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Reflective Essay

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all.

(Richard Wright 1975: 77)

Introduction

Finding yourself in a hole, at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude, and discovering that only writing can save you. To be without the slightest subject for a book, the slightest idea for a book, is to find yourself, once again before a book. A vast emptiness. A possible book. Before nothing. Before something like living, naked writing, like something terrible, terrible to overcome.

(Marguerite Duras & Mark Polizzotti 1993: 7)

Writing is an intense process; the act of putting words in the mind into shape on paper can be both painful and pleasurable but most importantly also, for me, self reflective. An author writes from everything she knows, though she may or may not know it. This is substantiated by Flannery O' Connor: 'Anybody who has survived an average childhood has enough to write about for a dozen years' (in Smith 2004: 27). In this way writing for me has been about self-examination and consequentially self-discovery.

After completing the longest writing project I have ever attempted, I have made many discoveries about myself. The one year that it took to write this novel felt akin to a pilgrimage, when one undertakes a journey to far flung places where self reflection is absolutely necessary to develop spiritually or, in my case, as a writer.

My writing project began in an Honours creative writing class as small chapters that were planned as part of a larger novel. As a new writer, I was advised to 'write what I know' because it made for easier writing, and was argued to be more 'authentic'. As I come from a strong family orientated background, I decided to write about family and when I looked for inspiration for characters, I found my rather eccentric aunt waiting to be put into words. Keeping with my resolve to write what I know, the story began to revolve around women (I have three sisters and my mother had seven sisters). In the novel, the women are mothers and daughters with differing personalities. My small chapters were welcomed in class and I enjoyed writing them, but by the end of the course I had arrived at my usual dilemma: the inability to maintain a sustained piece of creative writing. I start (I believe) interesting stories, but I cannot form endings either because I do not want the story to end or because I lack suitable ideas for a conclusion. Therefore, the following

year, I began a Masters degree in creative writing to ‘force’ myself to complete my project from the previous year. I completed it in just over a year. This essay serves as a reflection upon the process of that writing.

I will begin this essay by discussing voice used in my story. Thereafter I will explore character and then plot. I will then discuss how my writing has developed during the course of the year, which will then link up with how reading other writers has affected my own work. In each section I will discuss the problems I encountered and my possible solutions. Finally, I will briefly discuss the idea of writing as a journey of self-discovery, and then I will conclude the reflective essay.

Voice

Literature allows us a freedom that life does not, to be both inside and outside a character, to know thoughts as we can only know them in ourselves, and to see the externals as we can for everyone *except* ourselves.

(Janet Burroway 2003: 89)

Voice presented a constant difficulty in my writing. Initially I grappled with what voice I should use and thereafter had trouble maintaining it throughout the novel. At the start of the story, I was unsure whether I wanted an omniscient narrator in the third person or a biased, first person voice. There were many different combinations and each one brought their own set of advantages and disadvantages.

A first person voice had limited scope for authorial expression but it brought more immediacy and ‘authenticity’ to the story, while a third person voice offered more information about environment and characters but created a level of distance between the story and the reader. I briefly experimented with both voices and decided that I enjoyed the power and flexibility that an omniscient narrator provided. I also enjoyed the ‘story-telling’ effect of a third person narrator who knew almost everything about the environment and the characters. This is exemplified in my novel in:

Khadeejah Bibi Ballim did not like dirt. She did not like it when the salt shaker was not in its place above the stove. She did not like it when visitors left fingerprints on the doors of her glass cabinet. She did not like it when rice grains fell into the carpet [...] Khadeejah did not believe she was an obsessively clean woman. She thought it quite normal to wipe shelves every day, clean out freezers every week and repack cupboards every month. Sometimes twice a month to be safe.

(Khan 2009: 1).

Every writer arrives at her own interpretation of voice and I found my voice meandering into the mind of the relevant chapter’s main character in order to explain their behaviour and back-story. For example, in one of Summaya’s sections, the voice moves from omniscient narrator directly into Summaya’s thoughts:

She sank lower into the water. Let the water cover her face like a mask of warm cling wrap. She thought under the water. How could her daughter have remembered that? She must have been nearly two. Who remembers what happens at two? Could you hold a memory for so long?

(2009: 47)

And in the case of providing back-story:

Khadeejah had always been a hardworking woman. She had been used to hard work from the time she realised that eight younger siblings could not rely on their mother alone. They had lived in a bustling flat in Bronkhorstspuit, a *boere* farming town just outside of Pretoria. Ameer Rahim Mia and his fifteen year old wife had arrived on a ship from India and he had decided that Bronkhorstspuit was where he would build his home.

(3)

As can be seen in the first example above, the omniscient narrator almost becomes the character herself, and whilst I grappled initially with this voice, I soon became accustomed to slipping in and out of characters' thoughts. The important thing I came to realise, was to maintain this voice and not confuse the reader by changing the voice. As Burroway puts it in her book, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, 'Once you have chosen a point of view, you have in effect made a "contract" with the reader, and it will be difficult to break the contract gracefully. If you have restricted yourself to the mind of Sally Anne for five pages [...] we are likely to feel misused – and likely to cancel the contract altogether, if you suddenly give us an omniscient lecture on the failings of the young.' (2003: 54). There were moments when this occurred and I will discuss this in the problems and solutions section toward the end of this chapter.

Voice automatically led to the style of my story. My style consisted of fairly short sentences that used descriptive language which alternated between describing situations and describing characters' thoughts. The fact that I often delved into the mind of a character affected my style in two ways. Firstly, the thought process is often broken up

and abstract, and this can be seen in the (often) fragmented sentences. For example, in another of Summaya's chapters:

People talked a lot and they had too many opinions. People had smells in their hair and clothes. Their sweat was invasive (and their perfumes). They laughed too loud and were conceited. And if one of them cried or were upset you had to ask them what was wrong. Or pat their back.

When all she preferred to do was watch.

(Khan 2009: 85)

Secondly, many sentences began with 'But' and 'And' mimicking the way that thoughts, rationales and ideas often spring up one after the other in the mind: 'But they were too small to be noticeable; her eyes, her face and her lips' (2009: 85); 'But sometimes. Sometimes Summaya didn't feel like straggling' (89); 'And that damn child never gave in to Fareeda *khala's* needling' (92); 'And she wanted Aneesa to ask her. Because she couldn't bring it up on her own' (156).

One reader found this style of short sentences beginning with 'and' and 'but' irritating and claimed that it made for awkward reading with little flow. However, I felt it worked well to express the fragmented style of a person's thought process. So much so in fact that sometimes I even used one or two word sentences. For example, 'Scratchy. Choking. Dry. Even Khadeejah's food' (104).

The voice alters for the story of each of the protagonists, Khadeejah, Summaya and Aneesa. Each voice and thus style corresponds with the traits of the chapter's leading character. In addition each character also has a distinct style of dialogue.

Khadeejah speaks in a unique combination of broken English, Urdu and Afrikaans. The voice ('voice' hereafter refers to the style of each character's chapter and their unique dialogue) in Khadeejah's chapters is more sassy and direct, as she is a non-nonsense character. For example in chapter 10, the narrator ends with, 'Oh yes, Khadeejah Bibi Ballim knew them all' (52). And, 'How could he bear to look her? What with her dark eyes, long devil hair and her nails! Her nails wanted to make Khadeejah

cry. Hadn't she warned her beloved Naeem, hadn't she warned him that long finger nails were filthy? That they were a sign of the devil? That *shaytaan* himself lived in those fingernails.' (141). The voice remains omniscient, but it is written in the style of Khadeejah's strong personality.

In Summaya's sections, the voice tends to wander into reflective thoughts and there is a subtle sadness in much of her imagery. For example, 'The pessimist in her spawned by an underlying hate. And she hated many things. Hatred, for her, clung in corners of ceilings like sleeping bats that shudder their wings occasionally' (61) and 'Summaya only loved certain people. People like her, who craved the quietness of life. Who were left behind on the platform while the rest of the world climbed onto the train to take them Somewhere' (88). Her command of English is excellent and she never uses colloquial English, Afrikaans or Urdu (although while in India, she does lament this loss).

Aneesa's sections display an innocent and naive voice. Her language varies from childlike syntax ('kitkat pain', 'grandfather snail', 'stuck-in-the-middle-age') to a profound understanding of how people and relationships work. For example, 'Aneesa knew when her mother was lying' (16) and '[Aneesa] knew Nasmeera's type – loud, conceited and *very* insecure' (19).

In doing so I hoped to highlight the paradoxes of her age.

Each character also has their own way of listing things to comply with their unique voices. Khadeejah's lists are precise and exact, 1.), 2.), 3.), emulating the way she keeps order and neatness in her life. Summaya uses a loose structure with un-capitalised letters, a. b. c. The un-capitalised letters and lack of proper structure reveal her sense of rebellion and on a deeper level also indicate her loss of control. Aneesa's lists are even less defined; they are just made up of simple points to indicate an idea – thereby displaying a lack of set structure and an openness to absorb new ideas due to her innocence.

Each chapter gives the point of view of one leading character. Thus each chapter does focus on outside actions but the thought process is limited exclusively to the leading character of that chapter. Burroway refers to this as the **limited omniscient voice**; a voice that 'may go into the mind of one character... and also observe from the outside' (2003: 51). In each character's chapter I created an allegiance of sorts to that voice – which also meant providing contexts and histories and rationales for the characters' thoughts and

actions. For instance, Khadeejah is upset that Aneesa gets wet in the rain, but only the reader is told why – a flashback reveals that Khadeejah’s younger sister died from pneumonia. Both Summaya and Aneesa do not know this, and think that Khadeejah is overreacting. This style of presenting voice provided me with opportunities to contrast voice, carry the story forward and provide the necessary justifications for each character’s behaviour.

These justifications also encourage the reader to feel sympathetic toward a character. However it could also leave the reader in a dilemma as to whether to trust a character or not, since all their flaws and biases are revealed along with their justifications. Khadeejah is racist (but the reader sees this as a result of her upbringing), Summaya can be cruel (but this is also explained by her upbringing), and Aneesa is hateful toward her mother (but this is due to her personal situation). The limited omniscient voice makes it rather difficult to trust the narrator, especially when there are three different characters at odds with one another. This can be seen quite clearly at the end of Summaya’s chapter and the beginning of Aneesa’s chapter:

“Why’d you go to the bank?” Aneesa shouted after her.

“Cash a cheque,” Summaya said as she shut the bathroom door behind her.

ANEESA

Aneesa knew when her mother was lying...

(Khan 2009: 15-16)

Paul Mills refers to the limited omniscient voice as **free indirect speech**. This voice is beneficial, he says, because:

As readers it keeps our attention where it should be, not on the writer’s views and opinions, but on the characters in the story. We listen to *them*, engage with what is happening in their minds *below* the level of conscious, articulate speech. The writer enables us to see, hear and feel their hidden sensations, first intimations (for example) of doubt or of desire, before these become conscious or can be spoken about directly.

(2006: 6)

So, for example, the reader is aware of Aneesa's building anger toward her mother on page 57, long before it is exposed. The reader is also aware of Fareeda *khala's* intentions to cause injury to Summaya and Aneesa's relationship, and they are privy to Faheem's private thoughts as he talks to his daughter.

Problems and Solutions

As I have mentioned earlier, I found it difficult to sustain a particular voice. Occasionally I found myself with the inability to distinguish between voices, and used the wrong voice for a character. For example, in a particular section of dialogue I used Indian conversation traits for a Cape coloured woman, an occurrence which is highly unlikely in South Africa. A friend from Cape Town pointed it out to me – Colleen, a coloured woman, talks to the Indian Khadeejah and originally said, '**Eish** Aunty Kats, you getting naughty now! You watching too much of those Indian movies with the **young-young** boys and girls dancing around trees. You must watch programmes for your age.' (Khan 2009: 25) 'Eish' did not suit her dialogue and by repeating 'young' I used an older generation Indian habit of emphasising something by repeating a word in a sing-song manner. This also happened with Summaya: sometimes I gave her a typically Indian form of syntax until I realised that she wished to identify less with her Indian culture and therefore avoided talking with Indian mannerisms. She also has been educated at University and has friends of different races. In a paragraph where Summaya is explaining childbirth to Aneesa, I originally had, '*Ya Rabb*, the pain I felt.' This was Khadeejah's expression of 'Oh God' and Summaya would not invoke God's name, especially not in Urdu. I had to remember that the key to creating a strong believable character was to make sure they were always consistent.

I also encountered difficulty with Aneesa's childlike voice. Sometimes her dialogue became too sophisticated and I had to go back and adjust the speech (while also bearing in mind that Aneesa is smarter than the average 11 year old). My supervisor pointed out to me that occasionally Aneesa's voice 'sounds too old and mature'. So, for example, I altered,

“Don’t you think I know that? Don’t you think I know there was something wrong if my father left me and never came back. I knew he was wrong for that. I knew!” to a simpler “Don’t you think I know? I know it wasn’t good he left me... I know he was wrong!” (2009: 217).

For each voice I had to remember I was describing a different personality. This also aided in the process of self-discovery I mentioned earlier. By expressing myself through a number of voices I realised how restricted I was within my own life and I found myself living vicariously through the actions and situations of my characters. For instance, Aneesa and Khadeejah endure an attack in their personal space; Summaya loses (true) love and towards the end she begins to live the life she wants. By placing these characters in fearful and empowering situations I liberated myself on a certain level because I had to put myself in these characters’ shoes and experience these situations. It also allowed me to explore my own strange questions: are you allowed to look for your shoes in an emergency, and how do you clean up the mess of a dead person?

At times I found myself providing rationales for the behaviour of a section’s secondary character until I realised I held allegiance to the leading character of a chapter. For example, in Aneesa’s section I began describing the thoughts of Khadeejah and Summaya as they argued. I had to take a moment to reflect and realise that this was *Aneesa’s* chapter and the other characters were merely secondary to her at that point.

Character

The novel was initially planned for one protagonist; Khadeejah. She was modelled on an eccentric aunt in my family. Later in this essay I will discuss how an initially planned plot-driven novel was re-configured for a character-driven novel because of the development of strong individuals. In a sense, Khadeejah's character was the easiest to create because her eccentricities were already established: she only likes the colour white, she loves Indian soap operas, she is wary of white people, and she is an excellent cook. When I completed Khadeejah's opening chapter, I realised her voice was very distinct (she speaks informal, broken English smattered with Urdu and Afrikaans) and I felt stifled by having to consistently maintain that voice (this was my first 'serious' writing project and I wanted the freedom to express myself at many levels). This is when I decided to introduce a different character with a personality that clashed with Khadeejah's supposed 'sensible' views. In this way I was able to experiment creatively with different characters, and also provide an opportunity for conflict between the characters.

Summaya arrived in my mind as an antagonist for Khadeejah. Summaya is an unhappy and misunderstood character. Through her, I attempted to tackle the idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable in society. I had not planned Summaya's history when I introduced her but as I wrote her I realised she was an important part of the story. She is a strong character who is not easily seduced by conventional desires. She is the 'rawest onion' of the novel.

Aneesa arrived in the story as a balance between the extremes of Khadeejah and Summaya. She is innocent, soft spoken and honest. She does not carry the prejudices of her grandmother or the bitterness of her mother and in this way she was a character I enjoyed working on. However, while she maintained an effective balance between the characters and provided a common source of love for Khadeejah and Summaya, Aneesa *had* to change with all the events occurring around her. As Burroway explains: 'A dynamic character is somebody who is capable of change' (2003: 96). To keep Aneesa static would have done her, and the reader a great injustice. Initially I had difficulty altering her from the calm girl at the beginning to the angry young adolescent towards the end of the novel. It seemed inconsistent to her character for the normally sweet Aneesa to

scream at her mother. But I realised that adolescence was the best opportunity for her to change and also to express her pent-up feelings.

Burroway's claim that 'a character is somebody who wants, and that's what a character is' (2003: 20) helped me realise how important it was to create *desire* for each protagonist to develop. Without desire, the characters became stagnant, and my novel relied heavily on character to take the story forward. The protagonists in *Onion Tears* keep most of their desires hidden from one another. For example, Aneesa does not tell her mother about her feelings for Faheem until the end of the novel, and Khadeejah will never tell Summaya that she doesn't enjoy living on her own.

In terms of character development, Khadeejah is somewhat of a stagnant character in the sense that, besides for right at the end, she does not seemingly undergo any change in the novel (she's far too stubborn for that). But the flashbacks of her history and her life in Bronkhorstspuit *do* develop her character for the reader. So while the narrative is taken forward by Summaya and Aneesa, we are given a stronger sense of Khadeejah's character. Burroway claims that character can be presented to the reader in a number of ways, one of them being character as image (2003: 89). Khadeejah is a character largely defined by image. The opening chapter describes how she hates dirty fingernails and throughout the novel great detail is given to the food she cooks.

Summaya is a struggling character who is constantly changing. In her flashbacks, she is presented as a strong, independent person; when she meets her husband she falls in love and changes to someone less independent but more caring. And when he leaves her, she becomes critical of life, and emotionless. Finally, after the attack on her family, she changes yet again. It is implied that she will always continue to change. She is one of the more dynamic characters in the novel and I believe she is a representation of what any human being can become when faced with extreme change.

Aneesa changes as the search for her father intensifies. She grows from a quiet, innocent child to a moody, morose girl. After the attack she changes completely. Her thoughts are no longer fully presented to the reader; her chapters after the attack are fragmented and short. The change in her can be seen in the following:

Something had broken within her. Snapped. A tiny little thread. Change had come for Aneesa and she was no longer a stuck-in-the-middle child. It seemed a lifetime ago that she was at school. That she had played with dolls. And eaten scrambled eggs. Everything seemed distant. She heard voices as if from far away.

(Khan 2009: 237)

Problems and Solutions

Fictional characters are one of life's great mysteries. They exist as nothing more than words and sentences, yet in the mind of a reader they can become more real than an actual human being.

(Paul Smith 2004: 60)

E. M. Forster argues that in order for literature to work it has to be driven by its characters (in Smith 2004: 55). While working on my novel, I realised that plot did not work (this will be discussed in detail in the next chapter) so I decided to have very strong characters. As mentioned earlier Khadeejah did not present much of a problem as she is loosely based on a real person. However, the building of Aneesa and Summaya presented difficulties because they are completely fictionalised. As Smith says, 'Creating characters with a realistic depth of feeling and a believable, three-dimensional existence on the page is extremely difficult. It's like playing god.' (2004: 66). I believe no character can be pure fiction so there are parts of characters that can be attributed to friends, family and different generations of myself (the sense of exploring myself at different ages also added to my journey of self-discovery). I had to write detailed accounts of what my characters were like: their histories, likes and dislikes, habits, work environments and irritants. If I was sincere about my character, my reader would sense it because 'it's vital to know your characters intimately when you are writing, otherwise the way they face up to conflict may seem unrealistic or insincere, and they won't develop.' (77).

The main problem I encountered with character was inconsistency. I opened Summaya's chapter with detail of why she did not like waiting but later in the novel I would skim over details. This contrast of shallow and depth did not work and I had to learn to spend more time working on sections I was not keen to write in greater detail. I

realised the reader felt betrayed if they were offered an inconsistent character. When I first introduced Aneesa to the reader, she entered her grandmother's house and then soon rushed out of the house. Most of my readers immediately noticed this and asked me why. The fact was that I did not want to deal with her at that stage so I let her leave quickly. I had to rewrite that scene, and make Aneesa a strong believable character.

Plot

Something unfurls, something reveals itself. The crooked is made straight, or, the age being what it is, possibly more crooked; at any rate there's a path. There's a beginning. There's an end, not necessarily in that order; but however you tell it, there's plot.

(Margaret Atwood 2002: 158)

When I began my novel, I had a vague sense of the plot. I planned to revolve the story around a character, named Khadeejah. I intended to introduce an attack on her toward the middle of the novel and expected the remainder of the novel to deal with the aftermath of the attack. However, as my writing progressed and I introduced unexpected characters and subplots, the story began to change. It adapted and evolved and soon it was moulded by *character* rather than plot. Smith expresses this in the following: 'At one point in my own writing career I thought it was impossible for the author to lose control, but while writing one novel I was amazed to find that the characters I had created didn't always want to follow my plan of action – like your own children finally learning to talk back.' (2004: 56). Or as Doug Lawson puts it, 'Often I find clues to where the story might go by figuring out where the characters would rather not go' (in Smith 2003: 79). The attack on Khadeejah (which I had planned as a climax) became less and less important and eventually was pushed toward the end of the novel. Whilst I still think it is an important occurrence, I now feel character development overshadowed all else. Each character posed questions which I felt obliged to answer, and a character like Summaya, who was not even planned for, began to carry the story forward with her mysterious history.

As I wrote, I realised the plot could not develop further unless certain aspects of the past were revealed. In addition those pieces of the past had to be selected very carefully – each flashback provided additional information, but not *all* the information. This was relevant in the case of Summaya. I used selected flashbacks to advance the plot, but still keep the reader in suspense. So for instance, flashbacks to the 'Dark Days' describe the details of Summaya's suffering but never say exactly *why* she is suffering. Mills explains this: 'Delay can focus attention by manipulating details that excite but do not fulfill, our expectations.' (2006: 147). This proved a challenge in the story as I continually found myself checking which details I had already revealed. I also subtly misled the reader into

thinking Faheem was dead. This was done through an aunt who visits Summaya during her 'Dark Days'. She mistakes Summaya's sarcasm about the word 'shot' as a reference to the fact that her father killed himself. Since the reader does not yet know about Summaya's father's suicide they will assume that it means that her husband, Faheem, was shot.

People who offered fake pity should be shot in the street. She had even told *Gorimamoo* that people like her should be shot. *Gorimamoo* hadn't understood but merely nodded her head sympathetically at the word 'shot'.

(Khan 2009: 62)

Shortly after this the reader is once again misled by the character Fareeda *khala*. She is the only one that willingly reveals information on the subject of Faheem, but her information is incorrect. The reader, I hope, is left in a dilemma whether to believe her story or not.

Summaya's story is always linked to Aneesa's. The reader, along with Aneesa, wonders what happened to her father and tries to piece the story together. Aneesa, in this way helps lead an investigation for the reader to help find out what happened to Faheem. In the end, the two characters clash and the reader understands from both points of view what is finally happening. While Aneesa waits angrily at home and Summaya drives toward her, the reader then understands the bitterness of Summaya, and also the anger of Aneesa. So the plot weaves itself between the present and the past, often shedding light on why a character behaved the way they did.

The flashbacks used for Khadeejah do not necessarily advance the plot but do explain her behaviour in the present. When she becomes upset with Summaya for letting Aneesa get wet in the rain the reader knows why. When the gun is pressed into her waist the reader understands her immense fear. When she loses control over the attack situation we understand her frustration. And when her son does not press for her to live with him, we know from the flashbacks of her motherly love, how much this must hurt.

Problems and Solutions

Mills states: ‘As a device, delay cannot operate unless readers are given some goal, some target of expectation. If they are not the withholding of facts will lead to obscurity’ (2006: 148). With that advice in mind I tried not to prolong the release of information for too long. I continually gave small hints about Summaya’s history with Faheem in each chapter. There were instances when I prolonged information for too long and I was advised to ‘pick up the pace’. For instance when the young Summaya arrives home I used far too many descriptions and flashbacks before getting to the point where she finds her dead father in the room. The same thing happened in the attack on Khadeejah. I had to rewrite the scene many times until there was a visible pace to the events.

At times I found the plot of the draft rather dull and loose in structure. So I played with the idea of Fareeda *khala*’s big lie. My supervisor encouraged this idea and this was when I felt confident enough to create a whole chapter out of it. The lie also added interest to the plot and gave the plot more structure.

When I had drafted a rough idea of the plot, I was worried that the use of intermittent flashbacks might confuse and frustrate the reader. I had to edit and correct details so that the story flowed more easily. So, for instance, I went back in the plot and joined a character’s chapters that had previously been separated. I combined the chapters so that the breaks were less and the story flowed more easily.

The Development of my Writing

Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.

(George Orwell 1968: 7)

When I began this creative writing project I believed I was a fairly adept writer. However, after reading many novels in different styles (as a suggestion from my supervisor) and writing, rewriting and editing my novel, I realised that I was wrong. There are so *many* styles (from abstract to descriptive), and there are many ways of presenting a plot (from linear to non-linear). When writing is strong it can enchant the reader, when it is dull and overwritten it bores the reader. I have since learnt that there are subtle (but important) differences that separate good writing from great writing. My main concern was to find a style that I enjoyed and could maintain.

This discussion of the development of my writing will also explain how I arrived at my style in *Onion Tears*. A number of the problems which I encountered have already been discussed under their relevant chapters, Voice, Character and Plot.

It is said that easy reading is hard writing. This echoes one of the most important lessons I have learnt during the course of my writing. Each word, each sentence and each piece of information the author chooses to reveal is integral to the way the reader will understand the story. I have come to realise that there are many ways to say things. It can be a 'humid day' or a 'sticky day'. The specific choice of words is integral to the detail of the image I wish to portray to the reader.

My first and most important task was to clear the clutter in my writing, because the more I read the work of other writers, the more I realised that good writing is convincing, concise and clear. I tried to 'clear' my writing by shortening long-winded descriptions and removing unnecessary sections. Once I began editing my work (with this aim in mind) I realised there were large sections that did not carry the story anywhere. For example, I sifted through the chapter with Aneesa playing in the garden and I found that I had too many small stories about the pets she owned. In the end I removed a long

paragraph on her pet cocoon and fishes. The unnecessary description and the delay in action made for tiresome reading.

Overwriting slowed the pace of the novel significantly and affected the style I was trying to maintain. One frustrated reader commented on one rather long chapter, 'I am not reading a creative writing composition, get on with the story'. I therefore had to reflect on my writing and try to look at the bigger picture. There were times when it became all too easy to indulge in description. Thus, I became slightly wary of my adjectives and was careful not to delve too deeply into unnecessary description. My supervisor often corrected my manuscript with 'overwriting'. I realised if my images were sharp, the message was more effectively conveyed to the reader.

I also began to clarify scenes by breaking up awkward sentences. Awkward sentence structure confused the reader and broke the flow of the story. I found that some of my sentences were far too long and were held together by too many unnecessary commas. I realised that if one sentence held too much information, the reader wouldn't know what to concentrate on and would just move on without following the story properly or appreciating it.

I came to realise the importance of metaphor. As I worked on preventing myself from overwriting I realised some of the tightest writing and strongest messages were found in metaphor. I have learnt it is better to show than tell. Subtle writing acknowledges the reader's intellect while direct writing does little to challenge them (or even the writer). Metaphor is a complex medium and in the next chapter, under readings I will explain how some of my readings affected my use of metaphor. I learnt how to utilise good metaphors for sharper imagery. So instead of just saying 'Oil smells filled the air' (a good enough metaphor for me, when I began this project) my oil smells started doing strange things that they would never have done previously: 'Oil smells climbed up the walls and hid in wet corners.' (Khan 2009: 67). And once I learnt to creatively manipulate metaphor, it began manifesting itself more regularly in the story:

Even the dirt in the bin. Just because it's not visible. Just because it's forgotten. Doesn't mean it's *disappeared*. It's there. Lying at the bottom amongst apple cores and bits of thread. Forgotten. Waiting.

Sitting in the dark with its ears pricked.

(2009: 12)

The silence grew. It swelled and stretched the walls of their flat. It echoed off the kitchen tiles and wandered into their bedroom. It seeped into their carpets and crawled into their ceiling. It mocked them and swooped into their mouths when someone opened their lips to speak.

(135)

Metaphor expanded my writing on a creative level and provided a strong platform to convey a message.

Another important development in my writing was my sudden awareness of the reader. Most of my previous writing included personal poems and diary entries, but as a writer of a novel I was suddenly faced with the realisation that I was not only writing for myself, but also for an invisible reader. Subsequent criticism by my class and supervisor confirmed this. The awareness of the reader brought about many questions: who was I writing for? What type of readers were they? And most importantly, would they like my story? Margaret Atwood describes this awareness:

So that is who the writer writes for: for the reader. For the reader who is not Them, but You. For the Dear Reader. For the ideal reader, who exists on a continuum somewhere between Brown Owl and God. And this ideal reader may prove to be anyone at all – any *one* at all – because the act of reading is just as singular – always – as the act of writing.

(2002: 151)

With the reader in mind I began to learn (and am still learning) about writing for an audience. They usually understand the smallest signs and feel patronised if one makes something too obvious to them. For example, my supervisor advised me to remove ‘Perhaps somewhat crude but this stemmed from her simplicity’ when I described the character, Zohra. He said this trait was already implied and I did not need to elaborate upon it to the reader.

Through this I have learnt not to underestimate the reader. They are usually finely attuned to hints in the text. In fact, I have come to realise that readers are very sensitive. As I have mentioned in the chapter on voice, they feel betrayed if one changes anything too quickly and without reason. They notice the smallest clues from an uneasy pause in dialogue to a missing fact in the story. For example, readers of my first chapter immediately noticed that Aneesa was introduced too briefly and exited too quickly. And I once wrote a chapter in a dull uninspiring room and then moved to a sunny room and wrote another chapter. My supervisor immediately picked up the change in the tone and commented that one chapter was dull and should be removed whilst the other was alive and written well.

I also learnt that once one understands that the reader is sensitive to the text one can take this knowledge to the next level and ‘manipulate’ them. This can be done by providing misleading clues; the reader may think they have ‘accidentally’ discovered unplanned information or a clue. I made use of this by implying the wrong ideas. For instance, at the beginning of the novel I imply that Summaya’s husband is missing, presumed dead. Then in a subsequent chapter, Summaya uses the word ‘shot’, implying that her grief over her husband is linked to a gun (as mentioned earlier in this essay). After it becomes clear that Summaya’s husband, Faheem, is not dead I lead the reader to believe that Summaya had an affair and this is why her husband left.

I came to realise that a story is understood better if it flows. This idea is related to removing the clutter I mentioned earlier, but there are also other ways I have learnt to make the language in my creative writing piece flow. As my writing developed I learnt to be wary of repeating the same word in a paragraph. Repetition not only slows down the writing, but makes for awkward writing. For example there was a chapter where I mentioned the word ‘eye’ more than five times. I didn’t realise it until my supervisor pointed it out to me. This applied to repetition of even one word, especially if it was distinct. This also applied to the tags I used in conversation. Initially, I unconsciously continued to use the same tags. For example I followed the same pattern in my tags after direct speech: she/he said, while she/he did an action. I had to stop myself and look for new ways to present dialogue.

During the writing of this project I have come to understand how immensely important rewriting is. A piece is never completed until you can work on it and make the

piece as clear and succinct as it can be. 'Writing is rewriting what you have already rewritten,' says Paul Engle (in Burroway 2003: 217). This also includes getting others to read my writing because they have fresh eyes to pick up my mistakes and can also offer alternate perspectives.

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter I realised how important it is to read other writers. I have been influenced by much of the reading I have done while writing *Onion Tears*.

Reading List

Throughout my writing of *Onion Tears* (and even before I had begun) I was encouraged to read as much as I could. It was only while reading other writers that I realised the wisdom behind the advice: the exposure made me aware how much writing can be creatively manipulated. The style, the type of voice chosen and the twists of a plot can vary in extremes. After reading a number of novels, my main aim was to arrive at a strong, consistent voice that I was comfortable with.

Onion Tears deals with the lives of a number of female protagonists. Numerous books on the female struggle in South Africa have been written. Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call me Woman* (1985) provided a personal account of women's suffering during apartheid. Kuzwayo's intimate account of her experiences provided a context to view the struggle of South African women. It offered a strong basis for contextualising the older generation's current identity struggle in South Africa. In this way, Khadeejah's character grew in strength because I could apply real histories to what she endured. The historical context was also substantiated by my aunt's personal accounts of her experiences during apartheid.

Coconut (2007) by Kopano Matlwa, on the other hand, offers a contrast to Kuzwayo's account as it tells the story of two black women living in contemporary South Africa and the unique struggle which the post-apartheid generation faces. This was closer to the content of my writing in the sense that Matlwa writes about black people's experiences in the current South Africa, while my novel looked at the everyday lives of Indians in contemporary South Africa. Matlwa makes it apparent that apartheid has left a shadow over its future generations. This provided a strong parallel to Aneesa's life and her understanding of apartheid. However, their differing races limited the similarities I drew from both characters.

Daughters are diamonds (2007) by Shafinaaz Hassim is a study of Indian Muslim women in South Africa. Her research (for her M.A. in Social Work) is an examination of five different South African Indian Muslim women's lives. Hassim researches 'how the opportunities, challenges and obstacles facing South African Indian Muslim women within the family, are perceived and experienced by the individual; and to what extent, if

at all, traditionalist culture is able to create/influence a gap between opportunity and achievement for South African Indian Muslim women' (Hassim 2007: 22).

Her research represents a factual basis for information on Indian Muslim South African women since it incorporates interviews with Indian Muslim women from varying generations and economic classes. The contrasting age gaps in her interviews provide concrete examples for my characters' experiences of being different generations of South African women. This text was necessary for me to grasp the technical side of my story. Who is the Indian woman? What has been her experiences in South Africa? Hassim's research contextualises the predicaments of many Indian Muslim South African women in contemporary South Africa. Her research also provides a context for understanding how the Indian Muslim society in South Africa has formed today. While not shown directly, my novel is built upon these ideas of what constitutes the Indian Muslim culture in South Africa.

Drown (1997) by Junot Diaz, is a collection of short stories revolving around Dominican Republicans living in their hometown and as immigrants in the USA. On reading this, I learnt about conveying the customs, atmosphere and language of a different culture. Diaz brought out the flavour and liveliness of a foreign culture for me. In the same way I attempted to bring out a vibrancy and an excitement in Indian culture by describing various foods and cooking with vivid detail. Diaz uses humour to criticise certain cultural traditions (for example, looking down at Haitians because they are very dark skinned), and in the same way I tried to be critical about certain Indian traditions. For example, I criticise the Indian caste system but I embedded it in a discussion over cooking fish curry. Whilst Diaz provides a brief glossary of Spanish words used in his stories, I avoided it in an attempt to keep things as natural as possible. In any case, I have ensured that it is fairly clear for an English reader to understand. For example, Summaya and Khadeejah clean *elachie* seeds in the kitchen and shortly after it is mentioned that, 'Summaya tore open the soft cardamom shells with her nails and emptied the tiny squashed black seeds...' (Khan, 2009: 43). This indicates that *elachie* is cardamom seeds. Or when Khadeejah warns Fareeda *khala* in Urdu (so that Aneesa can't understand what's being said), Fareeda *khala* in her thoughts explains the gist of what was said to her:

“But – ” Fareeda *khala* started.

“*Bachi ke saam neh math kaho,*” Khadeejah interrupted suddenly. “Have more *dhal* Fareeda *khala*.”

Fareeda *khala* thought for a moment and considered saying something else. But she decided it was not safe. Khadeejah’s encrypted warning in Urdu for her not to say anything in front of the child was stern and direct. ‘Accidental’ questions wouldn’t be viewed so innocently after that.

(2009: 101)

There were also instances where I chose *not* to reveal the English translation. For example a conversation that Summaya hears while holidaying in India is not translated. This was aimed at leaving the reader in as much confusion as Summaya:

They knew it from the awkward way she looked back at them when they asked her a question in Urdu or Hindi.

“*Yeh Urdu bath nahien karsakthi hai?*”

“*Hum lo sikele hai Urdu baath. Yeh nahein sikaileenee hain.*”

“*Afsose ye Urdu bath nahain sikhailee hai.*”

“*Ha.*”

(181)

Imraan Coovadia’s humorous *The Wedding* (2001) provided me with a detailed examination of Indians who migrated to South Africa. While largely a love story, his novel comments on the multi-cultural society of South Africa and how Indians adapted to forge a unique place for themselves. *The Wedding* provided me with an apt example of the way one could set up a personal story while still commenting on society in general. While I think I may have arrived at my own way of doing it, it was nonetheless refreshing to read Coovadia’s wry depiction of life as a South African Indian. His novel offers a more detailed process of the experiences which Khadeejah’s father faced when he migrated to South Africa. Coovadia provides detailed descriptions of his characters’ lives in India, their sea journey to South Africa and their cultural integration. However, his novel is written in an autobiographical mode and focuses largely on first generation Indians adapting to Durban. My novel refers briefly to first generation Indians but then

goes on to focus on those generations which are long-established in South Africa (particularly in the Gauteng area).

Disgrace (2000) by J. M. Coetzee is a novel that deals with individuals and the transition to the new South Africa. Coetzee's character, David Lurie, has a daughter, Lucy, who is a victim of South African crime. Khadeejah, in my novel is also such a victim. A large part of Coetzee's novel deals with the conflicting (and contrasting) emotions that this incident invokes for Lurie and his daughter. Throughout my novel I explore South African identity and the way crime affects this idea of nationality. This can be seen on page 246, when Khadeejah wonders whether her father had any hesitation before he travelled to Africa. After her attack she feels trapped in a country that she did not choose to live in. This, I hope, raises questions as to which country you hold allegiance to? Your indigenous country or the country of birth? I believe there are fairly straightforward answers for Aneesa and Khadeejah but it is Summaya, the character that reflects the in-between generations, who feels the most conflict.

A very important influence on the style of my writing was Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). The book was given to me fairly early in my writing and I was immediately struck by Roy's expressive style. All her descriptions are highly detailed, for example:

But worst of all, he carried inside him the memory of a young man with an old man's mouth. The memory of a swollen face and a smashed upside-down smile. Of a spreading pool of clear liquid with a bare bulb reflected in it. Of a bloodshot eye that had opened, wandered and then fixed its gaze on him.

(Roy 1997: 32)

This led to my writing style becoming too cluttered as I could not control the style the way she could. This, I think, is when my problem of overwriting emerged. As I have mentioned in the section on the development of my writing I had to find ways to overcome this.

There were also a number of smaller influences in the form of South African Indian authors such as Ahmed Essop's *The Hajji and other stories* (1978), Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002) and Mariam Akabor's *Flat 9* (2006).

Journey of Self-discovery

Can an “author” exist, apart from the work and the name attached to it? The authorial part – the part that is out there in the world, the only part that may survive death – is not flesh and blood, not a real human being. And who is the writing “I”? A hand must hold the pen or hit the keys, but who is in control of that hand at the moment of writing? Which half of the equation, if either, may be said to be authentic?

(Margaret Atwood 2002: 45)

In her reflections on writing in *Negotiating with the Dead* Atwood writes an entire chapter on the writer’s fascination with the dead:

The title of this chapter is “Negotiating with the Dead,” and its hypothesis is that not just some, but *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.

(2002: 156)

As I have mentioned earlier, I realised on reflection that my novel held some of my own stories. So for me, the quote above refers to the history I keep returning to. I delve into dead memories from the past and revive them with my words. As I read further into Atwood’s chapter I realised also, that it was not only *my* memories of myself that I was reviving. I was reviving dead people from my past, but I was reviving people from my aunt’s history as well (as Khadeejah is based partially on her). It was only when I read Atwood’s chapter that I realised the writer’s fascination with the dead.

The *dhania* man was a man who used to sell coriander to my mother. I knew little about my aunt’s real husband except for the fact that he mistreated her – hence the birth of Haroon with his own complete set of unique characteristics. Even the story of love lost between Summaya and Faheem resonates with me. It was not so much the characters but the idea of eternal love that had played in my mind. Can it exist? Can it be perfect? So in this way an author revives or restores or tests stored theories in her head. As Atwood explains, ‘To go to the land of the dead, to bring back to the land of the living someone

who has gone there – it's a very deep human desire, and thought also to be very deeply forbidden. But life can be bestowed by writing' (2002: 171-172).

I explored ideas of my own identity through Summaya. This was done unintentionally when Summaya visits India with her mother. My own struggle with identity and cultural heritage was spoken through Summaya. As she comes to understand who she is, I also tried to come to terms with who I was, not fully Indian and still surprised by the beauty of the culture.

I believe *what* and *who* you choose to revive from the dead helps to unearth what is important to you or what is playing in the mind of the author. At the book launch of his new novel, *High Low In-between*, Imraan Coovadia mentioned that what all writers really like to do is experiment. I believe writers experiment with all the things floating in their mind. They make stories with bits and pieces of it, and if they sift clearly through it, they can make discoveries about their own selves. This is why I consider the process of writing *Onion Tears* to be a journey of self-discovery.

Conclusion

A novel is not entirely fictional. The pages are strewn with pieces of the author, whether these pieces are torn, warped or presented unknowingly. This process is acknowledged through the reflection on one's writing. Each character, Khadeejah, Summaya, and Aneesa holds traits of myself, the author. Some of them even hold distorted versions of my dreams and memories. I have always tried to write what I know and through this I hope I have always been true to the reader.

The trick to a strong, believable voice was to maintain authenticity. I should never betray the 'contract' with my reader by suddenly changing viewpoints or the style of a particular character. I used a limited omniscient narrator that delved in and out of characters' minds. The voice led to the style of my novel and my style was to write in a detailed yet also fragmented way that reflected the thought process of a character. Each character had a style to maintain. Initially I had some difficulty in maintaining each character's voice but I hope I have overcome that.

I have learnt that a character can only be real if they *become* real in your head. Each character was developed by revealing their histories slowly. I hoped that each character's unique style would make them richer in detail and thus more believable. I encountered problems in trying to create believable characters out of Summaya and Aneesa, but as the story progressed they each grew their own unique personalities.

As the characters grew in depth, *Onion Tears* moved from a planned plot-driven novel to a character-driven novel. Thus the attack incident moved toward the end of the novel. I had to carefully choose the memories I revealed about Summaya to maintain the mystery of her past. I also used a character's lies to mislead the reader.

My writing developed in a number of ways. I realised the importance of a strong style. I also had to work on my habit of overwriting to clear my writing. I became aware of the advantages of using imagery. I also became aware of how sensitive the reader is and how I could use this to my advantage. I realised the importance of a flow in my writing. Most importantly, however, I learnt that editing and rewriting are extremely important in changing a good story into a great story.

I was also inspired by other writers. My reading list consisted of a number of writers who influenced my writing. They ranged from South African Indian authors to eighteenth

century English writers. Each unique style and plot revealed to me how dynamic writing can be and how it can be used to enchant the reader.

This reflective essay has helped me to identify the difficulties in the development of my writing. My writing is still flawed in parts but I am now more *aware* of the flaws and can hopefully correct them more easily.

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