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Cultural Locale and Social Realities in South African *Zoo City*

Abstract

The query on the landscape of the society brings out the investigation of social setup and the cultural dilemma that focuses the representation of locale in which the living and non-living beings on earth survives. Locale defines the region with their language or the cultural contexts of the people that investigates the custom, knowledge, belief of the people in the society. In order to study the locale of the society through literature, it is the need of the researcher to find out the variations of the spaces, i.e., the urban and the rural space of the society. The study of the locale in the South African fiction examines the illustration of urban space through the novel of Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010). As a genre of science fiction in South African literature, this novel explores the social realities and cultural locale of the present-day Johannesburg city that exposes the inhabitants of the Africans' and the exposure of the African urbanism by showing the social setup of the metropolitan city, the life-style of the migrant worker and illegal immigrant of the South African society.

The habitation of the people in the society depicts the survival of the living and non-living being on earth through the screening of the social setup and the cultural locale of the society. In the study of the wide scope on the social realities of the people in the society, it is the essential role of the researcher to understand and exhibit the locale of the society through

which they are surrounded by and that defines the role of human in the cultural widespread of the society. The social realities and the cultural locale of the people are identified through the social norms, cultural values, the socio-economic conditions, and the description of the urban and rural space of the environment, where one survives.

It is defined through the article “Everyday Regionalizations” by Benno Werlen the definition of 'locale' is stated as, a spatial context or setting for action comprised of material elements as well as sets of social norms and culturally shared values, to be understood as a material, socioeconomic, and socio-cultural constellation of action with inter-subjective shared meaning contents. Therefore, it is an action related concept that cannot be turned into an objective fact or generalized as social category, having the same meaning for members of a society (in a certain region).

In order to find out the various social setup of the metropolitan city as well as the life-style of the people, it is through the representation of the locale, the presence of socio-economic strategies and the cultural values are examined.

Werlen (2009), locales have five main effects as,

Locales can have effect on other people's life-paths ... Locales provide the arena within which interaction with other people takes place; thus locales are the sites where class conflicts take place and the main context in which experience about the world is gathered and common awareness engendered... Locales provide the activity structure of everyday routine... Locales are the major sites for the processes of socialization, from birth to death; they represent places in which collective modes of behavior are learned (5).

This paper focuses the understanding of the South African society through the science fiction of Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City*, which is published in 2010. As a 'popular' novel, it depicts the urban space of the South African society through the present-day city of

Johannesburg. Cheryl Stobie (2012) explores its narrative potential, reading it as a critical dystopian novel that offers up an alternative view of the Johannesburg. Henriette Roos (2011) meanwhile is concerned with the way in which the novel may be seen to raise environmental issues.

Beukes' *Zoo City*, the depiction of the theme of 'animalled' represented as 'aposymbiots', otherwise known as 'zoos', which is present near the suburb area of Hillbrow. Robinson (2006) identifies the problem in the "locatedness of the original concept of modernity and the hegemonic position of Western urban experiences" (39).

In the case of Beukes' *Zoo City*, the urbanscapes of Johannesburg with which readers are presented share a strong resemblance with those that exist in reality. The Hillbrow of Beukes' imagining is not so very different in its social and economic makeup to a current-day Hillbrow. The scene wherein Zinzi purchases a loose cigarette from a Zimbabwean vendor is just one such example as these sort of informal street traders are typical in the South African urban landscape particularly in areas such as Hillbrow. Others such as the nightclub-scenes and the gated communities in the novel also comprise those urbanscapes with which a South African reader would be familiar.

As Wendy B. Faris notes, "[r]ealistic descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in" (168). However, the most obvious departure from this otherwise realistic depiction lies in the animal familiars that certain characters are forced to bear as part of their life's sentence for various transgressions. Thus, while the novel is not unrealistic or totally fantastical in its portrayal of the city of Johannesburg, it nonetheless contains that "'irreducible element' of magic" that Faris maintains is so prevalent in magical realist fictions. Because of this 'irreducible element of magic', "magical things 'really' do happen" in the magical realist text (Faris165).

The urban setting of the Johannesburg city in *Zoo City* exhibits the viewpoints of metropolitan city's margins that enhance the subjective role of the inhabitant people of Johannesburg. In fact, as Jessica Dickson asserts,

...so central is city-ness in Beukes's novel, offering an arresting and compelling angle of attention to Johannesburg and the subjectivities of its inhabitants, that...it warrants consideration within the growing canon of works on African urbanism (67).

Johannesburg is indeed a character in its own right in this text; throughout *Zoo City*, Beukes gestures to various characteristic parts of the metropolis as she sculpts her city-narrative into Gothic form. She opens the novel, for example, by exposing her protagonist to "light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seep[ing] across Johannesburg's skyline," waking her as this glarebounces off Ponte Tower and across her bed (1 - 3).

Johannesburg is yet to enforce such totalitarian tactics, but the 'animalled' are nonetheless shunned "to the edges of society" (254) and consequently forced to live in the city's most derelict and dangerous areas – namely *Zoo City*, the name given to the suburb of Hillbrow to signify its zoo inhabitants.

Zinzi lurches twice upon this mining account amid her look for the Radebe twins. She initially stands up to the remains of Johannesburg's starting points after she is removed from one of the city's tempest water depletes and "cleans up kilometers away" from where she started (187). Here, Zinzi experiences a piece of the metropole that she has never observed: dislike I'm the world expert on Joburg's tempest channels, however I've been down sufficiently here occasions searching for lost things to know the fundamental lie of the land. This is all new. The passages are a scramble of pitch-dark termite gaps, some of them narrowing without end to nothing, similar to whoever was burrowing them got exhausted and

strayed. The first gold-diggings perhaps, when Johannesburg was still only a pack of bushy miners scrabbling in the soil (188).

Along these lines, Zinzi comes to discover that the concealed profundities underneath the city house overlooked things as well as inert accounts too; a finding that renders interesting her past comprehension of Johannesburg's underground as she comes to think about the surrendered and inconspicuous mining structures that compensation tribute to the mining establishments of the city. This history is intensely felt when Zinzi goes to Johannesburg's edges, "south, to where the last of the mine dumps are – sulphur-coloured artificial hills, the ravages of weather and reprocessing, shored up with scrubby grass and eucalyptus trees" (255).

Here, Zinzi finds the assortment of one of Huron's unfortunate casualties, whose cadaver lies discarded between the dumps that mark Johannesburg's erosive mining past, just as its self-wasteful present: on the grounds that these "ugly valleys have been gouged out and trucked away by the ton to sift out the last scraps of gold the mining companies missed the first time round" Zinzi thinks that "[m]aybe it's appropriate that eGoli, place of Gold, should be self cannibalising" (255). We experience in this scene, at that point, a converging of the accounts of the past with those of the present – as Zinzi surfaces from the dumps the collections of the individuals who are devoured and devastated by the social, material and recorded structures that describe the City of Gold. This finding is made conceivable by Zinzi's capacity to "find lost things" (5) and is in this way one that serves to unpeel from Johannesburg its alluring outside, as Zinzi conjures the flipside of the city by rendering unmistakable the overlooked stories that lie underneath the city's glossy surface.

Zoo City is covered with such locales "under construction" – destinations in which the frequenting of the past is confined in unmistakably more idealistic terms than the ones we experience in Beukes' depiction of Huron's vile home. One of the more upscale spots that

Zinzi goes to visit, for instance, is Johannesburg's Rand Club: portrayed by Zinzi as a relic of the city's "Wild West Days, when it was frequented by Cecil John Rhodes and other colonial slumlords"(33). Zinzi utilizes this urban tribute to domain and extraction to conclude one of the online tricks that she drafts as methods for satisfying her medication obligations to Vuyo, her previous street pharmacist. This specific trick includes an American couple who Zinzi has prevailing with regards to making trust that they will benefit from monetarily helping the displaced person from Côte D'Ivoire that she has been acting like.

In this manner, through the execution of this trick, the Rand Club's pioneer history is recovered and changed – as people, for example, Zinzi and Vuyo, who might truly have been prohibited from the club, enter and re-outline this site without anyone else terms and as indicated by their necessities, for this situation, to finish another type of skullduggery empowered by the liquid domain of the internet. Zinzi visits numerous other such spaces of urban ease – like "Makhaza's Place", which serves as the local hang-out for Johannesburg's zoo citizens. Here, the city's past forms part of the creation of new urban locales. Situated on the second floor of "what used to be a shopping arcade back when this part of town was cosmopolitan central", Mak's Place is now frequented by "the squatters' who have made Hillbrow their home, who drink locally brewed beer whilst being surrounded by the remnants of the inner-city's "Former Life", which finds expression in a variety of old mannequins that clutter the bar still dressed in their original clothing: a male manikin wears, for instance, a pair of "sharp-pressed corduroy pants, a lime sweater vest and a fedora" while a female figure wears a "moth-eaten white mini-dress and go-go boots", both figures "arrested in some forlorn pose of retro cool" (43).

We encounter this idea similarly evoked by Mbembe in his work on Johannesburg: "in the wake of the collapse of apartheid", he writes, "the collage of fragments of the former city is opening up a space for experiences of displacement, substitution, and condensation,

none of which is purely and simply a repetition of a repressed past” (Mbembe38).Following Mbembe, instead of holding the city ransom to its history and bound to its eternal re-enactment, the ruins of the past are serving as the raw materials through which Johannesburg is looking to imagine itself anew – “Johannesburg is nowadays a metropolis increasingly forced to construct itself out of heterogeneous fragments and fortuitous juxtapositions of images, memories, citations, and allusions drawn from its splintered histories” (59).

Zoo City draws on an arsenal of Gothic machinery to evoke Johannesburg as a compositional city – that is, as a city comprised of an interplay between its sites of hope and despair, its surface and underground parts, as well as between its past and present. My intention in this chapter was to illustrate how *Zoo City*’s turn to Gothic results in the formation of complex and multi-webbed visions of contemporary Johannesburg. In this vein, Gothic in *Zoo City* proved particularly generative because it allowed for reflection on the city as a urban-centre constituted in and by multiplicity; as a place made up ‘heterogeneous fragments and fortuitous juxtapositions of images, memories, citations, and allusions’ and ‘of different layers of historical time superimposed upon one another’ (Mbembe, 59- 64).

The research work found the significance of the city of Johannesburg through Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City* that portrays of the protagonist Zinzi’s past, who faces the social commandments pass towards the culturally collided people. *Zoo City*’sunification of Zinzi’s past and the advent of her spam records as well as the imprisonment of Zinzi through the concept of ‘animalled’ highlights the facts of the social norms and the cultural values of the urban society that haunts and hangouts the remembrance of the past, occurrences of the present and restraints the possibilities through the ability of foreseeing the future society.

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