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Abstract

State?* South Africa stands at a critical moment of her history. Despite the optimisms of recent times, it is not of course a moment that has arisen, as one of our leading sociologists has it, by an ‘almost miraculous intervention’1. Rather, it remains explicable as a point in a long, difficult process of opposition to the structural inequalities of South African society. From any vantage point of that story, we could identify continuities and discontinuities that predate even the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948.

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SALLY-ANN MURRAY

The Law of the Vultures: A Story for an Altered State?*

South Africa stands at a critical moment of her history. Despite the optimisms of recent times, it is not of course a moment that has arisen, as one of our leading sociologists has it, by an 'almost miraculous intervention'. Rather, it remains explicable as a point in a long, difficult process of opposition to the structural inequalities of South African society. From any vantage point of that story, we could identify continuities and discontinuities that predate even the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948. Yet in looking back through history, we are also aware that a new future in South Africa is struggling to express itself, and as literary people we might consider what kinds of stories are at present most likely to claim our attention. Simultaneously, what stories could increase in value as we seek decisive shifts away from the lumber of a racially and economically oppressive society.

Perhaps the stories will be factual rather than imaginative, especially as we recall that so many South African writers, from Pringle to Serote, have avoided any easy distinction between fictional and historical responses to the experiences of South African life. One such writer is Phyllis Altman, who has been all but effaced from literary consideration and debate. First published in 1952 The Law of the Vultures, Altman’s only novel to date, was rescued from utter obscurity and republished in Johannesburg in 1987. Perhaps the publisher had already sensed that socio-literary developments in South Africa, in the eighties, were beginning to strike consonance with Altman’s insights and forms of response. Perhaps even more so now, as debates about senses of identity, socialist redistribution and liberal commitments to human freedom urge us to take cognizance of scenarios for another South Africa, Altman’s book deserves fresh critical recognition. As a critic remarked on the occasion of its republication, 'The Law of the Vultures is a classic South African tale of humiliation and injustice, ... both deeply moving and highly provocative.'

Thinking in terms of literary education, New Critical injunctions concerning the autonomous text have limited validity with regard to The Law of the Vultures. Instead, we need to see the novel as the product of forces in the late 1940s and early fifties, and our approach might find interest in the fact that Altman herself is caught up in the swirl of events even as she
The pressures of the time included, of course, the coming to power of the Nationalist Party government, the radicalization of the ANC, the stumbling adjustments of white liberals, and new organization among the black labour force. Altman, who had grown up in Johannesburg white society, had by the 1950s so dissociated herself from prevailing white middle-class norms as to have abandoned her teaching career because of the ‘naked and unashamed racism’ that her colleagues passed on to their white pupils. During the late forties, she had been a Welfare Officer with the progressively inclined Springbok Legion, where she had assisted hundreds of black, ‘coloured’ and Indian ex-servicemen who were grappling with both bureaucracy and the demobilization scheme and the broader inequities of a racist society. What we should note here is that although her actions in the Legion were informed by fair-minded ‘liberal’ tenets of equality and justice, Altman would shun liberal politics in South Africa. At the time of writing her novel she had been inspired by possible courses of action in black oppositional politics, and would show little interest in the formation of the Liberal Party in 1953. As the novel suggests, she found compelling the Africanist philosophy of the ANC Youth League and, paradoxically, the tenets of a nascent non-racial trade unionism, as embodied most visibly in young Communist labour leaders such as Dan Tloome and Ray Alexander. (Both had seen as their ultimate ideal the unity of black and white workers, and were removed from office in 1950 by the provisions of the Suppression of Communism Act.) In her working life, Altman herself came to embrace the socialist organizational approaches of SACTU (the South African Congress of Trade Unions). She was assistant General Secretary from 1956 until she was banned in 1963. Having been refused a passport, she left South Africa on an exit permit in 1964 and settled in London where she continued to work on behalf of the ANC for the International Defence and Aid Fund, and has edited both factual and imaginative writing on South Africa as published by Kliptown Books.

Altman’s lived allegiances and sympathies in the late forties and early fifties, therefore, were complicated though socially understandable. She emerges as a white liberal who had become impatient with liberalism’s own preference for gradualism. While the alternative Africanism appealed to part of her, so she seems to have recognized dangers in its apocalyptic visions of chauvinist black nationalism. Against this, she perhaps somewhat idealistically views a broad non-racial future. If the terms of her response and debate were smashed after Sharpeville, they have nevertheless been re-constituted as a characteristic of the 1980s, and I shall suggest that *The Law of the Vultures* is true to the complexities of its moment even as it strains to push beyond its own historical understanding to urge the reader towards a radically re-evaluated future in South Africa. What some critics have seen as a confusion in its central ideas, I intend to see as the mark of its authentic witness. In reading Altman’s conceptual shifts as
historically explicable, we also begin to appreciate her means of fictional representation. As I shall argue, *The Law of the Vultures* in creative ways challenges several realist expectations about the novel, such as the privileging of individualized experience in richly interiorized characters, the evocation of setting and, finally, the resolution, within the fictional narrative, of action and moral theme. Invoking the traditional antinomies of ‘poetry’ and ‘history’, some have remarked on a ‘lack of art’ in *The Law of the Vultures*. But I am suggesting that the novel yields its validity to us in its refusal to separate its material commitments from the art of fiction. My attempt to recover *The Law of the Vultures* as a literary text should be seen, therefore, as part of a wider social programme concerning, as I said above, the kinds of stories that could accrue in significance as we envisage a more just South Africa.

Set almost entirely within the circumscribed opportunities of black South African life, *The Law of the Vultures* tells several interrelated stories. Altman begins with the life of Thabo Thaele, a Basuto who, having once aspired to be a doctor, takes up clerical work in a progressive Johannesburg firm. After seventeen years he is jailed for a theft committed by a white colleague and, espousing a garbled Africanism, he forms the Africanist ‘People of Africa Society’. We then meet David Nkosi, a veteran of the Second World War, who has been decorated for saving the life of his white lieutenant. Lt Walkers vows to assist Nkosi after the war, but back in Johannesburg fobs him off with cash rather than intervene in helping the unfortunate Nkosi to secure his soldier’s benefits. As we weave in and out of other stories about black city experiences in a ‘white’ society, we are introduced to Dhlamini, a trade-union official at the factory where Nkosi has obtained employment. The crux of Altman’s argument lies in the ideological battle that ensues between Thaele, the aggrieved and virulent Africanist, and Dhlamini, the Marxist-inspired theorist, for the allegiance of the bewildered ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’ figure, David Nkosi. The novel ends problematically with Thaele, the aggrieved and virulent Africanist, and Dhlamini, the Marxist-inspired theorist, for the allegiance of the bewildered ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’ figure, David Nkosi. The novel ends problematically with Thaele killed, Nkosi jailed for allegedly inciting insurrection and Dhlamini, we are to suppose, back in the workplace, organizing for the future. In his delirium after being sjambokked, Nkosi concludes the fictional narrative, if not the larger social story:

Nkosi closed his eyes, for it seemed to him that Thaele lay in the corner of the cell. Thaele dying – his head pulp; ... unbidden, Dhlamini appeared ...  

‘Do not speak, Dhlamini, he said quickly ...  

For you do not understand everything ... Thaele is right and you are right. Thaele is right when he says that we must hate all whites. Yes. Do not shake your head. They make it easy for us to hate them ... But you are right also ... You are right when you said we must all stand together. All of us together ... But only our people. ONLY THE AFRICANS! ... He sank into a coma and lay unmoving for many hours. When he woke it was very dark in his cell, but he knew they were both still there. Thaele in death lay in the corner and Dhlamini in life stood opposite. (pp. 205-206)
The Law of the Vultures, Altman has said, indicts the 'the corruptness of white South African society', its title taken 'from a Zulu proverb - “He who does not obey the law of man will obey the law of the vultures”.'5 This 'law' Altman sees unremittingly at the heart of the South African body politic, and when her novel first appeared Altman’s politics were labelled subversive by a professor of law at Wits. The result was that many booksellers in South Africa restricted their orders of the novel. The term ‘subversive’, however, requires qualification. Altman certainly shows the brutal effects of a racist society on black people. In retrospect, however, what might have been more deeply subversive was that, in direct contradiction to the de-humanizing and retribalizing apartheid laws of the 1950s, Altman fills her primarily urban landscape with convincing black human beings, who both feel and think. In fact, ‘utopian’ visions of transformation, as we encounter in Gordimer’s novel A Sport of Nature (1987), could seem quite facile in comparison with Altman’s tenacious attachment to the actual registers of living in history.

Such attachments were both acknowledged and dismissed by reviewers of the time. One remarked that her ‘passionate commitment to the African course’ has rendered her writing ‘more than a little crude in technique’.6 Another declared, however, that The Law of the Vultures had a significant impact because Altman sympathetically and successfully captured the human stories behind the news: the stories ‘behind the daily crime lists, the terror in the townships around us, the beatings-up, the raids and the lorry-loads of farm labour.’7 Since Altman uses the motif of rural-urban migration, it was inevitable that similarities should have been found between The Law of the Vultures and Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country (1948). Significantly, however, Altman’s story spans the years 1930-1946: she thus projects her knowledge of the apartheid state back on to a period prior to the 1948 election. Whereas Paton’s novel, which was written at the time of Smuts’s United Party government, has recourse to hope amid desolation, Altman eschews the ameliorative possibilities. This reflects the fact, perhaps, that while Smuts’s ‘trusteeship’, to quote Karis and Carter, had ‘left open the door of expectation that the direction of South African policy might change, the unexpected victory of ...[the] Reunited National Party closed that door’.8 According to social reality, therefore, it should be expected that Altman’s vision and verdict will be harsher than Paton’s. According to the two writers’ temperaments, the material base of Altman’s response also seems apt to her purpose.

Yet her temperament, as I have suggested, was not singular and private in its compulsions, but touched historical consciousness perhaps in a more comprehensive way than Paton’s Christian idealism. Altman’s commitment to materiality does not therefore negate her desire to tap the inspirational energies still reverberating from the Youth League’s 1949 Programme of Action. In her memory, too, could have been the 1946 miners’ strike which, though severely crushed, had at least indicated that black
workers could be mobilized on a large scale. Even as she rejects the course of liberalism, The Law of the Vultures retains something of the liberal desire to teach white South Africa the folly of its ways. It is tempting to regard Altman's utter dismissal of whites in the novel as a reaction to what must have struck many politically progressive South Africans as the wholesale moral bankruptcy of white South African society in taking the path to Nazi-type social 'solutions'. As a consequence, partly, Altman left South Africa in the late forties, and The Law of the Vultures was written in London. With oppositional political organizations beginning to challenge the National Party government Altman returned to South Africa in 1951.

As Altman saw it, the various actions of her plot were intended to conscientize and educate a white audience. Yet perhaps to us the most relevant debate in the novel centres around the efficacy of populist or workerist possibilities for the future, for in tying race to class, Altman appears to us to be peculiarly contemporary. The battle of ideas is given human definition in the figure of Thaele the black nationalist, and Dhlamini, the socialist trade union official, so the 'diagram' of debate shifts into the 'picture' of character interaction. Altman conveys a vivid human story of people living in history:

everything Dhlamini said sounded so logical and sensible that during the day [Nkosi] was a firm trade unionist ... 'We are all workers together, black and white, and one day we will stand together ... then, the government and the bosses will have to listen, for without our work they can do nothing ... But I do not pretend to you that it will be easy.' [Yet Nkosi] had not joined officially, for in the evenings Thaele ... [eager 'to tear down and destroy the white man's world' (p. 115)] sneered and taunted him, and told him tales of white workers helping to break up the strikes of African workers and he became confused and bewildered. (pp. 150-152)

At first we might see the dignified Dhlamini as the simple alternative to the vengeful Thaele. But Altman needed to incriminate white society as a provocation to an unregenerate Africanism, and Thabo Thaele is seen as both product and agent of the social terrain. It is stressed that he comes to hate white people only after Mr Dent, his aptly named, ineffectually liberal employer, had allowed him to be unjustly jailed. Altman never underplays the way in which Thaele has been shaped by his experiences at the hands of white society. At the same time, Altman's own democratizing tendencies could not allow her to subscribe in an uncritical way to the sectarian character of Thaele's Africanist perspective, and we see Thaele himself come to live according to 'the law of the vultures', as he uses the suffering of fellow black people at the hands of whites to satisfy his own hunger for revenge.

In contrast, the union-organizer Dhlamini is seen by Altman to be patient and politically articulate: an advocate of 'unity, understanding and cooperation' (p. 162). Yet Dhlamini's labour theory, which idealistically
promotes economic imperatives over human sentiment, rational explication over empathy, and class over race, tends to erase the severe racial divisions of specifically South African reality. Again, it is as if the 'liberal', humane Altman is determined to qualify Dhlamini's ideological correctness when there is the danger of economic law minimizing the substance of human beings. Another interesting aspect to the presentation of Dhlamini is that despite his comments on class alliances having a certain authority in the story, his voice often echoes into something of a void where the practical manifestations of class are concerned. While Dhlamini frequently repeats longs views of history - one day black and white workers will unite - the shorter views of history had seen white workers in South Africa subscribe to myths of racial superiority. One wonders whether Altman, faced with real human situations, could really ignore the fact that moves forward would rely on a conglomerate of black struggles. Whatever the difficulties, we are deliberately allowed to attend to Dhlamini's speeches while sympathizing with the fact that the humble soldier David Nkosi, having been absent from his rural family for four years during the war, is unwilling to remain in Johannesburg in order to attend a trade-union night school. The narrative of history includes backtracking, false starts, and provisional consolidations. Ideals about a better future are no less valuable for being tested in the difficulties of everyday experience.

We should be wary, then, of following several critics of Altman's day who accused Altman of failing to interweave the threads of her narrative. According to one review, *The Law of the Vultures* 'creaks with improbabilities'. Yet, we may recognize that Altman was justifiably circumscribed by history so that her impulses to humanism and didactism could not arrive at any simple resolution. As the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin might have said, Altman attempts to engage with the voices of her moment not by imposing closure, but by grappling with the various, often equally compelling claims for social and cultural dominance. In what Bakhtin has called the heteroglossia of human and social life, textual discontinuities, shifts of perspective and even apparently irreconcilable assertions of moral preference may be seen as a sign of realism. As I am arguing, we need not experience ideological confusion in *The Law of the Vultures*, but an overriding conviction that something needed to be done about human suffering. 'Contradictions' begin to signal novelistic truth. Such a mimetic authenticity will affect the 'shape' of *The Law of the Vultures*. As I have intimated, Altman's response - as she explored issues against the events of the time - could not adequately be conveyed in terms of formal realist conventions of interiority of character presentation and linearity of plot. Yet critics have sought mostly to define Altman's characters according to notions of individualized experience. (Even at the time of the novel's recent republication Thabo Thaele, whose story begins the book, was insistently described as the tragic protagonist. When
confronted with the abrupt curtailment or, as it subsequently emerges, the suspension of Thaele's story one-third into the novel, critics have rebuked Altman for failing to sustain what they had expected to be Thaele's heroic development. The priorities of Altman's political commitment, however, might quite aptly have queried modes of personal characterization. As Altman has said, her book was 'compounded of imaginary but typical incidents' and if she 'did not consciously choose [her] characters as spokesmen of oppositional ideologies', she seems nevertheless to have sensed the need to avoid any ruptures between the individual personality and a representative social experience. 13

Thaele has the interest of a credible human being, for instance, but his psychological development is not allowed to govern the trajectory of the novel. With his working experience in the firm of Dent & Co. determined largely by political exigencies, his increasing anger and frustration as an African cannot be located as a 'fatal flaw'. Rather, he is a victim. Certainly his story has pathos; but if there is a tragic dimension, the 'flaw' lies not so much in Thaele the individual as, according to Brechtian understandings, in the dominating ideologies of the epoch. In other ways, too, the term tragedy might be inadequate. For the novel does not end with the death of Thaele. It is less concerned with noble dying than with the potential for productive living. Although imprisoned, Nkosi may be released, and he will have to decide about available courses of action in the future. Dhlamini, for his part, as I have said, remains there, organizing. In The Law of the Vultures, circumstances are finally not regarded as immutable; they can be changed by human action.

The fact of materiality is important. In her imagery, Altman often hints at a religious frame of reference – the struggle between Thaele and Dhlamini for the 'soul', or loyalty, of Nkosi, for example, which might suggest the temptation of allegory, where ideal possibilities are free from history. Yet in an interview with me in 1987, Altman explained that she does 'not believe in the fixed destiny of the morality plays' and feels that people who belong to organizations like 'Cosatu and the UDF are hoping to create a genuinely democratic society and are actively trying to shape their lives to achieve this end'. 14 In thinking of Cry, the Beloved Country, we may attach to both Thaele and Nkosi the symbolism of the prodigal son. But such archetypal patternings in The Law of the Vultures are continually being returned to the demands of precise social experience. If there is a longing in the novel for sudden transfigurations this may be part of Altman's desire and need even as she establishes a sociologically convincing locale in terms of people, fact and data. This was something not understood by the critic who felt that Altman's writing suffers from 'a starkness that loses many opportunities of atmosphere and descriptive death'. 15 To invoke a valley of desolation in contrast to Johannesburg, as Paton does, would be to invalidate the point Altman is trying to make about the truth of the socialized imagination.
If Altman’s style has been rebuked for its lack of ‘descriptive residue’, her plot has been regarded by some as jumbled. But while the action does skew from the single focus of Thabo Thaele to several other points of reference, the various stories in *The Law of the Vultures* are all linked to the central idea of massive dislocation that is so crucial to modern African experience. In presenting a number of ‘Jims’, and also a ‘Jane’, who came to Jo’burg, Altman recognized, perhaps more than other novelists at the time, that the black person was a permanent presence in the cities of South Africa. What might have been seen as awkwardness in her handling of action and setting can, from another perspective, be seen to have a sociological accuracy not found in other ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’ novels. Whereas Peter Abrahams in *Mine Boy* (1946) and Alan Paton in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) focus, in strong single actions, on single protagonists, Altman’s interlinked stories, her sudden shifts of character attention, her episodic narration and recurrent recourse to debate and discussion all have the effect of immersing her individual characters into a larger, populated landscape. These features also complicate the linear drive of the narrative. If we are impelled to envision a different future, the accumulated detail of people struggling in the here and now provides a crucial check on idealising solutions. In this regard, we are not merely noting a technique, but a democratizing of forms in literature and life. Whether Altman realizes it or not, her determination to speak out on behalf of a suppressed black majority has resulted in the muting of her own individuality of style in favour of a collective kind of voice. As we ‘listen’ to an exchange in Motsubi’s Tea Room, for instance, our attention is healthily deflected from Thaele’s preoccupations with self to the sustaining presence of the black community:

‘I am pleased you are out of gaol,’ [Motsubi] said quietly.
A tremendous rage gripped Thaele ... ‘Do not speak to me! You are a stranger to me. Must everyone know of my affairs?’ ...
Motsubi shrugged ... ‘It is not easy for us to keep out of gaol. I myself have also been arrested,’ ... Thaele drew a deep breath.
‘Why ... why were you in gaol, my father?’ ...
‘Why?’ Motsubi laughed without mirth. ‘why? Because I could not pay my tax. The year that my child died.’
A woman who had come in and had stood listening to their conversation, now came up to the table.
‘For us,’ she said, ‘it is work and gaol. For our people there is no other way to live. I also have been in gaol.’
‘You, too, my mother. Why? ...’
‘Because they found beer in my yard. I did not even make it ... but we lived in the one house and when the police found it they took me.’ (pp. 109-110)

At the end of the fictional narrative Nkosi, too, has been jailed. Yet he continues in his cell to question the political options available to black people, and one is tempted to quote a generation of political prisoners in
saying that in the long march of resistance Nkosi’s sentence - five years’ hard labour for ‘inciting insurrection’ - is nothing.

In South Africa today, pass laws have been repealed, prominent political prisoners have been released, democratic organizations have been unbanned, and there seem to be real possibilities for people to tackle, creatively, the issues that Altman, when she wrote her novel, saw as being crucial to any consideration of a more equitable society. At the same time, we still have the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act and various restrictive ‘native’ land acts. Mandela may say ‘throw your knives and pangas into the sea’, but Brigadier Theuns Swanepoel of the Conservative Party continues to insists that ‘The only negotiation with the enemy is down the barrel of a gun’.

In all this, The Law of the Vultures has the power and resonance to convey a crucial principle: we can only understand our present - and thereby construct our future - through an understanding of our past. And through a reading that has tried to connect her literary text to a larger social context, my case for the recovery of Altman should, I feel, extend beyond Altman herself to a wider conception of a new South Africa. Phyllis Altman would not have wanted to separate herself, as an individual, from a generation of ‘silenced’ South Africans including, among writers, Ruth First, Mary Benson and Alex la Guma. I deliberately mention both women and men. In a recent review of The Law of the Vultures, Christine Barsby claims that by stressing Altman’s link with a national struggle we might be in danger of neglecting questions more specifically about the role of women in South African society.16 Perhaps the challenge is to resist any separation of the national and the ‘feminist’. Instead we should recognize that the work of writers like Altman could actually encourage feminist criticism in South Africa to make a sharp conceptual break from currently available white middle-class American and European models, and to articulate a socially progressive presence for South African women in another South Africa.


NOTES


5. Interview, p. 100.


9. Interview, p. 102.


