

Mapping Trauma and Hope: Semiotics, Sexual Violence, and Reconciliation in Ahmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*

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Abstract

This paper combines Ferdinand de Saussure's and Charles Sanders Peirce's theories of the sign with recent developments in literary semiotics to analyze textual and symbolic patterns of trauma and hope in *Bitter Fruit*. It first situates Dangor's text within the universe of signs by showing how characters' traumatic experiences imbue it with historically grounded meanings. Then, in light of literary semiotics, it examines expressive glimpses of the provocative question of reconciliation and identity in the post-apartheid era to better analyze Dangor's contribution to transitional justice discourse. Finally, the paper interprets the ambivalent meanings of signs, using Lydia's and Michael's journeys from psychological crisis to healing, to suggest that these sign systems map trauma and hope, while revealing Dangor's commitment to imagining a more humane post-apartheid society.

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Introduction

Bitter Fruit is a post-apartheid novel that stages South Africa's transition through the intimate crisis of the Ali family. The story focuses on the Ali Family, haunted by traumatic memories and the need to confess unspeakable experiences. The story highlights "traumas born from a Janus-faced conception of race superiority and prejudices" (Diallo 64), through symbolic patterns. Through the novel, Achmat Dangor probes into ways to confront the past, reexamining the complex choices available to former targeted communities of the state's repressive machinery, who struggle to unknot the entangled threads of their lives. As a sensitive point of his community, the core of his writing is to imagine how his multicultural country can handle the hectic present and look toward a seemingly uncertain future. *Bitter Fruit* is a parody of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Unlike other contemporary Indian South African writers (Zinaid Meeran *Saracen at the Gates*, 2009; Shada Kazie Ali *Lesson in Husbandry*, 2012; Imraan Coovadia, *How Low in-Between*, 2009), who critically explore the post-transition culture, but who choose, unlike John Maxwell Coetzee, not to disclose the sexual violation of women, Dangor is more scathing against the transitional justice embodied by the TRC. He criticizes the system's "forgive and forget" principle. He is convinced that South Africans will never recover from past traumas if they fail to address them. That is the reason why he shifted from magic realism, in *Kafka's Curse*, to a realistic representation to draw a crude image of the country's past and present, a new democratic nation at the crossroads of cultures, uncertainties, and hope. Dangor weaves *Bitter Fruit* as "an appropriate metaphor for the tragic mulatto. It combines the notion of ripe possibility with sour prospects, which is the tragic inheritance of his literary character ... The novel is set on the cusp of the new millennium, at the end of Nelson Mandela's presidency and at the conclusion of the TRC hearing" (Mafe 113).

Review of Scholarship

Bitter Fruit is a Dangor novel that has received significant critical acclaim for its skillful thematic and aesthetic depiction of the traumas rooted in South Africa's social and political history. Indeed, Meg Samuelson argues in "Speaking Rape 'Like a Man': Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*" that Dangor uses realism to document South Africa's transition and its confrontation with the

past. Though the work offers insights into torments daily borne by characters, it hardly delves into the hectic issue of identity and reconciliation. The question is discussed by Irele Abiola when he avers that the South African writer's work reflects a core belief that "the burden of past atrocities is not confined to the victim, but leaves its marks on the victim's family" (255). This image of burden reverberates in the words of Diana Adeselo Mafe. She argues that "the bitter legacy of the old South Africa and the ripe promise of the new nation thus coexist in a fragile stasis, which is captured by the public and political TRC and its mediation of private and personal stories" (113). The promise of political democracy is rendered bitter by the superficial public treatment of sexual violence, as part of the apartheid state repression, noted by members of the hearing like Dangor. The South African writer gives the breadth of his stance thus: "the fact that sexual abuse of women in the struggle against apartheid was far more systematic and widespread than we want to believe or that the TRC has addressed... So, all I did was try to address a viewpoint" (Interview with Stacy Knecht 161).

Dangor takes up the gauntlet to address the issue of rape and its aftermath as a core means to stifle political dissidence under apartheid. In this way, the story further raises critical scholarship, with special attention laid on the unfettered condition of "a coloured woman who refuses to allow her personal experiences of trauma to be undermined and defined as merely wartime 'collateral damage'" (Bhardway 83). Such an insight into the psychological dimension of the narrative is stirred by Dangor's decision, as a mapmaker of truth, to re-enact, in the narrative landscape, the traumas caused by intimate assaults on individuals and the nation. Such an option thus provides both victims and perpetrators with a space to express unspeakable experiences. Dangor held firm on his belief that the rainbow's colors would fade from the young nation if victims of forced sexual assault were not only recognized but also given avenues to verbalize their *unshareable* traumas. This is the thought flow of Madeleine Laurencin's comparative study of John Maxwell Coetzee and Achmat Dangor's narratives of the transition, titled "A Polychromatic Approach to the Rainbow Nation Today" (2021). By exploring how the rainbow nation grapple with questions of identities, and reconciliation, she suggests that in "Bitter Fruit," Dangor represents the unraveling of the Ali family through the resurgence of a secret that tears a hole in the web holding Silas, Lydia, and Mickey together, exposing old wounds

and new desires (51). The strength of her argument lies in calling to attention the symbolism of the narrative condition of the family members, struck by a heartbreaking experience: Lydia's rape and the birth of her child. This bitter fruit forever distances them. Laurencin's discussion highlights the textual and semiotic elements embedded in the history of South Africa, a broken country yearning for healing and unity to become what Nelson Mandela described as "a Rainbow Nation... at peace with itself and the world" (Inauguration Speech 1994). This historically informed reading offers a comprehensive view of the story's symbolic power and lays the groundwork for analyzing Dangor's work through a semiotic lens. Such an approach could reveal the many signs and rhetorical devices within the text, offering parallel interpretations of the patterns of trauma and posttraumatic disorder experienced by the Ali family and South Africans. It could also show that some ambivalent semiotic images whisper a less rigid, more hopeful outlook from the author. These embers fuel Dangor's pursuit of reconciliation and "transnational connectivity" (Frenkel 149) in post-apartheid South Africa.

While supporting the ideas developed in scholarly work on *Bitter Fruit*, it must be recognized that few have approached Dangor's fundamental gesture of portraying the problems that afflict the new nation, as ciphered in the array of signs (linguistic and literary) that hover over the borders of *Bitter Fruit*. This research paper argues that *Bitter Fruit*, through a set of linguistic and narrative devices, operates as a profound textualization of silence. By conducting a semiotic analysis of the story, this study offers a new appreciation of the literary significance of Dangor's text, explaining that the disconnected lives of characters and their stressful condition can symbolize the historical echoes of the story.

This article argues that *Bitter Fruit* converts the Ali family's private trauma into a semiotic structure of post-apartheid memory exposing the limits of official reconciliation while opening a fragile space for self-definition. Meanwhile, the research paper seeks to elucidate a set of questions: how does *Bitter Fruit* transform private trauma into a semiotic structure of national memory? How do Lydia, Silas, and Michael function as signs of unresolved post-apartheid trauma? How does the novel's ambivalent sign system critique official reconciliation while preserving the possibility of healing? How can Saussure's, and Peirce's semiotic concepts illuminate the characters' verbal and non-verbal behaviors?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The methodology relies on textual analysis, drawing on developments in sign from literary semioticians within the frameworks of structuralism, and trauma theory. It seeks, first, to elucidate the recurrent verbal and non-verbal signs in the narrative; then it interprets the relation between signifier and signified or between representamen, object, and interpretant, to finally connect these signs to trauma theory. Such an analytical methodology allows for an evaluation of the political meaning of signs in relation to the TRC and post-apartheid identity.

Saussure and Peirce are foundational figures of semiotics. Their works are useful forerunners to semiotic analysis, with the groundbreaking dissection of the multiple aspects and interpretations of the sign. Their developments are resourceful documents for our discussion; the linguistic approach, at the center of the literary dimension, is a road map that can help argue that Dangor's text is steeped in South African historical context, and that the sign, whether interpreted in a binary (Saussure) or triadic (Peirce) angle, can only be analyzed in close relationship with its context. Their contributions to the field of semiotics can lead to a multilayered interpretation of patterns of trauma in the story. This will help demonstrate that the language of intimate and public wounds bears the same echo, and that the emotional recovery of communities is concomitant with the individual's reconstruction from traumatic experience.

Diving into the sea of signs, the reader encounters layers of harmonious and sometimes conflicting developments regarding signs. According to Umberto Eco, "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else" (7). If a sign can be interpreted through something else, it implies an interconnectedness that can form a whole of autonomous components, yet be part of a coherent sign system.

The Swiss linguist, Saussure, developed the structuralist approach to language in *Course in General Linguistics*, through the science of semiology, a major influence in structuralism. Saussure's semiology not only leads to a dualistic analysis of the sign (signifier and signified) but also sheds light on the crucial point that a word is not merely a "sound-image" (signifier), nor is it simply a concept.

Semiology¹ is "the science of signs," that embraced all modes of

communication found in human societies. Based on this definition of semiology, then, the description of the facial expression, the moan, and the behavior of Lydia during and after the sexual assault in *Bitter Fruit* all constitute signs that can be further interpreted as images of post-trauma syndrome.

Such breakthrough developments from Saussure have inspired the contribution of American Charles Sanders Peirce in his discussion of the sign. Both theorists wished to ring the bell of a rigorous study of systems and signs. From a pragmatic perspective, however, Peirce rows against the tide of Saussure's semiological bent to introduce "the term 'semiotics', which is synonymous with the concept of logic that focuses on the knowledge of human thinking process as portrayed in his writing published in 1931/1958" (Yahkin and Totu 6). Although both theorists of the sign were motivated by the same desire to expand the domain of signification and subsequently decode the relativity of meaning behind signs and symbols, their approaches differed.

However, unlike Saussure's dualistic methodology Peirce's semiotics, built on a triadic structure, divides the signifier to take into account anything that the senses can perceive. "Clearly, semiotics gives the signifier a wide range of possibilities" (Tyson 217). Peirce sums up his broad view of semiotics: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the later [sic] is thereby mediated, determined by the former" (EP2 478). Thus, in Peirce's account, a sign involves the representamen, the object to which it refers, and the interpretant produced in the mind of the interpreter. Lydia's silence in *Bitter Fruit* functions as the *representamen*, or even the *ground* for the acrimonious atmosphere in the family; the *object/referent* or cause is her rape by the policeman; the *interpretant*, is the impact of the rape. This symbolic framework surrounding Peirce's semiotics is reinforced by its structuralist foundation, which supports interpreting the sign system by highlighting a group of similar objects—rape victims in South Africa—synchronously (under apartheid/post-apartheid periods). If, for Peirce, everything can be a sign as long as it can "represent" something or symbolically "tell" something, according to an individual's interpretative thought, then the *competent readers* of Dangor's text can easily interpret the collection of images and other rhetorical devices as possible representamen symbolizing the grueling experiences endured individually and collectively by

South Africans. The meanings of trauma patterns in Dangor's story are mediated through the interaction between the representamen, interpretant, and object. This, for Peirce, is the process of semiosis; this is foregrounded by the fleeting nature of the symbolic aspect of the sign, which explains the fact that "the relation of ground and object is not immediately posited but is rather represented to mind through a mediating representation, or interpretant." (EP2)

Given all these complementary and sometimes conflicting theories about signs, and although the current lack of consensus on what defines semiotics might insinuate its vitality and broad scope, "... its practitioners share a common concern with ... the role of signs and symbols in whatever the object of study happens to be" (Rochberg-Halton and McMurtrey 1983, 142). Therefore, instead of examining the *parole* of literature, which is a surface phenomenon, "structuralism seeks instead the *langue* of literary texts." (Tyson 220) Bearing in mind that the literary text is hierarchically organized², an interpretation of these structures allows texts to create a meaning, often referred to as grammar, we can explore the object of study through the lens of literary semiotics. These semiotic principles provide a perspective allowing for an interpretation of the symbolic patterns in *Bitter Fruit* to reveal how trauma and memory are encoded within language and narrative structures.

In this case, the objective is to decipher the world of signs in *Bitter Fruit*, to understand how they generate meaning from the syntactic allure, and from the semantic and pragmatic dimensions, and to analyze the interactions between them and the ways they are symbolic of characters' traumatic experiences and quest of hope, but also of politics of national reconciliation. In doing so, this study combines selected semiotic concepts with trauma theories from Judith Herman, Caty Caruth, Thomas Luckhurst, and Crista Schonfelder, to decode how signs are textual devices, images hinting at patterns of traumas of individuals and a nation markedly affected by an escalation of violence. The crux of much scholarship, trauma theory is the focus of literary and cultural studies. Theorists of trauma have, from a psychological and literary perspective, concluded that behaviors and attitudes of victims of traumatic experiences, but also their mental state are all signs that can be used to interpret their social condition. As the consideration of historical facts is at the heart of psychological studies of trauma, *Bitter Fruit* is then part of the transition fiction whose main interest is the representation of

individual trauma, connected to the historical reality of apartheid.

More importantly, analyzing patterns of trauma and characters' reactions to posttraumatic stress disorder through semiotic and trauma theories helps highlight Dangor's moderate stance, especially when compared to other writers of the transition period regarding the future of the new nation. Indeed, by allowing victims of sexual abuse to carry their burdens and confront past demons through self-chosen paths, the South African writer, as the discussion will show, transforms his story into a semiotic system, yielding additional subtexts that can generate further interpretations.

Thus, the study first displays that *Bitter Fruit* is an audible silence of the agony collectively felt and individually reenacted, the impacts of which are insinuated in the myriads of rhetorical devices. Then, from a *semiotic-deconstructive* perspective, it delves into the ambivalence of sign systems to demonstrate that it is a symbolic expression of the writer's optimism in the redefinition of reconciliation and identity.

1. The Ali Family as a Semiotic Microcosm of National Trauma

The story in *Bitter Fruit* details the horrific experiences of a family torn apart after the sexual violation of the mother figure, Lydia, by a white police officer, Du Boise. "Under apartheid, sexual violation was an expression of white power over blacks; it was a *verb* with which white racists communicated with black combatants; rape was a means to create and reproduce multiple systems of domination, including racism and colonialism" (Diallo 61). The disintegrative effects of the rape memory have been revived by the impromptu meeting between Du Boise and Silas, a motif for the narrative voice to put the reader at the heart of the trauma borne by Lydia, but also to make him aware of how severe the consequences of the violation are, almost twenty years later. The irritation and hyperarousal raised in Lydia by the evocation of the name of her rapist are signs of posttraumatic stress that she thought she had repressed, but which, unfortunately, ended up destroying the couple's life. Indeed, "Lydia straightened her leaning body as the car straightened, peering into the side mirror as she entered the slow city traffic" (Dangor 10). This is not only a sign of a persistent fear, but also the image of a "caught moon" (11), a metaphorical pattern that can be interpreted as a symbol of the woman's entrapment, while being molested by the white policeman. This is how the scene is disclosed, from the perspective of Silas:

And then, one day, the moon was caught in the bars of a window that seemed familiar yet very different somehow, further away than even that distant township window that the architects had put it as an afterthought. [...] He heard Lydia's voice, different as well, hoarse and rich, vibrating like a singer's voice too deep to be played loudly through a set of worn-out speakers ... while someone laughed above the sound of an idling engine, and then Lydia's voice was sharp, ascending into a scream, before fading into a moan so removed it seemed to come from his dreams. (Dangor 11-2)

This metaphorical part is a semiotic image that symbolizes the traumatic effects of the sexual assault upon the direct victim, but also on her husband. Dangor also makes a refined use of sensory imagery that functions as a signifying system to share the horror heaped on Lydia in the van. In this reenactment of the trauma scene, Silas describes, through the changing tempo of Lydia's scream, the agony she was subjected to. The "moon" as a cosmic image is used as a *designatum* (following Morris' terminology) of the innocence and liveliness of Lydia before the abuse, set against the cold and agitated one after the assault. As an innocent "moon", Lydia was, one day, caught in the cloudy atmosphere of her country, as she had to bear the brunt of her husband's commitment to the struggle against the pecking order of races, at the heart of South Africa's historical evolution. Lydia's scream is presented in an oxymoronic allure, "hoarse and rich" at the same time, "vibrating like a singer's voice" and yet unable to be accompanied by a symphonic assemblage, "too deep to be played loudly through a set of worn-out speakers", reaching the apex before fading into a "moan", alluding to the throbbing of the woman. Indeed, as Meg Samuelson correctly reasons, "rape causes physical and psychological dissociation as it "robs women of speech, reducing their voices to screams and moans" (1). Thus, Dangor has well understood that "traumatic memory lacks verbal narrative and context. Rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensation and images" (Herman). Elaine Scarry, in *Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, further explains the resistance of physical pain to verbalization, when she relevantly pinpoints that

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language ... Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language,

to sounds and cries a human being makes before language was learned.

(4)

Therefore, Lydia, Silas, and Mikey, the bitter fruit from the rape, are all in pain in their bodies and minds because they are caught in a web of unspeakable memories. The abuse of Lydia, like the devastating pain caused to the whole nation by the apartheid system, whose bitter fruits are still sour to swallow in the transition era, has become what Crista Schonfelder called “family trauma” (18). It denotes “how the whole family may be affected by the individual jarring moments and how, in particular, interpersonal trauma within a family tends to shatter the group’s sense of safety and stability as well as to damage the bonds of the familial community” (18).

The family disintegration is made more pronounced in this cold exchange between the couple, a syntagmatic pattern made of short clipped sentences that are *representamen* or semiotic patterns of the emptiness, rage, and feeling of void tearing Lydia, ever since that night. This is not only a signifier of the distance between them, but also a sound object, following Saussure’s structural approach that symbolically translates the sentiment of angst that gnaws at a whole nation, after the demise of apartheid:

“Fuck you, Lydia, I know the difference, I know pain from pleasure.”

She stood up, her angry reaction showed by the coldness in her body.

‘You don’t know about the pain. It’s a memory to you, a wound to your ego, a theory.’ She thrust her face into his. ‘*You can’t even begin to imagine the pain*’ ...

“What else do you remember?”

“That Sergeant Seun’s face, our black brother, the black, brutal shame in his face.’

“You don’t remember my face, my tears ...” (Dangor 14)

The narrative option to detach the voice from this ideology-steeped exchange about the meaning of pain for the victim and their community, is an image that provides an encoded way to depict the conflicting perceptions of agony—both physical and psychological. Lydia seethes because she is convinced, like all rape victims, that her husband will never be able to grasp the pain she was enduring, the tears, and the expression on her face during the act. These are, in light of Peirce’s theory, *representamen of the object* (the rape), and the remembrance of which can be taken as an interpretant of lingering traumatic spin-offs.

Lydia's ire that brings her to air her truth in Silas's face is one ultimate expression of her post-traumatic stress disorder. Unlike what she admits to her husband after the latter announced bumping into her violator – “Silas, I'd forgotten...” (Dangor 13) – her agitation, delineated in the above quotation, is a sequel to an uncured wound, the symptoms of which are intrusiveness, reexperiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal, and hypervigilance, with a general feeling of anxiety and dysphoria. Her conviction that Silas cannot understand what she experienced, her refusal to speak about the unspeakable, her attempt to banish it from her consciousness give credit to the belief that “certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud (Herman).

These alterations of the dissociated mind of the rape victim are symbolically drawn at the horizon of Dangor's text, especially through the syntactic and semantic registers used by the voice to give another textual sign of the backlashes sexual violence has on Lydia and the family. Lydia's dance on the broken beer glasses can be called a *semiosis of suffering*. Read in light of Peirce's triadic approach, it is composed of the sign (silence/coldness), the object (referent/the rape), and the interpretant (dance on the jagged glasses as symbol/*representamen* of the trauma). The three concepts at the core of Peirce's theory of semiosis always interact and interrelate, as is the case in traumatic conditions, with the cause, manifestations, and consequences of the dissociation of the body and mind of the victim.

Therefore, dancing with delicate feet on broken, bloody glasses is Lydia's non-verbal language, a semiotic expression of her desire to forget the demons of the past. However hard she tries to forget, through intrusion, the atrocities from rape are tenacious as they refuse to be buried: the desire to avoid and deny the terrible past is made impossible by the conviction that denial does not work, due to a continual reenactment (traumatic neurosis for Freud) of the dreadful event. Hence, Lydia's conflict “between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Herman). The dancing scene is highly symbolic, as it sends back Dangor's text into signs of individual and family disintegration. It makes his narrative become what Yuri Tynjanov calls in his essay “On Literary Evaluation” (1927) a system with a semiotic status in relation to other historical series (or orders), implying a dynamic interplay where one system mediates meaning for another. This leads to approaching *Bitter Fruit* within “the cultural semiotic framework in which literary discourse is understood as

a set of cultural texts mediated/translated through and with other cultural texts” (Kroo’ 248). In other words, by bridging the ordeals suffered by Lydia and those of all rape victims to the cultural *con-text* underlying the narration, *Bitter Fruit* provides the system of South African culture with new textual internal translations through its poetic practice of intertextuality and intermediality (249).

Thus, to highlight the historically and culturally imbued aspect of the narrative, the position given by Madeleine Laurencin must be taken at face value: “The description of the ordeal Lydia suffers is harsh and unforgiving. It forces the reader to recognize the weight of characters and of the country’s past” (56). This is given credence by psychologists who often theorize trauma as an experience that is not easily represented, because the “unspeakability of trauma constitutes a pathology of history itself” (Frenkel 160), which can be interpreted, in the South African context, as a specialized language, bearing intertextual connections.

Analyzing the *langue* of *Bitter Fruit*, our focus shifts from the couple to the bitter outcome of the rape, Mickey, to exemplify the interrelated condition of all victims of the violation apartheid was, and through whom other signifying elements suggest the deleterious atmosphere in the Ali abode. Reading with him the diary of his mother, we discover

A ghost from the past, a mythical phantom embedded in the ‘historical memory’ of those who were active in the struggle. *Historical memory*. It is a term that seems illogical and contradictory to Mickey; Yet, it has an air of inevitability, solemn, and compelling, especially when uttered by Silas and his comrades. It explains everything: the violence periodically sweeping the country, the crime rate, even the strange ‘upsurge’ of brutality against women. It is as if history has a remembering process of its own, one that gives life to its imaginary monsters. How his mother and father have received a visitation from that dark past, some terrible memory brought to life. (Dangor 32 emphasis added)

The pervasive and unavoidable historical memory is focused on the breakdown of the Ali family. In fact, the intense trauma experienced by Lydia and Silas, along with its lasting effects, is conveyed here through Mickey’s consciousness. The widespread presence of historical memory in the South African context—the root cause of uncontrolled violence—is symbolically expressed through the tense that defies time: the simple present. This not only

allows the narrator to spotlight the tension between Silas's generation, which clings to historical memory as a semiotic object to facilitate remembrance and experiences sharing in the process of healing, and Mickey's different perspectives.

Thus, the emotional coldness surrounding Silas, Lydia, and Mickey is not merely an allegory of national trauma but a semiotic microstructure of transitional South Africa. It represents three crucial stages in the country's historical evolution. From Pierce's semiotics, Silas, as a *representamen* of former anti-apartheid activists, who look back in time, is an *interpretant* of South Africans holding on to memories to avoid the challenging and uncertain reality in postapartheid era. Lydia symbolizes the many unsung victims of white repression who pluck up the courage to face stifled traumas through different avenues. Mickey, 'the bitter fruit' of the violation of the mother/country, is a *sound-image* that signifies the youth, lost bitter fruits of the system, less blissful by the political transformation, alienated from family and society, and who slip into zones of violence. The Ali family is not merely an allegory of national trauma but a semiotic microstructure of the transitional era in South Africa.

In this way, shifting the narrative perspective from one character to another, placing the reader at the heart of a textual web of accounts of the same experience – the sexual abuse of Lydia and its lifelong impacts – is a semiotic system activated by the author to encode the *langue* of his text. This is done through a large use of the technique of psycho narration, which opens the door to the minds of characters to foreground the mental dissociation caused by the traumatic experiences that have befallen the family and nation. A telling illustration is Lydia's posttraumatic stress that triggers an inclement family environment that utterly destroys the couple's life, which progressively drifts away to fall into unbearable silence, to such a point that "their time spent together passed quietly, each one reading on their own, or listening to their own music through earphones or in their separate sanctuaries" (Dangor 61). This humdrum family life, expressed through the continuous regime of the verbs in the passage, is actually a *representation* of the general condition of South Africans in the transition, lost, disconnected, and battling to give meaning to the new political system. The silence and separation in their 'sanctuaries' are symbols of a persistent separation between racial communities, consequent to past traumas. Reading this passage as a semiotic pattern of past traumas for the whole country is all the more grounded because, as Luckhurst rightly states

in *The Trauma Question*, “the traumatic memory persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time” (81). This is a sign of trauma-born trouble in which “the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them” (Caruth 151). These intrusive images and thoughts repeatedly imposed and thus make it difficult for Lydia to explain to her husband what it’s like to be raped, is, in reality, a symbolic pattern of South Africa’s difficulty in giving words to moral wounds. On this, we partly concur with Meg Samuelson’s interpretation when she avers that with her words flung to her husband,

Lydia breaks the gender divide that names what happens to men’s bodies as torture and what happens to women’s bodies as rape. The implication is that to speak of rape within the structure of the TRC would only confirm its production of women as the victims of sexual abuse and of sexual abuse as a special category of harm pertaining only to women. (Dangor 2)

On the contrary, knowing with Elaine Scarry that rape as a form of psychological suffering does have referential content and is susceptible to verbal objectification (11), Dangor offers possibilities for the victims of sexual abuse to choose their path to therapy. This is what Lydia has done by refusing to share her story with the TRC. Instead, she uses her diary, a third space of enunciation (Bhabha 1996), as an alternative to get psychological aid and public confession. The diary, unfolded to the reader by Mickey, is a private space to tell what rape trauma is to her, a space of reenactment of the rape scene, where she can speak of the trauma in crude detail. In that therapeutic space, Lydia can journal the utter transformation that occurs in her life, “to speak of that which remains unspeakable within available public discourse” (Samuelson 2). Such a narrative formulation from the victim’s perspective gives another level of attention to the semiotic dimension of the story in *Bitter Fruit* and the diversified use of images and other linguistic turns at the core of the narrative grammar of his text. Through well-set semantic relationships (between the signs evoked and the objects they stand for) and a pragmatic dynamic that allows discussing signs and how they can be interpreted as symbols, Dangor shows commitment to bringing light to the contradictions and traumas bred by apartheid. It also allows a critical exploration of his unflinching hope for a safer and more humane South African nation, which

he somewhat manages to express through a hybridized use of sign systems.

2. Dangor as a Mapmaker of Hope through Ambivalent Semiotic Patterns

The discussion on the Ali family as a microcosm of national trauma has foregrounded insights into the debilitating effects of sexual assault during the anti-apartheid struggle. The set of semiotic images explored in light of the theories of Saussure, and Peirce has allowed us to conclude with Frenkel that, “Dangor’s texts reveal the nexus between the ambiguities of identity and the ambiguities of history that characterizes contemporary South African culture as a place of indeterminacy” (11). Truly, sexual assault is a running theme in *Bitter Fruit*, the symbolism of which is in the form of an allegory of the assault of the country as a whole by white zealots, with its mortifying consequences on the psyche of the victims, fighting to meet up with the blurred identities and contradictions that hinder the quest for reconciliation.

Such cultural indeterminacy can account for the presence of ambivalent signs that whisper, at the same time, the harshness of the themes unfolded at the textual level, and a glimmer of hope sprouting, despite uncertainties and frustrations in the transition period. In this way, *Bitter Fruit* can be approached as *cultural semiosis* because it imbues its universe of signs with the cultural realities of South African society. Indeed, unlike the somewhat rigid structural perspective, Dangor disseminates in his story a system of signs that endlessly interact and interrelate with other signs “out there” (as *sign-events*), and in the minds (as *thought signs*), following Peircean semiosis.

Thus, it is more relevant to explore Dangor’s atypical technique to express hope, through a set of signs that suggest, at the surface level, despair, but which, at an underlying level, is a resounding expression of his optimism. This ambivalent nature of signs is dissected through the variable analysis of the sign conducted by Peirce, combined with Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive theory. While Peirce sets out to develop the idea of the sign’s *mediary*²² role, Derrida demonstrated, first in *Of Grammatology* and in *Positions* (1981) that the sign (at the core of language, culture, human being, literature, and even

²² Because he was convinced that there is no immediacy of the sign, as Cartesian philosophy postulated it, of which we can have immediate consciousness.

identities) is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings, because of the interplay between language and the construction of meaning. Consequently, if, as Peirce posited, the concept of mediation resists taking signs in a rigid binary correspondence with their respective objects as they are in the here and now, a literary text like *Bitter Fruit* is crafted, following deconstruction theory, of multiple, overlapping, and conflicting meanings in a fluid relation to one another and to readers. The result of such dynamic interrelationships is an ambivalent meaning of symbolic signs of trauma patterns in the story, which resist what Derrida refers to as the “myth of presence”.

The following examples from the story serve as evidence of the impossibility of interpreting symbols and other semiotic images of the trauma experienced by the Ali family and the country in a fixed and immediate manner. It rather calls for a mediatory reading of the signs and their ever-shifting signifying system, because, should we repeat it with Derrida, “language has two important characteristics: (1) its play of signifiers continually defers, or postpones, meaning, and (2) the meaning it seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another.”³

A significant stylistic feature of *Bitter Fruit* is a constant change in verb tenses, in the temporal axis of the narrative, shown in the alternate use between “past” and present.” This shift in tenses is a sign of hybrid narration. At the first level, the narration is impersonal, with the past tense, which recalls historical events that have inspired the story. At the second level, there is the timeless present tense in segments where characters are in monologue, to express shock or a process of recovery.

The interpretation of the signifying system of this change in tenses infers that the breaks in the temporal line of the story are semiotic patterns hinting at the rape victims’ inability to control the continuity of life after the trauma. One telling example is when Mikey’s psycho narration is disclosed to the reader after the reader discovers that he is the bitter fruit of the rape (Dangor 30). Such a traumatic experience is expressed through Mickey, the symbol of South Africa itself, at that moment, cloaked in deep silence, lost in a transitional condition, unable to reconcile with himself and his family. The discovery is a sign, representing the trauma borne by South African youth during that tumultuous period, from which the reader-interpretant can

deduce, following Peirce's triadic semiotics, uncertainty about the future that lies ahead.

More importantly, knowing that the sense made of the sign is in the mind of the observer (*Sanford Encyclopedia*), another meaning can be derived. The *representamen*, which is the discovery that he is the child of sexual abuse, stirs in the young man an existential quest, symbolized by his decision to step out of the comfort zone of his family house and to go and map the road of his life, through his walks into Soweto. This is an encoded image of the hope nourished by the young man, who needs to reconnect the scattered pieces of his life, despite the shocking news. Michael, who shuns the sobriquet Mickey, which is itself a semiotic image of a hope and a new personhood – “like traumatized people [needs] to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future” (Herman). In this way, through the technique of the story in the story, a large window is opened to the story of Hajera, aged sixteen, a distant relative of the Ali family, raped by a British officer. This is a second-level narration through which the reader listens to the story, mediated through Michael's consciousness, told by Moulana Ismail (Dangor 198, 204, 205), where the 19-year-old man realizes that rape was a long-time weapon used not only to dampen resistance but also as a sign to represent power dynamics in colonial India. We learn along with Michael that

In the middle of all this historical ennui - how else can I describe it? – a British officer, a lieutenant, rapes Ali Ali's sister. She is sixteen years old, one year younger than Ali Ali. Her name is Hajera ... Of course, no action is taken against the soldier! He is English, he is white, and a commissioner officer! Untouchable! No one believes Hajera ... Ali Ali decides to act. ... They find the officer, days after he has been reported missing, hanging from a tree, his hand bound by his back. Ali Ali flees away from Bombay, in the opposite direction to the one the British think he will take. (Dangor 200-1-2)

The use of the timeless tense, the simple present, is a fully-fledged semiotic image that implies a shared method used in all spaces where the subaltern, to borrow Spivak's term, are silenced through rape. Hajera's story is the only one among many dishonored women, violated, and left with lifelong scars from abuses inflicted by those in power. Such a story can symbolize sexual violence, if interpreted as Peirce suggests, through the interaction between what it signifies in the South African context (as a form of subjugation) and its

interpretation and object. Indeed, Moulana Ismaila's powerful words echo in Michael's mind:

There are certain things people do not forget or forgive. Rape is one of them. In ancient times, conquerors destroyed the will of those whom they conquered by impregnating their women. It is an ancient form of genocide. It does not require a Sufi prophecy to see the design in that. *The Romans and the Sabine Women, the Nazis and Jewish women in the concentration camps, the Soviets in Poland, Israeli and Palestinian refugees, white South African policemen and black women*

You conquer a nation by bastardizing its children. (Dangor 204, emphasis added)

The enumerative style of the passage (highlighted here) is a literary device used to drive at the repetition and even trivialization of using women's bodies as a terrain to inscribe power. Their bodies serve as a means to conquer a nation through rape, but more importantly, they can also be interpreted as a sign that stimulates and emulates Michael's hope in his quest for justice. The story of Hajera, then, functions as a catalytic semiotic system with an ambivalent meaning for the young man.

First, he has now fully understood the past and has begun to confront his distressful experience, to face the future with an unwavering stance, like Ali Ali. Second, he believes that the last cancerous seeds of the past, symbols of apartheid, must be uprooted to foster hope for the future. In this context, the killing of his genitor, Du Boise (Dangor 253), is narrated in a straightforward style that involves the reader. After the murder of his father, his "heritage," he whispers, unwanted, imposed, "his" history, "his" beginning (Dangor 276), Michael, the bitter fruit, the bastard, is dead and is reincarnated into a new version—"Noor/light" (Dangor 277), the seedbed of a new identity. Such a new name, expressed in an indirect thought, adds to the ambivalent nature of the story, which allows a dialogic interpretation: *Noor* symbolizes rebirth, renewal, but also an assumed hybrid self-fashioning for the young man. However, the light felt by the latter can also be read as a sign of ambiguity, because the killing of Du Boise, though relieving for him, does not quench his quest of belonging, a sign of the uncertainties in the transition era.

Michael's determination to deconstruct what his person symbolized before he knows the truth about his birth and reconstruct himself is part of

the healing process from a traumatic family/social past, the sequel of which still follows him in his street roaming. This is articulated in monologues and questioning – a written manifestation of doubt, incomprehension, a request for an explanation (Aiuthier-Revuz 78)⁴ - that are signs of posttraumatic stress disorder, but also in his social bonding with his friend Vinu, a victim of incest, and Moulana Ismaila.

3. Lydia's Silence, Body, and the Semiotics of Sexual Recovery

In the story, Lydia's transformation from victimhood to healing is also expressed through a double-meaning sign system that avoids strict correspondence between the signs used to depict her healing journey and the signifiers. In their reconceptualization of rape, new feminists argue that it is a form of violence that destroys the person's sense of self, yet from which the survivor can recover. Dangor reinterprets this core belief by creating a character who is found in the darkest part of her life but becomes a woman who fully embraces her past and is aware of her new identity. Her directly quoted thought, "only women, wombed beings, can carry the dumb tragedy of history around with them" (Dangor 251), serves as a symbol of a more confident woman on her way to rehabilitation and also as a sign of her acceptance and subsequent healing from past trauma. Let us consider this part of her routine:

She sips the tea she has made - ritually heating the teapot, spooning in the exact measure of green leaves, inhaling the jasmine fragrance ... She would also sleep with someone younger now, if he – or she- could offer their bodies unselfishly as her instrument of release. From the years, the decades of sexual hunger, a simple, unadorned and unpretentious tapping of the swollen darkness, bruised, discoloured, of the place in which she has imprisoned her sensuality. She no longer needs to protect herself from her rapist, from her husband's fierce but all transient desires. She wants now to be lowered into an abyss of the flesh, unquestioned and unquestioning, to descend as if she is drowning, she wants the death of her sexual being, and thinks it could only happen dramatically, sinful and sinned against, sacrificed like Sister Catherine on the Cross of her Christ's disembodied lust. (Dangor 248)

This long psycho narration directly quoted by the voice is the ultimate expression of Lydia's long way to psychological recovery and her total break

away from rape trauma syndrome. The sign of the slow but progressive recovery, wrapped in a curative silence, is alluded to in the meaningful routine she builds around herself, and which delineates her determination to take back her sexual life in hand. The passage shows not only her decision to no longer let her abductor traumatize her but also to choose her own therapeutic method: to get rid of the swamp of smothering social and cultural expectations, and move from a haunted subject to a full actor of her sexual life, from an eerie past life to a more peaceful one. She is conscious that she can only fulfil her desire through an “unquestioned and unquestioning” sexual relationship.

This is suggested in the enumerative allure and imperative verbal regime of this other thought of hers directly reported by the narrative voice: “Hand Silas his heritage, say, something short and profound, kiss him on the cheek, then walk away, free of him and his burdensome past” (Dangor 251). Thus, in her will to deconstruct the old Lydia and to construct the new one, Silas must be effaced. This is another expression of the ambivalent meaning of the semiotic image of trauma at the textual level in *Bitter Fruit*. Although Silas, following Peirce’s ideology, incarnates the victims of the apartheid repressive apparatus, for Lydia, Silas’s inactivity translates the *dynamical object* (the *denotatum*, according to Morris) of the inevitable dislocation of the couple. That is the reason why she does not shiver to step into “transgressive” sex publicly. This is how the narrator, using an iterative design, draws a painstaking image of Lydia’s sexual intercourse with a young man, the figure through whom the narrative stages her recovery of sexual agency:

He remembers Lydia lying on the billiard table, that young Mozambican, Joao, perched above her, birdlike, a heron, uncommonly black, his awkwardness given grace by her arched body. Silver shadows lighting up the loveliness of their coupling: green upon her olive skin, deep blue against his dark, dark back. She held him, no more than that, moored him, as if to prevent him from drifting into space, his head in her hands, whispering in his ear, as if instructing him in the art of sex. On the other side of the room, lit up by a full moon, stood Silas, staring intently, like a voyeur. Then he stumbled away, as if intoxicated. (Dangor 268-9)

The representation of Michael’s thought by the narrator is signaled through the *verbum dicendi*, “he remembers,” coupled with nominal sentences, indicating a meticulous rendering of the lovemaking. These syntactic elements infer the

passion that drove Lydia in the act. The option to come back, through the son's perspective, to the scene of Lydia's releasing sexual act is another way for the narrator to reveal that the event was so liberating for Lydia, so shameful for the husband, as well as so indifferent to Michael, who no longer feels a sense of belonging with the 'family'. This "adulterous" act, which is, according to Silas, Lydia's "public declaration of freedom" (Dangor 272), is wrapped in an evocative style, (the use of the asyndeton and enumeration, "birdlike, a heron, uncommonly black ... body", framed with intensifiers ("dark, dark back"), and other animal images that constitute vivid grammatical devices of the intensely healing nature of the sexual intercourse. The overall structure of the passage keeps pace with the mating couple and Michael's eyes watching his mother's uncommon "boldness grudging but irresistible" (Dangor 266).

Therefore, Lydia is no longer the embodiment of the caught moon, the victims of sexual abuse evoked in the first part of the discussion. She has become a full-blown moon, an ambivalent image that translates Dangor's shifting images to give body to his hope, and through which he calls the bitter fruits of South Africa to fully assume personal and collective memory, to bear retributive acts and engage the demanding process of healing.

The sexual relationship with the young man, which is the verbalization of her psychological recovery, can be further interpreted, following Peirce's and Derrida's postulates. The love scene is a reflection of Peirce's infinite semiosis of the sign itself, as the multifocalised approach to present it supposes a plurality of meanings and interpretations, if we refer to Derrida's ideas in *différance*. If it is true that in Peirce's semiotic model, "the *interpretant* is created by the observer, the object is not given, but inferred, this makes a sign's meaning highly dependent on context. Thus, it can be the object of a context-bound interpretation, through which Dangor seems to whisper that every victim of sexual abuse should have the liberty to define his or her own way to deal with the horrendous experience, to meet the challenge of the present, and look ahead to the future. Thus, the question of sex itself is highly symbolic in the narrative world of Dangor. Through it, he sends snippets of his optimistic vision, from an ambivalent approach to the possibilities for national reconciliation. Its ambivalence can also explain the representation of sex as a symbolic therapy to address and eventually redress the tragic history of his country. Dangor's narrative is a pretext to map the road that should lead

to a brighter future. This is further accounted for by the symbolic connection between Lydia's journey to an unknown and yet open place, with South Africa; the journey is another text of the author's hope that is dissonant with the cold and close patterns of trauma at the surface level of the narrative.

However, Noor's departure, Lydia's driving away from her family, Silas caught into a seemingly interior peace are all signs of the limits of the TRC's vision of collective reconciliation in the nation. This explains why Dangor has always shown reluctance to the capacity of the transition justice system to heal the wounds of the past and bring disparate individuals to form a community. Despite such an unresolved narrative situation that foregrounds the ethical dimension of reconciliation, Dangor is optimistic, and has, unlike other writers of the period, a much more positive vision. *Bitter Fruit*, then, straddles the rigid structural binary division of the South African world under apartheid, reflected in the textual patterns of trauma, and the more flexible realities symbolized by the ambivalent signs swarming the story, through which the author mediates possibilities for traumatized individuals and communities to deal with the past.

Conclusion

This discussion has aimed to analyze Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* through semiotic principles, seeking to decode the underlying sign system that shapes the surface meaning of the troubled transition period in his country. The analysis shows that his narrative revolves around signs that symbolically represent the intense suffering and experiences of characters dealing with the brutality of apartheid, whose lingering effects are still felt both individually and collectively. Based on Peirce, and Saussure, the discussion has elucidated the characters' traumatic experiences of a long history of oppression, and their difficulty in rising above the chaos in the transition era. Through a cross-analysis of literary semiotics and trauma theories, the study demonstrates that the characters' bodies and minds in pain serve as a signifying system reflecting the widespread feeling of angst affecting and afflicting South Africa.

Building on signs is an innovative way for the Indian South African writer to connote that characters' bodies and minds in pain are a semiotic text of inexpressible traumas. With ambivalent sign systems, the story has shed light on the author's avowed conviction that facing unsaid traumatic experiences like rape is a prerequisite to reconciliation and identity

reconstruction. As a skilled writer, Dangor has effectively constructed semiotic images that act as symbols addressing these urgent questions in a multicultural society. Indeed, by using the Ali family as the *representamen* of the entire nation, the story initially depicts the breakdown of family and national ties, but also reveals what the author strongly believes are the requirements for reconciliation: the vital need for individuals and communities to confront, through self-defined avenues, past demons. The ambivalent aspects of the sign system, deciphered through Peirce's semiosis approach informed by deconstruction ideas, have led us to put into the limelight the open-ended aspect of the story.

The exploration of Dangor's text through the lens of literary semiotics reinforces other discussions (e.g. Melanie Laurencin) previously evoked. In this perspective, by dissecting the literary signs in the story, our analysis has entered into a dialogism with existing scholarship to assess the author's move from a critique of the TRC model to a designer of a *cultural semiosis*, imbued with the historical and transcultural realities of the transition era. This can certainly lead to other avenues for further research that could initiate reflection on semiotic patterns in Dangor's work and other postapartheid texts - Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Niq Mhlongo's *After Tears*, Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain*, and Thabile Shange's *In the Midst of it all* - to examine the relationship between narrative and social healing in contemporary literature. Achmat Dangor, in *Bitter Fruit*, is adamant in his belief that all victims of sexual abuse (as *sign-agents* of the transformation from victim to survivor) are the embodiment of multiple possibilities for South Africans to not only carry the burden of the past, but also, like Lydia, to envision a more clement future.

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¹ In his semiology, Saussure excluded the writing aspect, in his dichotomic language premise (langue-parole). Such position, inherently contradictory, was deconstructed by theorists like Jacques Derrida. This urged semioticians of the 1960s to thrust language to even greater prominence. A groundbreaking step was taken with Roland Barthes' averment that "linguistics is not part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics". (1968 11)

² The text is segmented into subtexts (levels, phonological, grammatical, syntactic, rhythmic, etc.), and each segment can be considered part and parcel of the semiotic analysis of literary texts.

³ Derrida combines the French words for "to defer" and "to differ" to coin the word *différance*, which is his name for the only "meaning" language can have.

⁴ [Le point d'interrogation] est « la manifestation écrite d'un doute, d'une incompréhension, d'une demande d'explication, réponse muette de l'un des interlocuteurs à ce qui vient d'être dit par l'autre ». (78)

Personal translation: "[The question mark] is 'the written sign of a doubt, a misunderstanding, a request for explanation; it is one of the interlocutors' speechless answer to what has just been said by another."