

Review of the book *Transition and Transgression - English Young Adult Fiction in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

by Judith Inggs

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Transition and Transgression – English Young Adult Fiction in Post-Apartheid South Africa is an effort by Judith Inggs to counter the dearth of information on English literature for youth in South Africa. As an intended resource for educators, teachers and researchers, the book is written with the underlying premise that “literature for young adults often illustrates and reflects changes taking place in society” (p. 1). Emphasizing how young adults view societal institutions that affect their lives and how they negotiate and identify themselves with respect to positions of power, the author provides relevant titles and content of literary texts as examples, while critically analyzing their value from an educational perspective. As most South African English literature is produced internationally, the richness and the depth of this book is brought out through the author’s careful selection of literary works in English by a number of South African writers based on their merit. The selection specifically includes works that are contextually placed within the geographical boundaries of the country. The author’s pick of the books and novels are based on how the narratives highlight and project South African history and culture. It is easy to see that the author’s own writing is also guided by the history of the country as the chapters are organized through specific time periods or decades that have influenced and affected the literature produced in the country. Hence the structural organization of the content is by the historical time periods which have influenced the literary works of South African authors. In this connection, it is relevant to state that the structural organization of the chapters simultaneously takes into account specific themes of young adult literature (e.g. romance, fantasy, dystopia), which makes it easy for the readers to compare and comprehend the development of the themes and genres with a deeper insight into the progression of South African literature.

The book takes the readers on a journey spanning three decades, commencing from a period of turmoil and unrest during the late 1970s and 80s through a period of disintegration of apartheid in the nineties (1989-1999). This is followed by the 2000s, which showcase the evolving contemporary lifestyle in the context of post-transitional South Africa. The progression of the chapters is through a continued focus on social issues that are either influenced by or are direct results of historical and political events in the country. The readers are able to experience the incidents through the author’s descriptions and direct citations of passages or quotes from books or texts that she has carefully chosen. Her lucid style of narration helps to highlight and

reiterate the effect of the socio-political events on the youth and how that affects their day to day lives.

In the first three chapters of the book, the author shows how these youth experiences are either direct or indirect results of racial segregation or imposed geographical boundaries that force the youth to rethink their identities, and their social relations with respect to the emergent changes in the social context. In the subsequent three chapters, she focuses on the adolescent subject during the post-apartheid period in South Africa that is marked by urbanization and globalization. Readers are able to relate to the usual problems of urban life and how that takes shape within a South African context through the vivid descriptions of the thoughts and feelings of the youth, particularly their aspirations, loathing and the constant search for identity as they get caught in webs of prejudice, crime and poverty. What makes the book particularly interesting is the analysis of power struggles highlighted through the author's interpretations of the characters and the stories. This quality helps to categorize this book as a rich resource for educators or teachers of English literature and the social sciences.

In keeping with the typical adolescent interests, the book also portrays realistic themes of sexuality and gender identity along with non-realistic themes of fantasy, myth, legend and horror, all of which have South African origin and reflect the culture and the history of the country. In dealing with realistic themes, the author does not merely critique and analyze power issues, but provides examples of a number of literary texts to emphasize the risks and negative effects associated with romantic relationships or sexuality. Further, by drawing upon Foucault's (1978) notion of disempowerment and sexuality as a discursive construct, the author points out how characters in the novels acquire social identities "as subjects constrained by accepted social practices and as agents able to resist such practices" (p. 66). The discursive constructs repeatedly reflect stereotypical gender roles. In this respect, the book is an invaluable resource that could be used for choosing books that would be relevant for discussions and debates in any classroom, particularly for generating awareness amongst youth.

In dealing with fantasy fiction, horror novels and speculative fiction, the author also points out new developments, trends, and the loosening of constraints previously imposed on South African literature by socio-political conditions. The book concludes with a chapter on possible future societies, emphasizing the developments in dystopian fiction. Identifying totalitarian issues or themes of death within the novels, the author provides numerous examples of South African dystopias and post-apocalyptic situations.

It is evident that prejudice and power struggles that mark identity development have remained a central theme in this book, although they are not necessarily linked with race or ethnic origins at all times. However, the book is an easy read given the overall structural organization of the chapters, each of which comes with an introduction or abstract where the author explains the themes she has noticed during her research and draws literary comparisons with works produced in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. She also attempts to underpin the theoretical as well as social or practical connections highlighting the changes brought in over time.

The book is a valiant effort towards projecting a holistic and thematic unity in literature that has references to the geographical and ideological spaces of South Africa. The language is lucid and it is a recommended read for all literature aficionados. In a broader context, exemplifying such identity development and power struggles in comparative studies with young adult English literature from other countries may prove beneficial to learning the history, culture and geography of a country. Educators, especially those in Canada, can use such resources to

connect with Indigenous cultures in the study of English literature. As the author herself asserts, this book is meant to assist teachers initiate and incorporate discussion and debate of topics that are sometimes considered taboo in certain cultures. Such discussions may help influence adolescents to act responsibly and learn about tolerance. In a country like Canada, which takes pride in having a cultural mosaic, this book may be of great relevance in classrooms for facilitating open discussions and debate on adolescent issues, responsibilities, and tolerance.

Reference

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. New York: Random House.