Unveiling humorous resistance: Incongruity and critical discourse analysis in "Born a crime: Stories from a South African Childhood"

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ABSTRACT

"Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood" is a bestselling memoir that was written by Trevor Noah, a South African-born comedian of global acclaim. In the book, Noah relives his upbringing in South Africa, when apartheid policies and legislation were designed and harshly implemented to keep the country’s citizens apart based on race and ethnicity. Yet, in relieving this oppressive and traumatic period and proceeding to the 1994 democratic era, Noah applies humor as a storytelling strategy to downplay this harsh period. Hence, this paper adopts the incongruity theory to present the juxtaposition that is evident in the form of surprises and tensions in the narrative, which the readers may find humorous. In addition, the paper draws on Apartheid Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as theoretical frameworks to conduct this qualitative study. CDA is used as a research tool to indicate how a text authored by a comedian from the global south is used to humorously resist political and social power relations. It is found that Noah manages to criticize the segregation that was there in a subtle manner and to educate the audience through humor about socioeconomic challenges in the country. Even though his writing is mainly in a language of the global north for possible economic reasons, he draws from the languages of the global south to correctly represent the culture of the South African people he is part of.

Introduction

South Africa has a unique history because it once existed as a union of two sets of white settlers who disenfranchised indigenous people, real owners of the country that are also the majority (Warnes, 2012). After nearly 30 years of democracy, racial inequalities persist despite Dousemetzis’ claim that apartheid1 ‘died’ with Verwoed2. Although apartheid was formalized by the ascension to power of the National Party (NP), a conservative Afrikaner party led by Daniel F Malanie in 1948, South Africa was always characterized by segregation just as discrimination persisted in Southern US, over a century after the official abolishment of slavery (Birkisdottir, 2018) (see also reference to Quijano’s “coloniality” and Foucault’s “history of the present”, in the theoretical framework). That the period stretching from 1910 when the Union of South Africa was established, to 1948 has been dubbed the “segregation era” is instructive (Mphambukeli, 2019: 2). Some trace apartheid to Jan van Riebeeck’s arrival in the Cape of Good Hope on the 6th of April 1652 to establish an “economy based on the use of slaves imported from East Africa and Southeast Asia” (Clark & Worger, 2011: 3). Despite arguments about its origins, what is indisputable is that apartheid disenfranchised black people of basic rights such as citizenship, decent housing, health and education. Making it more absurd is the fact that it was linked to

1 Afrikaans for ‘apartheid’ denotes a system of segregation based on race and or religion.
2 On the 6th of September 1966, Dimitri Tsafendas, a parliamentary messenger at the time, stabbed and killed South African Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in the house of assembly. Verwoerd is widely regarded as the architect of apartheid.

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religion through the Dutch Reformed Church⁴ because Afrikaners believed that they were a “chosen race”. Draconian laws were enacted to thwart “black urbanization, resistance, sanctions, and lack of security of investment” (Mphambukeli, 2019: 1).

As a measure to peacefully resist apartheid, many artists emerged as activists prepared to intervene in public spaces to highlight their dissent with social injustices and politics of the time (Thomas, 2022). The resistance, through music, plays and novels was used not only to encourage and lift the spirits of the oppressed through humour but to gain solidarity from people outside South Africa (Freeman, 2014). Some of the writers, black and white, of note were Njabulo Ndebele, Zakes Mda, John Kani, Nadine Gordimer, JM Coetzee, Alan Paton, Alex La Guma, Miriam Tlali, Steve Biko, Athol Fugard, Ingrid de Kok and Herman Charles Bosman. Post-apartheid era, arts in the form of books, music and buildings exist to serve to preserve that brutal memory and pay tribute to the victims whilst encouraging healing and reconciliation in the democratic South Africa (Marschall, 2010). These works’ storytelling further serve to preserve the history and traditional culture of South Africans which could be easily passed from one generation to the next (Hilda & Pelokazi, 2023). Trevor Noah (2016) is one such artist from the global south who uses humour in his storytelling to refer to the past political and social injustices. Central to the book is his childhood and his relationship with his mother and what she went through as a woman. In this sense, one of the social issues addressed by the narrative are gender issues and violence against children. Noah’s storytelling gives voice to black women and children during and post-colonialism and apartheid about their trauma, oppression, violations, power relations, abuse, struggles, inequality and socio-economic injustices as means of finding solutions to them (Aldoğan, 2021; Gebreen & Al-Hilo, 2020; M tumane & Dlamini, 2022; Tursunova, 2014). In representing the voiceless of the global south, the humorous storytelling draws attention to their unusual acts of resistance (Aldoğan, 2021). The term global south, like periphery, developing, least developed, third world and poor, refers to countries and people found in continents such as Africa, Asia and North America most of which would have previously been colonised (Dados & Cornell, 2012; Haug et al., 2021). These countries would be contrasted with the powerful first world countries of the global north (Dados & Cornell, 2012). Hall (2007 & 2018) prefers to categorise the global north and global south by using “the West and the rest” of the world to emphasise the dominance of the North/West.

Baisley and Grunberg (2019: 2) aver that there is disagreement among scholars on the definition of humour. This suggests that one would define humour as it applies in their context. The general view is that humour is what would make the receiver respond with emotion of amusement, smile or laughter, because of what they perceive as inconsistent or contradictory to usual expectations (Baisley & Grunberg, 2019; Sorensen, 2008). It is through this technique that the audiences’ attention is drawn to the main message with the hope that it would influence their attitude and behaviour or future action. There are many types of things that could be perceived as funny by different individuals or groups because of the exciting feeling they bring out (Olin, 2016). Some of the things that can amuse audiences could be a story told in a book, periodical, movie or play that entertains whilst it uses humour as a strategy to raise awareness on political and social injustice issues. In such circumstances, humour can politically be directed against oppression and the oppressor be in a form of reflection to society’s behaviour and how society needs to transform (Sorensen, 2008). Yet, humour is not always innocent as it is prone to amuse its audience at the expense of others, such as certain ethnic or racial groups including women (Sorensen, 2008). Similarly, Noah’s book is in this paper analysed to determine the extent to which it uses humour to bring awareness on the past traumatic history in the country and in his social life. The contribution of the paper is that it fills the dearth in research that investigates humour in the post-apartheid era writing in South Africa. Humour as strategy in challenging and coping with oppression and its dynamics has not been given adequate research attention (Sorensen, 2008: 168). The selection of Noah’s book for this purpose is apt because Noah explains that he “learned that laughter is a powerful tool. Against fear, against hate, against injustice. Against power.” He further writes, “If I could make someone laugh, they’d forget themselves and focus instead on the joke.” Available studies on storytelling suggests that it is an effective form of communication (Untarini et al., 2022). Hence, it is worth investigating the extent to which Noah is able to use humour as a coping mechanism not only for his difficult childhood but also as a form of resistance against the scars left by apartheid on the lives of many black innocent people who suffered and died in the hands of few white people in South Africa.

After this introductory section, there is literature review, methodology and findings and discussion that are presented together. Lastly, the conclusion provides a synopsis with recommendations to end the paper.

**Literature Review**

Literature review outlines the paper’s three theoretical frameworks and relevant works. These are the Apartheid Studies which touches on the political history of South Africa which forms the background of Noah’s narration. This is followed by the discussion of the incongruity theory to explain the type of humour used by Noah in narrating the painful past apartheid era. Lastly, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory is relevant as methodological tool that looks at the how of the use of words in the narrative.

**Apartheid Studies**

Mboti (2019: 1) problematizes apartheid by describing it as a concept that has been in existence “since antiquity”. He cites, among other cases, the 10th Biblical plague in the Bible, whereby people who were to perish were set apart from those who were to remain alive. He argues that apartheid cannot be traced to the National Party’s (NP) victory in the (May) 1948 elections which only took

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⁴ Most Afrikaners trace their origins to the Netherlands where Dutch is the official language.
place after Allan Paton’s *Cry the beloved Country* which was published in February in the same year. Mboti contends that despite deliberations at the 1973 Apartheid Convention and the 1998 Rome Statute on whether apartheid was an international crime against humanity, it was not classified as “a field of study… a theoretical paradigm, or as a singularity” (Mboti 2019: 1) (see also de Klerk’s views below). Mboti has contributed immensely towards theorization of apartheid. Besides founding Apartheid Studies, he has published *Apartheid Studies: A Manifesto* (2021) among other publications. His latest publication is *Introducing Apartheid Studies (AS): A new forensic-inductive philosophy for abolishing harm* (2023).

Mboti’s work on apartheid raises awareness of intricacies that tend to be downplayed. Apparently, racial tensions are always stoked because of society’s avoidance of engaging in discussions on apartheid. On the 16th of March 2017, former Democratic Alliance (DA) leader, Helen Zille sparked outrage in South Africa when she said colonialism had its positives. “For those claiming legacy of colonialism was ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water etc”. Despite her initial insistence that she was right, Zille eventually relented and issued an apology but not before she lost her position as Western Cape premier amid pressure from her party.

In February 2020, the last apartheid president, FW de Klerk torched a storm when he said, in a televised interview, he “was not fully agreeing” that apartheid was a crime against humanity (Mokholi and Subramany 2021). A former democratic South African president Thabo Mbeki, reacted by stating that de Klerk had professed ignorance of the declaration by the United Nations that apartheid was a crime against humanity. If a former head of state is oblivious to such crucial information, it implies that many other whites, especially Afrikaners need more education.

Professor Jonathan Jansen, a seasoned academic and former vice chancellor of the University of the Free State caused a furore when he seemingly echoed Zille’s sentiments. In a column that he contributed to *TimesLIVE* newspaper on the 1st of February 2023, Jansen suggested that many South Africans lived better lives during the apartheid era. Barely a week later, on the 7th of February 2023, a journalist, Rethabile Radebe penned a response in the same paper, arguing among other things, that the ruling party’s government, the African National Congress (ANC), has availed more access to education, employment and decent housing.

The background to apartheid in South Africa can be traced to the absurdities of the legislations passed by the minorities who were colonisers against many inhabitants who had no vote in their African land. In the then Union of South Africa, “a simple majority would give any victorious party power to pass practically any legislation that it wished” (Clark and Worger, 2011: 20). In 1911, the Mines and Works Act was passed. The 1913 Natives’ Land Act prevented black farmers who were progressing, from owning land outside their designated areas which were just 13% of the country’s land. Pass laws barred black people from municipal areas except to work so they had to produce passes so that their movements could be traced. Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, of 1949 criminalized marriage between whites and non-whites (Smith, 2017). The Group Areas Act of 1950 stipulated that whites and non-whites must be separated, leading to relocation of many families by the government. Furthermore, the Bantu Education Act, of 1953 made provisions for black learners to receive education which upon completion, limited them to menial jobs. In the same year, Reservation of Separate Amenities Act was enacted to prevent whites and non-whites from using the same public amenities like beaches, benches and buses. In 1959, The Extension of University Education Act (1959) limited enrolment of non-white students in universities. Ethnic tertiary institutions, one for Zulus, coloureds and Indians, another one for Venda, Tswana and Sotho students and a medical school for black South Africans were established by the government. In 1970, the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act stripped blacks of South African citizenship relegating them to homelands or bantustans like Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana, kaNgwane, Gazankulu, KwaNdebele, KwaZulu, Lebowa, QwaQwa and Venda. These areas received no service or funding and were characterized by poverty and residents travelled long distances seeking employment. All these actions were clearly meant to exclude non-whites from key sectors of the society.

In 1980, the government released a constitution that allowed coloureds, whites and Indians to vote but excluded blacks ostensibly because they had governments in their homelands. However international pressure and Prime PW Botha’s resignation after a stroke proved critical (Leon, 2015). Botha’s successor, FW de Klerk, negotiated with representatives from the African National Congress (ANC), other political formations and civic organisations between 1990 and 1993, culminating in a constitution that made provisions for democratic elections on 27 April 1994, the year associated with the beginning of democracy or freedom day in South Africa.

**Incongruity Theory**

There are a few humour theories that have been used in various studies. In line with the definition of humour presented in the introductory section of this paper, the incongruity theory is apt for this paper. Incongruity theory is premised on a humorous incident arising from what is perceived as unusual or unexpected of that context (Olin, 2016). The funny side of what is read or heard would be prompted by the fact that the audience would generally thought of something in a different way than what the communicator would present. For instance, the brutality of apartheid saw the killing of many people by the state and freedom fighters. Some of the atrocities inflicted by the state would involve the use its force to shoot and torture black people to death and afterwards destroy evidence by placing bombs around their bodies. In some cases apartheid was engineered to incite black-on-black violence, such as those who died through what came to be called “necklacing” in which a burning tire would be placed around the victim whilst they are alive. Violent and horrible a situation could have been, humour enables storytelling to turn things upside down by presenting them in a new and less brutal frame (Sorensen, 2008). Another often ignored issue by African writers is linguistic colonisation which commenced with the arrival of European missionaries in 1799 and led to the destruction of literature written in indigenous languages
(Diko, 2023; Kaschula, 2008). In the postcolonial era African writers need to decolonise their minds by not continuing to entrench previous language policies which portrayed colonisers’ languages as superior by writing solely in those languages (Ngungi, 1987). African writers, even when writing in English simply because it is considered a global language, should show awareness that language was a form of warfare that was designed by colonisers, especially the British Empire, to exclude the colonised and produce death of their languages and culture (Berenzain et al., 2021). Dominating ones writing about African culture with the colonisers’ language does not only destroy Africans’ words but their worlds too (Berenzain et al., 2021). Quijano (2000: 1) uses the term “coloniality” to show that colonialism does not end but evolves. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and Maldonado-Torres et al., (2019) concur that erstwhile colonialists are always seeking to regain control over their former colonies using discourse hence they call for countering these narratives. Transformative writers would therefore heed these calls by dismantling English as a so-called global language by adopting bi-/multilingualism in their writing in which they fuse the colonial language with languages from the global south. Hence this paper also sought to identify events in Trevor Noah’s narration of the Apartheid-era and stories about his life afterwards that readers could have perceived as having an unexpected funny twist through him using languages from the global south in a book published in English by American publishers.

With South Africa’s painful experiences, humour has generally been identified by many other writers as providing therapy that contributes to uniting the country’s diverse citizens. Several other literary works have been written about experiences of non-whites due to apartheid. Christopher Van Wyk’s Shirley, Goodness & mercy: a childhood memoir (2004) is about a young boy’s upbringing in a coloured area, Riverlea and Coronationville. Written in a light-hearted way, the book details the boy’s happiness at internalizing Psalms 23 from which it derives its title. He gleefully demonstrates his newfound ‘accomplishment’ to his mother, Shirley and then to community members who laugh each time he recites the verse. In Native nostalgia, Jacob Dhlamini looks back sentimentally at his childhood in Katlehong during apartheid and making the best out of the hardships. Dlamini longingly mentions experiences with Afrikaners, listening to indigenous language stations and similar houses in the townships. The novel “was published to positive critical reception in 2009, winning the 2010 University of Johannesburg prize (debut category) for creative writing in English” (Akpome 2017: 1). Eggs to lay, chickens to hatch (2010), Van Wyk’s second childhood memoir is a funny reincarnation of his experiences with Agnes, the family’s Zulu helper. He would not report her to his parents for coming to work with a hangover and she, in turn, would not mention his truancy from school.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) foregrounds this paper because it involves the use of language or “discourses” by powerful groups to describe themselves and “others” who they seek to control (Hall 2007: 56). Applying Hall’s logic, predominantly Dutch settlers calling themselves Afrikaners identified and renamed vast pieces of land which they named South Africa and relegated black, indigenous people to what they called Bantustans or homelands using “separate development”, as a euphemism of apartheid (its ideology). Ideology is a way of looking at things which depends on one’s beliefs or orientation (Van Dijk 2017). So, the (scientific) truth is that there was segregation in South Africa though the NP falsely called it separation. Hall distinguishes “representation” from “re-presentation”, with the former resembling what it denotes whilst the latter maybe a complete distortion (1997: 13). Hall adds that discourse cannot be “neutral”. Therefore, discourse is a continuous site of contestation between those who are in power and the subordinates (Gramsci 1971). Proponents of CDA such as Foucault (1970), Hall (2007), Fairclough (2013), Wodak and Meyer (2016) and van Dijk (2017), unanimously agree that discourse is power, and this is manifested through the way authorities and subordinates interact and terms by which they are referred to based on status. However, the contribution of this paper is that it deviates from the often-taken approach in which CDA is used to analyse how language in discourse frames negative ideologies by those in power. Rather, we seek to show how humorous discourse is used to resist dominance.

Research and Methodology

The paper sought to answer the following questions (i) How does Noah’s use of a comical style depiction of the periods during Apartheid and democracy in South Africa reveal his vision and (ii) To what extent does this portrayal reflect perspectives from the Global South? To this end, a qualitative approach was selected. Born a Crime was downloaded for use as the foremost primary source for this paper. This enabled us to read the memoir as well as highlight its main concerns. Aspects which required clarity such as laws and allusions to certain people, periods or events were sought on the internet using Google search engine.

Born a Crime was selected for analysis for use as a case study of a few memoirs which straddle two South African epochs and situates the current democratic dispensation in the context of the legacy left by apartheid. Noah’s mixed racial classification facilitates his reflexive experiences with black, white and people of mixed race. Noah appeared in You Laugh but it’s True, a 2011 documentary by David Paul Meyer which had two sold out nights at the Johannesburg Theatre and made “the biggest debut show by a South African comedian” (Reynolds, 2019). A year later, he became the first South African comedian to perform on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno and The Late Show with David Letterman in 2013 (Mambana, 2017). However, it was in 2015 when Noah rose to international stardom when he replaced Jon Stewart on The Daily Show where he spent 7 years before stepping down in 2022. The book is one of a few memoirs which tackle serious issues such as oppression and racism in the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Sadly, almost eight years after publication of Noah’s memoir, no in-depth analysis in the form of a thesis, chapter or academic paper could be found in our searches. We therefore hope our paper will stimulate interest in other researchers to develop literature on South
African memoirs which straddle apartheid to post-apartheid. As highlighted earlier, Apartheid Studies provided context and critical discourse analysis facilitated a close examination of major concerns of the study by looking at the selection of words in a humorous manner and the impact that they lent to the narrative.

Findings and Discussion

The following interconnected themes were collated and will be discussed chronologically: Identity, the irony of immorality laws, violence, religion and education, gender and gender relations and family.

Apart-Hate

Trevor Noah parodies apartheid as “apart hate” (13) and mockingly refers to it as “perfect racism” (67). Both these references to apartheid are unexpected and incongruent as some of the readers would not have thought about them in those terms. It is equally unexpected to learn that the success of this oppressive system came following recommendations by a commission of inquiry sent to observe types of racism in Europe to establish which aspects to adopt. European countries are usually perceived as mostly liberal for them to have been used as case studies for oppression.

Due to the large number of local black people, white settlers realized that they could widen cracks between them and incite them against each other. They created physical boundaries such as Bantustans which Trevor calls “puppet states” because whites instilled leaders who did not regard for their bidding. Trevor castigates the disregard for black lives embedded in the phrase “the Bloodless Revolution… because very little white blood was spilled. Black blood ran in the streets” (43). The reason for the revolution to be termed “bloodless” is unexpected and makes mockery of the black lives.

He says the NP government supported tribal wars between members of black political parties which were the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a predominantly Zulu party and the ANC which at the time, was dominated by Xhosa leaders. To put the tension between Zulu and Xhosa ethnic groups into perception, Trevor describes his mother as a “tribal enemy” of the Zulu minibus driver who she had an altercation with (55). Trevor also cites double standards of whites who condemn a security guard for killing a cat at a soccer match, yet they condone killing of many black people by whites.

The audience also learns with amazement that, people with Chinese origins were so few that they could not be put into a separate racial category, leading to them being lumped together with blacks. Noah explains that these classifications were also influenced by political economic factors. As such, despite physical similarities between Chinese and Japanese people, the Japanese were given “honorary white status” (254) because the government imported luxurious cars and electronic devices from Japan. Trevor creates humour by imagining a scenario in which a police officer apologizes for being racist to a Japanese person after mistaking him for a Chinese.

Language also shows the dynamic nature of identity and recognition of a worldview that it embeds. When a shopkeeper uses Afrikaans to express suspicion towards Trevor and his mother and she responds in the same language, he apologizes, not for being racist, but for doing so to the ‘wrong people’. Trevor describes himself as a chameleon because his identity is not fixed. He uses this to his advantage. At H.A Jack Primary School, he wins hearts of Zulu and Xhosa speakers by speaking their language. Trevor also charms his would-be muggers who think he is white by suggesting in their Zulu language that they should unite in robbing someone. Trevor’s maternal grandmother avoids beating him because she regards him as a white person due to changes on his skin colour if he is beaten. His maternal grandfather calls him “Mastah” and behaves like his chauffeur. Upon seeing Trevor, children shout, “Indoda yomlugu!” “The white man!” (176-717) and as some touched him to feel his skin, others run away. At funerals, Trevor witnesses melodramatic scenes as mourners stop crying upon his arrival and when he stands outside, some adults say he should be allowed in the house because a white person cannot be kept out.

Trevor pokes fun at his identity when he talks about him and his mother pretending to be strangers because of their differences in skin colour. When he gets too close to his father, the latter runs away with the bemused boy in hot pursuit thinking it is a game that he sometimes plays. Patricia, at some point pretends to be Trevor’s helper whilst Queen, a coloured flatmate, impersonated Trevor’s mother. They even had photographs taken in this stance. When Trevor asks his mother to pay for the toffee apple that he has taken, ‘dishonours’ him in front of the shopkeeper. Acting on advice from prostitutes who obviously have several survival tactics up their sleeve for one to live in Johannesburg without being stopped by the police, Patricia buys a few pairs of overalls.

Noah uses humour to show how they were able to cope with apartheid’s absurd laws that were part of the “segregation era” (Mphambukeli, 2019. He does this through his selection of words that poke fun of the system. Even though he publishes in a language (English) of the global north, he is however not shy to use indigenous languages from the global South to represent people of the global South and their culture. This shows his awareness of the role of the colonisers’ language as a form of exclusion and hence he includes people of the global South in his storytelling by recognising their language whilst subtly challenging the dominance of the West (Berenstein et al., 2021; Diko, 2023; Kaschula, 2008; Ngungi, 1987).

Language is also used in unexpected ways to show its power to help one survive. The games he plays with his parents are shocking yet funny as they try to deal with the ‘crime’ related to his birth and to expose socio-economic injustices (Akdogan, 2021; Gebreen & Al-Hilo, 2020; Tursunova, 2014).
Violence

Society is pervaded by violence, from the bloodletting between the ANC and the IFP to family level. Trevor experiences bullying a few times. He leaves Maryvale Catholic School after bringing a knife to scare his bully and whilst in his Eden Park neighbourhood, coloured boys tease him by throwing mulberries at him. Ironically, they refer to him as a bushman yet, he is coloured like them. At home, his mother jokingly remarks that he is truly half white and half black now. When Abel avenges Trevor’s humiliation by whipping his tormentors, he realizes that, like him, the other boy, is a child who has been brought up in a society that cultivates self-hate. Abel often fell into fits of rage which Trevor attributes to an upbringing in homelands in Limpopo where they fought bare-knuckled.

In the early part of the book Noah describes how he and his mother narrowly escaped being raped and murdered by a group of men on a Sunday evening coming from different churches. Although the situation is horrific, what makes it incongruous is the fact that Noah brings humour in it. At the beginning of the “Run” chapter he writes about action movies in Hollywood where people have to run for their lives as if this is entertainment. Their mother jumping out of a moving vehicle with two children is made dramatic. Since he was tired and sleepy during this near-death incident, he humorously tells his mother that he hopes the men would have been kind enough to wake him up before killing him.

These events narration may sound humorous yet their incongruency lies in the fact that they highlight gendered violence and the abuse of children. Noah’s storytelling presents their trauma, oppression, violations and socio-economic injustices (Akdogan, 2021; Gebreen & Al-Hilo, 2020; Tursunova, 2014) in a way that is healing and calls for reconciliation in the democratic South Africa (Marschall, 2010).

The Irony of Immoral Laws

The title, “Born a crime,” is concise, made up of just three words before the longer subtitle. To provide context, on page 9, there is what looks like a copy of the Immorality Act of 1927 which criminalizes intimate relationships between white people and black persons. This, together with the titular chapter in Chapter 2, makes a mockery of the system because Noah is a product of two consenting adults, which should not be criminalized at all. The folly of the Immorality Act is further exposed by dedication of ‘whole’ police squads to pecking windows in search of multiracial couples which, was the actual immoral act. Funny enough, the Afrikaners who came up with these laws are themselves a mix of Dutch, French, Germany and have traces of Indian and Khoisan ancestry. Yet, it is ironic that they sought to stop multiracial relationships. This shows the power of discourse when it can be used by authorities to control others (Foucault, 1970; Hall, 2007; Fairclough, 2013; Mphambukeli, 2019; Wodak & Meyer, 2016; van Dijk, 2017).

Religion and Education

Noah’s relationship with his mother as a single parent in times of apartheid is central to the whole book. Hence, most of the humour is used to bring out some laughter about the challenges they faced as a family and citizens of the then South Africa. Humour also helps to deepen their relationship and address their differences. Noah mostly pokes fun at his mother’s religious beliefs and those of many other African people. Apparently, religion does not offer practical solutions to every challenge which probably explains why Trevor’s maternal grandmother combines it with traditional beliefs and his mother “is as stubborn as she is religious” (35). He exposes Christian principles of which his mother is an ardent follower. For instance, when the car refuses to start, he reasons that it is God’s way of telling them to stay at home and when they are almost kidnapped on their way back home, he feels vindicated. As the car moves, he notes the irony of religion when a cassette of Jimmy Swaggart plays. Swaggart was a respectable preacher who fell from grace after he was twice caught with two different prostitutes on separate occasions between 1988 and 1991. Trevor exhibits his mother’s inquisitive behaviour by questioning why he is excluded from partaking in the holy communion because he is not catholic yet Jesus who the church follows, was a Jew. Trevor also questions why the priest breaks confidentiality rules by revealing a child’s confession. In these instances, humour is used in his storytelling to poke fun at religion. This comes as unexpected in a publication of his memoir due to the sensitive nature of religion.

Educational institutions are equally inadequate as they fail to convince him why he should follow certain routines. He says unlike school, his mother taught him to think. Though he admits that there is strict discipline at Maryvale Catholic School, he habitually breaks rules and school authorities struggle to deal with his unprecedented misconduct. He is sent to the supreme authority, the principal, a few times and comes back unscathed. He laughs when the principal beats him which clearly shocks him. As if that is not enough, Trevor remorselessly answers back to the priest after he had taken all the holy communion. Such behaviour by Noah would be considered by many as inconsistent or contradictory to usual expectations when dealing with priests (Baisley & Grunberg, 2019; Sorensen, 2008). This could be understood as Noah’s way of adding humour to his narration.

To crown it all, he is vindicated when the psychologist confirms that he does not have a mental problem. Even his mother who is a strict disciplinarian surprisingly defends him by suggesting that the principal fails to discipline Trevor that is why he laughs when he beats him but cries when she disciplines him. She also asks why Trevor should be reprimanded for taking the eucharist. In fact, she replicates his responses and when Trevor volunteers to leave the school after the principal threatens to expel him, she stands by her son. Noah uses humour in his description of the education system as designed to indoctrinate them and perpetuate racism. As an indication of their unhappiness the system, Noah and his friends satirize apartheid education by creating satirical poems and songs about their teachers which they secretly share as their form of resistance (Thomas, 2022).
Gender and Gender Relations

A vicious cycle plays itself as blacks replicate the violence that is meted on them by the apartheid system. Black men like Trevor’s grandfather, Temperance, Trevor’s stepfather, Abel are all abusive to women. Even Trevor’s aunt Sibongile’s husband, Dinky, who is basically decent, tries to appear tough by hitting her to live up to the myth that if one loves one’s wife, one must beat her regularly. Violence is so entrenched in the society that it appears to have no gender, age, racial or cultural face. There is also no protection for women like Patricia from the police against the abuse and violence they metered by men.

Though no mention is made of her fighting Abel back, Patricia also defies feminine stereotypes when she defends the man who had given them a lift from club-wielding taxi operators. When Abel is unemployed, Patricia is the breadwinner but because of insecurities caused by traditional expectations that a man should not be supported by a woman, he influences her to sacrifice her savings to help his struggling business. Abel beats Patricia just to show her that he is in ‘control’. Trevor describes as torture, the time that he and his mother stayed with Abel. At the beginning of the memoir, Trevor uses foreshadowing to inform the reader that his stepfather (Abel) would later shoot his mother in the head.

A combination of gender and ethnic prejudice sees the taxi driver who forcibly picks Trevor and Patricia hail all sorts of insults at her, accusing her of being promiscuous as ‘evidenced’ by her having two children by two different men, one of them a white one who sired the coloured boy. Trevor says there was a perception that “Zulu women were well-behaved and dutiful. Xhosa women were promiscuous and unfaithful” (55). Trevor also says Tsonga women bow down when they speak to men.

Women inadvertently perpetuate patriarchy and Noah humorously brings this point to the fore. When Patricia tells her mother that she wants to leave Abel because he beats her, her mother’s reaction is, “All men do it” (808) and suggests that she gives Abel another chance though she tells her daughter to do what she thinks is right. Ironically, Patricia chooses to stay with her grandfather Temperance, a philanderer and wifelbeater. Temperance would later waste a full tank of petrol in pursuit of women when Patricia had sent him to buy milk, only to return at night. Apparently westernization brought decadence as people like Temperance who are supposed to be exemplary, lead cosmetic lifestyles. His nickname, “Tat Shisha,” meant ‘the smokin’ hot grandpa. And that’s exactly who he was (116).

However, stereotypes are not always bad as Patricia’s feisty nature helps her to navigate the torturous terrain during apartheid. After providing her maternal family’s many needs, which she called “black tax”, Patricia eventually ran away to Johannesburg, a white area, at only 22. As a Xhosa, she is a thinker as Trevor says at the beginning. As a “rebel” (69), she defies the odds by learning to type and gets employed by a multinational pharmaceutical in Braamfontein. To get back at the oppressive system, Patricia convinces Robert, a decent white man to have a child with her. She dupes authorities by donning domestic workers’ apparel to sustain her stay in town. Patricia devises successful plans such as acting like Trevor’s maid and asking Queen, a coloured woman to masquerade as his mother. Noah also narrates how he created fake white families in his childhood as a way of resisting rejection in society. He mainly did this to gain friendships in a world where he found himself discriminated against because of his mixed race (Birkisdóttir, 2018).

Conclusions

Noah’s skilful storytelling demonstrates that humour can serve as a coping mechanism when one is faced by a difficult childhood. Humour is so powerful that it can be extended to heal the past suffering of the whole nation and race. It is however no joke that despite South Africa’s attainment of freedom, inequalities persist raising the spectre of racial tension. People who are in positions of power should strive to apply due diligence in their discharge of duty for the sake of the country’s social and economic development. Writings which highlight the political transition from apartheid to the democratic dispensation act as a mirror of society which provide a reality check. Encouragingly, many strides have been made in terms of increasing access to education, medication, housing, transportation and employment to previously marginalized people. However, corruption remains a challenge to the point that some people feel that things were better under apartheid.

Access to key aspects such as education and consistent application of principles of religion and the law are key to exorcising the legacy of apartheid. It is recommended that more works spanning the two key phases in South Africa’s history are produced. We also suggest that Born a Crime is translated to not only all South African languages but international ones as well because Noah has an international profile and the book provides a useful historiography of South Africa. All political formations and civic organisations representing South Africa’s diverse religions, cultures and ethnicities should interact regularly on ways to sustain tolerance among citizens and speak strongly against gender violence and the abuse of children.

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