

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Askari... Defined by their choices*

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**Jacob Dlamini**

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*When faced with the real choice between life and death, Sedibe chose life...He would have remained a hero if he had chosen death (p. 225).*

In *Askari: A story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* Jacob Dlamini offers us a fresh insightful perspective on an otherwise murky past which disrupts the neat and narrow teleological national narrative of our history. In the introduction Dlamini states that the book is about Mr X1 (Glory Sedibe *noms de guerre* Comrade September) and his conversion from freedom fighter to apartheid agent (p. 1). Moreover, the book attempts to understand; what is an *askari*? What makes one an askari and further, attempts to understand comrade September's choices and the conditions under which he made his choices (p. 2). Quintessentially the book is about agency and context, as comrade September "morphed" from insurgent to counterinsurgent.

In laying out the introduction and setting up the scaffolding for the readers, Dlamini issues out a number of disclaimers in his introductory pages, "As an author, I cannot be considered a reliable narrator because I was not 'there', nor have I achieved the balance between explaining and understanding that these events require. I have known about Mr X1 for more than half my life, and researched the topic extensively, but I am not sure that I understand it all. Furthermore, I cannot say I have not judged him. Nor can the primary source materials on which the book relies be trusted" (p. 2). After reading these scores of disclaimers, the reader is left perplexed as to the authors expected intimacy towards the book, and his confidence in crafting a solid account and

his own agency in wading through the material.

I first read Askari five months ago and when I re-read it for this review, it reminded me of Yann Martel's 2010 novel, "Beatrice and Virgil" as it too touches on a lot of topics and many of which are hard to describe. It is centred on a former Nazi official who then becomes a taxidermist and this non-fictional character enunciates that; "Taxidermists do not create a demand. They merely preserve a result. We are no different from historians, who parse through the material evidence of the past in an attempt to reconstruct it and then understand it... I am a historian, dealing with an animal's past; the zookeeper is a Politician, dealing with an animal's present; and everyone else is a citizen who must decide on the animals future" (Martel, 2010, pp. 96-97).

Dlamini just like Yann Martel (although allegorical) is trying to describe the indescribable and in Dlamini's book it is – collaboration and betrayal. Unfortunately he applies far too much critical distance between himself and the subject matter, dare I say - taking on the above mentioned Taxidermists "distance"; with scores of disclaimers in the introduction. One then initially (although this quickly dissipates) questions the authors agency; the overarching topic of this significant book. Fortunately his critical distance and self-conscious balancing act doesn't take away from what we've expected from Dlamini, which is; thought provoking simplicity, how he tactfully inserts himself in history and, his literary panache.

Dlamini posits that, "...to see Mr X1 as only a 'victim' is to hide from historical view his agency and to diminish his capacity to act, regardless of his circumstances. Being a victim of torture might help explain Mr X1's choices. It does not absolve him of moral responsibility for his subsequent actions" (p. 15). Context cannot be used as an excuse, nor can counterinsurgents say, "Blame me of history". Perhaps a lengthy introduction but it sediments the complexity of the topic and evokes thought as Dlamini argues that, "Collaborators upset our belief about who we are, as they do not display the 'political understanding' of apartheid we assumed all black people shared" (p. 12). Dlamini places Sedibe's story in the context of other askari stories, and other truths so as to try understand his choices.

Dlamini provides us with skeletal biographical detail of Sedibe, but of course the book is not a biography of Sedibe but an examination of his choices and circumstances which led to those choices. At 24, Sedibe joined the outlawed ANC and illegally crossed the border into Swaziland in 1977, and was soon sent for specialised intelligence training in East Germany. By age 30 (1983)

he was sent to the Soviet Union for additional intelligence training, and by age 31 the ANC appointed him head of Military Intelligence in the Transvaal. He then defected in August 1986 (p. 20). He was abducted whilst in a Swazi police station in 1986 “The Security Branch wanted Sedibe alive, but his value to them was only in the information he could provide about his comrades and the ANC. His life was something to the SAP only if he talked. They let him know. And he talked. By talking under torture, Sedibe underwent changes that marked him profoundly for the rest of his life: from resister to collaborator, revolutionary to counter-revolutionary and, in the eyes of the ANC, hero to traitor” (p. 71).

Under torture at Vlakplaas, Sedibe eventually provided information and crossed the Rubicon, choosing to become a collaborator. One needed to have been a trained insurgent before one could become a counterinsurgent (p. 41). But, once the choice (under torture) was made, the askaris found themselves in a precarious situation as they felt that the ANC would kill them for treachery (if they returned), and De Kock and his men would kill them for desertion (if they left), they felt they were stuck in a catch-22 situation.

Dlamini elaborates and further complicates the act of collaboration lading it with significant consequence, adding that, “... from the very beginning askaris always did more than track their comrades. They served as agents provocateurs, assassins, bounty hunters, double agents, informers, intelligence analysts, spies and, of course, state witnesses” (p. 39). The act of collaboration weighted more than a single act of cooperation, as being a collaborator elongated the choices made to betray one’s own.

The next chapters grapple with court transcripts during the 1980’s court cases where Sedibe as Mr. X1 took the stand as a state witness to testify against his former comrades. The chapters further challenge the TRC Amnesty Committee for failing to interrogate and complicate the ‘problem of agency’ (p. 188). Dlamini argues that, “each of the collaborators examined in this chapter tried to put his choices down to circumstance. That is not enough. Human beings never stop being moral agents” (p. 221).

Chapter 12 provides an interesting juxtaposition between Phila Ndwandwe and implicitly Glory Sedibe. Ndwandwe had joined the ANC and abducted by police, interrogated and tortured, and she eventually cooperated with her abductors but refused to be an informer. Dlamini writes that, “We could say that, by refusing to become an informer, Ndwandwe chose death. We could say that in contrast to Sedibe, she took the honourable option. But

that would be a dubious assertion” (p. 227). Dlamini then argues that Phila Ndwandwe did make the honourable choice. “She responded to her torture the best way she could, telling her captors some of what they needed to know. But she would not, and did not, take that final step and become a traitor. She collaborated but refused to become a collaborator. Therein lies the difference between her and Sedibe” (p. 228). Dlamini then firmly states that, “We cannot accept Sedibe’s claim that he had no choice” (p. 236).

In the conclusion Dlamini paraphrases two scholars in postulating that, “Knowledge does not equal power, but power cannot be exercised without it... How, then, can South Africans exercise power as citizens if they have little knowledge of this part of their past?... Life is messy. But does the messiness of life mean that we should let apartheid’s secrets go to the grave?” (p. 250).

Dlamini’s book performs a painful vivisection on our still fresh history, upsetting the almost accepted teleological national narrative purported by the ruling party. Dlamini as a gifted historian does more than what the taxidermist claims historians do – “preserving a result... only dealing with an animal’s past.” Dlamini takes into account Sedibe’s past, his then present, and the future implications of his choice to become a counterinsurgent. These events and choices are grappled with and conveyed in a considered manner in this significant book.

*A school of struggle: Durban’s Medical School and the education of black doctors in South Africa*

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*A school of struggle: Durban’s Medical School and the education of black doctors in South Africa* is an excellent authorized history of the struggles of black students at the Medical School of the then University of Natal. The author aims to understand and describe the challenges medical students enrolled at the Durban Medical School experienced during the apartheid era, and reveal