

KNITTING IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN FICTION

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Betty LaDuke, in her study of visual art in Zimbabwe, writes: "The missionary legacy in Zimbabwe is two-fold. In addition to the cross, the other visible but seldom discussed tool is the crochet hook. This tool has become a subtle means of encouraging women's passive creativity as they produced endless yards of intricately designed white tablecloths and doilies for upper-class White and Black Africans and tourists."¹ LaDuke's "passive creativity" contributed to the once vibrant tourist economy of the region. Its new place in the fiction of southern Africa is quite different.

For practical purposes, I have conflated knitting and crochet in this section. Admittedly, the two methods of textile production are not identical, but share the common method of construction from a single thread. More importantly, both are foreign imports to the landscapes and cultures I will discuss. While the current popularity of knitting can be charted by its presence in much contemporary fiction, the roles it adopts in the southern African context are often unexpected. Floss M. Jay's short story "Knitting Gloves", 1983, tackles the seemingly incompatible issues of maternal

obligation and sexual fantasy. Brian Chikwava's unreliable narrator deploys knitting to construct an image of the narrator's late mother in *Harare North*, 2009. Finally Tsitsi Dangarembga uses knitting to illustrate racially defined loyalties in pre-independence Zimbabwe in her most recent novel *The Book of Not*, 2006. In all three cases knitting is written as an object and action far more complex in associations and meanings than the "passive creativity" previously assigned to the craft.

"KNITTING GLOVES" BY FLOSS M JAY

In the four brief pages of text South African author Floss M. Jay uses to write "Knitting Gloves", we are shown how the presence of knitting can work to both confirm assumptions of domestic life and violently disrupt any comfortable sense of familiarity. The single perspective of the narrative is told from the point of view of the main character, Meg, providing the reader with few concrete clues to judge fantasy from reality. What is clear is that knitting exists in the real world, a fact that provides a comforting counterpoint to the short story's often-unexpected content.

First introduced sitting "on a long green couch" we meet Meg "knitting another glove, a striped one, the kind which has each finger a different colour".² Almost immediately there is a suggestion of doubt, if not for the time we can imagine Meg is investing in this production, then in the design of the outcome. The glove pattern comes from a French pattern book suggesting that Meg is following something relatively complex, sealed with the approval of a publication. But despite the skill required to knit the multicoloured gloves, they are thought by her unnamed husband to be "silly" in contrast to the "plain, navy blue gloves" he prefers.³ In this small trivial detail, a picture of a passionless marriage appears. An activity Meg enjoys is dismissed by her husband, a character of such unimportance that the narrator does not even assign him a name.

Others benefit from Meg's knitting. "Friends all over the country" receive her knitted gloves in varying sizes according to their identity in life as child, woman or man.⁴ The existence of recipients for Meg's efforts, shows her to be less isolated than her solitary craft first suggests. As well as occupying time, her production links her to a community otherwise absent from the narrative. Curiously, this opening scene concludes with the narrator admitting that "Meg also thought them [the coloured gloves] silly, but she preferred them."⁵ A tension is established between Meg's awareness and sympathy for her husband's conservative taste and the frivolity of multicoloured fingers that she finds preferable to the other mundane options life has in store.

With the exception of knitting, all other details referred to in the story are bleak. A winter garden with "only stalks and dry leaves, and the drizzle blank" faces Meg whose "loose fat give[s] way under the pressure" of her arms crossing her stomach.⁶ Dull discontent is brewing, both in the setting she inhabits and the body she occupies. But these descriptions of knitting, followed by domestic details lull us into a false, if depressing, sense of security. This familiarity is punctuated abruptly by dialogue from an unfamiliar character: "I want to fuck hard," David said, "smiling in her ear."⁷ We know Meg to be the recipient of this comment because she "is sweating, her hair stringy, her back wet against the brown sheet of an unfamiliar mattress."⁸ But it remains unconfirmed if David is the same man who prefers the safety of navy blue gloves to his wife's multicoloured creations. Somehow it seems unlikely that a man, whose choice of knitted gloves is so conservative, is the voice behind such sexually explicit dialogue.

Time skips again and before the first page of this brief short story has concluded, the reader is shown three snapshots in no particular chronological order. Gloves are knit. David speaks. Then Meg recalls "white flowers in her garden in springtime", a moment presumably at least nine months removed from the winter scene Meg now observes while knitting.⁹ Few chronological clues are provided, other than the observation that the spring garden scene with its filigree white flowers "puffing into the air all over the garden" "was in the spring, before David, and summer".¹⁰ David, it seems,

is not a man in need of knitted winter gloves. By the end of the first page we have returned to the "grey stone of the garden walls [that] was almost black from rain" and "nappies on the line".¹¹ David, real or imagined, is absent and somewhere in this cramped world of Meg's coloured gloves, overweight tummy and sexual fantasies is a child.

Steps count out the cramped proportions of the narrative's setting. "Four paces away, was the wall with the sash window."¹² With heavy thighs, the "weight of [which] made it impossible for her to move fast" Meg walks the "Three steps in the passage up to the child's room."¹³ The surprises the narrative has provided until this point can be made more comfortable if explained as dream or fantasy. But Meg's observations of her sleeping child are harder to dismiss as memory or fantasy. The broken capillaries on her child's temples disgust her. Observing the "burgeoning child" she wills it to "shut up and don't live" before entering another fantasy, this time of castration.¹⁴ It is unclear if the castrated male is her husband or her lover, but her husband becomes the likely candidate when the narrator reveals, "The child will never know that it is you who pretend to father her. I've made a fact of this emptiness."¹⁵

After drawing the reader through these disconcerting details, Meg leaves her sleeping child unharmed saying, "See you later. I'm going to knit some more."¹⁶ Knitting signals a return to the reality of daily matter, the concrete and tangible that resides in stark contrast to her fantasies of violence and sexual pleasure. Gorging herself in the kitchen, a landscape of mindless repetitions appears. It is a place where Meg "could not separate this bread from the bread of nine o'clock" consumed just an hour earlier.¹⁷ The garden she looks out on and the food she eats are written as: "all the same. All grey. Like the garden. And tasted of nothing."¹⁸ Knitting provides the only source of colour.

When the television is finally flicked on, Meg "picked up her knitting, found the place, and began to knit."¹⁹ The "wool a deep, rust colour, the colour of the deepest recesses of her womb" suggests the menstrual blood that would have been absent during her pregnancy.²⁰ Meg knits, as though her knitting has some intimate relationship to the creation of a child her body has made. "She made a finger while the television showed her more pictures."²¹ Her actions create another object that is both functional and hopefully joyous, antithetical feelings to those she has for her child and husband/lover.

The introduction of the television's external narrative in the closing sentences of the short story provides us with another potential source of escape. Can the abrupt interjections of violence and sexual fantasy be explained as the intrusion of the world of television, invading the domestic quiet of her home and knitting? The suggestion is easier than confronting the message that Meg is mother to an unwanted child, married to a hated husband, knitting to while away hours in her domestic trap, while dreaming of sex and castration.

Without the comfortable and relatable pastime of knitting, Meg may become too extreme a character for the reader. Her knitting provides a hook that signals she is not entirely foreign, but a woman engaged with actions that are familiar and benign.

Knitting allows us to push the shocking revelations of her other world out of reality and comfortably assign to them other explanations (dream sequence, television input). Meg's knitting may take on LaDuke's description of "passive creativity", but it stands disconcertingly close to thoughts and actions that are far from passive. Without the solid and relatable presence of knitting this bizarre narrative would become easy to dismiss.

BRIAN CHIKWAVA'S HARARE NORTH

Brian Chikwava uses a similar technique of unreliability in *Harare North*, a novel set in London. Here, again, we are reliant on the perspective of a single unnamed male narrator. Without the voices of other characters to confirm or deny the narrator's story, the reader is left in the similar position to "Knitting Gloves", wondering what is real and imagined within the world of the story. From the novel's first page, Chikwava's narrator sets himself apart by his use of a distinctive speech pattern. Laden with irony, the unfamiliar syntax and grammar he adopts provides the reader with the ongoing possibility for misreading.

When Chikwava's narrator finally arrives, after detention at Heathrow Airport, at a friend's house in East London, he brings with him "a small bag of groundnuts from Zimbabwe; groundnuts that my aunt bring from the rural home".²² The well-meaning gift is rejected without thought by Sekai, his friend's wife, who "give the bag one look and bin it right in front of me. She say I should never have been allow to bring them nuts into the country because maybe they carry disease. Then she go out and buy us McDonald's supper."²³

City living replaces rural values in one fell swoop, but the irony of it is clear to the narrator. Along with his traditional gift, our narrator also brings with him some of his own traditional values. Observing disharmony in his friend's marriage, he notes that "Things will have been better if he had do something about Sekai, like maybe giving she some small baby to keep she busy. But this have not happen since they get married and Sekai know how to play Paul now."²⁴ A feminist this protagonist is not. But the role of humour and the unfailing unreliability of the narrator's observations conspire to draw the reader into a world where fact and fiction are impossible to separate.

The night of the narrator's twenty-second birthday he "go to bed early" thinking that Paul and Sekai's unwelcoming home is "wrong place to celebrate birthday." In the three italicised pages of text that follow, we are introduced to his late mother. Again, the timing of the passage just before bedtime, and its disconnection from dialogue attributed to any other characters suggests a dream sequence. "Since she funeral," we learn, "she have knit herself back into life."²⁵ This ambiguous statement leaves all the information to follow open to interpretation. The passage could be a memory or a dream. But "knit" could also refer not to textiles, but the ways in which the memory of his mother has kept her connected to his waking life. Furthermore, the unfamiliar syntax and grammar Chikwava uses throughout the novel

makes it easy to dismiss the sentence as a misreading or misunderstanding on the part of the reader. Perhaps it is since someone else's funeral that the mother has worked to reconnect with friends and family? This strategy works to place constant doubt on the part of the reader, who must work to decipher the narrator's story as though reading in an unfamiliar language, which is precisely the narrator's experience in his new British homeland.

Chikwava writes: "She expect friends. The kettle on the stove begin to shake lid, letting steam out. Mother throw easy look at it and continue sweeping. Your house is like your head, she say to herself, you have to keep sweeping it clean if you want to stay sane."²⁶ The suggestion of insanity further disrupts our trust of the information we are receiving. Has his mother suffered from mental problems? Has our narrator witnessed or even inherited tendencies that would further complicate his telling of a truthful recollection of events? Considering the fact that he has only recently arrived in London, it is curious that his mother is already unconcerned at the cost of the bicycle repair she is facing, "because she have son in Harare North who can pay for all this."²⁷ Here too time can make unreal leaps.

In preparation for the arrival of guests, mother starts to "dust up inside house... Mother's bestest tea set, and water-glass sets. They is one them white doilies which she have knit all her life. On them glasses is the hens that she knit when she find she have nothing to do."²⁸ Much like "Knitting Gloves" craft is described as a way to pass time, here adopting a decorative function alongside the purchased ornaments. We know that the narrator's mother has had her funeral, nonetheless, "There is half-finished red hen; soon it will be finished and stuffed with cotton wool and put inside display cabinet."²⁹ This slippage reveals time to be nonlinear. There is knitting yet to be completed and a time in the dead woman's near future when this can take place.

While knitting occupies her idle time it provides a social function shared by a community of friends with which mother shares patterns and teaches:

*Mother show she friends how to knit them hens over pot of Tanganda Tea. They scribble down them details; wool colour code and all. She dig out the rest of them photos of me in Harare North—me I am feeding them pigeons in this big city. Mother go into show-off style, telling friends yea he is my son that one. Them other women look them photographs; they tea go cold.*³⁰

Before the passages in italics come to an end the narrator describes how "I settle over she like Mist, mother... I suck thumb and nod. Mother hold me to she bosom and rock me gentle."³¹ This tactic adds to the shock of the passage that follows, written in another voice: "Mother, she die of overdose. They carry she to hospital in wheelbarrow and she don't come back."³² How do we reconcile the image of a woman sharing knitted hen patterns with her friends and the image of a woman taken to hospital in a wheelbarrow, dead from an overdose? Much like the conflicting thoughts shared by the narrator of "Knitting Gloves", knitting is used to lull the reader into a sense of familiarity by establishing a domestic environment which is not difficult to imagine, before introducing 'facts' that challenge our expectations of the character. As our narrator becomes increasingly unreliable,

these early details and their reference to knitting are thrown into an even harsher light. The knitting described in the italicised passage may represent one facet of an entirely imagined identity the narrator has created for an imagined mother. By the conclusion of *Harare North*, the reader learns that it is impossible to know fact from fiction in the world Chikwava makes for us.

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S THE BOOK OF NOT

A final example of knitting in recent fiction from southern Africa occupies the more temporary domestic setting of the boarding school. Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*, introduces the sharp racial divisions at work in a European-style boarding school, The Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, in what was the British colony of Southern Rhodesia. Here our protagonist, Tambudzai Sigauke or Tambu, is one of a small group of black students, taken in by the Christian boarding school as token gestures of charity. Academically talented, Tambu pushes herself to achieve in a peculiar combination of arrogance and naive desire, both for herself and the praise of her uncle, Babamukuru, who finances her education.

The narrative begins with another example of shocking imagery. This time we read of a limb: "Up, up, up, the leg spun. A piece of a person, up there in the sky."³³ The leg belongs to the narrator's sister, Netsai, who has been helping the freedom fighters in the guerilla war against the white Rhodesian military. But after this initial introduction to her sister's experience, Tambu seems to immerse herself in her studies and a desire for self-improvement, blocking the incident from her consciousness. The strategy is one of survival: "If you went to school with white people and sat next to them in class, wouldn't you end up telling them something? One day the white people would discover my sister's activities."³⁴

Knitting appears in the second half of the novel, when the white twin sisters, the Swanepoels, are orphaned. Their parents' murder is described by the newspaper image handed out amongst the students:

*There was a quarter page sized photograph of a man sprawled out on the soil of his farm as though worshipping some old earth goddess. He had an axe in his head, carving the cranium into two equal half moons, so that it looked as though his head, perhaps because of his thoughts, has curiously turned into his buttocks. The man was Mr Swanepoel.*³⁵

After denouncing the violence, the sisters of the school invite those who are interested "to join women knitting comforters and gloves for the troops".³⁶ Tambu's decision to join the white women's knitting group is described with imagery reminiscent of the language used to describe her sister's horrific injury:

The impossibility of it, of the putting up of four fingers, of the stretching up of a hand on an arm, and then the impossibility of everything else after

that moment of raising up, impossible because legs and other limbs you knew of tangled in heaps as they fell, tramped through my thoughts like a too heavy armed force.³⁷

The girls of Tambu's own dormitory observe her knitting efforts with contempt, "Aren't there other people she sits with now?... these new people of hers, the ones where she goes knitting!"³⁸ Here knitting is not set in contrast to other shocking elements of the narrative. Instead it is directly implicated in the war effort. Knitting denotes loyalty to a cause, and in this case the cause is that of the white Rhodesian soldiers. One of Tambu's roommates questions her:

What if vana sisi who clean this room see this kind of thing in this room in this cupboard? She waved my ball of wool and knitting needles at me as though they were monstrous weapons direct from a brutal dictator's arsenal.... Which one of us will still be speaking if the elder siblings decide some people here must stop being sell-outs!³⁹

Vana sisi, a cleaner, will be a black woman subject to the same possibility of violence that threatens all the black students' families. Tambu's knitting takes on the burden of meaning far greater than the overturning of domestic expectations or passivity seen in the previous two examples. Here knitting comes to represent taking sides in a war for independence.

Inter-spliced with this violence is Tambu's almost impossible innocence. Trying to justify her knitting, she explains to her black roommates, "When the Swanepoels come back, I thought if... maybe someone said, I knitted a helmet and some gloves, I thought maybe it would help them, I finished quietly."⁴⁰ A father who "had an axe in his head, carving the cranium into two equal half moons", we know, will not need a helmet.⁴¹ Nor will knitting mend the amputated limb her sister now endures. Dangarembga borrows the popular and relatable image of knitting, but infuses it with the violence and segregation of her narrative's setting. In doing so she provides yet another example of southern African literature, adopting a pastime that enjoys currency today, but expands on the power play LaDuke observes to be at work in this "passive creativity".

In the three examples of southern African fiction discussed, knitting grounds narratives that contain challenging and unexpected details. Jay depicts knitting as a passive and solitary activity. But its presence frames information that is far from passive, heightening the shock value and contrasting the experience of the lived and the imagined. Chikwava draws upon the craft to construct a positive image of the narrator's mother, before then revealing information in direct conflict with the domestic stability knitting has helped to conjure. Dangarembga uses knitting to reveal the conflicting loyalties her main character faces in pre-independence Zimbabwe. Here knitting is about power, noted by LaDuke, that is defined by wealth and race. In manipulating the assumptions we as readers bring to the craft, each author offers an image of the craft that is entirely dynamic, rather than passive, in its creativity.