

THREE POISONS
By KRIBEN PILLAY

INTRODUCTION

I am happy to see that *The Three Poisons* by Kriben Pillay, a slender volume of writing with deep subterranean undertones, has been submitted for consideration for the UKZN Book Prize. The University and the academic community at large, and the wider public, are greatly enhanced by intellectual work of this kind.

This particular submission is a necessary reminder that knowledge production may take different forms and may straddle the discursive and analytical as well as the creative and aesthetic in highly original and imaginative ways; indeed, the latter form is as crucial as the former. As the renowned postcolonial critic, Gayatri Spivak, asserts, aesthetic education remains the strongest resource available in the cause of global justice and democracy [see Spivak 2012].

- **THE NEED FOR THE BOOK**

It is a truism that literature holds up a mirror to nature, and Professor Pillay's writing more than amply demonstrates this. Indeed, this book, like all good literature, goes further. It provides an important analysis of societal living in various spaces. South Africa has a commendable tradition of literary writing

that speaks to our history of colonialism, apartheid and institutionalized racism. Professor Pillay has been a contributor himself to this very corpus, and this recent book provides further important and necessary ways of seeing this history, with relevance and implications for how we live in the present.

This book inserts itself into post-apartheid writing which has many purposes. It is necessary to re-read the past, and to be critical of the ways in which the shaping of memory of the past proceeds. The agenda for transformation should be both prospectively and retrospectively oriented. In order to develop an egalitarian society it is necessary to explore the genealogy of cultural hegemony. K Booth argues that it is only by rethinking the ideas that made us can we re-imagine our country [in Vale et al, 2014: 5]. Professor Pillay's book promotes the transformation agenda of South Africa in general, and of universities and communities in particular, by drawing attention to the shaping of the social imagination.

- **DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK**

The title of the book, *The Three Poisons*, is derived from David R Loy, the author of *The World is Made of Stories* and the epigraph from the book gives the necessary background to Professor Pillay's project:

"...when we penetrate to the roots of the problems they analyse, in each case, we end up uncovering greed, ill will and delusion – 'the three poisons'... The book is composed of three separate stories, "An Unethical Clearance", "The Twofold Tamil Rule" and "Delusion".

The first story, “An Unethical Clearance”, is located in a university setting, and exposes the questionable behaviour of university personnel, who maintain a façade of adherence to rules in pursuit of scholarly standards, but who are propelled by expediency and personal aggrandisement. It is more than a matter of mindless bureaucracy; it is unconscionable flouting of ethical behaviour, and a gross lack of understanding of and sensitivity to academic integrity.

The second story, “The Twofold Tamil Rule”, aptly described as a “novella, bordering on epic proportions”[see Foreword], covers three generations of the Pillai family. An amalgam of personal and community history, the narrative covers a wide discursive field, and introduces many tropes for critical reflection.

It invokes the present time as a time of memory, and memory making, by constructing and representing the past. The particular and quotidian narratives are set in the context of the grand narrative of Empire. By focussing on the story of Empire, in a localized setting, the uprooting and re-location of individuals, the interactions in imperial/colonial spaces, and the seamless elision into apartheid space – all in the perennial attempt to search for home - the narrative is at once parochial and universal.

It is not surprising that the concept of home has developed in post-colonial writing, as the history of colonialism has been marked by travel and movement by the settler or immigrant experience. It is quite predictable that the theme of a ‘politics of home’ has emerged as a necessary trope in such

analysis. This dislocation takes on a peculiar meaning in apartheid South Africa, marked as it was by uprooting, dislocation and relocation, as we see in this story.

Historically, we see in this story the emergence of racial discourse and the gradual normalization of racial categories, and racialised spaces, as colonial rationalities and bureaucracies hold sway. There is also tension between the competing impulses towards accommodation on the one hand and resistance and agency on the other, living as one does “in this shadowland of semi-recognition” [Foreword]. We appreciate the recurring theme of engaging with a recalcitrant reality in diverse contexts.

The sub-text of the style and tenor of the narrative, with the idioms and idiosyncracies of a particular group, imbues it with authenticity and, more importantly, shows the power of self-definition [emerging as it does from “below”, and confirming, if confirmation is needed, the “epistemological privilege of the poor”] against the burden of history. It reminds us to that the *colonial occupation of soil and soul* [as Fanon would have said: see Gibson 2011] is resisted in different ways. It highlights too that South Africa was made by ideas, but from markedly diverse contexts, and that most of these ideas came here in languages that were intimately bound to the ideas they carried [See Vale et al 2014:5, my emphasis].

This story modulates the grand narrative of apartheid in creative ways and from particular vantage points. As Jacob Dlamini rightly observes:

“The master narrative would have us believe that black South Africans, who populate struggle jargon mostly as ‘masses of our

people', experienced apartheid the same way, suffered the same way and fought the same way against apartheid...The master narrative blinds us to a richness, a complexity of life among black South Africans, that not even colonialism and apartheid at their worst could destroy" [Dlamini 2009:18,19].

The third story, "Delusion", is fittingly elusive, enigmatic and minimalist, and raises more questions than it answers [the writer of the Foreword is wisely "frugal" in his response to the story]. The story shows the thin dividing line between certainty and delusion. Again, the writer uses the slipperiness of identity to create a narrative. How do we attribute coherence to the story? And why the very desire for coherence? Is this the great delusion of life? Do we take our reality/identity from what is attributed to us? And who are the arbiters of the "truth" of our identities? Who decides what is the "essence" to which we yearn? And does "essence" exist anyway?

Who is deluded? Is it the one who thinks he/she is deluded? Is it the one who thinks he/she is not deluded? Is it the one who thinks the other is deluded?

The story also raises questions about reception, and the proprietorship of reception, from multiple angles. What role does the reader play? Can the reader become some omniscient being, ready to fathom and unravel the truth of the story!? And how does the "habit of control" diminish any growing perceptiveness and "unveiling" we might aspire to, and entice us to embrace delusions? Indeed, *Three Poisons*, as a whole, is a *writerly text*, in the Barthian sense, where a *writerly text* invites the reader to take an active

role in the construction of meaning [as opposed to a *readerly* text, which is presented in a linear, traditional manner]; and “Delusion”, in particular, illustrates this well.

Professor Pillay works centripetally and centrifugally, training his eye on the immediate and particular, as well as implicitly ranging beyond it. The connecting thread/trope of all three stories is the question or conundrum of IDENTITY, as the stories provide explorations and meditations on identity from different vantage points.

Identity. It is appropriated? It is real? Is it fictive? It is a function of history? Is it a disruption of history’s effect? Is it [not] discriminatory? It is a burden/a millstone? Is it liberatory? Is it assumed? Is it [not] imposed? Is it a delusion? Is it permanent...cast in stone...? Is it temporary...worn like a jacket, and taken off at will...? In moving to deeper understandings of identity, true decolonization, in its widest sense, in different ways becomes possible...

- THE STYLE OF THE BOOK AND STANDARD OF COVERAGE

Professor Kriben Pillay adopts a minimalist style. His writing is a sparse and dense, highly suggestive and works with compression, nuance and indirection [“by indirections find directions”, as in Shakespeare]. At the same time it invokes what Walt Whitman observes in *Leaves of Grass*, “I contain multitudes”.

The style of the book also anticipates a certain pedagogy. The stories remind me of Isabel Hofmeyr’s analysis of Gandhi’s news journal, *Indian Opinion*,

in her book, *Gandhi's Printing Press - Experiments in Slow Reading* [2013]. Professor Hofmeyr highlights the element of *slow reading*, as deployed by Gandhi – where contemplative and meditative reading induces transformation at different levels.

- STANDARD OF SCHOLARSHIP AND STAFF MEMBER'S CONTRIBUTION

Professor Pillay is an accomplished writer, playwright and poet, apart from his contribution to academic work and leadership development. His poetry has appeared in ground-breaking anthologies such as *Voices from Within* [anthology] edited by Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor [1982]; *The Return of the Amazi Bird – Black South African Poetry 1891-1981* [1982]. His plays and writings have appeared in both African and Indian Diaspora collections. For example, his play, *Looking for Muruga*, has appeared in the international collection of plays from the South Asian Diaspora, *Beyond Bollywood and Broadway*, edited by Neilesh Bose [2009], and his exposition of the iconic South African play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, is included in the international collection, *Contemporary Literature from the African Diaspora* [1997].

Professor Pillay displays an abiding interest in and commitment to critical pedagogy. He works eclectically, crossing narrow disciplinary boundaries, and he has produced several studies in this and connected fields, all with a view to working for social change. He is, variously, intellectual, philosopher, creative artist, practitioner and pedagogue.

His work, collectively, shows the fundamental importance of the role of the Humanities in the cause of social change and transformation.

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