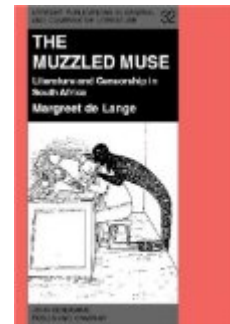


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margreet de Lange. *The Muzzled Muse: Literature and Censorship in South Africa*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997. xii + 181. \$149.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55619-431-3.

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Useful Book Hampered by Crucial Shortcomings

Although the title of the book accurately reflects the author's intentions in writing this book, a more fitting title for the content might have been *The Haltered Muse*, as the effect of the book is largely contained by its inability to fully address certain crucial issues. Still, it is an important book which raises a number of interesting issues in South African literature.

The author defines her objectives very clearly at the start of each chapter and methodically attempts to address each of these issues—with varying degrees of success. The introduction adeptly covers the major concerns of the book and outlines the relationship between censor and writer in South Africa well. The first chapter deals directly with censorship and the Publications Act.

From this point onward, the process is rather formulaic: a chapter on the relationship between Afrikaans literature and censorship, followed by a discussion of four specific instances in which authors reacted in different ways to the pressure of the censor; the relationship between White English literature and censorship, followed by a less successful discussion of the strategies employed by the writers in this category. Finally, there are two chapters which deal with Black literature in English and the Censors.

The final chapter takes a look at censorship in a democratic South Africa, and is the most insightful and successful of all the chapters. In fact, it is the only one that brings any new insights into the problem.

If anything, my main criticism of the book is that the style remains that of a thesis rather than a book. As such, important aspects have simply been glossed over in the knowledge that, since they are not directly relevant to the academic question at hand, they can be left out. In a book, however, they do need elaboration—such as a more thorough discussion of N.P. van Wyk Louw's notion of "lojale verset" (loyal resistance), a concept that shaped a large section of Afrikaner creative thought. Also, certain crucial arguments have not been mentioned, such as Herbert Dhlomo's writing on the language of African literature during the period 1930-1940, which formed the basis of the position taken by later authors.

While, in the second chapter, it becomes clear that two of the pivotal texts in the literature-censorship debate are Etienne Leroux's *Magersfontein, O Magersfontein* and Khayaletu Mqayisa's *The Confused Mhlaba* (in the book, it is simply called *Confused Mhlaba* and the author is never mentioned), yet when de Lange looks at specific texts, only Leroux's work is discussed. No justification is given why Mqayisa's text is ignored.

The author tends to simplify South African history and presents popular misconceptions as fact. So, for instance, *Die Kerkbode* is called a "popular magazine" (p. 15). This is, in fact, a half-truth: it is the official mouthpiece of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. As such, it carries with it a specific ideological and moral background and is automatically sent to every member of the church, which does provide it with a relatively large

readership. It is, however, not a popular magazine in the true sense of the word, and not all its readers necessarily agree with its ideology. Such misconceptions, coupled with a very potted version of South African history, tend to mislead the reader.

Likewise, the overview of Afrikaner history is oversimplified, presenting only a traditional, stereotypical view of Afrikanerdom.

The discussion of the history of the Afrikaans language ignores important recent studies, which point to the slave origins of the language and the important, but previously unmentioned, contribution made by the indigenous languages in the formation of the language.[1] The reading of the history of Afrikaans literature relies rather heavily on the work of Vernon February, which, though good, is at times marred by political correctness rather than historical accuracy. Still, the chapter provides useful information and presents the reader with a concise yet fruitful discussion of the relationship between Afrikaans literature and censorship. In a global view, the objections raised could perhaps be overlooked; still, more attention to aspects of the debate would have enhanced the chapter considerably. The accompanying chapter, which looks at the ways in which authors responded to the laws on censorship, is fairly insightful, but presents the reader with few new insights into their work.

The strength of the author's discussion lies in the fact that she has assimilated a vast range of writing on the authors into a concise, readable chapter within a more global picture of censorship in South Africa.

The chapter which deals with White English literature suffers the same deficiencies as its predecessor, providing a simplistic overview of White South African culture. What becomes evident as the book progresses is that censorship was largely an act against the Afrikaner establishment. It is harder to make a case for authorial strategy in the case of White English writers than for Afrikaans writers. The truth is that censorship did not affect these writers as directly. Coetzee's choice of material is an act of personal choice that is only obliquely influenced by censorship; Brink's choice of subject matter is a conscious act that can be related directly to the Publications Act—which the author amply shows. The more abstract the argument for an author's response to censorship, the more it flounders. The case for Gordimer is clear-cut and well-documented; Christopher Hope, in *Separate Development*, also consciously sought to confront the censors. But to argue that Coetzee's abstraction

is a direct response to the laws on censorship is pushing the point.

What does become clear in the various discussions is the contradictory nature of the censors' decisions. This emphasizes the arbitrary nature of this board and its hidden agendas.

The discussion on the language of Black African writing is, in my opinion, the weakest of all the sections in the book: no attention is paid to the pivotal role played by Herbert Dhlomo in the choice of English as a medium for African writers. Dhlomo's personal conviction, coupled with a conscious decision by the African National Congress in 1936 to adopt and promote English as its official language, is what led many of the earlier writers to write in English. In other words, it was a calculated act of political resistance which emerged long before the era of official apartheid. Ezekiel Mphahlele's statement in 1962 (quoted on p. 119) on the mission presses and the language of African literature echo what Dhlomo had said more than a decade previously. So, too, do Brink's remarks on the duality of the African writer's position (p. 119). The fact that the author specifically mentions the influence of the missionaries (p. 122) indicates that the author could well have been aware of earlier discussions on language, but that the material was not used effectively. In short, this section lacks comprehensiveness.

The author also fails to look at censorship of other forms that shaped the history of South African literature: Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* was shaped by missionary censorship. Herbert Dhlomo's short story, "An Experiment in Colour," was likewise censored by the Lovedale Press. (As a matter of interest, the subject matter of that story is not that far removed from Hope's *Separate Development*.) While this does not fall obviously within the scope of the current discussion, the ideology of missionary publishing reveals important insights into the way in which the censors of the apartheid era functioned.[2]

Among the important questions that remain unanswered in the discussion on censorship and black writing in English is why someone like Mphahlele, who undoubtedly opposed the Publications Act and its implications, and, along with other writers, supported the decision not to appeal bans, was willing to serve on the committee of experts that was consulted on occasion (p. 134). There is an underlying contradiction here that is never explored.

Also, the author does not investigate fully the use of overseas publishing houses as an avenue to bypass the censors.

Although the subject is often mentioned, it is perhaps worth looking into the reasons why authors like Brink, Gordimer and Coetzee make use of publishers outside of South Africa for their later works. Is this a reaction to censorship, or are there other, less ideologically sound motives that drive such a decision?

The bibliography reveals that the author has chosen to focus on books that are readily available outside South Africa and is fairly exhaustive. As can be expected, the principal voices are those of the traditional heavyweights: Gordimer, Brink and Coetzee. Little mention is made of important contributions by people whose profiles are not as high as those mentioned, nor of the heated newspaper debates surrounding the topic.

Much of this material can be obtained from the National English literary Museum in Grahamstown and the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige museum in Bloemfontein, sources which were obviously not consulted by the author.

The Muzzled Muse is a useful book which provides

moments of fresh insight. It is, however, hampered by insufficient research and a tendency to be too cryptic in its discussions.

Notes:

[1]. See the works of Tony Links, Hein Willemse, and lately, Christo van Rensburg, ed. *Afrikaans in Afrika*, JL van Schaik: Pretoria, 1997. The book includes contributions by Achmat Davids, Tony Links and Jeanette Ferreira.

[2]. See Midgley, P. (1994), "In his master's voice and other Missionary Myths." In Sienaert, E., Meg Cowper-Lewis and Nigel Bell, eds. *Oral Tradition and its transmission. The Many Forms of Message*, Papers given at the 4th International Conference on Oral Tradition, University of Natal, Durban, 27-30 June 1994; and Midgley, P. 1994. *Author, Ideology, Publisher: A Symbiotic Relationship*, Lovedale Press, and *Early Black writing in South Africa—with specific reference to the Critical Writings of H.I.E. Dhlomo*. Unpublished Diss. Rhodes University, South Africa.

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