

The meeting of a psychoanalyst and an indigenous healer

Book review

Sachs, W (1996) **Black Hamlet**. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press. 340 pages. ISBN 1-86814-299-X

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Black Hamlet is an intriguing biography of a Zimbabwean immigrant who moved to South Africa in the 1920s. When it was published in 1937, **Black Hamlet** was hailed as a pioneering work in the genre of psychoanalytic biographies, more especially because a person of African descent was its subject of study. In 1947 the book was republished in a revised edition called **Black anger**. In this revised edition, Sachs subtly tried to rewrite the history of his own investigation to reflect a more politically sensitive attitude towards the African people. In the 1996 reprint of the 1937 edition, Sachs's original opinionated and rough style to describe the life of a black man from the perspective of a white man in South Africa is evident.

Dr Wulf Sachs got the idea of writing **Black Hamlet** while working with black schizophrenic patients in a mental hospital in Pretoria. Based on his observations of the patients, Sachs proposed that "... the manifestations of insanity, in its form, content, origin, and causation, are identical in both natives and Europeans" (p71). It was this line of thinking that made Sachs curious to know "... if the working fundamental principles of the mind in its normal state were not also the same" (p71). To satisfy his intellectual curiosity, Sachs identified John Chavafambira as a subject whose experiences and dreams were investigated through the method of psychoanalysis.

In terms of structure, the 1996 edition of **Black Hamlet** kicks off with two introductions written by Saul Dubow, a history lecturer at the University of Sussex, and Jacqueline Rose, an English lecturer at the University of London's Queen Mary and Westfield College. Dubow focuses on the historical aspects while Rose tackles the book's literary attributes. Apart from these two introductions, the book is divided into three sections. In the first section entitled "Memories of the past", Sachs gives a detailed account of John's early life in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), his difficulties in relating to his stepfather (his father's younger brother) and subsequently how he left his native land to come and look for greener pastures in Johannesburg. The second section of the book focuses largely on the period of association between John and Wulf Sachs. Whilst the

original aim was to study the life and experiences of one African native, the book reveals a mutual fascination that gradually and finally develops between the author and his subject. The last section, entitled "Revolt" tells a story of John's trip back to Manyikaland.

Going through **Black Hamlet**, I found it to be a fascinating book that needs to be approached from a variety of angles. As stated in the preface to the book: "This is a text that resists any one approach, one that not only allows for, but requires, multiple readings and interpretations" (px). I have chosen to approach the book from three angles. Firstly, I have approached the book as a narrative describing the complex and tragic life of a Zimbabwean immigrant. Secondly, I have interpreted the book as a story about the political life of African people in South Africa just before the Second World War. Thirdly, the book could be understood as a dialogue between an indigenous African healer and a Western psychoanalyst.

As a narrative, **Black Hamlet** is about a man by the name of John Chavafambira, a native Zimbabwean diviner-healer who was born around 1904. Chavafambira's early childhood in Zimbabwe included losing his father at the age of three. He left home at around 20 to prove to his stepfather that he could be his own man and crossed into South Africa after a seven day walk. John's first job in South Africa was in a hotel in Pietersburg (Northern Province). It was here that he also met and married a woman by the name of Maggie. After being falsely accused of trying to rape a white woman, John lost his job and then moved to Johannesburg where he worked as a waiter before he finally decided to concentrate on his vocation as a *nganga* (indigenous healer). As a narrative, **Black Hamlet** eloquently tells a poignant story of a man whose life is characterised by unsuccessful attempts to reconcile two conflicting worlds - his traditional past in Zimbabwe, and the complex urban environment in which he finds himself in South Africa.

As a story about the political life of blacks in South Africa just before the Second World War, this book is about the brutality of racial injustice and the various responses that this social phenomenon invokes in both the oppressor and the oppressed. John first experiences the harsh realities of racial oppression when he is unjustly accused of raping a white woman. As a result of this experience, John started to develop a sense of resentment and anger toward whites. On arrival in Johannesburg, John finds the routine injustice and daily degradation of black life intolerable. He sees black prisoners being inhumanely handcuffed and publicly marched through the streets by white policemen. He lands in prison for being on the streets of Johannesburg at night without a pass. He deplores life in the slumlands of Doornfontein, Orlando and Alexandra. When the municipal authorities propose to close Rooiyyard (called Swartyard in Sachs's text), another slum in Johannesburg, John is enraged. According to Sachs, John's general response when confronted by these instances of injustice is initially to avoid conflict and to retreat within his own world. But when confronted by more such experiences of racial oppression and brutality, John begins to react in a manner that Sachs regards as impulsive and irresponsible. It is these many unpleasant experiences that ultimately politicise John.

As dialogue between an indigenous African healer and a Western psychoanalyst, **Black Hamlet** reveals the complexities that obtain when two healing systems that are premised on different epistemological foundations interact. Curious to learn about one

another's ways of healing, the relationship between Chavafambira and Sachs develops into a mutual fascination that is characterised by the sharing of ideas about health and illness. On the one hand, Sachs learnt how to interpret divination bones which, in his view, depended very much on the healer's grasp of the patient's troubles and to a certain degree on the symbolism of the bones. Chavafambira, on the other hand became interested in learning everything associated with Sachs's medical work. John even went to an extent of persuading Sachs to give him pills, tablets and mixtures that he intended to use to treat his own patients. Whilst the two healers appeared to benefit from each other, a reading of the book quickly reveals, however, that there was little, if any, parity in the relationship. Quite aside from the unlikelihood of an African and a European meeting on a truly equal basis in the South Africa of the 1930s, the psychoanalytic situation itself invested Sachs with a great deal of power over Chavafambira. Throughout the book, one gets a sense that Sachs has appropriated for himself the role of a father, a mentor and custodian of knowledge. It is this paternalistic and, at times condescending attitude toward John (and by extension toward African people) that I found annoying as I read the book. I am sure other people with a darker pigmentation like myself would find the book equally disturbing in this regard.

Despite its limitations, **Black Hamlet** will serve as a useful and stimulating text for both its critics and its admirers. Furthermore, this book could make a valuable and timely contribution to the current debate on how western and indigenous healing systems in South Africa should collaborate. Even though the book is based on the difficult experiences of black people in South Africa many years ago, **Black Hamlet** is still relevant today in a country where race relations are often adversarial.