

Inner Conflicts and Turmoil within the Self in Arthur Nortje's

Poetry

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Abstract

Many of Arthur Nortje's poems are vivid portrayals of the inner conflicts and turmoil, which he had to endure during various phases of his life. Through his poems Nortje is able to illustrate how the inner conflicts and turmoil in his psyche are created by the oppressive apartheid system, his identity as a Coloured (mixed race), his turbulent relationship with his loved one, his experiences in exile and his alcohol and drug addiction. The conflict within the self, threaten to overwhelm him to such an extent, that he virtually teeters on the brink of mental instability. It is thus evident that his poems depict his traumatic inner conflicts, continuous struggle with the self and his on-going battle to come to terms with the reality of his existence as the marginalised other. It is with these concerns in mind that this article aims to demonstrate how and to what extent the inner conflicts and turmoil within the self are highlighted in his collection of poems in *Anatomy of Dark*.

Introduction

In an analysis of Arthur Nortje's poems in *Anatomy of Dark*, it becomes abundantly clear that his search for happiness in his life is constantly being frustrated. Most of the poems in this anthology highlight his extremely lonely and introverted existence in South Africa, England and Canada. There is, inherent in his poems, an inner yearning in search of meaning to his existence as he struggles to come to terms with the effects of his hybridity, the apartheid system and thwarted love on his life. The poems, in effect, provide a kind of autobiographical account of his psychological state during periods of transition which McLuckie and Tyner (2004) describe as the narrative contours in his life. The snippets into his private life

ultimately provide one with a better understanding of the reasons for his drug dependency and alcohol abuse and his suicide.

Inner Turmoil and conflict

Nortje is clearly a highly disturbed man who is ostracised by society, the oppressive apartheid system and by his ex-lover who enriched his life and made it meaningful. Countless poems highlight his dejection after his ex-lover decides to break off their relationship and opts to marry a more prosperous Canadian instead. Throughout his life, Nortje is never really able to erase her from his memory, in spite of her rejection of him. Consequently, in numerous poems, there is a yearning for 'lost love' and sometimes a glimmer of hope that they would be reconciled some- day. Even though he tries to blot her out of his memory he is unable to do so, as she appears persistently in his hallucinations and his dreams which drive him to the brink of insanity at times. In the poem 'Blow-by-Blow Account' (64) for example, Nortje (2000) describes her control over him as follows:

A hundred times I wipe you out
and still you would return this way,
coming with the husk of night
and fading like at dawn the moon.

It is evident from the poem that he encounters major problems in his attempts to obliterate her from his memory as she 'still would return this way'. The memories of his intimate relationship with his loved one are so intense, that they deprive him of sleep and drive him to insomnia.

His obsession with his loved one and the fond memories that he has of her are so embedded in his psyche, that he becomes rooted in the past. This fixation with the 'lost love' impacts negatively on his existence and restricts him from making headway in his life, on both an emotional and material level. His inability to function without her is highlighted in poems such as 'Deliberation', 'Hangover', 'Separation', 'Absence', 'Poem in Absence', 'Catharsis' and the 'Near Mad', amongst others. His loved one features prominently in many of his

poems in one way or another and his absolute dedication and commitment to her are encapsulated by the following two lines from ‘Catharsis’:

...your image is the one thing real,
to you is my whole being given. (131)

The fact that he is able to give his ‘whole being’ to her unconditionally, although she has left him, elucidates his close attachment to her, even if she is only a vision in his subconscious mind. It is evident that Nortje is a deeply disturbed man, as he cannot free himself from the shackles of the past and has actually fashioned an image of his beloved (Joan) in his psyche that haunts him, drives him to alcohol and drugs and prevents him from sleeping. This inner turmoil and the conflict within the self eventually leads to insomnia which transforms him into a nervous wreck, so that whatever ‘consolation comes/drips away as bitterness’ (399). In ‘All Hungers Pass Away’ (398-399) the second last poem in his anthology *Anatomy of Dark*, it is evident that as a result of his despair and absolute loneliness and dejection, he has become despondent with his troubled life on earth and has an inherent desire to free himself from the unrelenting torment. This is demonstrated most aptly in the following manner in ‘All Hungers Pass Away’.

... Face-down
I lie, thin arms folded, half-aware
Of skin that tightens over pelvis.
Pathetic, this, the dark posture. (399)

The image of Nortje in this poem presents a rather abject figure of a man who has lost all faith and hope in the world. The posture, which he assumes in this poem, is one associated with death as demonstrated by his reference to the ‘dark posture’ in the last line. The inner turmoil and conflict, which he has had to endure, especially with the departure of his beloved from his life, has reduced him to the pathetic figure that he describes in these lines. Since he presents an image of himself as someone waiting to die, it is not surprising that he eventually commits suicide to free himself from his stifling existence, which threatens to suffocate his

very being. In his quest to find relief from the tormenting earthly experiences, his 'disturbed self' finds consolation in drugs which leads him to relinquish all previous attachments to people and places.

In many of Nortje's poems, darkness and loneliness feature prominently. The darkness does not only refer to his hybridity as a non-White having to navigate his life in apartheid South Africa, but also symbolises the 'darkness' in his psyche, which threaten to overwhelm him at times. Furthermore, the darkness associated with night, signifies harrowing and tormenting experiences as he is unable to sleep and wanders around aimlessly in search of some consolation. Darkness also becomes synonymous with the devil and hell as highlighted in his later poems. Whilst in 'Notes from the Middle of the Night' (358), he has to answer to the 'seven devils', in 'Nightly' (349-350), the 'thirteen satans strum mutinous dissonances' on his 'lifeline' and in 'The Near-Mad' (207-208) he is a 'hair's-breadth from the edge of hell'. All these references to Satan and hell highlight his hopeless plight and serve to accentuate his mental instability, which is so vividly alluded to in the above-mentioned poems. The poem 'Nightly' (349) is of particular relevance in this regard, since it clearly demonstrates the mental and psychological torture that he has to endure as a consequence of his failed relationship, amongst others. An in depth analysis of the poem illustrates explicitly that he has been reduced to a schizophrenic as he imagines that he is being chased by ghosts and tormented by devils. It is only when dawn arrives that the 'devils flee their stations / and the birds start to wake the universe'. The aforementioned poem is particularly disturbing because it provides visual insights into the workings of the schizophrenic's mind. The mental turmoil and inner conflicts associated with the dark forces or the dark side of his existence are aptly portrayed in the following lines from 'Nightly':

... and my pulse jump fifty feet at the sound in the cellar,
the tentacles of resting hands recoil and the clenched teeth
hold back a scream of terror in the ghost-infested midnight
when there is only space and me. (349)

The image portrayed in these lines is of a man who is in the process of undergoing such extreme mental and psychological anguish, that he recoils in fear. The persistent hallucinations, replete with some of the most gory and gruesome images of death and destruction, seem to overpower him and consume his very existence. Whereas the images of his beloved previously dominated his thoughts, at this later stage in his life, just before he commits suicide, images associated with death such as hell and Satan tend to predominate. It is evident that he is embroiled in a tussle between good and evil, but due to his mental instability, he is unable to differentiate between right and wrong and becomes predisposed to consuming large amounts of drugs to free himself from the ‘devils’, which threaten to destroy the very fabric of his being. At these, moments as so aptly described by Dameron (1976:161), Nortje’s world is a bleak and excruciatingly painful one.

His hallucinations could also be attributed to the excessive drugs, which he consumed on a regular basis, in a quest to free himself from memories of his ex-lover. In ‘Notes from the Middle of the Night’ (358-359), it becomes clear that he is losing complete control of his mental stability since his hallucinations take on outrageous proportions, as depicted so effectively, in the following lines:

... the brain that reeks with guilt feelings
hearing a peripatetic devil
in the cooling of a floorboards or a cat’s tread
demoniacal laughter in a dog’s bark
instant sorrow of an icebox starting up
the cold motor jerking juice for its circuit
out of my bloodstream, freezing me to the spot. (359)

These lines clearly highlight the plight of the schizophrenic during his moments of intense psychological anguish, when the sound of a cat could represent an approaching devil or a dog’s bark could signify the devil laughing at him. Furthermore, the icebox draws juice out of his ‘bloodstream’ thereby reducing him to a frozen object. It is evident that the inner turmoil and conflict is driving him to insanity. In reflecting on his mental instability Dameron

(1976:161) expresses the view that the delusions that he speaks of represent, at least in part, the bitter disappointments and utter loneliness of life.

Furthermore in both 'Nightly' (349-350) and 'Notes from the Middle of the Night' (358-359) he describes how his 'guilt feelings', which are embedded in his subconscious mind, have contributed significantly to his mental instability. His guilt feelings could be attributed to his excessive alcohol and drug dependency, his womanising and sex and his luxurious life in the company of 'rich women', 'Soho prostitutes' and 'homosexuals'. The vivid elucidations of the inner conflicts within the self in the aforementioned poems, enables one to acquire a better understanding of how feelings of guilt have a detrimental effect on consciousness.

Nortje is fully aware of his shortcomings in life and exposes these quite blatantly and acquiescently in his poems. In 'Love of Perversity' (371) for example, he admits that he has committed many sins and that his actions drive him to lunacy at times. The following lines clearly illustrate the inner turmoil and dilemma which confronts him:

Love of perversity, rage and vice,
unknown to all who live complacently,
drive me to lunacy, compel confession
I am loathe to make were I at Peter's Gate. (371)

He is unashamedly honest in his admission that he would find it difficult to confess to Peter (presumably in Heaven) about all the insalubrious practices that he was engaged in during his time on earth. He is clearly pessimistic about any hope of rehabilitation or the improvement of his wayward existence, because as he contends later in the same poem that even in heaven 'I would lurch in drunkenness and hate/committing torturous blasphemies' (371). It is evident that Nortje has no pretensions about who he is, and about the sins that he has committed thus far. This process of self-reprisal or self-loathing, which features prominently in a number of his poems, contributes to the further disintegration of the self, thereby leading to the development of a negative self-concept.

Through the medium of his poems Nortje tries to present as honest a picture of himself as possible, but in many instances resorts to a process of self-loathing or self-castigation to the detriment of the self. In a number of poems, he refers to himself as a drunkard without a future. Whilst at 'Twelve in the Morning' (147) for example, he describes himself as 'this beer drunkard ... with his satchel', in 'My Vacant Self' (123) he refers to himself as the 'dark drunk heart'. This representation of the self as an object of sheer hopelessness and helplessness further contributes to the inner conflicts and turmoil, thereby serving to highlight the futility of his existence. He is engaged in a quest to find meaning for his existence, but is only confronted with emptiness, despair and loneliness because he is unable to free himself from the demons of the past which torment him. This denigration of the self as being reprehensible and without purpose, could have weighed heavily on his psyche and could have contributed to his suicide. It is ironic; however, that the very act of writing these poems should have been therapeutic as he created a space to bare his inner feelings, concerns and mental anguish, but it actually had the inverse effect on him. The self-derision and an absence of optimism which characterise a number of his poems, highlights his morbidity and in so doing alienate him from the very process of writing.

Nortje's hybridity has a significant influence on his perceptions of himself which further contributes to the conflicts within his psyche. In 'Dogsbody Half-Breed' (344), he highlights his inferiority as a Coloured in White South Africa, who has to use the 'last ounce' of his energy for the 'master of his salt' (the White man). He is saddened by the manner in which whites wield power in the country and the atrocities which they perpetrate on a daily basis against the oppressed masses. He comes to the stark realisation that as a 'hybrid' he will always be in the middle to serve as a buffer for the ruling white elite. Since he is a mixture of both white and black, he is devoid of a true identity and struggles to come to terms with this hybridity which serves to stifle his existence. His confused identity is encapsulated effectively in the last three lines of the poem as follows:

... and I hybrid, after Mendel
growing between the wire and the wall,
being dogsbody, being me, buffer you still.

He comes to the realisation that he has to serve as a buffer between whites and blacks in the country as he is a combination of both races. Fawed (2000) contends that Coloureds are occupants of an interstitial middle that cannot be expanded, transformed or appropriated, except for political expediency. However, he (Nortje) is absolutely discontented with this role, because he realises that he is being deprived of his individuality since he is reduced to a mere 'cog in a machine'. Whilst the wire on the one hand could symbolise the townships with their rusted wire fences, the walls are indicative of the complete privacy of the white man's world. Dameron (1976:158) suggests that the poet sees himself as a buffer who has absorbed the abrasions that the two surfaces cause as they rub against each other. This implies that since he is in the middle, he will always be bruised by these experiences.

The irony is that although he owes his very existence to the combination of white and black, he is accepted by neither and consequently is forced to serve as a buffer between the two worlds and thereby denied of an identity. Nortje's hybridity, which is a very contentious issue in his life, leads to further conflicts within his psyche as he struggles to come to terms with the notion of 'Colouredness' in white apartheid South Africa.

In 'Hangover' (75) this hybridity takes on a more farcical yet disturbing dimension, especially the last stanza, when he tries to come to terms with his identity as a Coloured by providing the scantiest of details. These details are highlighted as follows:

In case of foul play, imprisonment, death
By drinking (identity is
268430: KLEURLING
Pretoria register, male 1 960)
Informs Mrs Halford, Kromboom Road, Crawford
House without garden. No reward.

He realises as a Coloured he is reduced to a mere number in the population registration book and in this way is denied of an identity. The bare minimum of personal details, presented in

the poem, illustrate his awareness of his insignificance in the country of his birth and the deprivation he has to endure by the sheer act of being born. According to Fawed (2000) Nortje's writing provides the opportunity to plumb the coloured psyche, to examine the painful effects of the experience and to explore how colouredness cannot be overcome through deracination or exile.

The inner conflicts and turmoil which drive Nortje to excessive bouts of drinking, drugs and sex to escape from his tormented existence is embedded in the recesses of his subconscious mind. These accumulated experiences have contributed to the person that he has become. Thus, in order to acquire a more balanced perspective of the reasons for Nortje's psychological state, it is imperative to examine his experiences during his formative years in South Africa that could have contributed to his instability during a later stage in his life. According to Klopper (93), in this regard, Nortje's poems seem permanently alienated as he never experienced a sense of community or psychical wholeness. His characteristic themes, even in these early poems are associated with severance, absence and loss. The poem 'Casualty' (168-169) for example, provides brief insights into his relationship with both his mother and his beloved, who has subsequently left him. It is evident that his relationship with his mother was a rather formal one as she always tried to 'drown his questions' by hanging 'upon the steam / of samp in soldered pots / and pumped the primus stove'. In the same poem he also curses his ex-lover by expressing the hope that she would remain sterile and never conceive. In this poem he lambasts both his mother and his ex-lover for their coldness towards him and for deserting him when he needed them most. His disillusionment with women is intensified by his contention that he will die 'at war with women'. He is after all a casualty of the war, which both his mother and his ex-lover have waged against him and in an attempt to retaliate against women, in his poem he expresses his admiration for his father, a man whom he does not know, for raping virgins during times of war. It is thus evident that this past negative experiences with women could have contributed towards his inner conflict and turmoil which he has to endure in the most gruesome manner during the final stages of his life on earth.

Nortje is not only ostracised by his mother and ex-lover, but the entire apartheid system militates against him in the most discriminatory and inhumane fashion. In 'Exploration' (112) he is treated as a second class citizen in the land of his birth as he is unable to secure a job or even sit in the park for that matter. This continuous cycle of rejection weighs heavy on his psyche as well and provides us with a better understanding of his reasons for committing suicide. The rejection which he experiences on a daily basis in apartheid South Africa is highlighted in 'Thumbing a Lift' (18), and 'Exit Visa' (395). In the former poem he feels that he is not given a lift by people in smart cars (presumably whites) while thumbing a lift, because of his race, but is finally picked up by a cattle truck. This poem aims to highlight his deprived state in the country where he is reduced to an animal and denied of an identity. The implication is that he is only good enough for the cattle truck, but not for other modern, sophisticated and luxurious cars. In 'Exit Visa' (395) on the other hand, he is given his 'marching orders' and is forced to take his 'gypsy leave'. In this poem like in 'Exploration' (112), he is once again alienated from the country of his birth and like a gypsy is reduced to a non-entity without a country (*a persona non grata*). According to Fawed (2000) many elements of his exile abroad, alienation, the loss of love (and a loved one), the sense of not having a place in society, the futility of life, the drinking and drugs and the self-loathing were already manifest before he left South Africa.

In most of his poems alienation and loneliness, which seem to feature prominently, highlight his plight as the 'outsider' or marginalised other. Surely these experiences of alienation and marginalisation in the country of his birth must have impacted negatively on the decisions and actions which he took later on in his life.

His experiences of alienation, however, persist during his periods of exile in various countries. These experiences are fleshed out in greater detail in poems such as 'Foreign Body', 'In Exile' and 'Waiting'. In 'Foreign Body' he realises that he is a misfit in his new country and ponders over whether he will be accepted and to what extent he will be able to adapt to this strange environment after crossing 'ominously still waters'. Whilst in the poem 'In Exile' (171), he is patently aware of how his soul has decayed in exile, in 'Waiting' (243) his exile is associated with 'isolation' in a 'gutted warehouse at the back of pleasure streets'.

It is evident that the solitude and loneliness associated with these experiences in exile are too gruesome to contemplate and it is precisely this message which he aims to convey to the readers.

In many of his poems in *Anatomy of Dark* he appears to be trapped in, as he describes it, a 'mirror prison of the self'. Here the mirror is used as a metaphor of the entrapment of the self. In his quest to give meaning to his existence and to search for his identity, he is reduced to a 'troubled, lonely soul' that wanders around aimlessly without any direction in life. He strives relentlessly to maintain his balance, but the myriads of negative experiences which he was exposed to in his own country and as an exile weigh heavily on his psyche, ultimately contributing to his annihilation.

Conclusion

Nortje's self-castigation and continuous search for meaning to his existence lead to on-going bouts of inner conflict and turmoil which consequently leads to his self-destruction. The application of the psycho-analytic perspective to the analysis of his anthology of poems sheds light on the extent to which his experiences, during his formative years, could have contributed to his mental instability and the concomitant inner conflicts and turmoil which are significant features of his life whilst in exile. The article thus attempted to highlight the inner conflicts and turmoil within the self during the various periods in Nortje's rather short life on earth.

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