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Hashtag Apartheid? Digital Discourse, Post-Apartheid Literature, and the Mission of Historical Reconciliation

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Abstract: This article aims to explore the reaching point of digital tools and historical stories while putting its emphasis on the transformation of Apartheid remembrances and South African literature and thus studies the internet as the major driving force behind such changes. The study checks to see how much social media, digital activists, and the efforts of Zakes Mda, Mandla Langa, and Lauren Beukes are shared and how that affects the historical representation and collective memory of modern South Africa. Further, it also freshly contends the utilization of digital platforms in building peace, in the telling of truth, and introducing literary works through the missiological approach and highlighting how technology plays a significant role in that historical justice reshaping.

Keywords: Algorithms, Apartheid, Digital activism, Digital discourse, Historical memory, South African literature.

1. Introduction

The creation of web platforms at a high pace has essentially changed the way history is remembered, carried out, and debated, particularly in such communities as those that have undergone experienced a deep trauma in the past just as South Africa has. Besides supplementary materials, social media, blogs, and audiobooks have appeared not as tools but as the very sites where Apartheid's history is being reimagined as a continuous narrative of change and at times at the vision of the new generation who are looking for a mixture of answering some questions and closing the book. Therefore, it reality, the cultural richness of South African literature can be seen in its migration from books to digital platforms, the latter being forums where writers like Zakes Mda and Mandla Langa have the opportunity to interact with, and influence, a large audience, both nationally and internationally, the global one especially being

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asked to broaden the scope and contextualize the issue of their nationality and understand the historical legacy. As an example, both Mda's *The Heart of Redness* and Langa's *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* definitely received the accolades in the literary world and gained an online platform for their discussion, such as forums, podcasts, and blogs, that, in return, led to a culture of remembrance where people from all over the world, not just within the national boundaries and the audience introduced a variety of interpretations of post-Apartheid realities.

What seems especially noteworthy here is in what way these platforms not only make possible but also actively promote, as proposed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his pioneering *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* of the idea of historical silences being contested. For instance, digital storytelling and audiobooks open gates for those who have been left out of the history, thus making it possible for anyone in the world who may be interested to be part of the complexities of history that are not only in the books but also in people's hearts. Besides that, Beukes' *Zoo City*, which is twisted in its genre, multiplication of past and present is done and animals, the agents in her stories, become metaphors of togetherness and reconstruction as they are still the voices conceiving the voices of the marginalized: the brutalized and oppressed, which sooner or later will reoccur and give new meaning to the issues addressed in the virtual discussions. (Trouillot 1995, 13)

From a missiological perspective, this digital re-enactment of the past creates new opportunities for interacting with the imperatives of truth, justice, and reconciliation, lifting up the task of bearing the social witness in the times of historical divisions. The vital significance of the necessity to address people in their own culture for the mission of reconciliation, revealed by David Bosch in his renowned *Transforming Mission*, is the direct opposite of its challenges but the focal point for the promise of reconciliation in digital spaces. The Church's interest in these digital stories is not some non-essential addition; rather, it is a significant part of the church's vocation of healing and restitution, reminding society that reconciliation needs to adapt and diversify because the era of digital technology is many-sided

2. The power of digital discourse social media and its role in redefining collective memory.

The transformational influence of digital communication on collective memory development has nowadays become the most important driving force, especially on those nations facing the past inability to accept injustices and disputed historical interpretations. The social media networks in particular have completely changed the landscape of how stories of the past are spread and rewritten, being the underlying factors of a more inclusive system of memory that challenges traditional historiographies. In the examples of *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall*, it is evident that grassroots digital movements can bring about local and global dialogue around the issues of historical injustice, symbols of colonialism, and systemic inequalities. More than just stimulating public discussions of these matters of conflict,

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the South African situation has also put the stamp of digital memory on these incidents, by which historical records are not only preserved but continuously updated and re-thought besides gathering public talks. The scholars such as Achille Mbembe, the author of books like *Critique of Black Reason*, have felt the exponential transitions from digital activism to the plausible planetary of ideas, which has been an increasing trend indicating that the political are unlikely to cut off with the technical operations of the memory factory. (Mbembe 2017, 32)

Additionally, search algorithms and digital repositories act as influential guards, regulating the presence and the way users approach the historical data, thus elevating the risk of misinterpretation. The technique inherent in companies like Google or JSTOR imposes a gatekeeping role on the platforms, which also induces the preferred narratives to rise to the top and move to the public's mind subtly. It must be realized by all that these algorithms are not just bare mediums of distributing the information but active participants engaging in the shaping of people's memory, hence showing a partiality toward certain discourses and at the same time ignoring the others. Safiya Umoja Noble in her book *Algorithms of Oppression* immediately strikes at the heart of the matter in her analysis of how algorithms can perpetuate a number of social and racial biases and thus obfuscate any delusions of digital spaces being platforms for democracy. (Noble 2018, 680

Running concurrently with this development, the internet-based activity of advocacy has drawn itself up into a powerful cultural and political movement of resistance. The cultural and political spaces in which discussions are being held are not only affected by such activism but history, too, is disturbed and changed. The speed openness to the public and the spread of digital campaigns have given shade to alternative voices to be part of the discourse of history, challenging the mainly exclusionary nature of the official history. One such illustration is the electronic process that is vetted as the reception of Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* which digital literature now enjoys. Online debates become a cause of the process of reinvention and more sensitive discussions through the electronic exploration of fictional territories of traumatic experiences, the struggle for human rights and the fight for the dead and the living. The results of such discussions are not just in the texts, but they are also evident in the diversity and the broader scope of knowing history that is built up. (Mda 1995, 121)

Consequently, what comes to the foreground is an unmistakably changed scenario, where history is no longer sub-divided into independent, strands of history, literature, or digital culture but is an interconnected whole. The change comes, from the talking point to the intellectual level of knowledge production, distribution, and validation. As the narratives of Apartheid, and its aftermath, are re-told numerous times, such a new phenomenon brings an intrusion of the digital into the category of a complex process of memory, power, and technology. The situation emerges when the stories are being re-enacted in digital space. Now, the process of historical storytelling not only becomes a vehicle of a single communicated fact as it becomes a transaction between memory, power, and technology. This mutual relationship, which

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is existent, also creates the possibility of a more participatory and conversational mode of historical consciousness, notwithstanding the risks of distortion, and monetization. Such a model is able to mirror the diversity and multiplicity of voices and experiences that constitute the South African past and its incessant restructuring in the digital age.

3. Digital humanities and South African literature

The creation of digital humanities as an area of study has given researchers modern methodologies to explore the dynamic relationships between literature and technology, especially in situations where historical facts are still debated and unresolved. Digital humanities also not only emphasize the physicality of digital instruments but also question the role of these instruments in cultural production and reception. From the South African literary landscape, this model brings fresh air by undressing the ways in which the current writers are using digital platforms to add, question, and open up the historical and literary aspects of our past. Through this process, by exploring not only conventional written texts, but also the digital environment - e.g., social media dialogues to interactive archives, the field of digital humanities offers a better understanding of how literature in the post-Apartheid era plays a role to the formation of collective memory. The concept of "distant reading" by Franco Moretti, presented in his book *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, emphasizes the capacity of digital methods to discover trends and links in literary corpora that may not be seen in other ways, a viewpoint that is quite apt when dealing with the disintegrated and networked character of digital literary culture in South Africa. (Moretti 2005, 30)

South African writers have been turning to virtual reality more and more in their attempt of making their works available and communicating directly with the people not only of the home but also internationally, therefore significantly increasing the range and resonance of their historical narratives. For instance, Zakes Mda can be cited as someone who has been very often active on the web, especially on the microblogging platform Twitter, where he not only comments on his own literary works but also deals with social problems in his society. In his novels, he digs out new ideas as in *The Whale Caller*, where social media provide a digital agora that makes such transformation possible. Likewise, the launch of Mandla Langa's *The Texture of Shadows*, which touches on the matter of post-Apartheid reconciliation that has not ended, is made more effective by the significant input from participants within online book clubs and literary forums, as readers are able to openly contribute their point of view and also provide more information to the context of the novel. *The Shining Girls*, a novel about the intersection of the theme of gendered violence and historical trauma by Lauren Beukes, is not only a platform for her to interact with her readers but also to explore the broader picture of equity and memory, thus locating her literary output within a wider, more inclusive discourse community. (Mda 2005, 45; Langa 2009, 66; Beukes 2013, 91)

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The internet engagement has a very complex effect as it enables authors to influence and change the recording of history in interaction with their audience, which brings up the issue of blurry lines between the original idea of an author and an individual's idea in the community. The speed of reactions within the electronic environment transfigures author's writing into a joint effort to construct the shared meaning, while the past events of histories are still being negotiated and disputed. According to N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, it is clear that not only the dissemination modes but also the cognitive and cultural frames through which texts are created and understood are affected by the digital environment, a fact very visible in the field of South African literature. The most radical reformation, for sure, is exactly how the writing of post-Apartheid literature has been undergoing a metamorphosis caused by the influence of and engagement with digital world which has now become internal. (Hayles 2012, 109)

4. Key writers and their digital engagement

Zakes Mda, Mandla Langa, and Lauren Beukes are definitely part of the contemporary South African literary world and they have been recognized there as authors who have great depth of message in their work as well as direct contact to digital platforms, which is a way their voices receive a global echo in conversations about history, trauma, and identity. In addition to this, Mda has taken it upon himself to not only publish his own ideas but to educate, through the internet, by making digital content that speaks in the memory of many people and absorbs the trauma of loss. Thus, platforms like Twitter have been useful to the author, who continuously speaks on various issues, by sharing personal experiences of the past, thus creating a record of the personal experiences of the people which are unknown to but essential for the wise interpretation of the past events, and those in the books such as the ones of the author has mentioned. At the same time, we can perceive that Mda, in his public manifestations, perfectly combines the literary with the political, and in this regard, he manages to draw strength from today's communication means to make the stories of Apartheid which are strong images in his mind also, alive in the public's mind, especially the descendants who will then remain opposed to the fact that such a time ever existed, and they who will ensure history is preserved and the monumental hurts of an era are not obliterated even in the frenzy of the digital age. (Mda 1995, 77)

Secondly, Mandla Langa has shown significant writing skills and he has been able to convey the richness of dialogue that exists in the shadows of the South Africa problems, suffering the past pain and still in search for the solution of the above two. In particular, Langa’s book*, The Lost Colours of the Chameleon*, is a vivid and thrilling tale about the collusion of political power and personal disloyalty. The author's footprint is also worthy of note; it consists of brilliant essays and profound online discussions which translate the literary issues into a current discourse relating to governance and accountability. Langa’s own participation in these platforms only

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confirms that there is an urgent need and space for young people to get involved in the narratives of liberation and restoration. Thus, such kind of mentorship is not only an alternative but can even be more important and of more impact than his reading, as it is clear from the legacy of the writer. His work demonstrates that blogging, generally regarded as being short-lived, can be a reliable medium of historical narration, and the most reliable channel of public participation when it is appropriately harnessed through an intellectual apparatus. (Langa 2008, 116)

Lauren Beukes broadens the horizons of the digital discourse, identifying the real essence of the digital culture in her created times. Both *Moxyland* and *Zoo City* carry the narrative of controlled technology intertwined with surveillance, and the forgottenness of the past, hence reflecting fears and concerns that still have a powerful impact on South Africa after Apartheid. Beukes's involvement in the digital world has many dimensions. By no means is it just about selling her work, but she also takes an active stance in the discourses on cyberculture, gender politics, and social justice, and so becomes a commentator and a creator at once in the digital realm. A fact also worthy of our observation is that by always having the right information about algorithms and the ways in which online platforms create the unavoidable truth and history, Beukes's stories become a voice challenging not only the existing power architectures but also the politics of digital memory. (Beukes 2008, 198)

In addition to the latter, these writers can be viewed as performing work that is approaching the borders of literature and digital activism. Their participation in the dialogues online is one of the factors that besides explaining the texts offers different interpretations and thus encourages the culture of participation where readers make their own input and not just the writers create the narrative. Mda, Langa, and Beukes are crafting the new space where literature and the immediacy and the reach of digital communication come into contact and intermingle. This they do in order to bring forth the many possibilities that literature still has in contributing to the rebuilding of nations through digital memory and through narrating untold stories in this digital era.

5. The symbiosis between technology and history

The advent of computer animation story transmission, particularly through combining animations and interactive formats, has drastically contaminated our traditional ways to think about historical events. Initially, the mass media might only be the first to crush the apartheid tale, but the increase of the 21st-century public has caused the interactive timelines, virtual reality museums, and digital forums to become the hit methods for the narrative. Artists like Lauren Beukes, the author of the book *Zoo City*, who in her work tackles the issues of marginalization and identity in a digitally-saturated Johannesburg, are just some of the examples of how a writer and the cyber universe can collaborate to make a double-bottomed, multi-level in-depth picture of social and historical events. This phylum of narratives tossed, and grafted into the stylistic structure of that one, by means of digital, and thus provided with space for

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continuous and live conversation, becomes the new germ of reflection on historical events. (Beukes 2010, 55-56)

Last but not least, in the multidimensional space of digital storytelling, that is online dialogues, which attract people back to the apartheid era and enhance their perception of it, the hand of digital interaction can also be noticed as a change power. Consequently, the online world functions as a location where past and present intersect and thus, recorded materials, as well as the stories, are not the only elements. Other features such as anonymous but knowledgeable commenters and time-to-time great writers make up virtual social media gatherings and through that shape the heart and matter of debates. People's activities in this line illustrate the way digital applications open the door to knowledge stock and also spur the very process of its understanding in modern days, thus demonstrating how history repeats itself and is a malleable component of both the recollection of the past and the activism for the future.

At the heart of this process is the relationship between history and technology in a cycle of continuous interaction with one another. For instance, the penetration of digital archives and real-time databases today greatly defines the work of historians such as what is worth saving, while the appearance of new trends in historiography sets the stage for new technological instruments of data visualization and narrative building. In South Africa, such mutually reinforcing dynamics are visible to the greatest extent, where projects like the South African History Archive Online are good examples of digital technologies that not only record the past but also create the new ways of historical inquiry. As the virtual environment continues to grow in its complexity, the interconnectedness of history and technology shows up more clearly and urgently, calling for both historiography and digital engagement ethics to be rethought. (https://www.saha.org.za/)

It is no longer the case that history is a static record amidst digital transformation but it now becomes an evolving, adaptive living entity that shares the evolutionary pathways of the technology by which it is expressed and disputed. Consequently, the interconnection between the advent of digital technology and the narration of history unfolds the puzzle for scholars, writers, and readers to solve – a puzzle wherein memory becomes political and social debate in the digital agora, thus ensuring that apartheid remains negotiable legacy in the people's collective memory.

6. Memes, hashtags, and digital trauma

Hashtags such as *#RhodesMustFall* have emerged to become a powerful vehicle for historical revisitation, thereby changing digital platforms into meeting points of collective memory and public protest in ways not seen before. These markers from the digital world not only consolidate the existing voices but also put the historical complaints within global discussions, thus, making the space more dynamic and the unresolved traumas of colonialism and apartheid more accessible to modern audiences. Essays on digital activism are further displayed through Khanya Mtshali's featuring of hashtags functioning not only as archival tools but also as mobilizing

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symbols—complex socio-political demands are thus encapsulated in understandable and shareable format, i.e., the most intricate issues in the society are expressed in a simple and understandable way. These interventions not only manifest the short-term outcome of mass media but also exert long-term effects in historical injustice, and, as a result, they urge the society to be alert to persisting problems while continuing the process of forming new political institutions for social change in South Africa. (Mtshali 2019, 44)

Implicitly, memes have become a source of strength and a driving force in the communication flow, condensing historical criticism into humour, irony, and visual shorthand which move at a very fast pace within virtual spaces. Despite the fact that they are often belittled as trivial or of no importance, memes are very powerful means of persuasion, they change the way events, figures, and ideologies are perceived and this effect is beyond that of academic or journalistic interventions. We can draw a parallel between Shifman's ideas in the book *Memes in Digital Culture and the Article* at the same time as she describes the participatory skill of memes, which gives them the advantage of being able to be used for ordinary people. (Shifman 2014, 158)

We are in a complex situation where the idea of digital trauma can be made more complicated. There are people and groups in society who try to represent their suffering caused by the violence of the Apartheid regime in the most basic and human way possible using digital means. This will be mostly for the victims and their families who had undergone traumatic experiences as a result of the violence to complete their healing process. Meanwhile, the World Wide Web not only provides a stage for the voice of the oppressed and the downtrodden but also has been instrumental in enabling digital communities of care and attention to grow. In Coombes' words, the reconciliation of memory and potential retraumatization which is actual after the Apartheid times is also a phenomenon for Internet users. The translation of personal and/or collective trauma into the digital space represents a double action of both therapeutic and political character, that way the victim can be a rebuilder of the harmonic resonance of his story and at the same time come in full view and examine with the others the very difficult questions related to public grief in an era of unstoppable, everlasting communication.

Reparative justice is increasingly exemplified by the storytelling on the Internet where personal accounts, archival footages, and reinterpretations are synthesized not only to challenge the dominant historical narratives but also to demand a true restoration. Through digital media, the marginalized communities are given an unprecedented voice that is capable of redefining the edges of historical discussions by making sure that the aspects of human lived experience are being showcased prominently. The thought is also present in Achille Mbembe's essay, *Critique of Black Reason*, where he illustrates the use of digital media as a tool for power disruption, an example being the spread of narratives on the internet contesting the official version of apartheid history. In this regard, digital storytelling is not just a form of remembering but it also becomes a powerful force in the fight for justice,

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enabling new alliances to be built and visualizing the concept of historical accountability in a world that is digital and interconnected. (Mbembe 2017, 221)

7. The mission of historical reconciliation

The act of historical reconciliation, when studied with the help of Christian theology, unveils a deep striving for the truth and justice that heals everyone, as well as a repeated request to redress past mistakes. Beyond being only a church-related affair, Christian mission has managed to start intertwining itself with political issues and has thus taken up the challenge to eliminate the wounds of history and ensure a better future. From Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness*, we can observe that truth leads the way, meaning that with no truth, reconciliation is impossible, and that, in turn, is the definition of a theology that does not mince words about the necessity of the exposure of past atrocities as a matter of God's will. This practice of demanding and submitting oneself to open and honest communication is consistent with the wider historical phenomena that have shown religious initiatives to be indispensable in and to peoples and their means to make systemic changes and to their self-cleansing practices. (Tutu 1999, 27)

In the realms of digital and literary communication, the concept of reconciliation has shifted its shape and reality through various filters, in the process giving vivid testimony of its lasting importance and also of its increasing intricacy. A masterpiece such as *A Human Being Died That Night* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela not only opens up to the brutal act of forgiveness but also delves deeply into the psychological world of the victim and the perpetrator, while in their own turn, the exchanges in digital media enlarge the discourse through the presence of witnesses, critics, and counter-narratives, and so doing, draw the attention of a wider and wider audience. (Gobodo 2003, 106)

John de Gruchy, in his work *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, insists on the position that relationality or dialogue is indispensable for reconciliation, the characteristics of which, however, find a new channel of expression through the internet, i.e., they have indeed quite new lives in the virtual panorama of the immediacy of time and the interactivity of the participants who create possibilities for the continuous renegotiation of historical events and meanings. So, the place of rhetoric in literature and the role of digital media in its promotion write a conversation out that goes beyond the written word, it is basically an ongoing debate that portrays a future although it beats with the heart of a contest. (Gruchy 2002, 80)

The Church, that has seen the light of the potential of digital platforms in the process of civilization transforming, has made an effort to be more present in these online spaces to help in this process. Besides the traditional pastoral activities, faith groups have now extended their influence on social media, blogs, and digital forums to work for remembrance, equity, and healing remembering that their prophetic witness remains in the digital age. Furthermore, Elaine Graham, in *Theological Reflection: Methods*, establishes in her work that the Church’s involvement in public issues has to be based on the context, a claim which suggests that the digital world is

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an arena where theological practice will face new challenges and find the means to evolve. The digital extension of the mission is a kind of double reinforcement of the Church's role of being with the poor and against the abuse of power, allowing for the reflection of ethical quandaries caused by algorithmic biases and the commercialization of suffering to be possible. (Graham 2019, 65)

The theory of narrative theology, the one that firmly holds the human story to be the essential element in understanding the divine truth, provides the best and the most consistent basis for the integration of truth and justice with the mission of reconciliation. One may notice that by preferring the lived and real and aiming for witness and evidence, narrative theology is quite vocal about reconciliation not being theologically neutral but rather the gospel is the source from where it is channeled, the gospel that is both within history and embodied in the communities. Another source claims that Stanley Hauerwas, as the author of narrative *Peaceable Kingdom*, has a discussion about the relationship between story and ethics, in which he claims that the Christian narrative weaves believers into a story of peace and justice which opposes the culture. (Hauerwas 2023, 111-112)

8. Conclusions

In the discussion of historical memory, digital culture, and theological mission, we can observe a deeply interconnected space in which the stories of trauma, justice, and renewal are ever-changing. The discussion is now led by the digital world, in which the formerly suppressed now have a platform, while literature is still the way for the community to remember, debate, and reconstruct the historical events of the past. The new ways to reaching out to the people with the message the Church is using to highlight its commitment to Christian mission demonstrate that the task of dealing with the pain of yesterday and keeping pace with the desires of today is still relevant. As we learn from works like Desmond *Tutu's No Future Without Forgiveness* and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night*, the process of dealing with the past is nothing but a straight line; it is still incomplete, if not requiring a new agreement and renewal on an ongoing basis. Electronic and digital storytelling, despite their problems, are opening doors that were never opened for the democratization of historical discourse, but they still demand us to pay close attention to those stories that are told and those that are omitted. The intertwined relationship between technology and history, filled with the influx of literary and theological inputs, encourages the development of the ethical conduct of constant watchfulness and kindness. In the end, approaching reconciliation with history as a mission, by speaking not only the truth and by using various platforms, enables the society to have a collective memory that not only keeps the past but enables the current and future generations to cooperate and build justice and humanity.

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