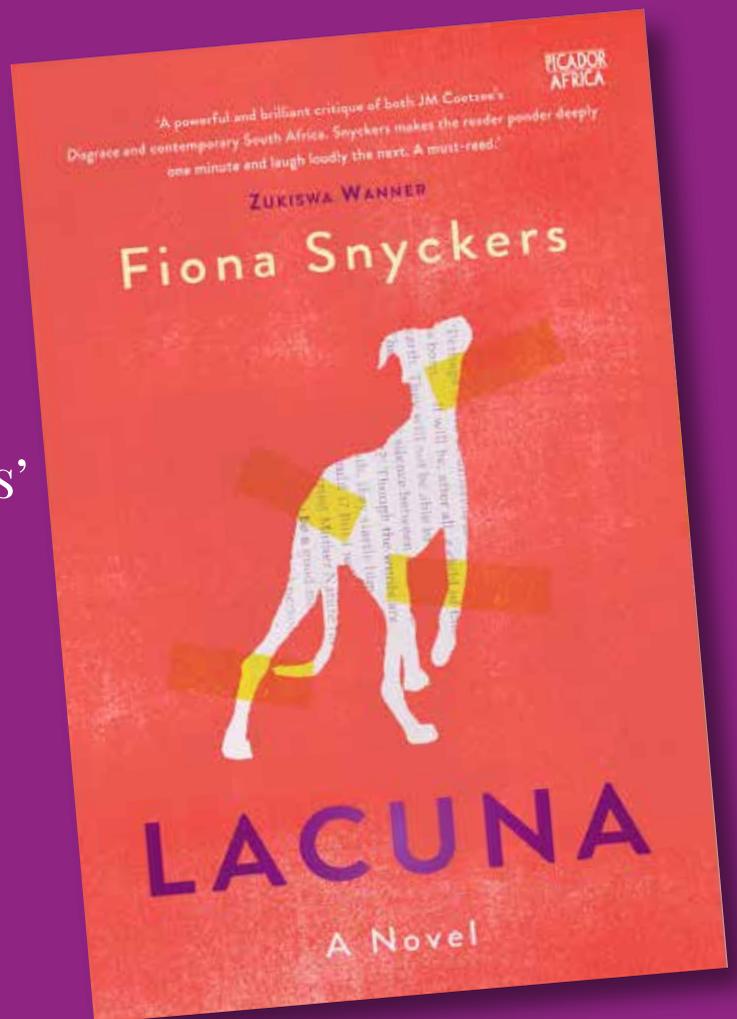


Who is the Real 'Gap'?:

Reviewing Fiona Snyckers' *Lacuna*.

By Danyela Demir



In her illuminating book *White Women Writing White: Identity and Representation in (Post)-Apartheid South African Literatures* (2009), Mary West convincingly argues that,

[...] despite official efforts to realign racial politics, whiteness in South Africa continues to exude a powerful sense of normativity. This normativity has recently been overlaid with defensiveness, an ambivalent combination that resists rather than assists the process of reconciliation, and in many ways deepens the racial divisions. (pp. 12-13)

West analyses (post)-apartheid texts that were largely written during the first decade of post-democratic South Africa, ranging from novels by Pamela Jooste and Susan Man to short stories by Nadine Gordimer and Marlene van Niekerk and poetry by Karen Press. West's main thesis is that white women writers find themselves in a 'double bind' (p. 29), oscillating between fighting the injustices of apartheid and simultaneously reproducing the very racist structures they write against. She argues that some writers fair better than others in this endeavor (p. 17). Although

Fiona Snyckers' novel *Lacuna* (2019), a response to J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), seems to have the intention of dismantling racist structures by attempting to be critically white, I was reminded of West's remarks on what has been labelled as the 'post-apartheid weepy'. Using examples of works by writers such as Pamela Jooste and Susan Man, West states that these texts are often characterised by 'the discourse of privilege (reliant on cliché and emerging as normative)' (p. 6).

Snyckers' novel, in contrast to Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which tells the story from David Lourie's point of view, has Lucy, David's daughter, who is gang raped by five Black men whilst visiting her father's farm, as the protagonist. Lucy's ordeal, which is sidelined in *Disgrace*, thus becomes central in Snyckers' text. One might argue that *Lacuna* is a feminist response to *Disgrace*, in which Lucy, due to the fact that the novel is focalised through David's perspective, has little narrative space. However, Snyckers' text is highly flawed and can ultimately be read as a patronising text that has very little to do with the reality of the majority of this country and people of colour in general.

The main reason for why the novel fails becomes clear both in the title and in the beginning of the book. Lucy tells the readers that she has been gang raped on her father's farm and that a colleague of hers at the English department of the imaginary University of Constantia, named John Coetzee, has used her story as foil for his novel *Disgrace*. Lucy further explains, and elaborates throughout the novel, that she is the lacuna in the novel. She contends that Lucy in *Disgrace* has no agency and is only used as a vessel to birth the brown child, conceived through rape, who will save South Africa's future (28-29). Whether one agrees with this interpretation of *Disgrace* is less of importance to me than whether Lucy can be called a lacuna at all. I argue that Lucy is not, in fact, the actual lacuna in *Disgrace*. On the contrary, she makes her own decisions. They might not be comprehensible or logical to the readers, but she refuses to bow down to her father's insistence that she must talk about the rape, that she should report the rape, that she must leave the farm, or that she should consider aborting the baby. No, in *Disgrace* the lacuna is not the white woman as Snyckers would have us believe. Coetzee's lacuna is the voice of the Black woman and the woman of colour: Soraya,

Melanie, and a nameless Black sex worker, who David picks up from the side of the road towards the end of the novel, are the voiceless, the women without agency. The most prominent example here is perhaps Melanie, the student whom David rapes. Melanie hardly speaks and her actions are determined by David or her overly protective boyfriend or her religious father. The readers know nothing about Melanie other than what David Lourie chooses to tell us about her.

As much as Melanie is the lacuna in *Disgrace*, she is a mere speck of dust in Snyckers' text. Melanie's rape is referred to as 'the misunderstanding with the female student' (p. 111) when Lucy explains that her father took early retirement from university. What must I, as a female reader of colour, make of this but a cruel reminder by a white woman that white women's bodies are more valuable than ours? Lucy's ordeal is 247 pages long while Melanie's rape is referred to as a 'misunderstanding'. Some critics might argue that this is irony, that this is an attempt at holding up a mirror, but as I will outline below, the author is highly didactic and tells us when Lucy attempts to be critical, is an unreliable narrator, or when she is crying tears. In the only two moments during which Melanie is mentioned in the novel, there is nothing of that reflexive tone, no irony or ambivalence. If anything, this is an example of what Mary West aptly calls a 'double bind'. To add insult to injury, it is, as the readers find out at the end of the novel, at a Black women's expense that Lucy writes her story at all. Thus the Black women and the women of colour can only be two things in Snyckers' text: the neglected casualty of a white man's rape or the educator. The black women here is the means to empower the spoiled, teary-eyed and unreflective white woman, which is not very different from how women of colour are described in Coetzee's novel.

The novel is also highly problematic on an aesthetic level. Lucy is, as she tells the readers from the onset, an unreliable narrator:

I am untrustworthy. But I'm the only access you have to this story. My lens is the only one through which you are permitted to peek. Does that make you feel unsafe? I bet you'd prefer a calm, authoritative, third-person narrator to set the facts out for you. Neutrality is a man's job, after all. (p. 14)

I suggest that this quote is a direct challenge to

Coetzee's text, which is focalised through a man's gaze, written in the third person. Although the text is perhaps further intending to show that survivors of rape are seldom believed by using the device of unreliable narration, it comes across as self-evident. This is due to the fact that little room for imagination is left to the readers, for Lucy does not fail to tell us when she lied about something after we have been subjected to a few pages of a scenario imagined by her, whether it is an imagined trial of her rapists or what her psychologist supposedly tells her, for example.

It is not that Lucy is not self-critical, but even those moments are more likely to be found in a 101 textbook on critical whiteness than in real life and thus the didactic tone of the novel is reinforced. The examples are endless, reaching from Lucy's virtual conversations with her white, vegan lover, to her encounter with the Black sociologist at the end of the novel, but a case in point is Lucy's conversation with a Black man at a robot:

My door isn't locked. As a hawker approaches, I slide my hand sideways and lock the door with a clicking sound that reverberates up and down the street. The man motions for me to roll down my window, which I do.

'You locked your door as I approached,' he says. 'Would you have done that for a white man?'

'Of course. One is always vulnerable at intersections. It had nothing to do with the fact that you are black.'

He stares at me in silence. The interrogation in his gaze unmans me. Unwomans me.

'You're right,' I say. 'It had everything to do with the fact that you are black. I profile black people all the time, especially black men. I associate them with criminality.'

'And how do you suppose that makes me feel?'

'Hurt. Abused. Angry. Overwhelmed by frustration and a sense of injustice.'

'Precisely.' (pp. 165-66).

The conversation continues for several lines. While reading this passage, I was asking myself which middleclass white woman has ever had such a conversation with a Black hawker at the traffic lights. The textbook phrases are overwhelming and seem to mock Black people's daily experiences of racism and white fear, and the affect of repulsion

on black bodies rather than being a self-reflection on Lucy's part. Again, this reminds me of Mary West's thesis that white women's writing is marked by a slippage between the attempt at writing against structures of racism and simultaneously maintaining these very structures in their own text. Black men in Snyckers' novel feature as either rapists or poor salespeople who scrape a meager living on Cape Town's streets, which is just as violent a form of reproducing stereotypes as can be seen in her representation of Black women and women of colour.

Apart from these rather problematic aspects concerning race, the novel is, to my mind, also flawed on the level of plot. From the beginning of the story right through to the end, Lucy is obsessed with J. M. Coetzee's representation of her story in *Disgrace*. John Coetzee, the character who is supposed to resemble the writer J. M. Coetzee in *Lacuna*, is a professor while Lucy is a PhD student and contract lecturer. Both work at the English department of the University of Constantia. Lucy attempts to find John Coetzee and imagines multiple ways of confronting him about having twisted her story and about how unjustly she feels that she has been represented. She is also resentful of his global success as a writer at her expense. This obsession with John Coetzee overshadows the problematic relationship between Lucy and David, which, in an unexpected and somewhat contrived twist of plot, turns out to be nightmarish and almost monstrous. The readers are left to wonder as to how David's violent betrayal of his daughter seems to have a lesser psychological impact than John Coetzee's fictionalisation of her rape.

The novel was perhaps an attempt at writing back to Coetzee's text, to construct a feminist version of Lucy, but Snyckers' feminist version of Coetzee's novel is a glaring example of privileged white feminism at the expense of racial and class justice. Thus it ultimately fails, for as Flavia Dzodan aptly reminds us, 'My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit' (Tiger Beatdown, 2011). ■

References

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