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Off-colour? Mike Nicol's Neo-noir 'Revenge Trilogy' and the Postapartheid *Femme Fatale*

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## **Abstract**

This article critically examines the use of noir, neo-noir and global noir conventions in Mike Nicol's 'Revenge Trilogy' of crime novels, *Payback* (2008), *Killer Country* (2010), and *Black Heart* (2011). Nicol invents a black *femme fatale* who is shown to be an 'evil' concentrate of all that is perceived to be corrupt under postapartheid conditions. The 'dame' in question, Shemina February, is portrayed in such a way that she becomes a projection of what scholars and commentators increasingly see as a corrupt, neoliberal power-base hijacking the legacy of the South African struggle against apartheid. However, the article raises the question: why locate such a pronounced sense of political 'evil' in a black female character? Coming from a white writer, regardless of his credentials, such a gesture raises the possibility of dubious racial and gender typecasting in an act of (perhaps unconscious?) projection. Might the white postapartheid writer, in this way, be seeking a sacrificial object for the perceived ills of postapartheid, in much the way classic noir projected its anxieties about the displacement of (white) male agency onto 'bad' women after the second world war? The article offers alternate readings of Nicol's *femme fatale*.

[200 words]

## **Keywords**

Crime fiction; postapartheid; South African literature; femme fatale; noir; neo-noir; global noir.

## **Off-colour? Mike Nicol's Neo-noir 'Revenge Trilogy' and the Postapartheid *Femme Fatale***

The *femme fatale* of classic noir film and fiction, and her neo-noir successor, are overdetermined generic tropes that nevertheless serve as useful encodings of sociopolitical anxieties under modernity (noir) and late modernity (neo-noir), including neoliberal, global capitalism (global noir). This article examines the emergence of a strain of South African noir that incorporates all of these variants, bespeaking a peculiar complexity of displacement that speaks resonantly, if ambivalently, to postapartheid conditions. Mike Nicol's 'revenge trilogy' of thriller novels – *Payback* (2008), *Killer Country* (2010), and *Black Heart* (2011) – written in a reflexive noir register, introduces the 'coloured'<sup>1</sup> character Shemina February as the corrupt heart of the novel's action. She is driven by a lust for revenge against protagonist Mace Bishop, a white South African, for an act of violence committed against her in a cross-border guerilla camp during the 'struggle' years. Bishop is a former freedom fighter and arms dealer on behalf of the liberation struggle, who, along with his black South African comrade and close friend Pylon Busi, interrogated Shemina in the camp. The garrison's leaders, we learn, had strong circumstantial evidence to suspect that she might be an apartheid spy, and so they deputized Bishop and Busi to "grill" Shemina. In the process, Bishop smashed her hand with a mallet. Now, many years later, she is a lawyer, a well-connected, wealthy networker who works in the ethically ambiguous intersection between business and government, where she calls the shots with alarming ease, at least

from Bishop's point of view. In short, she is written up in such a way that she comes across as a projection – an evil concentrate, one might say – of what scholars and commentators increasingly see as a corrupt, neoliberal power-base hijacking the legacy of the South African struggle against apartheid.<sup>2</sup> However, the question immediately arises: why locate such a pronounced sense of political 'evil' in a black<sup>3</sup> female character, a postapartheid version of the *femme fatale*? Coming from a white writer, regardless of his credentials, such a gesture raises the possibility of dubious racial and gender typecasting in an act of (perhaps unconscious?) projection. Might the white postapartheid writer, in this way, be seeking a sacrificial object for the perceived ills of postapartheid, in much the way classic noir projected its anxieties about the displacement of (white) male agency onto 'bad' women after the second world war (Boozer 1999: 22)?<sup>4</sup>

The *femme fatale*, in Bruce Crowther's description, is calculating, manipulative, and cruel, using her sexual attractions "blatantly and without regard for the polite conventions of the past" (1989: 115). She knows what she wants and "she [doesn't] care what she [has to do] to get it". Though society may have dealt her "a low hand from a stacked deck", she has "an ace up her sleeve: her body" (115). For Mary Ann Doane, she is 'not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism' (1991: 2-3; cf. Dresser 2012: 634; Sherwin 2008: 178; Place 1998: 35). Sharon Willis relies on Slavov Žižek's work *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (2001) in an argument about neo-noir that reverses the apparent implication of the male gaze in traditional noir. This is an important point when looking at the work of Nicol's 'postapartheid' *femme fatale*. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* Žižek writes that, if one

understands the notion of a symptom as it was articulated in Lacan's last writings and seminars,

namely as a particular signifying operation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship to *enjoyment (jouissance)*, then the entire relationship is reversed: if the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself loses the ground under its feet, disintegrates. In this sense, "woman is a symptom of man" means that *man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom*: all his ontological consistency hangs on, is suspended from his symptom, is "externalized" in his symptom. (2001: 155-156; emphases in Žižek)

Willis, relying on Žižek's position, concludes that neo-noir typically figures 'a private war of the sexes that foregrounds masculine anxieties about incompetence, weakness, and failure in a universe where the boundaries between the private and the public or professional are constantly shifting' (1997: 64).

Without going into the merits of Žižek's provocative but possibly reductive glossing of Lacan, two more general points emerge: 1) neo-noir and global neo-noir bear witness to a heightening of masculine anxiety rather than its eventual resolution (as in early noir); and 2) female power is given more independent rein in neo-noir than merely acting as an 'ultimately reassuring male shield from castration anxiety', as Richard Martin (1999: 93) puts it. In addition, several kinds of displacement can be seen to be at work in a pronounced manner in neo-noir: of male primacy as a given; of men's power over women, their political confidence, competence and control; and, in Žižek's reading, of the male subject's very ontological consistency. It should be no surprise, then, that the weakening of (especially white) male political heft widely perceived to be evident in postapartheid is central to the workings of Nicol's postapartheid *femme fatale*. In

addition, the question raised by Christine Gledhill (1980: 127) is key: is the *femme fatale* (and for our purposes, Shemina February) a victim or a predator or both?

In the reading that the novel appears to invite, Shemina concretizes in her character and actions a corrupt (or 'rotten') political culture involving extortion and murder, with the willing co-operation of associates in government. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that 'hits' (hired assassinations) of both a political and a more broadly criminal nature are common enough in South Africa,<sup>5</sup> and that high levels of corruption and crooked dealings are widespread in postapartheid governance, as they were in the apartheid period (Lodge 1998: 157; Hyslop 2005: 789; Mbembe, 2013: n.p.). Nevertheless, one must ask questions about how form (here, neo-noir) determines – or overdetermines – content, and to what ideological effect such a move might be made. In particular, critical scrutiny seems necessary about the manner in which an especially virulent species of corruption is displaced onto a black, female South African figure in Nicol's trilogy.

Certainly, white displacement has been a conspicuous issue since 1994, and even more so from a male vantage. Political power has decisively shifted from the former white patriarchy to the black majority, where it is generally seen rightly to belong. This new political power, however, remains muted by the fact that economic influence remains mostly in white hands, despite significant black economic empowerment within the black elite in business and government, and a large and increasingly wealthy black middle class. (cf. Seekings and Natrass 2008; Bond 2013; Allen 2006).<sup>6</sup> So, not only has power shifted – both in terms of financial and symbolic capital, reshaping both the economic and moral high ground – but such

realignment of power is often illusory, creating the appearance of a fundamental change that, in hard economic terms, has left an asymmetrical, hard-nosed capitalist hierarchy mostly *unchanged*. Additionally, 'black' power all too often enters into alliances with old forms of 'white' power, in partnerships of capital, creating an illusion of revolutionary change that appears to be a smokescreen for (continued though racially reshuffled) minority or elite enrichment. In the process, there is an apparent displacement of economic power that is in fact really only a redistribution, or a partial displacement, of figures on balance sheets, leaving the greater moral project of social rejuvenation largely unfinished.

Still, the displacement of perceived 'evil' (corruption, wheeling and dealing between business and politics) onto a black female subject appears to speak very specifically to the loss of power and influence among whites, and white males in particular. How problematic is this move within a form of genre fiction that, for Chris Warnes, in its best manifestations should be playing (and often does play) a socially "conscientising" role in postapartheid writing (2012: 983)?<sup>7</sup>

### **Reading the *Femme Fatale* in Postapartheid South Africa**

In Nicol's depiction, Shemina February is surrounded by an aura of desire and dread that is comparable to Rider Haggard's outlandish Ayesha in the Victorian tale of wonders and horrors in Africa, *She* (1887), a novel that might be said to originate the *femme fatale* as a figure in writing in or about southern Africa. February, in her turn, is similarly imbued with extraordinary powers, except that hers are entirely

worldly, to wit the art of political maneuvering and having people who get in her way killed. She has no trouble at all reeling Bishop back into the net of his past, outwitting and eclipsing him with unerring regularity. Shemina's motive to get even is both individual and political, arising from emotional, psychic and physical hurts that link her to an immemorial line-up of murdered, wounded or otherwise deformed southern African woman, all the way from Saartjie Baartman to Anine Booysen.<sup>8</sup> Apart from seeking personal revenge, then, she is also engaged in acts of redress against the hurt of the generations stretching back to Cape slavery and the taint of bastardization (cf. Coetzee 1980). To this, add the smart of Shemina's physical torture at the hands of cadres in the liberation movement, one of them, infuriatingly, a white boy.

Shemina, in the time of postapartheid, is thus both a (former) victim and a (currently) powerful agent, and she now finds herself in a zone where politics and business meet, a space in which she finds it both possible and profitable to exploit the new vortices of justice and justness opened up by neoliberal, postcolonial conditions (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 5). She works the space of ethical undecidability in such conditions, merrily instrumentalizing disorder via both legal and extra-legal means. These are conditions in which there is little common ground, for example, on whether 'corruption', rather than a universal wrong, is an imputed 'western concept' that is opposed to traditional kin systems of patron-client patrimonialism in Africa (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 9). Certainly, for Shemina, working vertical wealth hierarchies that blur private and public interests is less a moral or political 'problem' than an opportunity to accumulate capital; in doing so,



she not only makes heaps of money and compensates for past wrongs, but she also advances her campaign of vengeance.

Shemina therefore has all the nous, power and motivation of the neo-noir heroine *and* a more specific historical agenda. Above all else, she is motivated now, in the early years of postapartheid, by conditions in which the personal and political, and the licit and illicit, are inextricably intertwined. She has both been tainted by accusations that she acted as a spy, *and* maimed by torture, with a mutilated, unsightly hand as a daily reminder of her injury, something she must wear on her person, as part of her very identity, 'look' and feel. It is no wonder, then, that she turns it into an instrument of sadomasochistic sexual allure (covering it a sleek black glove), a trap for the male antagonist she wishes to destroy.

Whatever else one may infer about such a narrative move, it certainly points to Shemina being figured as the apotheosis of inversion, one which renders male power in postapartheid visibly frail. Significantly, Nicol's configuration of plot sees a fusion of black and white masculinity (Mace Bishop and Mo Siq,<sup>9</sup> not to mention Busi) pitted against a force of womanly suasion that renders all of them, and everything they represent, weakened and friable. In *Payback* (2008), Bishop and Busi have a meeting with with Siq. To break the ice, Bishop and Siq talk about Shemina:

Bishop chased the tea with a mouthful of wine. 'She bought my house, you know, the one where [Bishop's daughter's abduction, engineered by Shemina] happened.'

'Shemina? I didn't. That a fact?'

'Ten months it'd been on the market she comes up with this offer that's short of what I want but also I need to sell. Had to sell.'

'One hard woman.'

'Cash.' Bishop soaked up a vinaigrette with a piece of ciabatta. 'I find out she's got a place in Clifton, on millionaire's mile. A share in a wine estate. Industrial property. The sort of portfolio that'd make brokers drool.'

'You sold to her though.'

'I didn't want to. The woman's got something about her that's disturbing. I would use the word evil.'

'So would I.' Mo forked up couscous. (Nicol 2008: 141)

One might speculate that this (albeit brief, conversational) alliance between a white and a black man against a rapacious, power-hungry black woman seems just a little too good to be true, too conveniently appetizing for (especially white) readers who see in postapartheid life a series of evil gambits driven by a greed whose libidinal charge leaves them affronted and 'disgusted' (a common enough political feeling among white South Africans who have suddenly discovered the moral high ground). Locating such ostensible immorality in a *black* woman, setting her up not only against white men, but a combination of white and black masculinity, surely cannot be taken as an innocent move? Seeing this 'bad' woman so described in terms inscribed by the male scarring she causes, the reader (especially the male reader) is enabled both to revile and (perhaps secretly) desire Shemina. In addition, it plays into the hands of such a reading that two operators as skilled as Mo Siq and Mace Bishop, both morally compromised, find themselves deferring to the even *more* 'evil', craftier Shemina; both have been victims of her superior playing of the system, and both fear her and are in the dark about her plans. As Siq says to Bishop, '[w]hat you have to ask ... is why she did it? With Shemina, there is always some other reason. Something behind the obvious .... Something else' (141). To this, Bishop replies: 'I asked that question .... I ask it still. Damn freaky situation' (141).

Arising from this, one could read Shemina as the political empowerment of the least influential class under apartheid – black women – now taking such moral victory to unexpectedly *amoral* lengths and co-implicating justified political empowerment with dubious personal revenge. This, it might be argued, transforms her otherwise justifiable moral and political motivation into a Faustian bargain with the devil. Or, at the very least, this is the way politically ‘disgruntled’ white readers are likely to see it. Alternatively, one might take a Žižekian view and see Shemina as a phantasmatic projection of the anxieties engendered by postapartheid conditions among white readers and, quite possibly, the writer in this case. Such anxiety, here, espies in Shemina an unsavoury vortex, an unappeasable appetite for gain stemming from earlier deprivations that ultimately defies all (masculine or ‘rational’) attempts to ‘master’ the situation. This fear, as figured in Nicol’s trilogy, might be described as the projection of severe masculine jitters about a reign of power that conglomerates desire and seduction with the prospect of runaway ‘spoils’. Such spoils would appear, from Mo Siq and Mace Bishop’s point of view, to be too rich for comfort, out of their range and control, and over-ripe, as in rotten, with all the coincident affective evocations of distaste arising therefrom. It is arguably an apprehension that would appear to be in keeping with a more generalized social anxiety – envy, perhaps? – about not getting in on the ‘spoils’ fast or sufficiently enough. Both among the elite of postapartheid and the (desperate) up-and-comers, one might detect a palpable social frisson of disquiet, knowing that others are making the running while all that those left behind (in Afrikaans, the ‘agtergeblewenes’) have is the consolation prize of seeking to be ‘good’ or ‘moral’ citizens. This would account

for the incessantly expressed concern – in social media, on talk radio, in the newspapers – about the ‘spoiling’, the worldly rottenness, of a rapacious governing (read ‘black’) elite chasing down its collective id, insufficiently fettered by the restraints of considered or ethically reflexive action. White thriller-readers and media consumers in South Africa, especially those who lived through apartheid without too much distress, now conveniently discover their ethical sensibilities! Shemina embodies all of the ‘distasteful’ drives that give rise to such newfound righteousness. In addition, she engenders the anxieties consequent upon their unleashing in libidinally unmasterable form – that is to say, (political and economic) desire run amok, or out of ‘civil’ control.

Shemina has no qualms about dealing with assassins or arranging ‘hits’. (She has former husband Mo killed, and she herself murders Bishop’s idealized African wife Oumou.) She neatly externalizes, for fearful readers, the seductive but also corrupt power inherent in postapartheid ‘empowerment’, and the danger such (supposedly degenerated) power holds for life itself, inviting death into a world of revolutionary promise, a world of ‘infant democracy’,<sup>10</sup> in a way that can only create ambivalent, fraught reactions. This evocation of a zone of nightmare in postapartheid, a concoction of desire and death, sex and slaughter, should be viewed critically. Is it a paranoid cocktail served up for hapless (mainly white) readers, or might it be a sociopolitically accurate depiction?

If we follow Žižek in believing ‘the truth about *femme fatale* as male fantasy – that is, as a creature whose contours are drawn by man’ (2005: 111), as an ‘inhuman partner’ or ‘traumatic Object with whom no relationship is possible’, a ‘void

imposing senseless, arbitrary ordeals' (102), then much potentially becomes clearer. The "dark" woman Shemina February subjects the men under her whip to arbitrary ordeals. She creates tremendous, unsatisfiable desire and severe discomfort, compounded by the possibility of suffering or the imminent threat of misfortune and misery, if not death. This compound of attraction and anxiety, legitimacy and licentiousness, figured as it is in the over-rich postapartheid noir demi-goddess Shemina, might be read as a phantasmatic externalization of the psychic 'double life' of postapartheid. That is to say, Shemina might be seen to embody – or externalize – the duplicitous manner in which postapartheid is perceived to operate. The post-1994 dispensation, as an achieved fact, brings with it a kind of satisfaction via the perception of an unimpeachable ethical superstructure (an excellent, liberal constitution), but it also offers giddy worldly enticements, rich ends achieved by dubious and dangerous means. Postapartheid thus calls forth hopefulness, on one level, but simultaneously inspires mortal peril, on another. This is especially so from a patriarchal point of view deriving ultimately from the neocolonial, Enlightenment sense of a 'good' patriarchy directing events with a rational hand. From this vantage, Shemina stands in for a 'void' of ordeals in which patriarchal rule is subsumed in an orgy of thwarted desire and cunning manipulation. As such, she can be seen to be a figure whose rendering – amid the male castration anxieties so evident in the men around her – ironically confirms her power, her *She*-like hold over the formerly powerful, now flailing, male characters (cf. Place 1998: 35).

Such expression of insecurity about masculine agency, turning as it does the powerful black woman into a freakish witch with far too much power and control

for her own good, should strike us as potentially problematic. First, it fails to account for the fact that women in postapartheid continue, for the most part, to be victims of violence in ways that contradict the apparent power wielded by Shemina February; and second, it offers a problematic sense of gender as dichotomized. As here configured, such a characterization of gender fails to account for any number of shades and combinations across a range of behavioural characteristics, both 'masculine' and 'feminine'; it fails to give gender the now widely granted view (largely influenced by Judith Butler) that 'masculine' and 'feminine' identities should be more appropriately seen as a variable *repertoire* of performative elements and characteristics rather than a two-tone, chessboard chiaroscuro of polarized essences.

Shemina's exaggerated portrayal, then, invites a critical reading in which she can be seen to concretize, or gather within her character, precisely the overdone pitch of white frenzy so current in postapartheid media about corruption and misrule in the ranks of the governing elite (read 'blacks'). Regardless of the facts – and the facts point to a degree of mismanagement and corrupt dealings in the era of 'Zumocracy' typical of the late-modern postcolony across the world – the shrill pitch of what I elsewhere call a 'white whine' in postapartheid<sup>11</sup> cannot go unremarked. In this context, Nicol's creation of a 'bad' black woman who 'screws' every man she encounters, with a nice dark twist, all the way from the good whitey hero with struggle 'cred' through to the rotten Zuma-apparatchik, seems just a tad too convenient. It provides an outlet for confirming, with a solid thriller-whack, all those repressed anxieties consequent upon male marginalization. (It comes to mind, too,

that Shemina concretizes white male dread of ‘miscegenation’, a thick trope in South African letters, variously handled, from Sarah Gertrude Millin in the 1920s to Zakes Mda in the 2000s.)<sup>12</sup>

### **Alternate Readings of Shemina February**

Nicol renders the ‘bad black woman’ projection in both the baroque erotic hues in which Shemina is drawn, and in the sense of deadliness, or fatality, with which she is imbued. The final novel in the trilogy, *Black Heart* (2011), is devoted substantially to the development and final resolution of the love-hate drama of repressed desire between Bishop and Shemina, and to its dissolution via death. Arising from an examination of this resolution, I will argue that *Black Heart*, and the trilogy as a whole, enable two distinct, and contradictory, readings: first, as detailed above, one that sees Shemina February as an all-too-handly projection of white displacement and the insecurities such marginalization creates; and second, a reading that sees in the postapartheid noir demi-goddess a more embracing account of responses to, and feelings about, the postapartheid set-up. I refer to these two variations in interpretation, below, as ‘more’ and the ‘less sympathetic’ readings.

Early on in *Payback*, the first work in the trilogy, Shemina is given to reflect on her initial meeting with Mace Bishop in Cape Town. In this encounter, he does not yet recognize her as the woman he once interrogated and tortured:

He was attractive. So much the better. Cocky. Sitting there behind the desk, cool and confident, looking at her cleavage. Shifting for a glance of her

breasts when she'd leant forward. Not caring that she'd noticed. A man pleased with himself and his world. Pleased with his wife, his daughter, his sexy red sports car.

'Enjoy them, Mr Bishop,' Shemina February said aloud (2008: 44).

Shemina, in Nicol's rendering, says this because she is intent on taking Bishop's life apart, and she keenly looks forward to the vengeful pleasure with which she will do this. Like any number of noir *femmes fatale*, her life is dedicated, not to family, or love, or regenerative engagement, but to revenge against the man who in this instance has managed to eke out a good life in postapartheid, despite the obvious political disadvantage of his being white and male. That he has prospered despite the fact that he once ruined her beauty, smashing her fragile left hand to bits with hammer-blows in an ANC camp, makes Shemina even more determined to exact vengeance. If one sees Shemina as a phantasmatic projection, cut from the cloth of male-centred anxieties, then the picture becomes one of anxiety about precisely the precarious nature of the male braggadocio displayed in the above passage, about such unlikely survival in a world in which white men were not supposed to flourish in quite the way Bishop seems to be doing. At least, this 'not supposed to' is the underlying anxiety lodged in the postapartheid imaginary from the point of view of a white male subject, its most paradoxical human entity, perhaps, combining as he does both considerable power and significant vulnerability.

Beyond being a projection of the white male subject, however, Shemina might also be regarded, in the more rather than the less sympathetic reading, as the most visible peak of a more general threat to good social and political values. In such a reading, all gender and racial positions are implicated in this more comprehensive



moral and ethical downfall. (It is appropriate to remember that female subjects can incorporate masculine characteristics, as Shemina does, and vice-versa, especially in postapartheid, which is a scene of inversion in many spheres.) Shemina's persona is overtly sexualized, and her feud with Bishop is cast in a language of heavily accented eroticism, in which the power of suasion is the pivot. However, the attraction seems to run in both directions, as do the various acts of projection, and one should not fail to bring such coeval, if "bad", mutual regard into critical reckoning.

Consider the opening scene of *Black Heart* (2011), the closing novel in the trilogy, in which a "devastated" Bishop infiltrates Shemina's opulent Clifton apartment on the Cape Atlantic seaboard as a prelude to his plan to kill her in revenge for her murder of his wife Oumou at the end of *Killer Country* (2010), the middle fiction in the trilogy. Shemina is shown by the omniscient narrator to be watching CCTV footage of Bishop's break-in, quietly in control of the situation. She is impressed that Bishop has the savvy to roll down his beanie, turning it into a balaclava, before he looks up at the CCTV camera. 'Nice touch', she says. Then she 'tapped the keyboard to pause the image', and catches her own face reflecting on the screen, 'her high cheekbones, pencilled eyebrows, the plum richness of her lips. Her latte face ghosting over that of the balaclavaed man. She puckered her lips in a kiss. Putsch' (2011: 7).

This passage is typical of Shemina's overt articulation of a conflicted attraction to Bishop. Her 'puckering her lips in a kiss' coupled with the notion of a 'putsch', or violent coup d'état, is symptomatic of the joining of eroticism and aggression in this zone of dangerous desire, a projection, to be sure, of the dangers,

the illicit spoils of postapartheid, not to mention the nemesis that awaits anyone who overreaches for such rich pickings. The joining of an erotic kiss with the idea of a putsch speaks volumes about the twinning of strong desire – unpredictable, potentially perfidious, morally equivocal – with sociopolitical power. Such compulsive overreaching, or what one might describe as desire in the body politic hitting the red zone, runs (in the sympathetic reading of Nicol) the risk of the ultimate spoiling of everything, coincident with a more general despoliation feared to be evident in the country on a larger scale.

The reader watches as Shemina observes Bishop moving through her apartment. One sees him stop and examine a set of cut-throat razors mounted on the wall above Shemina's desk. These are blades that had once shaved famous men, we learn, including Cecil Rhodes and Joe Silver (believed to be Jack the Ripper). Each of the blades has a story, '[e]xcept there were only five there now. The missing one, her grandfather's, had been used to cut the throat of Mace Bishop's wife' (8-9). Before that, we read, fully a 'quarter of a century before that, her grandfather had used it to slit his wrists. Rather die than be turfed out of his house. In a way, Shemina believed, that particular cut-throat was an instrument of history: destiny manifest' (9). Nicol's narration here, then, figures Shemina explicitly as the return of the repressed in a history of oppression not fully avenged, both in psychic and in physical terms.

This scene deserves more patient attention. It continues thus:

She snapped again on Mace Bishop, Mace Bishop focusing on the empty space in her cut-throat collection. Realizing that the blade used to kill his wife had

once been an ornament on her wall. How'd that make him feel? Rise the rage in him? Bring up the red pulse? What was he thinking, this man, Mace Bishop? This man in her white lair, among her things. This man intent on killing her. Fired by revenge. Did he even begin to figure out why she wanted to hurt him? Why she wanted to ruin him? Wreck his life? He would. By the time she'd finished, he would. (9).

Shemina' thirst for revenge, as described here, is equaled only by the intensity of her engagement with Bishop, betraying her own desire, in which lust and vengefulness combine to create a virulent concoction, especially when mixed with the power she has to secure information, pay off killers, and influence events in a manner that is shown to be almost uncanny – the 'uncanny' effect, of course, being integral to everything she represents as both a real character and a psychic projection. The narration continues:

There he was in her bedroom. Shining the torch over her bed, the bedside table with the digital clock, 04:20, the landline phone on its recharger, the photograph in a silver frame. The only photograph in the apartment. A photograph of Mace Bishop in his Speedo after a swimming session at the gym pool. One of a number she'd taken on the sly. Put it there hoping it would push him over the top. (9)

As if such pseudo-intimacy isn't outrageous enough, Shemina is given to thoughts of explicit desire for Bishop:

She watched him run his hand over one of her evening dresses. Imagined she was wearing it, his hand gliding down her back. Sometimes she thought of him like that. His hands hard against her breasts, hard on her buttocks pulling her into him. She shook her head to throw the thought. Flushed by the thrill of it. There was the man she wanted to kill with his hands in her underwear, coming out with one of her thongs, satin, red, holding it up, crushing it into his fist. He threw it back into the drawer. Sat on the edge of her bed, bounced like he was testing the comfort factor. Fell backwards against the pillows, his hand sliding underneath, finding a black negligee.

Holding it up. Silky. His torch beam sliding from it to the photograph on her bedside table. Pity she couldn't see his expression. (9-10)

One is tempted to see this almost-love, this denial of attraction despite its appreciable presence, as a figuration of the presence/absence of the great love affair that, in better circumstances, or under ideal conditions, might have stood in for reconciliation and love in the 'new' South Africa, something like the vision of rainbowism fathered by Desmond Tutu or the inspiration engendered by the ultimately forgiving, paterfamilias gestures of Nelson Mandela. But this is a love affair on the rocks, a projection of great potential and energy – the attraction of mutual others, perhaps – gone south. Now the sexual charge remains, the sense of the possible still there, but working only in service of an ethos that seeks murder, undue gain, and revenge for betrayal most foul, with severe disappointment on all sides.

From any subject position within postapartheid, whether black or white, male or female, this gothic postapartheid scene, gussied up in garish neo-noir tones, speaks to a sense of spoliation writ large. For Shemina, here is the man she might want to be in love with, but is obstructed from doing so, stymied, by a justified sense of hurt – of personal injury – for which her mutilated hand is a bodily signifier, whether she was in fact a spy or not. For Bishop, she is the immemorial postcolonial Other in its most enticing guise, as unattainable, aloof, erotically engaging, and yet lethal in both a literal and a symbolic sense. She portends death and destruction not only for him personally, but also for the sense of a country regained from the brink of violent revolution. She stands in, then, for the wrecking of something deeply

desired, namely a forgiving accommodation with that which was formerly quite beyond the pale, so to speak, and is now yet again so. The less sympathetic reading of Nicol's play with the black *femme fatale* in the revenge trilogy would find the location of this lost possibility within the figure of a black woman – a conclusive derailing of the postapartheid plot – a somewhat perverse expression of (white) masculine displacement. Whether such a reading is justified depends on how much one credits Nicol with being critically aware of exactly such displacement, or masculine derailing, and his presenting of the whole Shemina story-arc across three novels to describe it as such, in a *reflexive* manner. Giving the writer this kind of credit would result in a kinder reading, and one in which Nicol might be seen to be foregrounding the idea of a 'manifest destiny' when he describes the cut-throat used to kill Bishop's wife as 'an instrument of history: destiny manifest' (9). That is to say, rather than see Nicol as locating displacement anxieties somewhat blindly within the figure of a black female subject, thereby creating a convenient – and, dare one say, racist – scapegoat, one might read Nicol's story as inscribing instead a recognition of the *necessary* ascendancy of the black female subject over the white man in postapartheid, despite the discomfort and 'trouble' that it causes. Given Nicol's track record, and the formal sophistication his earlier work (see Nicol 1998, 1994a, 1994b, 1992), not to mention his anti-apartheid credentials as a writer, such a reading would appear to be creditable at the very least. However, the licence given to genre – or perhaps one might say Nicol's submission to the tendency of noir to concentrate evil in the figure of a 'dame', a divisively gendered *femme fatale* – certainly troubles such a reading.

The critical question, I would argue, is whether to read Nicol's noir as an instance of neo-noir in which, as Jack Boozer writes, 'the siren's behavior ... seems consistent with the ethically corrupted marketplace competition and sexual exhibitionism that surrounds her' (1999: 29). Such a reading, then, mightn't be seen as a projection of perverse symptoms onto a black female subject *only*, but the use of the *femme fatale* in neo-noir style as indicative of what Boozer, above, calls an 'ethically corrupted' zone in more capacious terms. This would support a reading of the co-implication of *all* parties in the revenge trilogy in ethical compromise: ordinary citizens (Ducky Donald Hartnell and his son Matthew), the police (for example, Gonsalves, a white detective who takes petty bribes), former Umkhonto we Sizwe operatives of all colours and both genders (Bishop, Busi, Shemina February), state apparatchiks, senior government officials, in fact just about everyone in the story, except perhaps for the somewhat idealized figure of Oumou, Bishop's spotless wife, and their biracial daughter Christa. (Of course, this polarization of 'good' and 'bad' women is inherently problematic.)

Such a reading is supported to some extent by the plot configuration of the novel's ending. In a more conventional noir set-up, the male heroine might kill off the *femme fatale*. In *Black Heart*, Shemina's outwitting of Bishop continues right up to the end, as it must, given the politics of power and the historical odds of the situation. She has all the connections, money and power, while Bishop has mostly desperation and canny survival skills. In a final shootout scene in Shemina's apartment, Bishop comes off second-best. Shemina shoots him twice in the body – one bullet hitting an upper arm, and another a thigh. She then delivers a dramatic

speech. The set-piece quality of the writing here is surely meta-reflexive on Nicol's part, playing with the genre?

'Bishop, back to that night in the camp when you came to me. Wanting to fuck me.'

'Bullshit.'

'Wanting to fuck me, Bishop. I could tell. In your eyes, I could tell. I got to see that look a lot of times, in men's eyes. In Membesh. In Quatro. That's what our heroes did for fun. To pass the time. The big boys. The big boys you see nowadays in their Armani suits. They'd get that look. Come into our cells to pick a woman like they were picking fruit. I'll have that one. You. Collect-a-cunt's what they called it. Nice, hmm? After that recycling thing. Collect-a-can. I can hear them laughing.

'But let's not go there. It's ugly stuff. The sort of stuff can make you want to get even. Makes you fantasize about revenge. My stuff, Bishop. Thanks to you.' (Nicol 2011: 317).

This passage is perhaps the first in the entire trilogy in which one encounters a flesh-and-blood Shemina with a measure of complexity, a character with whom one can more readily relate as something more than a convention, a dark spider-woman. Her pain and humiliation at the hands sexually predatory male cadres, who now walk free 'in their Armani suits', unpunished for acts of rape and sexual harassment, is readily understandable. Her scorn for 'our [male] heroes', 'collect-a-cunt' exploiters, and their impunity – in fact, their current state of lavishing in the spoils, Kenny Kunene-style<sup>13</sup> – is equally comprehensible. In addition, one senses the real pain she felt then, and still feels now, especially in view of the shocking claim she proceeds to make next:

'That night. I'm lying there naked on the mattress with my broken hand throbbing. Throbbing like I hadn't known pain before. So sharp, so constant, so everywhere in my body death would've been a mercy. I remember thinking that. Thinking please kill me because then I wouldn't be in pain. Pain so bad I couldn't see properly. Everything was blurred. Even you at first.

Standing next to me. This white angel with all the blond hair. The devil angel. Staring down at my body, my breasts, my thighs. You remember you crouched down, touched my cheek. Then my nipples. Softly with the tips of your fingers.' (317)

Even though Bishop denies having done this ('Crap. It's all crap. It's your fantasy', he replies [318]), this, like the question of whether Shemina was a spy, is another undecidable issue – did Mace Bishop indeed give such inexpressibly indecent expression to his desire for Shemina as to touch her breast after pulverizing her left hand? If he did, surely this is every bit as bad as her being a spy, if not worse? More generally, though, this showdown brings to the surface the messiness, the coeval wrongfulness on all sides of the struggle line, making nonsense of any presumption, by any party, of automatic superiority or elevation within a tarnished postapartheid milieu in which the plot appears to have been comprehensively lost.

Shemina then reveals – or claims – that she *was* in fact a spy, delivering an extraordinary confession, followed by an unaccountably neat analysis of postapartheid moral rot:

'Anyhow, before we move to the grand finale, I have a secret for you. Something else you won't appreciate, but what can I do? History is history. Fact is fact. Fact in this instance, Bishop cheri, is bashing my hand to pulp didn't get you what you wanted. Didn't get you the truth. Fact is, you know, I was an agent. That hated type, an apartheid spy. How about that? And nobody ever knew for sure. Here's this traitor with a Maced hand waltzing about in their midst and they never knew. I was good. You have to admit, I was good. I'm still good. End result? I got information on all the big players. Both sides. The lowdown. The dirt. Which, I've found, is a misnomer after all. What it's actually is paper. You know, paper in the stock market sense? Like a share that can be converted into money. Hard cash. That's what I got. Come the new country I ditched the whiteys, bedded down with the darkies. Hardly difficult seeing as they'd bedded me already. I snuggled up, got even more paper on them: who got arms deal kickbacks, who got lifestyle changes, which gangster bought presents for which cabinet minister. You know, that



sort of thing. Who got farms, cars, houses, holidays, directorships. Whose family ended up with the major contracts. Long and short, who put their pudgy fingers in the state's till. So much of it going on, you keep your eyes open, at some point you're going to score. What can I tell you? In this world, the rich and powerful are the ones with the lowdown. Probably it's always been like that. So there you go, Bishop. Story of my life.' (318-319).

And there it is – Shemina as the ultimate projection, the distillation and essence, of everything that is perceived to be putrescent and sick, in a way that would make Frantz Fanon turn in his grave, in the 'new' South Africa, postapartheid style.

However, although she embodies such moral decay, and trades on it, it cannot be pinned on her alone. It precedes her and will succeed her, too. This wider complexity of ethical corruption is consistent with neo-noir convention, and especially its global variant (Kochlar-Lindgren 2014; Peckham 2014). The possibility that Shemina was in fact a spy, that is if her claim is not mere mockery and taunt – which is decidedly possible – ultimately does not matter, as any claim to moral superiority, on any side, has comprehensively been surrendered.

Still, how does Nicol resolve the plot? Shemina must be destroyed, or else she must kill Bishop. The death of Bishop is not the ending Nicol wants, as Bishop is one of the trilogy's 'good guy' protagonists – that is, in comparison with Shemina's excesses, especially her slitting of the innocent Oumou's throat with a cut-throat razor. But Bishop cannot be allowed to kill Shemina – he is a formerly privileged white man up against a newly empowered, previously disadvantaged black woman, after all. Even though she is a figure of corrupt neoliberal modernity, a white man in opposition to her surely cannot be allowed to take her out? To resolve this impasse, and to save his muddled hero, Nicol brings in Mart Velaze, a killer who works for

Shemina and other shady wheelers and dealers in the power-and-influence game. Velaze, described as '[t]he only black man Sheemina February had encountered who'd never pulled a move on her', (Nicol 2011: 10-11), is an operator and double-crosser who thrives in the zone of illicit work tacitly sanctioned by powerful politicians. In the event, Velaze shoots Shemina in the back of the head just as she is about to kill Bishop. She knew too much, and she was getting to be too dangerous for too many people in power. Or so the plotline goes, not implausibly, although very conveniently, it must be added.

As observed above, the libidinal economy in play here, and the unrestrained forces of Eros that drive it forward in Nicol's revenge plot, ultimately stake out a dangerously ambiguous, outlaw zone of action in which it is next to impossible to distinguish virtuous acts from villainous ones, and legal from illegal actions. This, at least, seems to be the message Nicol is tacitly underlining, that is to say, within a more sympathetic reading of his use of genre, despite certain troubling elements of gender-displacement. Willis's observation is helpful in this regard, namely that neo-noir plots tend to '[load] anxieties onto the question of sexual difference and sexuality', foregrounding 'masculine anxieties about incompetence, weakness, and failure in a universe where the boundaries between the private and the public are constantly shifting' (1997: 64). Not only is the world of neo-noir one in which male primacy has been dethroned, but it also ushers in a world in which disambiguation on a larger scale seems all but impossible.

In keeping with such a scene of more general displacement and unsettlement, Nicol's dramatic plot and twist in the tale perform, via genre, the

anguish of a transition that once promised new horizons but now threatens to bring *all* its players closer to death instead, back to inglorious beginnings rather than achieved resolutions, to inconsequential destruction rather than any kind of moral or ethical deliverance. The implication of Mart Velaze killing Shemina – that is, of death at the betraying hands of someone on her own side – is that the system breaks down by the force of its own entropy, its own accelerating momentum towards disorder and, eventually, chaos. No independent, ‘white’ hero is able to be the agent of corrective political action any longer, especially while acting alone. White, male agency under postapartheid is necessarily curtailed. But its eclipse by forces that are as degenerate in their own way as apartheid operations once were, and as lethal, unthinking and blind, brings Nicol’s entertaining and stylish fictional critique to a fitting close – fitting, that is, when seen as an artistic adequation of a political slide into outright plot-loss that is perceived to be everywhere evident in the off-colour, over-rich era of Jacob Zuma.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Racial and/or ethnic tags remain notoriously problematic in South Africa, where “coloured” denotes mixed racial origins stemming from the European incursion into what is now South Africa beginning in the mid-seventeenth century.

2. Widespread scholarly consensus exists that the South African ‘revolution’, traditionally envisioned as a project of the Left, was hijacked by neoliberal capitalism, especially under former president Thabo Mbeki. There is also broad consensus that the governing African National Congress has been infected, in varying degrees, with the typical ‘postcolony’ bugs of consumption frenzy and political corruption. See, in this regard, among others, Habib 2013; Vavi 2010; Allen 2006; Hyslop 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Bond 2013; Mbembe 2013; Hartley 2014; Mbeki 2009.

3. 'Black' in this article is used in the inclusive South African sense developed in the lead-up to democratic transition and in the country's popular 'struggle' formations; in this usage, 'black' denotes 'coloureds' (in the South African usage defined in Note 1), people of Indian and Asian descent, and any others of non-European origin, in addition to black people.

4. Feminist critics have dealt quite comprehensively with the problematic figuration of the *femme fatale*. Katherine Farramond's PhD thesis, *Beyond Backlash: The Femme Fatale In Contemporary American Cinema* (Newcastle, 2011), is a good starting point. See also Julie Grossman (2009), in addition to the gendered studies cited in the main text of this article.

5. At the time of completing this article, the most striking evidence of this was to be found in the Shrien Dewani murder case, in which Dewani is accused of arranging a 'hit' on his wife Anni during their honeymoon in Cape Town in 2010. Amid a slew of similar murder cases, the *Cape Argus* newspaper set out to see how quickly, and for how much money, 'hitmen' could be found who were willing to kill for a fee. 'The results were scary,' wrote the newspaper. 'In one day three people were found who were willing to kill someone for money. The asking price ranged from R5000 to R15000 [about \$500 to \$1500]' (see <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/how-to-find-a-hitman-for-r5-000-1.1000112#.VE-fQYvLf3M>, accessed on 28 October 2014).

6. At the time of writing, the most recent of many similar empirical analyses was an Oxfam report called 'Even it Up: Time to End Extreme Inequality'. See <http://www.oxfam.org/en/research/time-end-extreme-inequality>, accessed on 2 November 2014.

7. Warnes (2012: 983) argues that writers such as Deon Meyer and Margie Orford 'keep faith with some of the core features of "serious" South African literature: its capacity to document social reality, to expose injustice, and to conscientise readers into different modes of thought and action.' See also my article on the 'political' function of crime writing in De Kock (2014).

8. On Saartjie Baartman, or the 'Hottentot Venus', see Crais and Scully 2009; Anene Booysen was a 17-year-old Cape woman who was gang-raped and disemboweled in Bredasdorp in the Western Cape in 2010 (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape\\_and\\_murder\\_of\\_Anene\\_Booyesen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_and_murder_of_Anene_Booyesen), accessed 29 October 2014).

9. There is little doubt that this character's name is a play on Mo Shaik, the man with whose brother, Schabir, President Jacob Zuma was found by a High Court judge to have had a 'generally corrupt' political relationship involving bribes. On Zuma's relationship with Schabir Shaik, see the South African Communist Party (SACP)

news clip, 'Shaik judgment may cost Zuma dearly,' accessed on 3 April 2014 at <http://www.sacp.org.za/docs/medioclips/2006/nz1106f.html>.

10. A popular description of the country's relatively young democracy. See, for example, Deon Meyer's use of the phrase in his novel, *Heart of the Hunter* (Meyer 2003).

11. In 'Freedom on a Frontier? The Double Bind of (White) Postapartheid South African Literature' (De Kock 2015).

12. See Millin's *God Step-Children* (1924), and Mda's *Madonna of Excelsior* (2002).

13. Kunene is an ex-convict turned businessman who gained notoriety for throwing a lavish 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party at which he ate sushi off the belly of a (black) woman wearing nothing but lingerie, and swigged from \$1,300 bottles of Dom Pérignon, according to the *New York Times*. (See <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/15/world/africa/15southafrica.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed on 4 April 2014.)

14. Despite this novelistic vision being somewhat compromised by its troublingly gendered complexion, the sense of a rotten, overripe political dispensation is widespread among postapartheid writers of all hues. Two good recent examples are Rustum Kozain's long poem, 'Dear Comrades' (2014), and Niq Mhlongo's coruscating novel about political degeneration among the moneyed political elite, *Way Back Home* (2013), among many others.

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