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Ethical Ambiguities in Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* and Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog*

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Abstract

This article investigates how the use of unreliable narration in Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* and Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* reveals ethical ambiguities as represented in post-apartheid fiction. These ambiguities have been amplified by the writers who have broadly adopted the use of first-person narrators/protagonists to negotiate the apprehensions that have ensued in the process of building a new society. By adopting a close, textual and complementary reading of the two novels, this article identifies instances of unreliability in characters, in particular, of bad faith or bad will, which condition such characters to deception and wilful avoidance of responsibility. Drawing from theoretical insights on the orientation of narrators/protagonists as unreliable narrators, and on race and cultural theory to define the post/apartheid condition of social unsettlement, this article pursues instances of inconsistency and contradiction of the self to define ethical uncertainties in the texts. In effect, the article shows that bad faith and fallibility, manifested in the tendency to lie and take advantage of morally ambiguous situations, are deployed by the narrators/protagonists in the novels to wilfully project their own self-interest, thus rendering the pursuit of empathy, consideration and responsibility uncertain. The article justifies the place of unreliable narration in magnifying ethical issues in literature.

Key words: Bad faith, collective, ethical ambiguities, self, unreliable narration.



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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of apartheid, post-apartheid writing has devoted significant attention to ethical ambiguities that have arisen due to the enduring memory of a problematic past and a sense of the continuities of that past into the present. These ethical ambiguities stem from the difficulty individuals face in determining an ethical choice to make with respect to adopting guiding principles of behaviour. This difficulty is rooted in the unfair and brutal past that has been defined by lasting trauma on individuals and communities. An enduring feature of this writing is the adoption of a culture of introspection, in which characters turn inward into the interrogation of the material realities and circumstances of the present moment. Kgebetli Moele and Nig Mhlongo are some of the writers who intertwine histories and memories of communities largely through individual and personal voices. The writers emphasise the ethical ambiguities confronting the post-apartheid society marked by uncertainty and unsettlement through characters/protagonists narrating their experiences in the first-person narrative point of view. Moele's *Room 207* and Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* amalgamate ethical issues with stylistic options that magnify the uncertain ethical choices of characters.

A significant number of post-apartheid writings are inspired by spatio-temporal reorganisations in South African cities after apartheid. Moele and Mhlongo belong to this generation of South African writers who choose the city as a point of inspiration. Studies on their creative works, for example, by Rafapa (2018), have focused extensively on the social and material circumstances of communities affected by partisan race relations, discrimination, and social and economic inequalities in predominantly urban centres. Reflecting on Mhlongo's writings, Moreillon and Stiebel (2015) observe that Mhlongo fuses his personal experiences with the experiences of the characters in his fiction. Mhlongo fuses the fictive self with the personal/autobiographical voice. By positioning the self within the matrix of race and economic relations, Mhlongo manages to offer a closer engagement with the ethical anxieties facing contemporary South Africa. Mhlongo shares a similar thematic focus with Moele. Their works are positioned within a post-apartheid ideology that recognises the expectation of a collective

multicultural rainbow, while demonstrating a dispirited frustration with the progress being made by the nation. Their works at once imagine the ambiguities and the uncertainties of the historical transition in South Africa. Moele's *Room 207* and Nig Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* represent personal anxieties related to the failure of the Rainbow dream as imagined with the end of apartheid.

According to Ibinga (2010), Moele's *Room 207* visualises multivocal and varied reactions from individuals and communities towards the social, economic and political contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa. Protagonists in Moele's (2006) and Mhlongo's (2004) novels desire to escape from entrapment caused by painful memories. The characters realise that it is not easy to live through the legacies of apartheid, which stage their unsettlement and the accompanying anger and rage. To stage their ambiguous relationship with the past, the characters in the novels fuse their personal selves with their suffering, alienation and confusion.

In this article, we examine the character of Noko, the narrator in Moele's *Room 207*, as well as that of other characters, and of Dingz, the narrator in Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog*, to show how the characters find themselves unable to move forward in a segmented society that regularly demands rationalisation, particularly of past experiences.

Room 207: Strategies of Unreliable Narration

Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* features six young South African blacks, S'busiso (otherwise known as Zulu-boy, because he is a Zulu by ethnic extraction), Molamo, D'nice, Modishi, Matome, and the narrator called Noko, who live(d) together for over a decade while sharing a single rented room with a door inscribed "Room 207" in Hillbrow, in downtown Johannesburg. While Noko remains the primary protagonist, the others retain and express their respective individuality through him. Fludernik (2017), writing regarding the collective voice in narratives, identifies the concept of "collective protagonists" to refer to those characters who are involved in a similar set of circumstances, express "a common attitude", as they engage in "collective storytelling as co-authors and co-narrators." The characters in *Room 207* engage in acts of collective

storytelling. The protagonists come from different ethnic communities of South Africa. For example, S'busiso is a Zulu, Noko a Sotho, Matome a Pedi, while Modishi is a Tswana. Milazzo (2013, p. 44) argues that in *Room 207*, "a simplistic and homogeneous notion of 'black identity' is complicated by ethnic heterogeneity." In that regard, the novel moves beyond the identification of one black collective identity, into the identification of individuals from particular communities, some of whom, like Zulu-boy, are thought to reflect ethnically inclined social traits. By sharing the single room, the individuals of Room 207 exhibit the ideals of communitarianism that preach for collective efforts to solve communal problems. Praeg (2014, p. 51-52), reflecting on Ubuntu, contends that "with urbanisation and the anti-apartheid struggle, came the expansion of the secularisation of the formal principle of the Ubuntu praxis so that it no longer referred to local kinship-based and visible communities of metaphysical locality." In effect, Ubuntu, with its precepts of neighbourliness and reciprocity, was transposed into the urban context, with its multiple networks.

Yet, beneath this ideal of sharing and reciprocity, their being together in the same room masks certain forms of individual vulnerabilities. Even though they live together in the same room in the embrace of communitarianism, their primary focus is on harnessing their individual efforts to pay rent, and collectively meet food expenses and retain a little for other necessities. However, these individuals also have their own personal pursuits, which are not generally aimed at solving their communal problems. Herein lies the uncertainty. For many years, the members of Room 207 shared an aspiration that they were going to make it out of the city. For over a decade, staying in the "dream city" of Hillbrow, each member of 207 entertains a dream that they will leave Hillbrow at a time when they have actualised their dreams. Kathleen (2016, p. 14) argues that the "hopes and dreams of the characters ... are suspended in the hopeful yet uncertain temporality of 'not yet'." They live in an illusion in which they "figure their stay [in Room 207 and in Hillbrow] as an incarceration from which they are attempting to escape in order to actualise the prosperity they so desperately seek" (Kathleen, 2016, p. 15). The hope

is inspired by illusory stories of financial breakthroughs. They therefore desire to escape from the materiality of their present circumstances into a utopia of a fulfilling life beyond 207, in particular, and Hillbrow/Johannesburg, in general. Justifying the enduring interest of post-apartheid writers in the representation of the South African city, Mhlongo (2008, p. 1) reflects on "the city's ability to lure people into believing that it can fulfil their egos, and their empty quests for a life of comfort, convenience, pleasure and fortune." For Mhlongo, the author of *Dog Eat Dog*, the fallacious "gleam of the city" conditions people's entanglements with the city and urban life. The city retains a deceptive allure that feeds and consumes the fancies of anyone who comes by it. Modishi of 207, who thought he could make a career out of music in the city and earn a lot of money in the process, squanders his inheritance. The "buzzing street with neon lights" had ensnared him, forcing him to leave the relative comfort of the rural areas to live in Room 207 with his peers (*Room 207*, p. 49).

The first-person narrator, Noko, in many instances in the novel, excoriates post-apartheid living conditions by emphasising the unfortunate condition of the room, which is "humid and heavy" because its windows are hardly ever opened because of the constant threat of theft (*Room 207*, p. 14). As a primary focalizer, he expresses his own experiences, while also voicing the actions of others and commenting on their disposition, who remain, as Fludernik (2017, p. 139) puts it, "agents, narrators and focalizers." He stands at a privileged narrative position that allows him to draw conclusions on the values and experiences of others. On this account, his position is ambivalent. Kathleen (2016, p. 22) observes that Noko "plays host; he invites the reader-interlocutor-guest into his space, while also retaining that othering gesture – the reader remains a guest and outsider." This narrative position, which challenges his reliability as a narrator, is magnified by the instances in which he shares self-deprecating comments about self, and about others. For example, he entertains a wish that he is maimed through an electric fault by the overhanging electric wires in the leaking geysers in their room because that would provide him with an opportunity to take the landlord to court and hopefully secure an insurance payout

that will allow him to fund “the out-of-Hillbrow party that Matome says we are going to have the day we move out of Hillbrow for good” (*Room 207*, p. 14). This party is subsumed in an endless dream, regarded as a figment of a successful life ahead after the mis/adventures in the dream city. However, this dream prefigures a dreamy existence of a future not altogether premised on the circumstances of the present, as they live in a condemned building that is a constant reminder of its fatalistic leanings. This problematic wish for a personal injury in order to fund an imagined communal party is a pointer to a faulty and vaulting self-sacrifice that is disguised as communal responsibility. Writing about the re/constitution of the black community in the context of slavery, Hartman (1997, p. 59) shares the uncertainties that plagued individuals whose connections after slavery were “forged in the context of disrupted affiliations, sociality among the constant threat of separation, and shifting sets of identification particular to site, location and action.” Such communal disruptions produce restless communities whose values and beliefs are continually in flux.

Ethical Duplicity of the Self

Frenkel (2013, p. 34) argues that *Room 207* “reinscribes stereotypes and exhibits a dubious morality.” Noko, especially, manifests his perversion and immorality, although he projects a different, outward mentality. He draws us to the persistent immoral language in the novel, while at the same time, invites us not to prejudge him on the basis of that language. One of Matome’s lady friends wants to “fuck” him, the narrator reports, and he/ the narrator intercedes: “Excuse the language, but that’s exactly what came out of her mouth” (p. 26). Ibinga (2010, p. 63) argues that Moele’s use of vulgar language is consistent with “the mindset” of the young urban dwellers. Ibinga (2010, p. 64) notes that the novel uses a street language that is consistent with the characters’ social space. In this instance, the narrator’s intercession does seem to obligate the narrator to the representation of the need for good conduct: it only serves to heighten his own “horror” at the use of such a language by the female gender. Otherwise, in many instances, the narrator is implicated in the use of foul language. He rationalises, for example, the problematic distinctions between “love” and “sex” on the basis of

their assumed meanings after he had random sex with Matome’s girlfriend. He justifies the immoral encounter:

First, Dimakatso was Matome's, and then she was mine, and we were still living in the same room. This situation arose because Matome did not want to have sex with her, who preferred loving her without having sex because he did not want 'to have sex at this time in my life'. (*Room 207*, p. 28)

Despite his closeness to Matome, the narrator does not display any guilt or remorse over his betrayal of Matome. In this profane situation, the narrator manages to have sex with Matome’s girlfriend because he, Matome, believed in abstinence and that he understood love to mean just that – love. The narrator, on the other hand, took over Dimakatso, had sex with her, and then rationalises his actions: “It was just unfortunate, the Dimakatso thing, but then another name for sex is making love and there’s not much difference between making love and sex to you and me, I think” (p. 28). In invoking the readers/ audience, the narrator attempts to escape responsibility for the betrayal of his friend and roommate, Matome. By inviting us to share the same point of view regarding his problematic choices, the narrator becomes unreliable. According to Chatman (1978, p. 233), in unreliable narration:

The story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by 'reading out' between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been 'like that', and so we hold the narrator suspect. Unreliable narration is thus an ironic form.

We can detect instances of bad faith in Noko’s character. By using equivocation in language (such as in the deceptive rationalisation in the meanings of the words “love” and “sex”), and by avoiding responsibility towards what we would believe is his use of an immoral language, Noko’s real intentions and character are rendered suspect. By repeatedly getting equivocal, he becomes a fallible narrator who fails to “reliably report on narrative events” (Olson, 2003, p. 101) and instead projects his own biases and excuses to the implied audience. We can conclude that Noko has bad will in this context. Sartre (1956) argues that bad faith constitutes an individual’s lying

to oneself. An individual develops a resisting identity which features the deceiver retaining a deceptive consciousness that conditions his or her bad faith. Reflecting on Sartre's existentialist philosophy, Cox (2009, p. 39) argues that bad faith constitutes an "attempted evasion of responsibility." A character engages in wilful deception by either denying responsibility for particular actions, or misplacing or misdirecting his/her empathy towards other objects.

It is ironic that he betrays Matome, a man whom he seems to have developed a sense of affection and admiration for. However, on closer scrutiny, it does finally appear to us that this form of shared understanding between the two is premised on a collective will as a "group agency" (Fludernik, 2017, p. 141) whose main aim is to achieve subjective ends using dubious means. Matome is a man who does not subscribe to any form of cultural memory. Frenkel (2013, p. 42) assesses that Moele's novel "suggests a world based on maintaining the self without recourse to any sort of overarching ideology." This assessment summarises Matome's outlook on life in the novel. Matome's present is only the now, and his future depends largely on the transient, which translates to dealing with the unforgiving social and material environment in any ingenious way possible. Matome has nothing to look back on in the past, and here, the now, for him is what is most important. Frenkel (2013, p. 35) surmises that the novel disavows the significance of history in the present. Matome's concept of freedom in the present is ambiguous, as he creates a different world that is not attached to his social and historical reality. Because he has no obligation towards the past, his ethical choices are often whimsical and deceitful. Matome chooses to gratify personal whims and desires by mispending money collectively contributed by the members of 207 (for the purchase of groceries) to purchase drinks and to fund other "joyful things", chiefly entertaining their girlfriends. He often uses his criminal networks to meet the obligations of the other characters of *Room 207* so that they engage in such activities as merry-making even before important financial obligations are met, such as paying rent. As observed above, Matome's vanity stems, in part, from his past, which gave him no room to make acceptable ethical choices based on any sense of historical or cultural reality. The

narrator in *Room 207* also straddles from an ethical consciousness of recognition of wrongdoing and taking responsibility to a problematic recognition and embrace of Matome's evil character. Even though he initially felt disgusted by Matome's tricks of ensuring collective survival in 207 by stealing, the narrator seems to gradually get into his character as a "man of all seasons", and to excuse his wily ways, later.

Uncertainties of Dual Selves

Harman and Thomson in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (1996, p. 3) argue that perceptions regarding right or wrong may become relative to individuals when it comes to making moral choices. Harman and Thomson (1996, p. 45) go on to identify that there should be "compelling reasons to satisfy the moral requirements that you accept" for a given set of actions to be rendered morally acceptable. However, in Noko's situation, we cannot find compelling moral reasons to warrant his immediate change of perception regarding Matome's shoplifting, other than the fact that the theft suits his desires and ultimate personal gratification. Noko, therefore, appears as a person who has no principles or values of his own. He conveniently blames Matome's thieving ways on the histories of poverty and hunger, foreclosing his anger initially, which was premised on Matome's personal irresponsibility of mispending collected money, and later choosing to steal from the "friendly" supermarket. It therefore shows that Noko would have done precisely the same thing if he were in a similar set of circumstances. We can therefore identify an equivocal disposition in Noko that conditions his dual, ambiguous character.

It is instructive to note that the narrator's earlier revulsion at Matome's thieving ways ultimately finds acceptance when he considers that Matome stole to survive. He rationalises Matome's specific misconduct because he is not only a beneficiary, but also because he does not want to efface Matome's other virtues, such as abstinence, and his loving, affable, and trusting nature. The narrator also registers another significant individual trait in Matome: he was a man who effaced his own emotional feelings without tangible expression in an existential, self-abnegating fashion. For example, the

narrator is shocked that Matome was unable to register his sadness at the death of his mother. Matome invites the narrator to his home, only for the latter to realise that he had been invited to attend Matome's mother's funeral. When the narrator felt "sorry and angry" at this "deception", Matome explains that he did not want to tell him beforehand because he did not want anybody to act sad and feel empathetic towards him. The narrator also found out another existentialist thinking in him: he held the view that the day one dies is way better than the day one is born, so he rejoiced at his mother's death, thinking of it as rest. It is clear that Matome's attitude to and outlook on life is conditioned by a certain sense of anguish and frustration about the past. Hartman (1997) identifies theft as one of the strategies black people have used to signify their silencing as they fight against "racial subjection". Matome's dual personality, as a serial thief on the one hand, and as a loving and considerate person on the other, can be said to be a product of a convoluted racial environment. His rejection of the narrator's empathy is because he has subjected himself to a different personal world that gives no room for the politicised and racialised environment that they live in. Demir (2019, p. 181) asserts that the melancholy exhibited by characters in the novel is a pointer to "their troubled relationship with the past." Strategies such as the silencing of his mother's funeral or his rejection of discussions surrounding his past reflect Demir's (2019, p. 181) assertion that the characters have not achieved "psychological closure." Those like Molamo suffer from a kind of rootlessness occasioned by troubled social pasts in a community that puts pressure on individuals, especially men, to conform.

Signifying his understanding of the necessity of Ubuntu in the community, Molamo exhibits a sense of duty and responsibility over the other young men in 207. Demonstrating ethics of care, he is the older member of 207 who acts out more as his brothers' keeper. When he shares stories about the past, and about their communities in general, he acts out as an important member whose main responsibility is to ensure that they have eaten, not so much by way of providence, as his situation was equally hard, but much more as a gesture of friendliness that signifies individual obligation towards community, in the

logic of Ubuntu. His stories about the black community, however, are stories of self-abnegation and fracture, and his personal narrative is also a significant story of fracture and disorientation. His stories of township sexual proclivities and immoral behaviour, although exciting and appreciated by the other members of 207, are a pointer towards his problematic past with his many girlfriends and mothers of his children, all born out of wedlock. As a wounded man, Molamo suffers from personal fracture as a man who has not been able to reconcile himself to the many women in his life, and the uncertainties of the children in the community, as he had four children with four different mothers. As an individual, he is troubled by the sad reality that he is unable to reconcile his private life with the communal expectation of him as a man, as a member of a patriarchal society that demands that he must be in a position to provide for his women and children, and the thoughts of inadequacy cloud his mind. A greater personal frustration emanates from his ambiguous relationship with one of the women, Tebogo, with whom he has had a son, the young Molamo. By middle-class standards, the educated Tebogo owns a car, has money, and lives in a townhouse, and is currently staying with Khutso, a man who has also struggled his way up to become a successful man to match her standards. Molamo remained grossly inadequate to their son (and to her), and once when he, the son, refused to go to school, Tebogo took him to see the expensive house of her boyfriend, "Uncle Khutso", who had a degree and owned fleets of cars. So, in order to teach her son a lesson, she told him to choose whether to be like his father, who lived in a rented house with five of his friends, or be like Uncle Khutso, and the boy got the drift, and never refused to go to school again. Molamo is a "wrong" example to his son.

Dilemmas of Racialised/Black Masculinity

A number of scholars have taken issue with the instances of misogyny in *Room 207*, which are generally inflected as a "crisis" of hegemonic masculinity (Demir, 2019, p. 183; Nichols, 2021, p. 3; Milazzo, 2013, p. 40; Frenkel, 2013, p. 35; Ibinga, 2010, p. 69). This observation has equally been made in respect of Mhlongo's male characters (Dass, 2018) and Zizi, the protagonist in *Mgqolozana's Unimportance* (Graham, 2022, p. 142). These

scholars have taken issue with the overarching theme of black masculinity in relation to gender-based violence, which appears to have taken root in the South African society, and which is clearly manifest in the protagonists of the novels. The openly lecherous men in Mhlongo's *After Tears*, Zizi's problems with Pamodi in *Unimportance*, as well as in the banal language used by Noko in *Room 207*, establish a dominant pattern. Nichols (2021, p. 3), commenting in relation to Mhlongo's and Moele's characters, identifies "continued spatial oppression brought about by township geographies, intense policing" of black people as some of the predisposing factors that manifest the crisis. For Demir (2019, p. 183), the crisis is a manifestation of ingrained communal attitudes towards women. According to Dube (2016, p. 72), the dominant representation of masculinity through systems of violence has led to "exaggerated emphasis on the destructive and anti-social aspects of such experiences." By apportioning it as a "black" problem, it has impacted discourses on gender-based violence, on public health and especially on HIV/AIDS, and unemployment (Dube, 2016, p. 73). In effect, such discourses have tended to put the black man under close surveillance because they are projected to be the primary aggressors.

In Molamo's context, this "crisis" does not manifest through outward violence. He suffers internally because he fails to measure up to the standards expected of a man in his community. This also appears to be a dominant reality for most of the men envisaged in the novel. Thrust in an environment where their masculinity is threatened, the men irredeemably suffer from low self-esteem, and the unforgiving urban environment emasculates them, predisposing them to ambiguous ethical choices. Another character who suffers from imposed patriarchal standards is Modishi. Members of 207 exert peer pressure on Modishi by making fun of his childless state. They urge him on to have unprotected sex with his girlfriend, Lerato. They chide him for not having a child at twenty-three, while each one of them already had more than one. Consequently, Lerato is drawn into a pregnancy that she is ill-prepared for at a tender age, and she aborts, and aborts again the second time, before she confesses (the pregnancy and the abortion) to him. All the

while, she had kept the secret of the pregnancy from him, while she was oblivious of his secret plans. Modishi feels pained at what he considered a personal betrayal by Lerato, and when he confided in his friends, they were not very sympathetic towards him, especially as they actually knew that Lerato had aborted twice in one year and had kept the secrets from him. His friends could not feel empathetic towards him. Instead, they sink him into further depression, and with a belief that he did not necessarily require comforting because he was a man, his friends deny him an opportunity to vent.

The ethical uncertainties facing the South African black male are a product of a deeper social crisis, beyond the manifestations of gender alone. The "crisis" is linked to the constitution of the South African community, particularly in its racialised geographies in terms of poverty, unemployment, lack of access to education and other social necessities that accentuate perceived failure of men in a patriarchally-obligating society. In consequence, the kind of resistant personality exhibited by the men, together with its violent manifestations, is a pointer to this crisis. For example, the men of 207 demonstrate a resisting identity when they commit a "malpractice" of failing to pay their rent repeatedly. It is ironic that the six members hardly ever manage to pay their rent on time. The characters "celebrate" the countless number of times when they were locked out of the room, often days after they had spent their rent money on parties, drinks and women. In an effort to wish away individual obligations, they consider themselves as "freelancers" and hustlers (*Room 207*, p. 73, p. 143), and so they excuse their conduct by labelling themselves as a notoriously needy group that requires help, especially by the government. Even though they take offence at being locked out of their room when they fail to pay the rent, they take precautions not to be present during the humiliating lock-out by going to spend the nights in their friends' houses, "not because we couldn't afford to pay, but because we have given the money away, used it for other, joyful things" (*Room 207*, p. 78). This behaviour shows the absence of personal responsibility on the part of the individual 207s. The failure to exercise individual responsibility comes because of the problematic tension generated by individuals solving their collective whims in

problematic circumstances. Zulu-boy, in the thinking that black people should empathise with fellow blacks the more in view of their past circumstances, often finds fault with the Xhosa housekeeper and the Zulu security guards in their apartment building. For him, they are not acting morally to force a fellow black person to pay rent when they fully understand their own predicament, as they themselves are fellow blacks with full knowledge of poverty as a black burden.

But even though they fully understand that poverty is a stumbling block to black people's freedom, they do little to improve their living conditions. For example, the characters are united in celebrating the life of Herman Mashaba, a South African business mogul who succeeded in life without proper education, having dropped out of the university. The characters repeatedly harness the memory of Mr Mashaba to inspire them for a life ahead, even though they seem to find greater inspiration in the fact that he succeeded without an education than in the material circumstances that forced him off campus, or that which would have guaranteed his completion. The fact that they are also dropouts like Mashaba connects their stories of disadvantage in a similar fashion, and their aspirations for a better life ahead are prefigured, problematically, in the image of Mashaba (p. 17).

Like us all here in 207, except for D'Nice, he [Mashaba] is a dropout of that great institution of education we call university. University of the North, to be precise. It is a very sad black story, and we can all tell it very well ... Herman Mashaba is the green shoot that pushes itself out of the heavy ash to greater heights. Remember, that was back in the days of ... I take off my hat, my shoes and my balls to this exceptional darkie brother of the soil. (*Room 207*, p. 17, Ellipsis in the original)

The roommates' celebration of the mis/fortunes of Herman Mashaba not only fits within a justification of the instances of failure at the university for such characters as the narrator, Modishi, Matome and Molamo, but also activates a sense of a "post-utopia" in which educational failure is rationalised in favour of economic freedom. The general apathy, as

expressed in the narrator's conscious choosing of silence over apartheid (as manifested in the ellipsis), conditions these young men's inability to transcend the oppressive practices of the present. Demir (2019, p. 180) argues that "the consequences of apartheid are very real for the characters, even if they chose to avoid the source of injury." The sadness in the characters is "due to their troubled relationship with the past, which impedes their forward movement" (Demir, 2019, p. 181). Apartheid becomes a taboo term, which can only be rendered through careful euphemisms. Since race signifies a past of violation that everyone wants to forget, choosing silence or rendering race through euphemisms is one of the ways of re-conceiving an ethical space for the present.

Milazzo (2013, p. 34) argues that *Room 207* "challenges and reinforces colourblindness discourse and, in mystifying institutional racism, appears emblematic of the ideological ambiguity and dearth of antiracist militancy." In post-apartheid South Africa, racism no longer operates in the overt, but in the covert sphere, and its systems of operation are mirrored through the ambiguities of silences, euphemisms and tautologies of language. In introducing the figuration of apartheid and race in Hillbrow's formerly white hotel that houses room 207, the narrator says: "It used to be a hotel in the days of ... you know, those days which the rulers of this land don't want you to forget" (*Room 207*, p. 13, ellipsis in the original). In *Room 207*, apartheid is rendered through the euphemism of the "dark days". The constant figuration of "sad black stories" in the novel, while on the one hand carefully avoiding signifying them as legacies of apartheid, also at the same time indirectly inscribes the question of race and implicit racism, by identifying the characters' challenges as "black". Sadness emerges as a trope of failure, of unfulfilled expectations, of the frustrations of individuals, especially as seen and reflected through individual and collective aspirations. Reflecting on Niq Mhlongo's and Moele's writing strategies, Rafapa (2018: p. 77) argues that the writers address "persisting institutional racism, hegemonic silencing of black antiracist critiques, and white talk insidiously seeking to perpetuate white privilege in an ostensibly equal democratic South Africa." As already observed before, racist

discourses have been used to legitimise black complaints against the legacies of apartheid. Matome's belief about the relationship between individual and collective failure of the black community is linked to black people's inability to meet their aspirations, and how anger, hate and feelings of failure stem from a problematic position of black people affected by generational hate (*Room 207*, p. 88-89). Molamo, on his part, believes the contradiction in black people's desires and ambitions produces a kind of "hateful love ... a blind self-pride and artificial black proudness" (*Room 207*, p. 89). While Matome thinks it is the "economics of living" and not "black pride and black love" that is responsible for the degeneration of Hillbrow, Molamo quips that "This very Hillbrow that you and I are living in was cleaned by blacks back in the days", referring to during apartheid, when they, in fact, did not live there (*Room 207*, p. 89-90).

The self-reflexive conversation between Molamo and Matome speaks against the many times when these black individuals blame the past for their continued poverty and the "economics" of their present circumstances, especially given that they are questioning their own black existence in the changing fortunes of the new South Africa. This self-reflective engagement with the past provides a frame in which communal aspirations are judged against individual disorientation within the city. The young people also seem to connect the failure of the black community to the notion of a lack of respect for fellow blacks, or for their circumstances. They are united in the reasoning that predominantly white suburbs would become run-down if black people were to emigrate to those places in weeks, justifying, in a way, the very problem with spatial occupation, and the utopia of black spatial occupation of formerly "white" spaces. The instances of black self-abnegation and self-annihilation constitute ethically problematic individual actions that are hinged around the politics of blame.

Dog Eat Dog: Ambiguities of Self-Deception

In *Dog Eat Dog*, Niq Mhlongo presents a novel that reveals the uneasy realities of young people in university environments. The protagonist, Dingamanzi Njomane, popularly known as Dingz, is a young man who decides he must navigate through

thick and thin on campus at the University of the Witwatersrand. As a born-free young person savouring South Africa's freedom, Dingz ensures that he makes the past bear in his wily struggles in the present. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2007, p. 282) figurate Mhlongo's protagonist as the city's 'hustler' who "monitors the atmosphere" as he operates, and as he tries to make sense of his place and position in the city as a student who must balance between his obligations to his university, and to his community back in Soweto, and to self. Consequently, he has to manoeuvre "with energetic and often underhand activity, turning others into suckers, hiring less skilful players into competing against him in a game of chance" (Nuttall & Mbembe, 2007, p. 282). From the onset, Dingz's real intentions are opaque. He has an ambivalent, dual personality that he activates a particular identity when it befits him. Despite his intelligence as a black student on campus, Dingz's behaviour is primarily guided injudiciously by a desire to meet his own subjective needs. Reflecting on Kant's morality, Atwell (1986, p. 9) identifies two ends of morality – subjective and objective – in which the "objective ends are the ends of morality." For Atwell (1986, p. 14), what constitutes "good will" in a person's character includes "talents of the mind" (such as intelligence) and "qualities of temperament" (such as courage). Atwell (1986, p. 14) argues:

A good talent of mind (such as intelligence) and a good quality of temperament (e.g., courage) are only conditioned goods because they can become bad, and actually will be bad when made use of by a bad will. In other words, intelligence and courage are bad when employed by an evil individual.

On this account, Dingz possesses these qualities, but he wills his intelligence and courage towards subjective ends. Dingz's character, particularly in terms of integrity, is put into question. He exhibits a divided personality. We argue that the genesis of Dingz's divided personality stems from his diseased conscience. Dingz's moral judgements are tinged by extraneous social, political and material factors that condition and direct his actions. His options for what he considers to be right or wrong are duplicitous. Byrne (1992, p. 21), writing regarding individual conscience, posits:

The idea of conscience as the seat of the individual's knowledge of right and wrong is linked to the phenomena of conscience: conscience invites us to do acts before our plans are set, witnesses our acts as we perform them, and accuses/excuses our conduct after action is complete.

Byrne's (1992) assertions imply that a conscientious individual benefits from his/her own past mistakes and is ready to redeem in the pursuit of acceptable conduct. Dingz, however, is unable to use his conscience. By observing what Byrne (1992, p. 40) would call "anatomy of actions", we can argue that Dingz's intentions, motives and the ultimate consequences of his actions put his integrity into question. Time and again, without the benefit of hindsight, Dingz misbehaves. Right from the township, Dingz sustains a culture of deception. For example, a deceptive behaviour is demonstrated in Dingz's eagerness to purchase stolen items at the township. He and his friend, Dunga, entertain a particular group of thieves who would bring them expensive goods, which they would buy off at alarmingly low prices. When these black thieves are killed, and Dunga and Dingz find themselves as witnesses at the scene, they instantly feel a sense of revulsion, as they move away from the scene of their death "for fear that the victims might miraculously come back to life and point us out as their customers" (*Dog*, p. 217). They also take time to criticise the police for taking bribes in order to spare criminals. They fail to be self-reflexive in this context, and they therefore cannot interrogate their guilt and complicity in handling (the) stolen items, and being equally guilty and liable to prosecution. Dingz and Dunga not only manage to camouflage their complicity in the crime in the townships, but they also participate in criticising spiralling theft levels in the townships without any degree of guilt. This culture of deception is replicated and pronounced in his dealings at the university.

In many of his dealings at the university, his actions are guided by bad faith. Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* argues that bad faith emanates from a kind of falsehood in which "the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding." Sartre (1956, p. 48) argues:

The liar intends to deceive, and he does not seek to hide this intention from himself nor to disguise the translucency of his consciousness; on the contrary, he has recourse to it when there is a question of deciding secondary behaviour.

In fighting back to be awarded a bursary which he had on various occasions been denied, Dingz takes advantage of old, perceived black stereotypes. He devises a plan to use the unease in race relations in the country to upstage the university administration in his attempt to complain against the allocation. So, when Dingz storms into the Financial Aid Office at the university to complain about not benefiting from the bursary kitty, he is prepared to create a racially charged scene by dissenting against the laid-down protocol and upstaging the peace at the office. Minesh Dass (2018: p. 119) contends that *Dog Eat Dog* is about "institutional racism and academic exclusion." Dingz's main bone of contention in this context is to question what he perceives as endemic racism in the award of bursaries. However, the method that he uses to address these enduring legacies of apartheid puts his personal integrity into question. He cleverly and mischievously avoids a "three-metre-long queue" at the office to ignite the ire of the (coloured) secretary and to get the attention of the university employees, who, to him, are biased against him in awarding the bursary on account of being black. He charges: "*I will show them today*" (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 12, emphasis in the original).

Dingz's unreliability stems from his wilful desire to create a situation that will work for him. Phelan (2017, p. 94) argues that one effect of unreliable narration is its "estranging" effects, as it modifies the "interpretive, affective, ethical, or other kinds of distance between authors and audiences, on the one hand, and character narrators, on the other." By staging a defective personality, Dingz's conduct (or misconduct) generates an ethical ambiguity which exists between our criticism of his actions in this context and sympathising with him on account of the seemingly unjust educational system. Acting out of mischief, he premeditates the coloured secretary's response when he sidesteps the queue, and as he "expected", the secretary abused him publicly by claiming that black people are lazy, thoughtless,

stupid, illiterate, and inconsiderate. As a coloured member of South Africa, making an ill-conceived remark against black South Africans, she unwittingly gets into Dingz's trap. When the secretary called her white supervisor, Ms Steenkamp, Dingz, in his view, registers his racial lens on her: "She shot me a shrewd look and raised her nose as if she was confronted with a disgusting township rubbish dump" (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 13). So when she reprimands him for his "apish behaviour" and acting in an uncivilised manner, she also unwittingly gets into his racial trap. He is excited when she gets on the defensive ("That's where I wanted her, on the defensive" *Dog Eat Dog*, p. 16). All through this altercation, Dingz is prepared to feign horror at the oblique references to him as an ape, or as "emotional", and feigns horror thus: "That's like saying that I was socialised with the apes and I should be living in the mountains or the zoo. Is that what you see when you look at a black person like me?" (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 17). Dingz's reaction in this encounter is all a stage-managed opportunity meant to appeal to the emotive question of black under-privilege and past invisibility. Bhopal (2018, p. 24) claims that racism operates at the level of resentment when it is de-legitimised, and can no longer be sustained in overt terms. This is the situation that Dingz finds himself in. He flashes up the race card to communicate his resentment over what he feels is the racial problem that has curtailed his freedom and agitation for a good life. Dingz takes advantage of what DiAngelo (2018) regards as the "fragility" of white individuals in racially charged situations, and he seethes with pretended rage in a dishonest projection of benefitting from racial bias.

Confronting Racial In/visibility: Dilemmas of 'Diseased' Conscience

Dingz is bent on bringing up the thorny issue of race and racial disenfranchisement in order to embarrass the white university administrators and to locate himself as a victim of racial disadvantage. Dass (2018) argues that Dingz imagines certain epistemic structures, including the bureaucratic systems in the university, such as in the award of bursaries, must fall. Dingz uses the race card against the (white) registrar of the University of the Witwatersrand, Dr. Jane Winterburn, over the unsuccessful bursary application that he has made a number of times.

Dingz notes that the "regret" letters he has received from the bursary committee were generic in nature, except for the dates. He wonders: "*Did anybody even read my applications? I wondered angrily... What more information do these people want about the poverty that my family was living in? I asked myself*" (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 8, emphasis in the original). Dingz's ethical uncertainty in this context stems from what Hite (2010, p. 266) identifies as strategies that unreliable narrators use to upstage others, like when he postures to the readers to be empathetic towards his cause while remaining indignant and condescending towards the university establishment. For him, he thinks that there is another reason that is being hidden behind the genial posturing; that the committee ought to have written to him thus: "We regret to inform you that you are black, stupid and poor; therefore, we cannot waste our money in your thick Bantu skull" (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 8). So when he storms into the Financial Aid Office, he goes there with a sense of "entitlement" that being black should necessarily make him get a bursary. To this end, Dingz carries himself as an untrustworthy narrator. His conduct reflects Olson's (2003, p. 102) view that untrustworthy narrators are "*dispositionally unreliable*" (emphasis in the original). Olson (2003, p. 102) adds that the "inconsistencies [these] narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioural traits or some current self-interest."

During the appeal for the bursary, Dingz provides the registrar (which he had done on previous occasions) "evidence" of his father's death, his mother's meagre pension meant to support a family of nine, and related affidavits. The registrar notices that it is quite impossible for a family that size to survive on the 350-rand pension, casting aspersions on the veracity and accuracy of his application documents. However, he defends that their situation is "difficult" to the point that they are unable to pay for water and electricity. Then he excuses his lies:

I was not ashamed that I lied. Living in this South Africa of ours, you have to master the art of lying in order to survive ... As she looked at me, I hid my hands under the edge of the table so that she couldn't see my gold-plated pulsar watch, which I had bought the

previous year at the American Swiss. (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 22)

Dingz is acutely aware of his own character flaws in the request for the bursary. Dingz's desire for an expensive watch against his financial situation at the university cannot be easily justified. By choosing to cling to the materialism of the postmodern/ post-apartheid culture, he loses his sense of credibility and, to use Peter Zima (2010, p. 194), he manages to frame his success on a culture of deception in an escapist environment where truth and objective reality are either questioned, subverted, or silenced. He is obsessed with material advantages that place no objective demands on his present economic reality, as he is a student who is dependent on college and government help. On the flip side, however, he doesn't really fit into the category of a very poor black student, unlike his peers who came from far-flung rural areas.

Immediately upon leaving the registrar's office, guilt pricks his (diseased) conscience. He imagines himself in the image of Verwoerd, the former prime minister of apartheid South Africa, who was killed by a parliamentary messenger:

But before I could get far, I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my gut. It was as if someone had stabbed my stomach with a sharp razor blade and cut my intestines. It was the kind of pain that I imagine Verwoerd felt the day Tsafendas's knife intruded violently into his gut (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 33).

Gross (2016) argues that Verwoerd's name has become symbolic in South Africa's political sphere as "a dagger of accusation." By appropriating Verwoerd's victimhood, Dingz's position as a victim is processed through ambiguity, as he is an aggressor at the registrar's office. Furthermore, by projecting himself as a victim at the registrar's office, he cleverly avoids responsibility – and guilt. Guilt, to him, appears only as an abstraction, especially when considering that he continues to berate the university and racially profile on another related matter – that of examinations, as we shall observe subsequently. Fanon (1967) identifies a problem of recognition which is inflected through ingrained colour prejudices, as black people exact their revulsion against the white gaze. For Fanon (1967, p. 93),

blacks, "out of the necessities" of their racially-charged struggles, choose regression as a weapon to fight against what they feel is racial bondage and to assert their own identity. The struggle in Dingz's particular situation is the university bureaucracy that continues to racially profile black students on campus. Dass (2018) argues that Dingz's actions amount to a concerted attempt by Dingz to reflect on the continuing systemic racism at the university. For Dass (2018, p. 132), Dingz's actions can be read through as an attempt to make certain systemic injustices visible, and to, in the process, call for political recognition of the convoluted educational sphere. Dass (2018, p. 134) locates Dingz's divided self as existing in an ambiguous position in which "one's sympathy and one's condemnation are evoked simultaneously in order to reveal the complex ways in which class, race and gender intersect in contemporary South African society." At the centre of this complexity is Dingz's staging of his unreliability for effect in his particular situation.

Dingz takes advantage of black self-assertion to make a case for his personal whims and to individually benefit from an assumed position of white racial disadvantage. Dingz's behaviour reflects Fanon's (1963) exposition on the dangers of intellectual manoeuvres, particularly as used to achieve selfish ends. Dingz's idiosyncrasies are not geared towards an objective search for truth, especially as an intellectual; he is only interested in taking advantage of black stereotypical images, and not confronting the actual realities of black people from an objective position, as Biko (1978), whom he has read extensively, would have expected of him. Ethical uncertainty is revealed in Dingz's problematic dealings with the white gaze, which he exploits to his own advantage. Dingz wants to take advantage of past historical and political circumstances by inviting them to bear on his problematic quest for consideration for a bursary. In order to achieve his own selfish ends, Dingz must reinscribe race as a "battleground", but more emphatically, to assert his own individuality by first speaking against his invisibility. His behaviour mirrors the problematic quest for black self-assertion in the South African "post-racial" society.

Dingz's behaviour in this context approximates to a significant degree the works of Fanon and Biko in the reflection of the role of violence in racialised societies as a means to an end. Dingz's primary reason for using violence is to provide a signature against his invisibility and to stamp his authority. Crowley (2013, p. 55), following on Fanon's theory on violence, contends:

For Fanon, the figure who best exemplifies the problem of isolation and ineffectual resistance is the colonised intellectual. The educated individual who experiences dehumanisation and social alienation within European and colonial societies because of his or her skin colour, yet he has been socialised to accept Western cultural values and norms, occupies a central place in Fanon's decolonial theory.

Crowley's (2013) position can be used to locate Dingz's resisting identity to a domineering white culture at the university that haunts him to prevaricate between allegiance to past memories inflected by race and sticking to a world that is pegged on, at least in theory, shared prosperity and equal educational attainment. Dingz is confused between his quest for freedom on campus and his desire to finish and graduate from the university. That is why he doubles up, committing more crimes as he pursues his personal interests in a bigoted manner. As a gifted student, Dingz was admitted to the university with impressive grades. He is also a widely read student. His favourite reads are George Orwell, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Richard Wright, and, more importantly, Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*. However, his reading lists and interests seem inconsistent with the demands of his university. While in session on campus, he fails to do a critical examination because he had not prepared well enough. He spends much of his time outside the campus and outside the learning environment. He entertains girlfriends, which makes him lose valuable academic time. Dingz also misses lectures so that he could go out and shoplift, assisted by his friend, Themba, in order that he could solve a pressing personal need – that of entertaining his girlfriend. When not seducing girls, Dingz spends his time drinking in bars in Braamfontein. During these flings, he and other truant students undertake

competitive drinking sessions. A careless, unprotected sexual encounter with his girlfriend also makes him miss classes, as he has to visit a doctor for an urgent medical treatment of a sexually transmitted infection. Over the weekend, he prefers not to read, in the comfort of a personal adage that "There was no reason why I should copy others" (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 165). Finally, when the examination does finally arrive, he finds that he is unable to answer any question. He therefore slips out of the examination room.

Benefitting from Fallibility? Narrating Against Epistemic Injustice

From the above reflection, it is clear that Dingz is not only an untrustworthy but also a fallible narrator. Oslon (2003, p. 101) identifies fallible narrators as those who "do not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgements or perceptions or are biased." Dingz's berating the university for his own commissioned failures demonstrates his unreliability as a character. Dingz's lethargy in the classroom is largely because of the ways in which university lecturers dispense knowledge. Dingz is incensed by his university professor who "complicates" the learning environment through such lofty re/conceptualisation that is meant to disenfranchise his students, especially the black student. Dingz thinks that the white professor does not understand his black students. He is perceptive to note that the professor is polite when speaking to white students, knows them by their sur/names, and respectfully listens and appreciates their responses. For Dingz, black students are highly invisible in the classroom, and the professor hardly knows them. White professors consign black students to invisibility, and even when black students volunteer to participate in the classroom, their responses are rendered through a jaundiced lens and consequently rejected. Heleta (2016, p. 2,3), writing regarding students' participation in decolonisation of knowledge in South Africa, identifies "Eurocentrism and epistemic violence" that condition "patronising views and stereotypes" largely about black students on campus. Dingz's attitude to the classroom situation (such as missing class, as observed before) may be thought of as one form of resistance against systemic injustice on campus. Dingz also thinks that certain forms of

knowledge are not necessary, or unwanted, especially as it is not contextualised within the African setting. Crawford, Mai Bornu and Landström (2021, p. 23) contend that the “calls to decolonise knowledge production in Africa are related to colonial practices of power and domination.” The teaching at Dingz’s university seems to reflect what Crawford, Mai-Bornu and Landström (2021, p. 27) consider as an “epistemic injustice” in the constitution of the South African curriculum that pays no attention to the material realities of the South African people in totality in terms of relevance and suitability. Dingz and many other students do not find reasons to be present in the South African classroom, and in the few times they attend the classroom, they find themselves out of the centre of the academic enterprise. In many ways, this escape from the material reality of the classroom contributes significantly to the cases of school dropouts and constituent failure.

After he fails to do a critical examination, Dingz, armed with the race card, decides to approach the dean of the university in order that he may be allowed to sit for the examination. Dingz plans to look for reasons to do the missed examination takes him to visit a clinic to procure a “valid reason for absconding”, which, however, does not succeed, as the white doctor dismissed him for acting out (p. 182). When he realises that his chances of getting a reason are getting difficult by the minute, he plans to use the student’s representative council, the SRC, to help him find some anthropological reason to explain his inability to do the examination during that scheduled time. Finally, he fabricates a “sad black story” that he was attacked by a “blackout”, which was “a result of the shock news that I received about the death of my cousin” (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 184), which “happened”, ironically, several months before. Dingz’s university requires that he submit documentation to show proof of the relationship with the deceased. In looking for this “documentation”, he visits a mortuary in an attempt to look for a deceased person who shares his surname in order that he can transpose him as a relative by presenting his death certificate to the dean so that he could be allowed to do the supplementary examination. When he locates a deceased person with a similar surname, he visits a government office to procure a death certificate. He

poses as a lawyer and completes the process by offering the required bribe. After he procures the sham certificate, he justifies his actions, thus:

I didn’t feel sorry that I lied to get it. Lying to get a death certificate was my practical affair to me. My world at that moment was simple – no lie, no certificate, no exam, no degree and back to the township. (p. 248)

Dingz knows that the reality in this case – that is his failure in examinations – would have a bearing on his entire life. He therefore justifies lying because he benefits from it in the short term. Dingz cannot remain true to his cause because his cause is contradictory and subjective. When the dean prods him to ascertain the authenticity of the death certificate, he passionately hides in the supposed communality and reverence of the dead in an attempt to mystify him in the thinking that he, the dean, would be at a loss on account of his ignorance of black people. In an attempt to benefit from white ignorance, he avers: “I explained trying to put the dean as far into his corner of white ignorance as possible” (p. 247). When the dean continues to be hard on him and to reject his communal alibi, he snaps and plays the racial card to threaten the dean. He asks the dean to answer if he, being black, was lying with regard to his family’s bereavement, because he is predisposed as a black to lies and falsehoods, and again, if black people lie regarding their situations (the attendant problems which he thinks blacks face in South Africa). He instantly forges into anger and hatred. His personal experience suddenly morphs into a communal experience. He problematically figures his personal disappointments and falsehoods to represent the larger community, and in that, his attempt to re-historise the past proves not only ethically ambiguous but also deeply disturbing:

Most of all, I was disturbed by the arrogance that he was showing about black people. I never thought that a man of his calibre would be so ignorant about the cancer of poverty that cripples so many families. Poverty means that you cannot give your loved one a proper burial. It also means that you cannot contact your relatives who live far away in times of need. Without money your children don’t go to school like other

kids. In a nutshell, it means that you do not exist and you are wasted. (p. 248)

This outburst, Dingz primarily chooses to question what he perceives as an inappropriate air of white privilege on campus. The challenge of perceived white privilege dogs the white dean when he tries to deal with Dingz's problematic behaviour. He knows that Dingz is potentially lying in his claim that he lost a relative, but he must give him a fair hearing, as dealing with him with a certain level of firmness would be considered inimical, considering past historical misadventures. He must consider that, as a white man, there is a different way he should deal with the black student. On the other hand, fully conscious of this situation, Dingz is prepared to covertly bring racism into the circle in order to circumscribe the dean, and hopefully coerce him into making a decision in his favour. On his part, Dingz's problematic pursuit of justice (which he thinks should be tempered by sympathy on account of his "situation": "I faked a grieved expression searching his eyes for sympathy" [p. 184]) is discoloured by the knowledge that two of his white friends, Paul and Nikki, who missed the same exam, have already been given permission to prepare for a supplementary exam. But how? By dint of their privileged status as whites, particularly in their being able to access a family doctor, who justified their absence from campus on medical grounds. Dingz believes that the two were undeserving as he was, but now that they have been considered, he sees no reason why his case should be different. The dean, boxed into a corner, finally promises to look into the matter, and the following week, Dingz wins, as his request to sit the examination is accepted.

Dingz manages to extract ill-deserved prospects and personal apologies from his chosen white victims. Dingz's trumping up the race card reflects the ethical ambiguities where race appears as a prominent signifier of power and shifting demands for attention. When a white "blonde" requests him to assist a black woman who was fumbling at an ATM, Dingz snaps at her, wondering if she expected him to assist her because she was from his black community. He then enjoys the racial trouble that he has created:

I could tell that my words had had a strong impact. Yes, it is true that I was implying

that she was a racist. It was the season of change when everyone was trying hard to disown apartheid, but to me, the colour white was synonymous with the word, and I didn't regret what I had said to the blonde. Anyway, I had been told that playing the race card is a good strategy for silencing those whites who still think they are more intelligent than black people. (*Dog Eat Dog*, p. 39-40)

Dingz's behaviour shows him as an unreliable character with a masterstroke to employ certain vindictive methods to gain attention and assuage his ego. Dingz continues to harass the blonde until she apologises, for that was what he wanted. As Sue (2015) writes with respect to the racial experiences in America, whites hold the view, on the one hand, that past prejudices, including racial prejudices, no longer have meaning in the present. On the other hand, blacks think that racial discussions must continue to thread and signify ongoing dialogue, particularly on discussions around racial privilege and economic legacies of the racialised past. Dingz easily finds the re-inscription of racial categories beneficial to his own personal, individual quest for recognition and visibility. Dingz, as a university student, is well aware of the fact that race has been silenced in everyday discussion in South Africa, but is, however, alive to the potency of its re-inscription in the South African sphere. Dingz then personally undertakes to take advantage of the "silencing of race" (a term Bhopal [2018, p. 8] uses to signify colourblindness discourse in America), to take advantage of the existing racial pre/sentiments. Dingz is portrayed as an untrustworthy narrator whose actions and values are marked by ambiguities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This article has critically examined the voicing of ethical ambiguities by the characters/protagonists in Moele's *Room 207* and Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog*. It has demonstrated the difficulty in building a new ethics in a context where the past, in its multiple inflexions on the present, generates ambiguity, which in turn is magnified in the multiple voices that compete for attention. It has evaluated the contention that ethical ambiguities stem from the characters' desire to survive in an

unforgiving environment in which the past of apartheid exists as a sufficient burden. It has been shown that when the self is transposed into a dubious collective context, the individual is forced to stage an alternative personality as a strategy for survival. Through unreliable narration, the characters/protagonists in the novels confront the

ethical realities of post-apartheid society by adopting dual personalities. The article has concluded that ethical values, such as empathy, sincerity, or responsibility, remain as abstractions, as characters engage in wily ways in order to either escape from limiting circumstances or to survive.

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