

‘THE TRUTH OF WOUNDED MEMORIES’:
THE QUESTION OF FORGIVENESS
IN SELECTED POST-APARTHEID TEXTS

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**2 December 1949 – 11 December
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**MARIJKE VAN VUUREN DIED TRAGICALLY AND
UNEXPECTEDLY WHILE SHE WAS PREPARING HER STUDY FOR
EXAMINATION.**

THIS THESIS WAS SUBMITTED POSTHUMOUSLY.

ABSTRACT

(WRITTEN BY DAVID MEDALIE)

Apartheid may have ended formally in 1994, but its legacy endures in many aspects of South African society and in the lives of individual South Africans. One of the difficulties which post-apartheid South Africa has had to contend with is the question of justice for the victims of atrocities committed during the apartheid years, and the possibility of redress. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) was established in order to formalise a process whereby victims could tell their stories and have their pain recognized, and to grant perpetrators an opportunity to provide information and acknowledge their wrongdoing.

This thesis explores the possibility of forgiveness in relation to the complexities of guilt and victimhood. Forgiveness is posited as a powerful and viable response, which has the potential to free both the perpetrators and the injured parties from the stranglehold of the past.

The thesis draws on studies which approach the question of forgiveness from a moral and philosophical perspective. These include the work of historians and theorists such as Simon Wiesenthal, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur. It then goes on to consider the ways in which a number of seminal post-apartheid texts, works of fiction and non-fiction, have dealt with forgiveness and its potential to heal. One chapter focuses specifically on texts which deal with the TRC and its aftermath, especially Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1999) and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night* (2003). This is followed by an analysis of three important novels which foreground and problematise the issue of forgiveness: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (published initially in Afrikaans in 2004, and then in an English translation in 2006), and Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2009).

Nelson Mandela will not go down in history for the 27 consecutive years that he lived imprisoned without ever renouncing his ideas. He will go down in history because he was able to draw from his soul all the poison accumulated by such an unjust punishment. He will be remembered for his generosity and for his wisdom at the time of an already uncontrollable victory, when he knew how to lead so brilliantly his self-sacrificing and heroic people, aware that the new South Africa would never be built on foundations of hatred and revenge.

Fidel Castro¹

¹ In Asmal, Kader, *et al* (eds). 2003. *Nelson Mandela: From Freedom to the Future*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball. xviii.



ILLUSTRATION

CONSTITUTION HILL: FORMER SOLITARY CONFINEMENT CELLS
FOR MEN, NOW LEFT OPEN.

Photocollage by Marli van Vuuren. 2009.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Bible translations:

KJV King James version.

NIV New International Version

RSV Revised Standard Version.

(All Biblical references are to the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.)

Books of the Bible:

Col: Colossians

Cor: Corinthians

Eph: Ephesians

Ez: Ezra

Gen: Genesis

Heb: Hebrews

Hos: Hosea

Is: Isaiah

Jer: Jeremiah

Jn: John

Lam: Lamentations

Lk: Luke

Mk: Mark

Mt: Matthew

Prov: proverbs

Ps: Psalms

Rom: Romans

Sam: Samuel

TRC Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

GLOSSARY

Hanslam A tame (pet) lamb

Plaasroman Farm novel