demonstrates the author's intention to represent the diversity of black peoples living in South Africa. At the outset, *Mhudi* is primarily about the Barolong people, a Bechuana tribe living, according to Plaatje, in 'the extensive areas between the Central Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert' (2011:23). Their lives conform with the pastoral idyll, as is evident in the description of the Barolong:

> They raised their native corn which satisfied their simple wants, and, when not engaged in hunting or in pastoral duties, the peasants whiled away their days in tanning skins or sewing magnificent fur rugs. They also smelted iron and manufactured useful implements which today would be pronounced very crude by their semi-westernised descendants. (2011: 208)

The subtext of this scene is that, prior to colonial expansionism, rural life in South Africa was more fulfilling and sustaining for its tribespeople. It evokes a half-forgotten and hazy past—a common feature of Romantic literature, and one which marks Plaatje's epic intentions for the novel.

After the sacking of the Barolong at Kunana by Mzilikazi's Matabele indunas, who use excessive violence against the men, women, and children of the Barolong, Ra-Thaga meets Mhudi in the bushveld. Both are refugees who have wandered alone for several days. The miraculous tenor of their meeting is quickly consummated into a marriage—a marriage around which the symbolic universe of the novel turns. After a brief stay with a party of Koranna hunters, the couple seek out and find the Seleka branch of the Barolong, at the same time as Ra-Thaga meets up with a party of Boers making their Great Trek into the interior.

These new allies, with the help of other groups disaffected by Mzilikazi's rule, including the Griqua, the Bakwena, Bakhatla and Bahurutshe, are able to unite to repel the fierce Matabele, who, upon decisive defeat, decide to move North, towards what is today known as Zimbabwe.

The fact that this story comprises a historical account of the various enmities and alliances of different ethnic groups is itself a revolutionary act. Already, in Solomon Plaatje's lifetime the Great Trek was being taught on the school syllabus in a way that was totalising. As Pieter de Klerk notes, '*Dit is veral Gustav Preller wat verbind word met die beskrywing van die Voortrekkers as helde en die Trek as 'n reeks heroïese gebeure*' (2009: 662) (It is especially Gustav Prellar who will always be bound up with the narrative of the Voortrekkers as crusaders in the Trek which was itself a series of heroic events). The first president of the South African Union government, Louis Botha, was a passionate supporter of Preller. Isabel Hofmeyr succinctly explains the reach and aims of Preller's historicism:

> When not scriptwriting he busied himself working—often simultaneously—as a newspaper and magazine editor, author, literary critic, historian and key organizer of the

> Second Language Movement which formalized modern-day Afrikaans. Uniting all these tasks was one overriding concern—the popularization of history. (1988: 522)

One extraordinarily busy Freemason, with the financial support of government and its mechanisms, managed to capture large swathes of the popular imagination among white South Africans. His mastery of propaganda was unparalleled, and educators were among the populace who he influenced. Hofmeyr explains that through 'inversions, repressions, ellipses and displacements, his works institutionalise forgetfulness as much as recall' (1988: 534). Via these means, and the support of nationalist apparatchiks, the education system at that time was being co-opted into creating a narrative in which the story of the Great Trek was growing absurdly in scope and dimension.

By writing a historical narrative in which the Great Trek plays a minor role in the background of the histories of the various groups of black South Africans, Plaatje sets himself against the excesses of Great Trek propaganda. This argument is not entirely new. Laura Chrisman in her *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje* describes Plaatje's re-imagining of history as 'radically decentred narrative' (2000: 207). The narrative being decentred in this case was the master narrative of nationhood as promoted by the Union government. Such an interpretation acknowledges Plaatje's activism against the whitewashing of history. Another scholar to back this claim is Shane Moran who describes Plaatje as 'an engaged tactician interrogating the history of ideas' (2015: 16). His interpretation bears out *Mhudi'*s tactical subversion of the dominant political agenda of his time. In other words, *Mhud*i can retroactively be called a postcolonial novel because it interrogates race-based injustices perpetuated through colonialism.

Redistributive Justice and the Legacy of the 1913 Native Land Act

Even before the plot itself begins, the author's commitment to foregrounding racial injustices as inculcated through the legal system is made clear. The book begins with the dedication:

> To the Memory
> Of
> OUR BELOVED OLIVE
> One of many youthful
> Victims of A SETTLED SYSTEM
> And in Pleasant Recollection
> Of her life work, accomplished
> At the age of 13, during the
> INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC
> This Book is Affectionately Dedicated (2011:5)

Plaatje and his wife, Elizabeth Lilith M'belle, were originally blessed with six children. The death of Olive is not attributed by Plaatje to the 'INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC'. He says she is the 'victim' of a 'settled system'. Plaatje's fury, as a bereaved father, is seared into his judgment against the settled system of white colonialism (distilled as the Union Government).

As the inclusion of his dedication suggests, families are central to Plaatje's writing, just as they were central to the work of the English playwright Shakespeare, whose work Plaatje translated into his own Tswana language and admired. Stephen Grey's article 'Plaatje's Shakespeare' discusses how the textual resonances between Shakespeare's drama and Plaatje's in *Mhudi* are everywhere apparent. Specifically, he notes:

> Shakespeare's themes of war and peace, justice and honour and power, are Plaatje's, too, and Plaatje has learned from Shakespeare that to write critically about your own times and to avoid a censor's clampdown requires infinite literary cunning. (1977: 4)

A further aspect of Shakespeare's work that Plaatje adapts for his own purposes, is the English playwright's acknowledged ability to make the grand narratives and political movements of history personal by showing their effect on families.

Synecdoche and the Romantic Couple as a Model of Nationhood

Plaatje makes the idea of a nation personal by casting the marriage of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga a synecdoche for the grand epic project of the novel, which is to trace the rise a fall of the Barolong people, alongside other groups, represented by other romantic pairings. These include the relationship between chief Mzilikazi and his favourite wife, Umnandi,

and that of the noble Boer, De Villiers, and his fiancé, Hannetjie. As is the case with Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, the primary romantic couple of the Matabele have a relationship that defines and is defined by their culture, people, success and failures. Similarly, De Villiers and Hannetjie represent their people, but their paring occurs only at the end of the novel and through the prompting of Ra-Thaga. While Mzilikazi's character is dynamic and flawed, and his relationship with Umnandi is complicated by jealousy and polygamy, the Boer couple are meant to represent only the best of their people, and so they occupy a complex position of being representative of their fellow Boers but without their same prejudice. As Shakespeare would have done, Plaatje sets up these relationships as foils for each other for the purpose of tacit comparison. The interplay of these narrative threads follows an epic trajectory for at least three distinct South African peoples.

Importantly, the main romantic couple of Mhudi does not function as a mechanical synecdoche of object relation, in the mould of 'crown for king' and 'boots for soldiers' but as an organic one in which the culture of a nation is suggested by the relationship between two of its members. It is similar to the synecdoche of Antiquity, which, Gorden Williams explains, 'functions as a synecdoche in respect of itself, but paradigmatically in respect to the wider context' (1999: 22). Mhudi's and Ra-thaga's relationship as well as the characteristics of their group are allusive in a way that suggest a life beyond the confines of the novel. This rhetorical device gives readers an emotional stake in historical events in *Mhudi* by making prominent the experiences of individual characters.

Religion and Resistance: Christianity, Colonialism, and the 'God of the Rain

Together, Mhudi and Ra-Thaga form the smallest unit of a society, while their love is the dramatic crux of the story. The nature of this union and what it suggests about the potential glorious future of peace and prosperity for the Barolong people is evident in Plaatje's description of their marriage:

> That exactly is how our hero and heroine met and became man and wife. There were no ceremonials, such as the seeking and obtaining of parental consent, because there were no parents; no conferences by uncles and grand uncles, or exhortations by grandmothers and aunts; no male relatives to arrange the marriage knot, nor female relations to herald the family union, and no uncles of the bride to divide the *bogadi* (dowry) cattle, as, of course, there were no cattle. It was a simple matter: taking each other for good or ill with the blessing of the 'God of the Rain'. The forest was their home, the rustling trees their relations, the sky their guardian, and the birds, who sealed the marriage contract with their songs, the only guests. (2011: 61)

For Plaatje, the most immediate source for this image would have been Adam and Eve in Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost.* The couple is represented as living in a perfect, prelapsarian state. Nature offers itself to protect, comfort, satisfy and delight the couple. More to the point, the man and woman in the garden is a reminder of Plaatje's own religious convictions as the son of Christians who worked at South African mission stations.

The scene is not just a reminder of Plaatje's literary and religious commitments. Mhudi and Ra-thaga's marriage should be read for its symbolic significance as what Plaatje saw as the potential monogamous marriage offers for equality between a man and a woman. This Christianised vision of equality is also emphasised later in the book when Ra-Thaga's friend De Villiers asks the racists among his fellow Boers:

> What did Paulus mean, when he said to the Galatians, There is neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free, male nor female, but are all one in Jesus Christ? (2011: 197)

Ultimately, Plaatje uses a Christian framework to argue for equality, not only between the sexes, represented by the union of man and wife, but also on the basis of social status and skin colour.

While Plaatje's social justice on the basis of Christianity may seem simplistic, it is important to recall the words of Black Consciousness hero, Steve Biko, who, in chapter 10 of his book *I Write What I Like*, published in 1978, exhorted black churchmen to become church leaders, and to preach a version of Christianity relevant to the struggles faced by black South Africans:

> The Church and its operation in modern-day South Africa has therefore to be looked at in terms of the way it was introduces to this country. Even at this late stage one notes the appalling irrelevance of the interpretation given to the Scriptures. In a country teeming with injustice and fanatically committed to the practice of oppression, intolerance and blatant cruelty because of racial bigotry; in a country where all black people are made to feel the unwanted stepchildren of a God whose presence they cannot feel, in a country

> where father and son, mother and daughter alike develop daily into neurotics through sheer inability to relate the present to the future because of a completely engulfing sense of destitution, the Church further adds to their insecurity by its inward-directed definition of the concept of sin and it encouragement of the *mea culpa* attitude. (1978: 56)

Biko's chapter on 'The Church as Seen by a Young Layman,' was a stern indictment against the preaching of Church doctrine in a way that was irrelevant or even harmful to the project of developing Black Consciousness. Plaatje's epic of more than 50 years earlier anticipates the need to make his faith relevant in a context where ideological state apparatuses such as the Church, schools and even the family (Althusser 2017: 136-137) could so easily be co-opted for the production of race-based injustice.

Ideological State Apparatuses and Literary Subversion

The term 'Ideological State Apparatus' was first coined by the French Philosopher Louis Althusser. In the essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' he theorises how subjects come to form their sense of self through these institutions. This is why Plaatje's depiction of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga's marriage is so crucial to understanding the work's wider implications. Although Plaatje retains the sense of there being a Christian God present, through his allusion to the capitalised 'God of the Rain' (2011: 197) and the overt reference to the Garden of Eden, he strips Mhudi's and Ra-thaga's marriage of those aspects of a Christian wedding ceremony that might otherwise signify the hidden curriculum of colonialism. Since there is no Church building, there is no architecture built according to Western norms and standards about which a white priest could claim to have special knowledge. There is no book written in any foreign language. In fact, Mhudi and Ra-Thaga's shared use of their own mother tongue is one of the things that draws them together. There is no special attire dictated by Western standards of decorum. Biko stressed this point in *I Write What I Like*, that when Christianity came to South Africa, it was prescriptive, especially when it came to dress, immediately creating visible divisions among 'the converted (*amagqobhoka*) and the pagans (*amaqaba*)' (1978: 56). Even family are absent from Mhudi and Ra-thaga's wedding, so that the weight of cultural ideas that relatives might bring are completely absent. The event that causes this lack of community—i.e. the genocide of the Barolong— is tragic, but it also creates the necessary conditions for Mhudi and Ra-thaga to forge their own destiny together.

Biko's and Althusser's ideas apply to *Mhudi* anachronistically. Ideas often exist in literature before the terms and theoretical ideas for understanding those ideas have been invented. This indicates the achievement of *Mhudi* in that it was a novel before its time in many respects. Nevertheless, Plaatje's forward-thinking vision of social justice in *Mhudi* is not perfect. His fear of miscegenation is apparent when the narrator relates the foolishness of Motonsi's 'masterpiece of folly' (2011: 24) which was an attempt at crossbreeding cattle and buffalo. The concept of love conquering all was not alien to Plaatje, but he was not convinced of its applicability to interracial relationships.

Women in Mhudi: Companions, Carers, and Complex Figures

Mhudi's depiction of women is also problematic. While the novel is transcendent, in terms of its representation of the ways in which women support one another, it shows a conservative tendency by tying female characters' identities to the roles of wife, mother and housekeeper. If any woman were able to escape these roles in *Mhud*i, that would be another matter, but none do. When Mhudi miraculously gets up after her bout of malarial fever and takes her 'Leap in the Dark' (2011: 164) to find her husband at the battlefront, she must first arrange for the care of her hut and children. She charges her cousin Baile, 'take care of my hut for me', she then considers that 'the children could stay with Matsitselele' (2011: 165). Matsitselele had made a minor appearance earlier in the novel as one of the Barolong women at Thaba 'Nchu who shame the 'timid man' (2011: 91) that runs from the 'load of bloodred devils' (2011: 94) later identified as the Boers. The underlying assumptions about gender evident here are that, even when women prove themselves braver than men, there is a gendered expectation for men to be courageous. The corollary is that women's roles necessitate their responsibility for childcare and the home, making their physical bravery in contrast to men's surprising.

Even so, Baile does support her cousin, and presumably so too does Matsitselele. As a result, Mhudi is able to go to the front, establish a friendship with Umnandi, and change the course of Matabele history by protecting her new friend and hiding her identity (2011: 177-180). Through their friendship Plaatje explores the idea that women are better than men, which is most apparent when Mhudi laments to her sister by affection Umnandi that 'men, in whose counsels we have no share, should constantly wage war, drain women's eyes of and saturate the earth with God's best creation—the blood of the sons of women' (2011: 179). Here, Plaatje's point is well made, especially in light of the aftermath of the First World War, which would have ended one year before the writing of the novel began. Still, the gender essentialism implied by calling 'the sons of women' the Christian God's 'best creation' is inescapable.

Another awkwardness in the novel's gender representation, is its all-too frequent references to women's attractiveness to prospective husbands based on their cooking, beer-brewing and childbearing abilities. In the opening scene the Baralong woman of an ideal bygone age has the duty of 'fattening and beautifying her daughters for the competition of eligible swains' (2011: 23). Most of the reason for Mzilikazi's great love of Umnandi is connected to her culinary skills. He shows 'indiscretion' by outraging 'the feelings of his other wives by sending their food to Umnandi to be cooked all over again' (2001: 96). While her inability to bear children is related with sympathy, there is nonetheless a sense of triumph when Umnandi at last 'presented the King and her nation with a son, the newborn prince!' (2011: 194). Even in the Boer camp, cooking skills and demure behaviour are defining features in the eligibility of a woman as a marriage partner (2011: 171). Mother-in-laws are heartily praised, and Ra-thaga honours his mother-in-law's achievement as 'the woman who mothered my wife and nourished every fibre of her beautiful form' (2011: 170). While Ra-thaga's sentiments are laudable (and superior to the rather dull 'mother-in-law-bad' attitude of the Western tradition) he locates Mhudi's value primarily in her looks, and her mother's worth derives from her role as nurturer. These representations of women have nothing intrinsically wrong with them, but they are not broad or diverse enough regarding the many aspects of a woman's life from which she might derive fulfilment.

Another way to stress the difference between men and women in *Mhudi*, is to focus on the men, who get to enjoy shooting, horse-riding, running, fighting, spying and holding court. Men have more fun in *Mhudi* as in life. Ultimately, the novel's representation of gender is underpinned by a Christian and traditional worldview, one that strives for egalitarianism in which man and wife are envisaged as enhancing one-another. Such a view is empowering and important, up to a point, but it is also limited and has little potential for redressing women's diminished scope for decision making as entrenched by patriarchal social systems.

Despite this, Mhudi herself stands out as a charismatic character whose quick wittedness in difficult situations, such as Ton-Qon's attempt to seduce her and kill her husband, invites readers to question whether women's roles are too confined by society. Her frequent displays of cool headedness in the face of danger, particularly lions, and her ability to quickly determine whether an alliance will be beneficial or distasteful is meant to prompt the question as to whether patriarchal societies have been getting it wrong by restricting women in ways that prevent their taking up leadership positions. Plaatje could have done more to further this idea in the book, but to do so might have alienated his intended readership. Myrtle Hooper characterises this readership as 'predominantly white' and that his decision to use English would have been motivated by the desire to reach 'the sector of the colonial hierarchy that had decision-making power'. Of course, as Hooper adds, Plaatje's 'hopes would not have stopped short of access to a later generation of educated black people' (1992:39). Mhudi is quite a subtle invocation of the unexplored possibilities for women, which makes her a character constructed to effectively spark questions about women and their superior leadership abilities in comparison to men in the mind of a more conservative reader.

Mhudi ends with its main heroine and hero riding away into an unknown future on 'the gift of an ox waggon' from De Villiers. Voss identifies this wagon as the new technology that marks the end of one era, and the start of a new one. Crucially however, this moment can only come to pass after Mhudi and Ra-Thaga have played an instrumental role redressing the wrongs wrought against the Barolong by the Matabele. This ending raises the question, whether a greater injustice, with even less justification than the *Mfecane*, may also need to be materially redressed in the future. Mzilikhazi had already prophesied this outcome:

> The Beshuana are fools to think that these unnatural Kiwas (mlungu) will return their so-called friendship with honest friendship. Together, they are laughing at my misery. Let them rejoice; they need all the laughter they can have today for when their deliverers begin to dose them with the same bitter medicine they prepared for me; when the Kiwas rob them of their cattle, their children and their lands, they will weep their eyes out of their sockets. (2011: 188)

Mhudi follows an epic trajectory. First it recounts the peaceful, pastoral lives of the Barolong. After the city of Kunana falls, Plaatje sews the seeds for a new flowering of the Baralong through the love story between Mhudi and Ra-Thaga. The equality of their relationship, signalled by the title of the book but also the way the couple interacts with one another, indicates their potential for forging an egalitarian society (in Plaatje's view at least). The cradle, land and cattle robbing Kiwas about whom Mzilikazi prophesies are the white ruling class whose reach was already far too long in Plaatje's life. *Mhudi's* Romantic genre markers signal his intention to provide some temporary relief and escape from the excesses of white supremacy in Plaatje's day and age. That they are referenced elliptically in Mzilikazi's prophesy invites the reader to reflect on how themes of justice in the novel apply to the unjust political situation of Plaatje's own context.

Genre, Editorial History, and the Half-a-Crown Controversy

In the HAWS version of the book the character of Half-a-Crown is meant to indicate the Mzilikazi's prophesy has come to pass. Not all versions of the book feature this character. Briefly, in the 1970s Tim Couzens and Stephen Grey discovered what they believed to be an 'original typescript' of the novel in the Cory Library for Historical Research at Rhodes University. More recently, Brian Willan has argued that their 'original version' was a foul copy of the author's working drafts and that the Lovedale edition is truer to Plaatje's final vision for the novel. Specifically, he says, 'any changes that were made were entirely at Plaatje's volition' (2021: 202). Willan's argument is the more persuasive, yet the scholarship of Couzens and Grey remains important because of their discussion of the character of Half-a-Crown in the HAWS version. The character was originally intended to be a frame narrator. As Couzens and Grey observe, 'The missing Half-a-Crown, with his half-ironic, half-pejorative monicker, also stood as a living recrimination to those who denied the South African black man a heritage and a historical memory' (1978: 209-210). Including Half-a-Crown is a tacit indication of the eventual theft of the land belonging to the Tswana people via the legal mechanism of the Native Land Act. His crown being 'halved' gives him a metonymic relationship with all black people robbed of their heritage. The problem with including Half-a-Crown is that he diminishes the final, triumphant tone of the novel's ending. With so much taken away from the Tswana and other South African black people, it would be mean to rob Mhudi and Ra-thaga of their jubilant new life that starts at the novel's close.

Additionally, the reader of history already knows what is coming, and, incidentally, there is no need to add a frame narrator to highlight the orality of the narrative. It's already apparent through the inclusion of many Tswana proverbs and parables as well as the use of oral testimony in the novels' several court scenes. In summary, the fact that Half-a-Crown was included in the author's foul papers shows that Plaatje was carefully measuring when and how exactly to cut off his epic. His decision to remove Half-a-Crown affirms his artistic discretion.

Conclusion: Justice Remembered, Justice Imagined

Why is establishing this story's genre and the authors' exact editorial interventions so important? Because the ending of *Mhudi* indicates the promise of a new and perfect Barolong society. Utopias represent a goal that nations strive for. The achievement of a perfect society is at the heart of all epic literature and most romances. For example, King Arthur's perfect egalitarian society, symbolised by his knights and their round table, is an example from the Arthurian cycle. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Eden is the original paradise, and the coming of Christ suggests the opportunity for a new beginning for humanity. More prosaically, plans for ideal social cooperation are created regularly by those whose job it is to improve society. South Africa's National Development Plan for 2030 represents a goal that we South Africans want to achieve for the country's future. The Sustainable Development Goals too, represent a goal that we as global citizens wish to achieve. In creating the idea of a unified and egalitarian rural society, symbolised by the union of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, Plaatje fashions an aspirational vision for non-urban members of South African society to strive for. This vision is notable for its rich depiction of the sustaining qualities of nature, as well as the fact that the 'society' constituted by Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, is able to step into the future only after the Matabele are defeated and redress for the wrongs of the past had been realised.

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