

*Bloodlines* by Elleke Boehmer (David Philip)

13 October 2000

In *Bloodlines* Elleke Boehmer, the author of *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, has herself written a self-consciously post-colonial novel, in which the founding of the new South Africa is linked to the struggle of the Boers and the Irish against British domination.

Boehmer weaves, in her own recurrent metaphor, the strands of a design in which the interwoven Irish-African bloodlines issue in the early nineteen-nineties in the act of one Joseph Makken, a young Coloured man: planting a bomb in a Durban beachfront supermarket, he is responsible for killing six people.

Amongst the dead is the lover of Anthea Harding, a young, mildly left-wing novice reporter on a Durban newspaper. Drawn to the case initially by the intensity of her own loss, Anthea becomes fascinated by Dora Makken, the bomber's mother, and makes her way into the woman's life and story.

The novel's central notion of interrelatedness is explicated by one Gertie Maritz, a Coloured sage who corners Anthea at a party she attends at Dora's home: "We're all survivors, the relations of victims, Joe Makken's relations, here we are carrying our cocked-up history with us. In any woven cloth it's useless to look for a thread that hasn't taken the bend of the others. Nothing's whole wasn't once mucked. And vice versa."

The rest of the novel is dedicated to the reconstitution or unravelling of the story of the Makken clan, in particular the story of Dora's grandmother, Dollie Zwartman-Macken, a black servant on a Boer farm, whose liaison with an Irish soldier fighting with the Boers against the British produced Dora's father, and led, so the pattern suggests, to the impulse behind the planting of the bomb. In Joseph Makken's act is reborn the spirit of resistance that brought his grandfather to Africa; only now his opponents are the descendants of those Boers that his grandfather was attempting to help.

As this inadequate synopsis will suggest, this is history through the female line: the narrators and focalisers are for the most part women, and the Boer War, like the Struggle, is seen largely through the eyes of the non-combatant women, the victims, supporters and inspirers of male endeavour. To underline this emphasis, a central strand in the design is woven through the journals and letters of one Kathleen Gort, an Englishwoman drawn by her sympathy with the Irish and Boer cause to come to South Africa as a nurse in the Boer War.

Paradoxically, the reconstruction of the past through Kathleen is the most convincing aspect of the novel: Boehmer brings her research into the period to vivid life in the intense, almost neurasthenic, reflections and observations of this coddled young woman in the midst of the horrors of Ladysmith. Contemporary references are skilfully and at times amusingly incorporated into her account, as when Kathleen reports with barely-concealed acerbity on the self-dramatising campaigning of Maud Gonne. In this respect, the novel invites and repays comparison with such recent reconstructions of the period as Ann Harries's *Manly Pursuits*.

Conversely, the weakest part of the novel is the depiction of the friendship between Anthea and Dora: Boehmer's present-day Durban seems less real than her turn-of-the century Dublin and Ladysmith. This may be because Boehmer vacillates on the persona and voice of Dora, the working-class vehicle of some of her central notions: infantilised by an addiction to biscuits and cool drinks, Dora is yet given some of the novel's heftiest pronouncements: "Miss Hardy, who is this we who will so very kindly, big-heartedly do something for my condemned son? What gives you the right to be part of that *we*? This right to be excited? Approaching my family

story with its hidden sorrows and shame like a *discovery*. Setting out with hardly a moment's pause to convert it into an article for your paper, the story that I myself don't know the beginning or end of and don't anyhow want to touch. Mn? What gives you that right?"

This rather stilted sermonising in unlikely places recurs too frequently; but the novel should probably be read as a kind of post-colonial fantasia rather than a realist novel, an imaginative exploration of the possibilities of connectedness rather than an attempt to render a wholly recognisable South African reality. In this it resembles André Brink's *Imaginations of Sand* and Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature*, with both of which it also shares a vision of hope founded on a female power conjoined to male opportunity (and, as in the Gordimer, through interracial sexual relations, though Anthea is less energetically dedicated to this cause than Gordimer's indefatigable Hillela).

A realist critique of *Bloodlines* would founder on the sheer unlikeliness of it all, the flatness of minor characters like Anthea's parents (cardboard cut-outs of White English-speaking South Africans), the idealisation of the dissident figures (Joseph Makken in particular comes across as a kind of humanitarian terrorist: "I mean, I was sorry those people had died. I don't know how to say it but I am happy to be on trial here. I am happy for my suffering if I can pay in any way. If this flesh of mine can pay.")

Boehmer does not attempt, beyond a few token swearwords in Joseph Makken's speeches, to distinguish her characters in terms of idiolects: they all speak with a kind of neutrally elevated middle-class sensibility, irrespective of education or social class. Class markers are restricted to interior decoration: the display cabinet in the home of Anthea's Indian lover's mother, 'a big dresser covered in teddy-bear plastic' in Dora's house, 'three trout heads mounted on a wooden panel' in Anthea's parents' home.

Against the relatively thin texture of the surface, though, can be placed the thoughtful conceptual framework, the careful patterning, the skilful tracing of bloodlines through several generations to make of a desperate act of violence a token of regeneration, a possible but by no means certain means of reconciliation. If *Bloodlines* does not altogether convince as a realist novel, as a vision of hope it is timely and welcome.