



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



At first glance, Joburg appear like a chimera – far on the horizon appears a valley from which high rises and skyscrapers loom – the city of gold as a *Fata Morgana* for the weary traveller.

Growing up in Germany, South Africa was a forbidden place full of hatred and violence, a minority exploiting and suppressing the majority. Our heroes were Nelson and, for us adolescent girls, the beautiful and never surrendering heroine Winnie Mandela, whose ban in Brandfort became a political awakening for many of us, causing us to enter the streets of a boring and silent West Germany.

Children of the Fog is how my generation is referred to in Germany today, we are the grandchildren of World War II who finally understood that within the boring and peaceful West German society we inhabited, we still suffered from the past, from the War and the silence of our ancestors and relatives who denied their traumas and, in many cases, also their sympathy and participation in the Nazi regime.

The iron weight of the past weighted heavy on the younger generation, families were a cradle of silence and suppression. For us, the later born, guilt and redemption, shame and self-loathing were part of our journey to understand what had happened in the past and, as our grandparents and parents remained silent, the crimes of the Nazi times became even more monstrous and incomprehensible. We navigated in a fog, in a mist of hidden guilt and hidden trauma. The failure of the survivors to acknowledge their guilt made us angry, but we were too young and inexperienced to understand where this came from. We only knew that we had lost our

innocence and felt we had to fight for the victims, who were not only victims of our elders, but also of us.

Homelessness and loneliness, misunderstanding and depression became companions of a society that neglects their past, their actions and implications. Transgenerational transmission of war-related trauma is what it is called today. I still feel ashamed of how I ignored my beloved grandmother's stories about her flight – with her four children and ailing mother – from the Red Army, which she hardly survived. My generations shame about German guilt and our mandate to honour the victims and the liberations, kept the elders silent at first. We felt that it was important to pay for the unimaginable crime of the Holocaust and the Second World War. It has been – and still is – the most important mandate of German self-perception that such crimes and such terror should never, ever arise again.

Being part of a perpetrator's group or society requires the courage to venture into the unknown, the awkward and painful. To meet your own demons...

Coming to South Africa, I have witnessed how a society in transition is working on shedding its colonial skin on its way to democracy and freedom and to address the crimes and traumas of the past.

The task to liberate all of its people out of the dark ages of colonialism and apartheid that still resonates with all South Africans – and this is my point to the born-frees too – to heal the wounds of the past, means that perpetrators and victims have to negotiate a present and future that does acknowledge the sufferings and wrongdoings of the past.

Johannesburg is the place I chose to make my home, a place full of wonder and frustration at the same time. The beauty lies in the sharp contrasts, in the restlessness of the sun as the counterpoint of the nebulous ephemeral of the place that I left. The road to understanding the underlying psychological and sociological patterns of transition brought the perpetrator's grandchild into a boomtown that is constantly reinventing itself. The sharp contrasts made



visible through the sun are an underlying pattern of the city's architecture that was shaped by the absurd idea to separate people and keep them apart.

One can imagine how long it will take to overcome the spatial division of the city that is still manifested in so many of its citizens' heads and perceptions of each other.

The child of the fog embraces the colourfulness, the brightness and the multiculturalism of this exciting city, so lively, diverse and energetic. This diversity is a revelation and the coexistence of so many different people, nations, religions and languages offers such a powerful idea of how the world could be if we finally learned to embrace each other in her/his own right.

Embracing each other in the aftermath of violence, war and separation is a long, winding road to travel and beneath the sharp contrast is a nebulous space of misunderstandings and incorrect self-perceptions. Old patterns and values have to be abandoned, old privileges named and replaced.

The paradise of the newcomer is full of thorns and shards for those who grew up in it. Divisions, some invisible to the inexperienced new citizen, are still in place and often so long a part of the social dialogue that it is difficult to perceive them, let alone overcome them.

In contrast to the silence and passiveness of post-war Germany, here there is debate and a cacophony of different attitudes and ideas eagerly expressed in the media. Anger

about the slowness of change is readily expressed. Most people don't realise the trauma and guilt that they carry in private, it has not penetrated due to a terrible defensiveness of many. But trauma and guilt cannot be suffocated.

It is a deeply comforting fact that the sufferings and traumas are named and talked about in South Africa, even though it sometimes feels that each group is only talking about itself, even former perpetrators often seem to perceive themselves as victims. And victims they are, but victims of their own actions and of their unwillingness to embrace their guilt and to reconcile with their former enemy. The task to get to know each other seems so enormous. The past and different experiences make it such a mammoth task to find common ground – language and socially inherent patterns are too often relics of colonisation and apartheid.

Victimhood is a stance that I often find among those who once profited from the status quo ante – also 'fellow travellers' have to deal with the consequences of their actions or omissions. In all parts of society. The children and grandchildren of the perpetrators are not guilty in the legal sense, but ethically and morally. In the sociopolitical context they play an important role – they must learn out of the injustice and create a new way of social interaction. That is their responsibility – to abandon the old ways and build a just and democratic society of equals where victimhood should not be a parameter of self-perception for anyone. **CF**