ACHMAT DANGOR’S
BITTER FRUIT
Patty Chang, “In Love” (2001)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cosHkYIJy4

“And yet, that kiss was indelible a gesture impossible to withdraw. Like Du Boise’s penis, an irredeemable act of intrusion.” (166)
“…Dangor narrates a complex and nuanced alternative to dominant understandings of South Africa, moving away from a bifurcated logic of black and white, good and bad, past and present, into a byzantine and intricate conception of South African culture.”

(Frankel 150)

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“At least now that apartheid was gone, black and white suffered equally.” (25)

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“Kate’s own grandmother, Catherine, had always lamented: ‘This is what Africa does to you, it smudges your features.’” (76)
BITTER FRUIT:
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

• Part One: Memory

• Part Two: Confession

• Part Three: Retribution
The Pomegranate...and Other Fruits

- Not—in taste, at least—a bitter fruit
- Supposed by scholars to be the actual fruit taken from the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis
- The Rape of Persephone (Proserpine) by Hades (Pluto)
- The fig tree: ‘He stands on the stone table and selects a large fig, bites into the skin, then opens it with his fingers. He thinks of a woman’s sex, ancient and eternal, no young girl would have such gritty sweetness. Was this not perhaps the fruit that got Adam and Eve thrown out of Eden? Who would want to give up an unblemished state of immortality for the insipid apple?” (39)
- The words “bitter fruit”: used in connection with beer/hops (17)
Lydia

...In the few months in late 1998 covered by the novel, Lydia has made the transition from being unable to walk to an impressive degree of mobility and autonomy.

Lydia’s sexuality is central to the recovery process. Since the rape, half her lifetime ago, she has been sexually numb, but desire now reawakens in her. There’s an intense incestuous scene between her and her son Mikey. If they had made love, she thinks afterwards, “there would have been energy, even if it was a vile energy, filled with self-loathing and hatred” (167)...

That in the end is the message of the novel: race matters. To health the wounds of her rape by a white man, Lydia has sex with a black man, and to the extent that she is an emblem of the nation, she shows the way to the future...

If Lydia (like Lucie and Dulcie) is the nation violated by history, the conclusion of the novel is hopeful: she is restored and asserts her autonomy in making her way toward the future...

(Gane 108)
Silas

• “Good mixture of abstemious Muslim and puritanical Dutch Reformed” (69)
• Motivated by selfishness? By an inability to connect with others?
• “a man capable of crossing emotional divides only through touch” (145)
• A flawed protagonist or simply a human one?
• The township boy made good?
• Why so much focus on his sexuality: impotence, failed masculinity, extramarital affairs, etc.?
“IT WAS INEVITABLE. One day Silas would run into someone from the past, someone who had been in a position of power and had abused it. Someone who had affected his life, not in the vague, rather grand way in which everyone had been affected, as people said, because power corrupts even the best of men, but directly and brutally. Good men had done all kinds of things they could not help doing, because they had been corrupted by all the power someone or something had given them.” (3, emphasis added)
Mikey

- Do we, as readers, find it problematic that the child of a rapist seems to be—if not a sexual predator—highly manipulative in his sexual relations with his university professors, and that he rejects silence or reconciliation in favor of violence?
- How are Mikey’s killings of Du Boise and Viljoen a reaction to the Oedipal moment between him and Lydia? Why is Silas exempted from this violence?
- Why does Mikey choose to escape to India, reversing the process of the historical narrative of ‘Ali Ali’?
Mikey and Mireille: ‘Playing Gandhi’

- ‘Mind sex’ (Mireille) or ‘Erection of the mind’ (Mikey): Dangor’s metaphor for the novel?
- Alludes to Gandhi’s early years as a lawyer in South Africa
- Parallels the novel’s critique of Mandela as the unequivocal, ‘perfect’ hero of the fight for independence (while not undermining his achievements)
- Subtly demystifies the personality cult conceiving of Mandela as a ‘saint’
- Sets up a strong parallel between sex and (gendered) power relations
Silence, Secrecy and Memory

- “What unspoken trauma had he brought home, she must have been wondering.” (5)
- “You chose to remember, you chose to come home and tell me... So that’s it. Your hurt. You remembered your hurt.” (13)
- The function of the diary as the silent, secret text, the private record of memory/history that, in being exposed, sets into motion an unstoppable chain of events culminating in Mikey’s violence and Lydia’s release from her marriage with Silas.
Silence, Secrecy and Memory

The silence of the underground:

- Silas’s inability/unwillingness to disclose his involvement: “He had endangered their lives, hers and Mikey’s, because of this secretiveness, his inability to trust her, his own wife” (57).

- The conflict between personal and families duties and responsibilities and the needs of the movement

- Lydia’s rape as a political warning, an attempt to disrupt the movement by disrupting individual inter-personal relationships

- “Imagine people sharing the intimacy of deadly knowledge, confiding in each other, in secret places, at designated times. They may as well fuck each other” (55).
The Novel and the TRC

“That’s why he was so good at his job, helping the country to forget and therefore to forgive, a convenient kind of amnesia.” (112)

“For Lydia, forgiveness only comes from amnesia initially, inverting Tutu’s maxim that South Africa should forgive but never forget. Yet a central notion of the TRC, that the future can only be established by confronting the past, also emerges in Bitter Fruit…” (Frankel 159).

“There are certain things people do not forget, or forgive. Rape is one of them.” (204)
The Novel and the TRC

‘You think Archbishop Tutu has ever been fucked up his arse against his will?’

‘What difference does that make?’

‘The difference is he’ll never understand what it’s like to be raped, to be mocked while being raped, to feel inside of him the hot knife—that piece of useless flesh you call a cock—turning into a torture instrument.’ (17)
...and pessimism for the future under Thabo Mbeki (June 1999-September 2008)

- “Freedom had loosened bonds forged in the ghetto.” (219)
- “This year was the last but one of the century; they were facing a twilight period, an interregnum between the old century and the new, between the first period of political hope and the new period of ‘managing the miracle’.” (255)
- Consistent refrain of Mbeki’s “own team”: removing Silas, Julian, etc. from government (in part for “racial” reasons)
- The Crucible Restaurant as a symbol of the new South Africa
...and pessimism for the future: HIV/AIDS

- Lydia’s new post—at just the moment when Mbeki, a self-proclaimed “AIDS dissident” is taking charge
- According to the *Guardian*, 6 Nov. 2007, “a 100-page paper [was] secretly authored by Mr Mbeki and distributed anonymously among the ANC leadership six years ago. It compared Aids scientists to latter-day Nazi concentration camp doctors and portrayed black people who accepted orthodox Aids science as ‘self-repressed’ victims of a slave mentality. It describes the ‘HIV/Aids thesis’ as entrenched in ‘centuries-old white racist beliefs and concepts about Africans’.”
- “Now Julian was spending aimless hours at the office, trying to formulate a ‘comprehensive HIV policy’ that would soon be redundant, given that the President was about to retire and his designated successor had strong views on how this ‘scourge ought to be tackled’.” (229)
The ‘Coloured’ Community—and Its Future

✓ Muddies the waters of apartheid-era racial politics: Is Dangor ‘Indian’ or ‘coloured’? What about Silas? Is Silas’s way of being ‘coloured’ the same as Lydia’s? Why—or in what ways—do such identities continue to matter in the new South Africa?
✓ “[Gracie:] Here we are, in our twilight zone between black and white, trying to be both and ending up as neither.” (82)
✓ “Getting tired of this ‘not-black-enough shit.’” (148)
✓ “God, he had to stop going on about ‘black this’ and ‘black that’. He was surprised by this preoccupation with race. Perhaps he had been denying it for too long: who we are is still determined by what colour we are…” (272)
The ‘Coloured’ Community—and Its Future

✓ Rendered, in the novel, largely through gross sexual comments and analogies, which undercut the legitimacy of any ‘racialized’ cultural identity based on a notion of purity, or on the notion that South Africa’s different ‘racial’ groups are distinct, separate communities.

✓ Du Boise’s characterization of Lydia as ‘a nice wild half-kaffir cunt, a lekker Wilde Boesman poes’ (17).

✓ Frances Dip’s “golden sideways poes” (104)
Silas closed his eyes and listened to Alec’s voice again, and there it was, a voice among many voices. Christ, what was he thinking? Voices like that come from a vast genetic pool. Millions of us, bastardized, hybrid, but still cut according to a pattern. The son of a slave-owner takes as his bride a captive slave child, they produce a bastard child, this bastard marries yet another child of master and meid, miesies and boy, and so forth, ad infinitum, basic piel-en-poes history. Any one of a hundred thousand men could have a voice exactly like that. (101)

He had hurt her, Du Boise, yes, but more than in the mere brutalizing of her vagina, he had violated her womb with the horror of his seed. (119)

My heritage, he says in a whisper, unwanted, imposed, my history, my beginnings. (276)
The ‘Coloured’ Community—and Its Future

✓ “You conquer a nation by bastardizing its children” (Moulana Ismail, 204)
✓ ‘Vinu Viljoen,’ she says her name out loud. ‘Bastard people are beautiful, bastard names are not.’ (163)
✓ No space for ‘bastards’ anymore? “Beauty honed on the same bastard whetstone as I. We will make no more like her, or like Michael, for that matter. Our ambitions are too ordinary, a house, a car, a garden. We no longer dream of painful beauty when we make love.” (222)
✓ Silas’s desire to escape from the “claustrophobic fervour of the ‘new South Africa’” (181): to Paris, to Mauritius, etc.
The Role of India and Islam in the Novel

- Mainly broached in the second half of the novel: why?
- The imperial connection
- The issue of terrorism (with the novel being published in 2001) and of the resistance being called ‘terrorists’ during apartheid
- Echoes of apartheid’s rape narrative: “In the middle of all this historical ennui—how else can I describe it?—a British officer, a lieutenant, rapes Ali Ali’s sister” (200)
- The past and present coming full circle
C.P. Cavafy, ‘Since Nine O’clock’

Half past twelve. Time has gone by quickly since nine o’clock when I lit the lamp and sat down here. I’ve been sitting without reading, without speaking. Completely alone in the house, whom could I talk to?

The shade of my young body also brought back the things that make us sad: family grief, separations, the feelings of my own people, feelings of the dead so little acknowledged.

Since nine o’clock when I lit the lamp the shade of my young body has come to haunt me, to remind me of shut scented rooms, of past sensual pleasure—what daring pleasure. And it’s also brought back to me streets now unrecognizable, bustling night clubs now closed, theatres and cafés no longer there.

Half past twelve. How the time has gone by.
Half past twelve. How the years have gone by.