

## REVIEWS

A Review of Margreet de Lange (1997) *The Muzzled Muse: literature and censorship in South Africa*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins (Utrecht publications in general and comparative literature, 32).

**Christopher Merrett**

In this short but tightly written and concisely argued book, Margreet de Lange puts forward the view that censorship has been a critical factor in modern South African literature. In exploring the process by which authors had to write for both their readers and the censors, de Lange draws attention to variations in literary form; and to the internal workings of the censorship system in the period 1963 to 1985.

While not forgetting security legislation and various types of harassment as forms of censorship, she explains that the Publications Acts of 1963 and 1974 epitomised apartheid ideology which was based on a totalitarian vision of Christianity and reflected the close links between language and political struggle in the history of the Afrikaner. The result was a system that demanded affirmation and rejected individualism, flexibility and idealism. It revolved around a moralistic and conformist view of life and the perceived interests of the average white South African. The infamous section 47 of the 1974 Publications Act listed pornography, blasphemy, ridicule of sections of the community, harm to race relations and threats to state security as reasons for banning. All were interpreted in a narrow fashion that contrived to treat the disenfranchised of South Africa as the enemy within while arguing disingenuously that the Act was about morality rather than maintaining the status quo through political repression. As a consequence writers were caught in the crossfire.

De Lange goes about her task by looking at three types of literature: Afrikaans writing; English writing; and Black writing in English. The collision between the censorship system and Afrikaans literature that had broken out of the laager from the 1960s onwards with the Sestigers created a major stir in literary circles and reverberated in the Afrikaner establishment. It had some far-reaching consequences. The banning of André Brink's *Kennis van die Aand* eventually led to the founding of a samizdat type literature based on subscriptions; as well the introduction of the concept of the 'likely reader' and consideration of literary and artistic merit by the censors. Nevertheless, Etienne Leroux's *Magarsfontein*,

*O Magersfontein* received the Hertzog Prize while still banned and this created considerable tension within establishment circles. This period of upheaval in the late-1970s led to a more flexible system that remained pre-eminently a political tool but emphasised tactics rather than rigid grand strategy and was to have a profound effect on all types of South African writing.

The censors banned Brink's *Kennis* ostensibly on religious grounds but in reality for political reasons: the book painted too authentic an account of the experiences of a Coloured South African. By contrast, his '*n Oomblik in die Wind* had less immediacy and examined the experiences of a white woman in the eighteenth century. Decontextualising and dislocation were techniques that were successfully used by Afrikaans writers to evade the attentions of the censors. Karel Schoeman's *By Fakkellig* was set in eighteenth century Ireland which nevertheless had enough obvious parallels, a dominant minority for instance, to raise questions about contemporary South Africa. But this required an imaginative shift that either did not concern or was missed by the censors and it remained unbanned. Louis Krüger also used Ireland in *Die Skerpskutter* in which the Catholic ghettos of modern Ulster hold obvious comparisons with black townships. It too escaped banning because it was not seen as inciting change in South Africa. John Miles' *Donderdag of Woensdag* was a picaresque work on South Africa that satirised the evasive strategies used by other authors to avoid censorship. Although a telling analysis of contemporary South Africa, the censors refrained from banning on political grounds but again preferred the religious clause.

As de Lange points out, writers in English were not constrained by a local market but they had been subjected to censorship far longer through the embargoes on imported, foreign published titles. The censors had always been particularly worried about popular paperback editions and using the 1963 Act they showed their concern over the likely size and nature of audiences for South African writing in English. Two of Nadine Gordimer's novels illustrate the attitude of the censors. *Burger's Daughter*, a work of high realism set in the mid-1970s which reproduced previously banned text, was banned under all five criteria of the Publications Act and described as an 'outspoken furthering of communism'. But the utopian, futuristic *A Sport of Nature* was untroubled by the censor. In the event, *Burger's Daughter* was soon unbanned but without the co-operation of the author who bitterly opposed a tactic designed to reflect well on the reformist pretensions of the government and which gave the impression that white writers had been co-opted by the system.

Christopher Hope's exile view of South Africa as a madhouse was illustrated in *A Separate Development*, a satire about race classification. It provoked a

classic reaction from the censorship bureaucracy. A censorship committee banned it as harmful to race relations and state security on the strength of a few passages; but the Appeal Board recognised the satire, pointed out that it should not be taken too seriously, and unbanned it. Again the work of an English speaking writer had been used as a political football in the conflict taking place within the censorship bureaucracy. At the same time, JM Coetzee's allegorical works about philosophical questions only loosely related to the South African condition escaped the censor's net because they were 'not a blueprint for action or a call to arms' (p108). The problem with this sort of writing was that the literary critics questioned its relevance to contemporary South Africa. Indeed as JM Leighton, a former head of the censorship apparatus, had famously written: 'If you are not allowed to criticise the Government or its agencies, then describe the antics of pigs, as Orwell does in *Animal Farm*' (quoted on p110).

The third group of writers considered by de Lange comprised blacks writing in English. As she points out, writing in the vernacular was considered a reflection of apartheid's divisiveness and it was in any case tightly controlled by establishment publishers and school boards. Of course, black writers suffered from apartheid in its totality and a literary generation had been censored into oblivion by the banning of individuals, including many who were in exile. Problems also arose with publishers because of the likelihood of banning and the pricing of published work. The censorship reforms of the early-1980s did not benefit black writers, nor were they able to exploit the literary tactics of their white colleagues because literature was almost universally regarded as an arm of the struggle. The censors were extremely nervous of the inevitable directness of black writing and the inspirational effect it was feared to possess. Nevertheless, the authorities did employ the safety valve thesis and, in a spirit of repressive tolerance and paternalism, they unbanned some titles on appeal, although the authors themselves predictably refused to co-operate. It has been argued in some quarters that the emergence of poetry was the black writer's evasive tactic to counter censorship but this is rejected by de Lange. Poetry, she argues, suited the circumstances, was in any case connected to oral tradition and perhaps most importantly was cheaper to publish.

Miriam Tiali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* and Mtutulezi Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* were duly proscribed at the same time as books on similar themes by white writers were unbanned. De Lange highlights the divisiveness of the system by showing how the Publications Appeal Board failed to appeal against the decisions of censorship committees where black writers were concerned. *Muriel at Metropolitan* was banned on the strength of an isolated passage, an approach to censorship that was supposed to have lapsed. *Call Me Not a Man* was

proscribed because of one story about prisoners labouring on a white farm that had already been published in the magazine *Staffrider*. Again, old methods of censorship were applied to black writers: the book was ostensibly banned for 'lack of literary merit' but the real reason was a desire for political control. Bannings applied to *Staffrider* itself suggested that exiled writers were of particular concern to the authorities. But it was in turn the object of selective unbannings on the basis of perceived literary merit: the likely readership was judged to be elitist and the revolutionary potential of its prose was therefore discounted.

The book closes with a chapter on the censorship system of post-1994 South Africa, an important contribution because so little has been written about it. De Lange perceptively argues that much the same structure will survive the democratic transition with the emphasis upon classification and regulation. Promoters of the new legislation have tried to give the impression that it is free from bias but there is little doubt that it may still be used for political purposes. In the meantime, we live with the anomaly that all existing bannings remain in place until individual titles are laboriously released one by one, a classic case of reform from within.

*The Muzzled Muse* has a comprehensive bibliography and an accurate index of names. On balance, the most notable success of de Lange's work has been to illuminate the inner workings of the South African state censorship system during the darkest days of apartheid. Her treatment of the literary devices used to evade censorship is comprehensive but perhaps less well developed. One or two minor errors mar the text: Belfast's Catholic neighbourhood is named Falls Road not Falls Way; South Africa's securocrats worked with an Internal Security (not Securities) Act; the notorious *Jacobsen's Index to Objectionable Literature* is not spelt with a *k*; and the surname *Buthlezi* is treated to a number of erroneous spellings which should have been picked up by the indexer. Nevertheless, this is a highly readable volume which presents the reader with valuable insights into an important aspect of political repression at the height of South African authoritarianism.