

Original Paper

Sexual Transgression: An Answer to the Immorality Act in

André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*

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Abstract

*This article investigates, through Michel Foucault's work about sexuality and transgression, the transgression as it is articulated through André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*. This sexuality is related to the socio-political shifts underway in the depth of the apartheid regime. In this article, transgression is posited as a dissident tactic towards transformation of ways of thinking sexuality during apartheid. Transgression challenges "this sexuality on constant assistance" as a defined and reified entity which reflects the position of André Brink on sexual matters. Depicting sexual transgression in his novel becomes a literary weapon for getting down one of the essential pillar of the apartheid regime: the Immorality Act.*

Keywords

dissident tactic, Immorality Act, literary weapon, pillar, sexuality, sexual transgression

1. Introduction

Every society has certain norms and principles to control and order the behaviour of its people in all spheres: be in religion, politics and even in sexuality. During the apartheid regime, sexuality was outrageously used as a political weapon to control and categorise individuals: their sexual behaviours, inclinations and pleasure. Anything that invited dissident writers to combat in their novels prohibited sexuality according to the canons of the apartheid regime. Depicting this sexual transgression then becomes one of their weapon to combat and move away this sexuality under assistance. Most of them, like Brink, were members of a group of South African white writers who, in the 1960s, helped to break down national taboos on the treatment of sex and politics in fiction. And transgression was truly a key

idea for dissident writers. They denounced what this radical form of institutionalising sexuality did to people and their private lives. But what is sexual transgression?

According to Chris Jenks (2003, p. 2), “to transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe”. Sexuality of transgression can be defined as a sexual act that goes against a law, rule, or code of conduct that governs sexuality in a given community or society. As such it can be seen as an offence; the violation of a law or a duty or moral principle. Transgressing is also the act of going beyond or overstepping some boundaries or limits established by a system or an organisation. That is to say, something done, that is usually opposed to something said, and designed to challenge conventional ideas or beliefs, etc. And this sexual transgression is much relayed in André Brink’s *An Instant in the Wind* (1976).

In this article, we explore the ways in which sexual transgression is depicted to challenge the Immorality Act and also expand on its manifestations in the novel following the work of Michel Foucault (1978). In fact, his work discusses the way sexuality becomes a site for the construction of knowledge and power. Foucault’s approach allows us to envisage individuals as capable of transgression, enabling them to challenge disabling barriers and find new selves, new ways of being in the world by getting rid of this kind of political “double bind” like that of the apartheid regime.

In this novel, sexual transgression is most of the time practiced by dissatisfying individuals who try to cross the restrictions set by the Immorality Act with the sole desire to attain freedom, sexual desire or any welfare regarding sexuality. *An Instant in the Wind*, based on a postmodernism and feminism theory, focuses on gender and sexuality issues including their deviation. In terms of the plot, it recounts a sexual intercourse between a black man and a white woman. In a first part, this sexuality between Elisabeth and Adam will be unveiled and in a second part the main motivation of such a sexuality in a rigid system of surveillance will be given.

2. Disclosing of “Forbidden” Sexuality between Adam Mantoor and Elisabeth Larsson

An Instant in the Wind (1976) was written by André Brink Philippos in the depth of the apartheid regime. It is a detailed description of a passionate and intense sexual intercourse between two adult individuals in poor conditions: Adam Mantoor, a black runaway and Elisabeth Larsson, a white and sublime abandoned widow in the bush after the assassination of her legal husband by a wild animal. In fact, Adam was asked by his Bass (Note 1) to flog his mother, because she refuses to prune the master’s vineyard in order to attend her own beloved mother’s funerals. And when he refuses to do so, his Baas smashes his face with a piece of wood, and Adam turns on him, and beats him almost to death. Then he flees to South Africa’s veld. There, he comes to meet Elizabeth Larsson, the only person to survive her husband Erik Alexis Larsson’s expedition in the vast South African interior. Alone and terrified, she pleads with the runaway slave to bring her back to the Cape Town and her home.

She is an educated white woman, totally helpless in the wild. At first their relationship is guarded, poisoned by the black and white in them both. But hesitantly there emerges between them a friendship

that engulfs their most private selves, as they face the long trek back to the Cape Town, the cradle of the apartheid regime. And in the stunning story of their trek together, they find in each other their mutual need and humanity, and finally their days together turn into an unforgettable and tender love story.

In the novel, transgression is posited by André Brink as a tactic towards the ways of thinking sexuality differently from the one edited according to the codes of the Immorality Act. In fact, the apartheid regime has made sexuality, which is supposed to be a private affair, a political one. Through it, individuals of all races and social status are controlled. No one is free to choose whoever he/she wants as his/her sexual partner. Everything is already barricaded by the system. No one can escape it. The complaint of Elisabeth Larsson—the main female protagonist of *An Instant in the Wind*—is quite revealing:

To be a girl like me is the worst that can happen to one. Don't do this, don't do that. Be careful, your dress will get dirty. Watch out your hair. Don't let the sun burn your face. Do you think a man will look twice at a girl who does such things? After all, that was the final aim: to be attractive to a man. No matter what you want, your whole life is determined by someone else (p. 150).

This is also the point of view of Kristien, another female character of Andre Brink's *Imaginations of the Sand* (1996, p. 455), who shares the same ideas as Elisabeth Larsson for the fate reserved for women: "I'm not even a woman anymore. I'm just someone's wife, someone's sister, someone's mother ... I don't even have a name of my own. I started with dad's. Then he passed me to Casper like a barter item."

Through these confessions, these female characters paint what was the life of a woman under the Immorality Act. They were never treated as intelligent and responsible individuals, but as mere objects or gadgets in the hands of men.

The Immorality Act most often defines as normal any sexuality through the presence of the penis and the vagina between white people only or between Blacks only. Whoever breaks the ban, that is to say the law is punished with seven years of imprisonment as prescribed by the Act. In other words, any sexuality that does not follow these requirements is perverse or transgressive.

Due to the Immorality Act, a sexual intercourse between two people of different colour or of the same sex is highly prohibited. Adam Mantoor as a black slave is firmly defended to have a sexual intercourse with Elisabeth Larsson, a pure white woman. As such the sexual intercourse between Adam Mantoor the black runaway domestic servant and Elisabeth Larsson the white woman is a transgressive sexuality even if it occurs between two consenting adults: a male and a female. This transgression is proscribed by the Immorality Act according to its own canons. And such a transgression is problematic as transgression does not define itself. Sometimes, transgressed acts enable to resist to the discursive power which denigrates it. The missions of the Immorality Act in relation to transgression, not only were central in the creation and reproduction of racism, but also were significant in supplying the

content of a white male power for the safeguarding of the purity of the white race. This emphasises the difficulties in rethinking paradigms of sexuality differently without falling into established ideological patterns such as a woman without a husband or a masculine tutorial figure is nothing but a poor woman who is despised. It is only in marriage that a woman is glorified, especially as she remains subordinate to the man.

The sexual intercourse between Adam Mantoor and Elisabeth Larsson is so pure and sincere that it goes beyond these ideological patterns by inscribing the call of their body or their flesh into a dimension that cannot be controlled by simple ideologies. From there, the potential of what their body can receive from this sexuality of transgression is limitless. Through it, one can fly inside his own body in transformation and redistribution of fleshly intensities, that is to say, we fly from what we were before a sexual intercourse and become something otherwise. As sexual intercourse is the occasion where their both flesh and speech unveil their true position, Elisabeth is right when she praises the merits of Adam during their sexual intercourse (1976, p. 145): “....*My man, my own... She moistens a finger in the slit of her sex and touches on his forehead, between his eyes...I’m baptising you again... Now your name is Adam, for me.*”

Through this extract, it can be noticed that Elisabeth is completely transformed after their sexual intercourse, hence the baptizing of Adam with her vaginal mucus on the forehead and between the eyes, in the same way the Roman Catholic rite of baptism does to his disciples. This baptism can be seen as a message by way of reply: the supposed superiority of the white race, which in reality is highly questionable. Here, the narrator testifies beautifully through Elisabeth’s transfiguration about the power of sex, of its capacity to elevate individuals out of worlds that would divide them, and also of its occasionally transcendent miracle. And here, the title “*An Instant in the Wind*” of the novel is very sound. And this is the way the narrator explains it: “*It is like the sky through which a bird is flying. And only occasionally, very rarely—an instant in the wind—it is allowed to alight on branch or burning stone to rest: but not for long.*” (p. 198).

Through this quotation, the act of lovemaking, even if it does not last, signifies more through the transcendent miraculous power that it conveys. Lovemaking is more like a battlefield where two forces of miraculous power meet, interact, and collide. Moreover, lovemaking appears as the only occasion where Adam, the wanted slave and Elisabeth, the lost white woman can interact for a while on the common ground of libidinal drives, considering the huge discrepancies between their origin and their other attributes: political power, economical background, social status, religions, and even skin colours. According to the mores within which Elisabeth has been raised, Adam Mantoor is not even a man for her, but he might be something to be feared. It is the reason why Elisabeth is initially revolted by Adam. She is terrified of him, and even afraid of him.

If lovemaking becomes the only occasion for them to commune with one another, it can be said that their bodies become an important vehicle of exchange and of change through which the transformation

is regulated and performed during their sexual intercourse. It leaves them with transient corporeal pleasure, and as last resort orgasm for an intrinsic inner communication:

We have got to complete the circle, she says, taking his hand (...) I love you more than I do myself...This precious instant of togetherness the night allows is all we have : here is my body, here I am, take me...In this fleeting night you're eternally mine. Man. My man... p. 145

Through this extract, we notice that Elisabeth is entirely fascinated by Adam's sexual performance which is exercised to turn Elisabeth into the subordinate, by creating the possibility of blacks' domination over Afrikaners. Adam can use his possession of Elisabeth's body during their sexual intercourse in the articulation of his black male power. Foucault's claims that "the body is the inscribed surface of events" and "power is exercised, rather than possessed" can characterize this black-white relationship (1978, p. 15). This kind of power is deferred in their case to the moments when the two are not in competition. If her body is conditioned and lost by the apartheid ideology, Elisabeth, herself, refuses this inscription, and she eventually accepts the subordination to a new order directed by Adam, the Black:

And now no longer slave. Man. My man, my own... I love you. I have no other explanation to offer. I love you...I love you more than I do myself... You're the first to whom I am a person...And because I love you I don't want anything to happen to us... p. 112

Our interpretation suggests that it is the very demonization of the black male body that makes Elisabeth think that something bad can happen to them. Elisabeth Larsson is fed up with the way things are going in her environment and braves what seems to be normal. By praising Adam's sexual performance, her position is to take the opposite of anything dictated by the apartheid regime concerning her sexuality. Acting like that enables the narrator to denounce the fact that transgression is, in some cases, the way minorities face what is qualified as normal sexuality. It exploits minority ways of thinking desire, not because it is necessarily different to common sexual practice. It comes to the fore that transgression takes its roots in the desire to reverse established power structures by creating a new discourse pointing out the limits or contradictions inherent to the dominating discourse. This also challenges the notion that the value of certain subjects is always undesirable because it is named as such by the dominant's discourse.

The narrator's position in transgressing the Immorality Act appears as a tactic that becomes, literally, an entrance point for dissident writers, feminists and all minorities interested in challenging ways in which sexuality was thought during the apartheid regime. During the apartheid regime, sexual intercourses between a black and a white were forbidden as such they were considered as a transgression. When this type of forbidden sexuality is discovered, the authors have to fall under the law. And this crime can lead to, according the Immorality Act, seven years of imprisonment. By

exposing such a prohibited sexuality according to the canons of the apartheid system, the narrator's motivation is to break down the Immorality Act around which all these rules are made.

3. Sexual Transgression, an Answer to Immorality Act

The apartheid society was based on constraints and boundaries. In racially structured societies like the apartheid regime, racial fantasies, insults and policies should never be read outside of their enmeshment in sexuality and gender. It is, of course, difficult to make sense of sexuality or gender while neglecting the race. Its starting point was the Immorality Act (Note 2). The first iteration of the Immorality Act came into effect in the late 1920s and prohibited sexual intercourses between those classified as Europeans and those classified as natives. This law was amended several times between 1950 and 1988 to intensify restrictions on and penalties for interracial, and later same-sex physical intimacies. This regime, to use the Foucault terminology (1978, p. 266):

banned any sexual congress between the races which through imposition of physical constraints on one of the most elementary functions of the body can be regarded as the most sinister attempt on the part of the State at controlling and punishing individuals who were following their desire.

The Immorality Act of 1957 (Act No. 23 of 1957); subsequently renamed the Sexual Offences Act of 1957 repealed the 1927 and 1950 acts and replaced them with a clause prohibiting sexual intercourse or "immoral or indecent acts" between white people and anyone not white. It increased the penalty from four and five years according to the sex to up to seven years' imprisonment for both partners.

In the apartheid society, sexuality-crossing between different racial groups was quasi non-existent. The sexualisation of apartheid lives on in current constructions of intimacy and in the field of community and self-regulative practices with respect to desire and racial identification and continues to be reinscribed in new ways in post-apartheid South Africa.

Therefore, Elisabeth's relationship with Adam certainly plays a major role in the transformation of South Africa, which leads to a process of boundary-crossing between races and cultures. In fact, situated within the moral panic and political turmoil of the 1970s, the narrator of *An Instant in the Wind* employs abundantly prohibited sexual intercourses as a powerful weapon to expose the ugly face of the apartheid regime. Relating sexuality of transgression becomes for Brink a strategy to get down what constitutes the gist of the apartheid regime. And in the novel, white women have the leading role in practising this sexuality of transgression. It is through the Immorality Act that idealised notions of whiteness needed to be produced and policed-legally, symbolically and reproductively-to sustain the racial myths of Otherness and superiority on which apartheid was based. Elisabeth Larsson who is supposed to defend the system assumes her transgression with "the forbidden fruit":

If their white women start doing this sort of thing: it undermines everything in which they've got to believe if they want to remain the masters in the land. Don't you realise that? p. 221

Elisabeth invites the Afrikaners to change their mind on sexual matters if they want to continue being the rulers of South Africa. It means that they have to take into account the different changes operating in the whole society. The sexual transgression of this white woman with a black man is not innocent. It is a way of destabilising both whiteness and white male power to bring to public consciousness the desires and the transgressions of these white women that could not be spoken, but were enacted. It appears as a dissident voice that can open a gleam of hope in the head of all those who are fed up with the system. Moreover, it reinforces the idea of venturing into new areas while bringing to the fore reasons for taking a distance from former convictions. Elisabeth position also evidences both the importance of this race/sexuality nexus to the apartheid project, as well as how sexual desire points to the futility of its underlying ideology. Functioning as a site of transgression and disruption, sexuality of transgression in this novel exposes the instabilities of the Manichean logic on which apartheid ideology was based.

This Manichean logic is perceived in Alan Paton's famous *Too Late the Phalarope* (1955). In *Too Late the Phalarope* for example, the protagonist is a white police officer—that is to say a white man and moreover an agent of the law—who is tormented and disgusted by his feelings of lust for black women. He describes his sexual desires as a “mad sickness” that would “strike [him] down if it could” (1955, p. 46). Significantly, the black woman in Paton's novel with whom the police officer has sex exposes the illicit affair to his superiors, but is ultimately denied narrative agency. Rather, she is reduced to a mere conduit for the political and ontological downfall that results from the protagonist's torturous desires. This further resists the vision that white women lay at the heart of apartheid's moral policing. As a site of transgression, then, sexual desire disarticulates and renders unstable the figure of the idealised white, heterosexual man for whom the apartheid regime was structured.

This shows transgression as a normal and natural phenomenon supported by the desire for subversive continuity from what can be considered as the “sacred”: sex. It follows that transgression refers to Brink any exercise in transcending limits or what is regarded as a limit in a given barricaded system like that of the apartheid regime. By attacking sexuality, Brink like Foucault (1978, pp. 35-36) recognises that:

Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another....Transgression is neither violence in a divided world, nor a victory over limits; and for this reason, its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing live that causes the limit to arise. Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. But correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive...perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division.

And this position of Elisabeth goes hand in hand with Foucault's (1978, p. xxi) when he argues that: “transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated

substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty forms, its absence through which it becomes all the more scintillating”.

If transgression is not perceived as negative nor positive, it has the merit to express a kind of rebellion or fracture vis à vis the monolithic apartheid system. To transgress is more than this, it is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation. Analytically, then, transgression serves as an extremely sensitive vector in assessing the scope, direction and compass of any social revolution. In the words of Chris Jenks (2003, p. 88):

transgression that has this capacity to challenge, fracture, overthrow, spoil or question the unquestionable can no longer be contained as naughtiness or occasional abhorration. Transgression is part of the purpose of being and is the unstable principle by which any stasis either “good” or “bad”, renders them purposive.

In one word, transgression is part of our life. That is to say, to live is to transgress. Transgressing to open new and original issues becomes essential for the dynamism of any existence is what Brink seems to invite us to do.

4. Conclusion

Andre Brink’s *An Instant in the Wind* is significant as a work of historical fiction as it constitutes alternative reflections on the apartheid’s sexual prohibitions. This article’s aim is to acknowledge the powers of formerly marginalised sexuality to challenge established ideas regarding sexuality during the apartheid regime and even today. By examining sexuality specifically in the perspective of Michel Foucault, we show that Brink’s vision of change is inseparable from the sexual policy in South Africa, as well as from the ghosts of apartheid and the modes of facing it. Taking the present “New South Africa” as its point of departure, *The Immorality Act* continues to be a hindrance in interracial love stories between Blacks and Whites—on both a cultural and an individual level—and widens its scope from the racial opposition “Black and White”.

But the genius of Brink lies in his ability to wrest from these transgressions a passionate energy for a useful sexuality, for intelligent discussion, for enlivening sexual relations, for positive communal living in a society where freedom will rhyme with democracy and our personal will to do whatever we want without being judged.

Brink is an accomplished realist writer. Hisrealism takes the form of an experimentation in most of his novels. And *An Instant in the Wind* is significant as it reveals Brink’s connexion to the social and political environment of his time. When denouncing the policing of sexuality he calls our attention on the fact that sexuality is the true revelation of any individual to be the affair of a sole system.

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Notes

Note 1. Baas is a common name that means Boss or Master, used especially by non-whites when speaking to or about Europeans in positions of authority during the apartheid regime used.

Note 2. It may be reminded that these acts were concurrent with other measures such as the Native Land Act of 1913 and the Group Areas Act of 1950, both reinforcing the apartheid philosophy.