Dark outsiders: ethnicity, identity and the motherland: the cruelties of migration, part II

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“Migrancy …involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are a constant subject to mutation.”

Tales of exile are as old as the world. The epic heroic story of the Wanderer returning home is an essential part of every mythology. Re-inventing origin and telos, a beginning, a first, the narration of exile offers confirmation of an identity put to task, a lost position regained.

The timely loss of context, the loss of a surrounding where things which one does and says are understood as ‘natural’ often work out in a series of traumatic experiences where identity-markers like class, age, gender, religion and ethnicity are determining factors of different forms of imprisonment in the past, to be overcome in a nearby future.

During the 20th century, the post/colonial heritage has deconstructed the narration of exile from the archaic, more tragic model of the Emigrée, the Wanderer walking the earth, and has created a new model in a political modern mood: the world of the postwar Immigrant, the temporary Refugee, the ex-student.


The novel offers the two just mentioned, different perspectives, that is two different times and places where two scenarios are played: one before the Second World war and one after, one in England and one in Sudan. The first has the universal tragic modality; in the second, the world of the narrator of the story and that of the author conflate: modern times.
This year I decided to concentrate on the work of a South African friend, an author of stories and plays, a theatre director, translator etc. Anthony Akerman had lived for 17 years in the Netherlands in a self-chosen political exile and returned in 1992, when the racist regime in S.A had fallen.

Rereading his first drama texts from between 1983 and 1995, I was struck by the surprising analogy with the Sudanese novel. What Tayeb Salih did in one book, offering two models of exile-literature, Akerman worked out in two plays: *A Man out of the Country* and *Dark Outsider*. The first is a text on the life of a South-African refugee at the end of the 70ties, adapting and surviving in his guest land, the second is a drama around the South African poet Roy Campbell, a dark wild soul living in the London of the Bloomsbury times, of the Woolfs, Vita and Harold etc. etc., and later in Portugal.

Both African writers, the black Sudanese and the white South African reflect (on) the process of entanglement of male sexual identity, African black and white machismo and stereotyping, and a fundamental insecurity to live where African soil did not support and carried their ‘maleness’ any more.

I would like to explore these analogies in the re-construction of Africa as ‘home’, as ‘homeland’ and its meaning for both black and white male identities in Diaspora. I will focus first on the work of Akerman.

Like him while working on *Dark Outsider*, I will keep in mind the remark of Michael Hastings: *In theatre all biography is fiction, and some fiction is autobiography*. Fiction, fact and biography stand in a fluid relation.

1. **The Lost paradise**

I met Anthony Akerman, born in South-Africa in 1949, in the beginning of the 1980ties in Amsterdam where he lived and worked mostly as a theatre director. In his self-chosen exile, he suffered nevertheless from a deep sense of loss that focused on the loss of home, of Africa.

In one of his stories, written after a visit to the borders – not to be tress-passed of his motherland (*The Road to Maun*) he mentions the description by Doris Lessing of the pull that Africa exerts on the exile as an old fever, always latent in the blood or an old wound throbbing in the bones as the air changes.
“I never got Africa out of my blood and after so many years it resurfaced like a severe bout of Malaria”: a homesickness trying to be assuaged by food and music and ‘Africa-ness’ in his home from home. That was in 1985.

He came back to Amsterdam and went on writing and directing his own plays: the anti-military, anti-racist *Somewhere on the border* (1983)\(^6\) and *A Man out of the Country* (1989), and directed most of the plays of Athol Fugard and new plays often connected with South African themes.

A friend, first through the theatre, we discussed his typical Anglo-Saxon style of writing and directing, which in Dutch theatre developments then was considered traditional and rather old-fashioned. Strongly under the influence of an international Avant-garde that started in the US, terms like postmodernism and deconstruction were slowly introduced in our critical work, the classics were turned inside out breaking story, characters, and time and space.

His irritation about these phenomena went deep. Educated in solid forms of realism, the dispersion of the story in favor of ungraspable identity-constructions was unacceptable. He accused us, critics and theatre makers, of a lack of seriousness both in art and life. A message not clear was no message at all.

I wondered and pondered about this abhorrence of changing theatre-forms, which I myself considered fascinating, valid and refreshing. At a certain point, I thought that his rejection went deeper than a discussion about what kind of theatre functioned best on a political level. For myself, and Anthony, forgive me my arrogance, I formulated his resistance like this: not being able to part from a particular form and style since it would oust and betray his frame of thinking, cultural memories and, in a way, his mixed but overwhelmingly South-African-English cultural and educational heritage. Lose this, lose all, or worse, betray the past, betray Africa.

Now, some twenty years later and, maybe, better educated myself, I would prefer to take refuge into more abstract psycho-analytical, Lacanian terms. I would like to emphasize a cultural dimension to the concept of the Symbolic Order, the world of cultural fixed symbolization and representation, (Akerman’s educational heritage) and connect the term with those of the ‘cultural screen’ (what can be seen and said, culturally speaking) and the ‘cultural imaginary’, the imaginary unconsciousness that frames self-image and image as a base of the first steps in self-recognition and a feeling of identity.
It is this underlying Imaginary Order, which binds everybody in the motherly realm of symbiosis and desire, that Julia Kristeva connects with the Platonian chora as an undefined space of undetermined articulations.

Returning to Africa after more than ten years Akerman writes: ‘It was healing to walk through a familiar world. It was my world. I belonged. I marveled at what I had always taken for granted. I vowed I would never do so again. I luxuriated in familiar smells, sensations, sounds and colors. Every night I went to locate the Southern Cross in my sky.’ (Maun,3)

But literally standing on the borders of his motherland, South Africa becomes blurred and seems to disappear: ‘On the other side of the fence the bush feld looked just the same as it did on the Botswana side of the border. It was curiously disconcerting. I’d expected to feel something extraordinary. I’d thought that my heart might miss a beat. I’d feared that I might do something reckless and dramatic. Nothing happened. We stood there in the immense stillness of empty places.’ (Maun,3)

The ‘lost paradise’ is always a delusion, argues Kristeva

**Identities and stereotypes**

Writing from a ‘position of damage’ of displacement, im/migrant authors widen and diffuse the generic boundaries of (auto) biography. Negotiating their own and their characters identities on the borderlands between immigrant, expatriate and citizen they have to deal with aspects such as race/ethnicity, history, biography, class, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, and Post-colonialism. And that in a double sense where the homeland and the guest land are different cultural and moral spaces.

Where the identity of author and/or of character is male, “the encounter between self and other offers the cultural primal scene of recognition and functions in two ways: as the recognition (or mis/recognition) of the other sex as well as of the other/foreign culture.” (Gerhard Neumann)

The strangeness of the woman becomes based in the differences of the two confronting cultures or with those interwoven.

When I gave my first article the title *East/West differences as War between the*
Sexes\(^8\), I was led to this statement not only by Tayeb Salih’s black male hero Mustafa Sa’eed in London, who sets out to liberate Africa from British domination with his penis, and conquers four women in a row. Also, a list of Sudanese writers up till the beginning of the 21th century, fit this model. Their heroes, seduced by ‘over-sexed’/ liberated western women in their new countries, leave in the end the strange land for Sudan and the girl back home.

The two migration drama’s of Akerman seem to take also the ‘love-interest’, he speaks about a ‘love story’ for Mary and Roy Campbell, as the center of his narration. As in true life, I suppose, the female characters are in essence the foreign country, just by being not from Africa. They are born-betrayers, so to say.

In *A Man out of the Country*, the girl-friend Maria betrays her lover Tristan and refuses to accept the daily-life Africania including his South-African friends.

Mary in *Dark Outsider* is not only very English, but also bi-sexual, she starts a relationship with Vita Sackville-West.

In her excellent introduction to the publication of Akerman’s plays in 2000, Lesly Marx writes about the close ties between sexual and artistic impotence and the loss of identity in exile.

“As in Tristan, in *a Man out of the Country*, Roy’s (Campbell) masculinity is profoundly tied to his sense of belonging to South Africa. Exile is pervasively felt as a kind of death in *Dark Outsider*, heralded most obviously by the title.

Bereft of his homeland, married to a woman who cannot live in South Africa, he is in constant danger of being artistically dispossessed, resorting to vitriolic, if acute, epigrams against his perceived enemies”\(^9\)

Vitriolic epigrams, even violence, drunkeness and a writers blocks…they are too weak a shadow of this hunting youth:

At an exclusive dinner-party in Sevenoaks, Roy Campbell remembers:

“At the age of eleven I could bring down a charging buck with a single shot and knew most of the answers in the bush. When I was last out in Natal a drive was arranged of those big Javan deer, about the size of a waterbuck. (...) I took a stick from one of the beaters and leaped into the stream to intercept. I came straight at him and unhooked the dog off his horn. He dived at me and caught me by the
armpit in the fork of his horn while I crashed him over the hump with my stick (…)

The Native beaters and Umnugenzi all stood round in a circle and watched this.

Then they composed a song about it on the spot.”

Roy sings a praise-song in Zulu and performs a Zulu dance

“I grew up among the Zulu’s. They are a race of aristocrats, who were conquered by a nation of grocers. The Zulu’s have only one art- conversation. But their conversation is always worth listening to.” (p. 65)

Akerman gives much attention to this ‘masquerade’ as the stereotypical South African. In a paper, presented in 2002 at the University of Durban-Westville, he speaks about his first play as a ‘dramatic essay on the white male psyche’ and continues his argument in speaking about Campbell’s character as wearing a mask that kept slipping: “Among colonials he was an European and among Europeans a colonial: among cowboys a poet and among poets a cowboy”. (David Wright).

One of the masks was that of “a swaggering South African He-man (…) representing some of the worst attributes of the South African male ethos in general: intolerant, bigoted, violent, anti-intellectual, regarding artistic inclinations as prima facie evidence of homosexual tendencies”.10

There is a rather fascinating coincidence between Roy Campbell’s performance, repeating the stereotype of the South African white male and the mimicry of Tayeb Salih’s black hero Mustafa Sa’eed who performs ‘the beast in the jungle’ calling himself a yes/no Othello.(Black is African is Sudan)

Both the celebrated S.A. poet and the brilliant student from Sudan, now teaching in London, are living in the England of between the wars; both characters deal with the humiliation by an (upper-) class society, progressive and promiscuous while exploring different sexualities. And racist.

Or how would you call this:

“Dada fought in the South African war. Quite frankly it escapes me why anyone should want South Africa “, says Vita.
“Unless you were born there”, answers Roy.

And:

“As we drank tea, she asked about my home. I related to her fabricated stories about deserts and golden sands and jungles where nonexistent animals called out to one another. (...) There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes to a naked primitive creature, a spear in one hand, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles.

What race are you, African or Asian? she asked.

I’ am like Othello- Arab-African. (...) My face is Arab like the desert of the Empty Quarter, while my head is African and teems with a mischievous childishness “. (Salih, 38)

“An African Giant in the English scene”, writes the Sudanese author, and in a form of excessive mimicry the character of Mustafa Sa’eed occupies an aggressive and transgressive position in his novel. When ‘mimicry’ as a concept of Indian scholar Homi Bhabha, aims at a “copying of the colonizing culture, behavior, manners and values by the colonized, containing both mockery and a certain ‘menace’, a blurred copy, then it must be clear that this black character mimics and plays at the same time with the expectations and values about the black man in a white and colonizing culture.

Migration is a two way traffic. The voyage into ‘otherness’ does not offer the traveler a feeling of authenticity and individuality. Experiencing a deep sense of un-belonging and uprooted-ness he/she runs the constant risk of being turned into his/her own cliche and stereotype. On the other hand, the stereotype seems to offer a moment of ‘real’ identity, be it a hysterical over-identification with a socially prescribed role, as Freud described it.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do, writes Akerman in a short story.

Motherland, home

“Immigrant writing crucially overlaps with postcolonial literature in the spatial negotiation of “home” and belonging, either in terms of a loss, a quest, or a desire” writes Heike Paul in her Mapping Migration, 20
When we look at the three texts under view we can differentiate between several scripts.

1. **The script of loss.** What is remarkable in Akerman’s play about his period living in Holland (*A Man out of the Country*) is the way how the character Tristan represses his ‘Africa’ with exception of some token symbols, and his denial of the possibility to go home.

   Africa is in his friends, Dean and Chris, on their way back. Akerman describes them as ‘the real south African white sort’, fed up with British-ness. They represent his youth, his love and hate at the same time. Africa is also in Samsom, the black fugitive: his Africa is black in the many stories of white suppression.

   With a one way permit on his way out, he started looking for a new country and learned the languages so that he could speak / in freedom. But nobody spoke with him, yet. Tristan occupies the in-between position: the professional South African Exile, trying to write, desperately, the Great South African Novel.

2. **The script of the quest**

   The *Season of Migration to the North* offers the continuity of two scripts folded into one. The nameless narrator having just returned from studying in Great Britain, meets stranger Mustafa Sa’eed who has settled in his village on the Nile. He starts to tell his story to the narrator, and it is the narrator who reconstructs it after Mustafa Sa’eed has disappeared in the Nile. The past of wonder-boy Sa’eed in England, his sexual adventures, the killing of his wife, his punishment and redemption, living now in the small village describes in a way the heroic and romantic tale of earlier times.

   The quest of the narrator is a more recent one.

   Returning home confronts him not only with the winds, sounds, smells, the sun, the heat and the warmth of his family “as if a piece of ice was melting” but also with ‘the prison-house’ of the rural traditions going back to eternity.

   Not accepted as a ‘intellectual’, doing some ‘useless’ work in Khartoum, he becomes involved in a love-drama with Hosna, Sa’eeds Sudanese wife.

   Not being able to make a decision there is bloody murder again, hushed up by the village. What is *Home*? Less of a paradise, more a decision to live.
3. **The script of desire**

It becomes clear that being a migrant, being in the in-between situation, is something different from a has-been traveler. When the eventful and often tragic life-line has ended, the story can be interpreted and re-constructed in the direction of *telos*, of making sense. But the open-ended story of the migrant is another one, as we can see in the texts of Akerman and Tayeb Salih. Compared with the apparent passionate hero, the position of migrant himself (the characters of Tristan and the Narrator), is an ambiguous and empty one.

In a way, he is the double of the hero (Roy Campbell and Mustafa Sa’eed) but also his shadow. Mirroring each other, they offer a form of identification that is both fulfilling and false. Fulfilling because the identification fills the empty space of the in-between, the recognition of a past as presence and the acceptance of loss. False, because the heroic stories are re/constructed, written out of lack and desire, as a projection of feelings greater than the daily life stories, the possibilities of experience of the migrants themselves.

Tayeb Saleh published his novel in English, only some years before Anthony Akerman arrived in London.

As authors and artists, they developed comparable strategies in dealing with the cruelties of migration, its desperation and deep sadness.

Through Salih, I could read the plays of my old friend Akerman, in a more connected and fruitful way. Or so I hope.

*Exiled like you and severed from my race*  
*By the cold ocean of my own disdain*  
*Do I not freeze in such a wintry space*  
*Do I not travel through a storm as vast*  
*And rise at times, victorious from the main,*  
*To fly the sunrise at my shattered mast*  
Roy Campbell (Tristan da Cunha) p.2
Notes

3. Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, Penquinbooks, 1969
5. Anthony Akerman, ‘The Road to Maun’, unpublished manuscript
8. Mieke Kolk, Sha’za Mustafa: ‘East/West Differences as War between the Sexes, an introduction’, and Mieke Kolk, ‘Re-inventing Identities; Season of Migration travels to Theatre in the North’, in Mieke Kolk (ed) *Rituals and Ceremonies in Sudan; From Cultural heritage to Theater*, Amsterdam, 2006
9. Akerman, 2000, XVII
10. idem, 4