

**From solidarity with the people  
to solidarity with the ‘company’:  
State capture and Karen Jayes’ dystopian novel  
*For the Mercy of Water* (2012)**

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**Abstract**

*For the Mercy of Water* sheds light on an uncanny conjunction between the rape of women, the rape of a country and the rape of the truth. It relates a story about the vulnerability and resilience of women in a phallogocentric world. It deals with the phenomenon of ‘state capture’, the exploitation and abuse of state institutions and resources for the sake of private profit. Last but not least, it examines the relation of journalism and novel writing and flies the flag of truth-telling as a form of bearing witness and ‘remembering’ in a post-factual and increasingly totalitarian environment.

**Keywords**

South African dystopias, rape, privatization of water, state capture, truth-telling

**Od solidarności z ludźmi po solidarność z ‘firmą’:  
Przejęcie państwa a dystopijna powieść Karen Jayes  
*For the Mercy of Water* (2012)**

**Abstrakt**

Powieść *For the Mercy of Water* rzuca światło na niesamowitą łączność pomiędzy gwałtem na kobiecie, gwałtem zadany krajowi i gwałtem zadany prawdzie. Opowiada historię o bezbronności i wytrzymałości kobiet w fallogoncentrycznym świecie. Zajmuje się zjawiskiem ‘przejmowania państwa’, wyzyskiem i nadużyciami w instytucjach państwowych i zasobach dla celów prywatnego zysku. Co nie mniej ważne, powieść rozpatruje relacje między dziennikarstwem a pisaniem powieści i promuje prawdomówność jako formę dawania świadectwa i ‘pamiętania’ w post-faktualnym i coraz bardziej totalitarnym środowisku.

**Słowa kluczowe**

dystopie południowoafrykańskie, gwałt, prywatyzacja wody, przejęcie państwa, prawdomówność

**1. Introduction: South African dystopian novels**

South Africa has always been a good soil for dystopias (cf. Schoeman 1972; Gordimer 1982; Coetzee 1982), and even after the fall of apartheid, dystopias continue to be written (cf. Dovey 2007; Langa 2008; Bruce 2011; Strydom 2015). A number of explanations can be found for the writers’ dystopian inclinations. Because of South Africa’s violent history, the fear of a totalitarian government is deeply ingrained in the cultural memory of writers. While the white population is still afraid that the pent-up hatred against them might break out after all, the black majority is becoming more and more disillusioned with their own government because it has failed to ‘deliver’ and has disappointed the hopes of many people for quick economic change. Moreover, both population groups have had to realize

that negative global developments do not stop at South Africa's doorstep.

Karen Jayes' novel *For the Mercy of Water* relates a story about the vulnerability but also the resilience of women in a phallogocentric world. It shows how the rape of women is used as a means of waging war even against one's own people. It sheds light on the phenomenon of 'state capture', the exploitation and abuse of state institutions and resources for the sake of private profit. Last but not least, it examines the relation of journalism and novel writing and flies the flag of truth-telling as a form of bearing witness and 'remembering' in a post-factual and increasingly totalitarian environment. If there is any hope in this rather bleak novel, it lies in the regenerative faculties of nature – the 'mercy of water', which according to Jayes is a present to mankind from 'above' – and in the conviction that it is important to listen to these individual testimonies. For the testimonies keep the truth alive, even if those in charge are desperately bent on stifling it and cynically construct a different tale.

## **2. *For the Mercy of Water*: A local tale with global relevance**

*For the Mercy of Water* makes use of the well-known conventions of the dystopian genre (cf. Rabkin et.al. 1983; Booker 1994a and 1994b; Gottlieb 2001; Mohr 2005; Claeys 2017). The novel is set in a not too distant future; the country is in the grip of a severe drought, and potable water has become a rare commodity; economy is going badly and the government has handed over control of the water resources of the country to a privately-owned 'water company', the daughter firm of a global player; a civil war has been going on for some time between city-based and state-supported paramilitary troops of this water company, which tries to uphold control over the water resources, and country-based rebels who fight for free access to clean water.

Following rumours that there have been heavy rainfalls in a remote and supposedly depopulated valley of the arid country, the anonymous first-person narrator, a writer of novels, goes on a quest to find out the truth. Travelling to the valley in a lorry of the water company, she is raped by one of the drivers. When she finally arrives at her destination, she sees three large tents, harbouring a doctor, a young aidworker, a man representing the company, and a journalist. In one of the tents, there is a character called 'the woman'. She is severely traumatized, and her story does not seem to make sense. What transpires is that she was in charge of eight girls for whom she acted as mother and teacher and who were gang-raped and finally killed by men of the company – with one exception: a girl called Eve managed to escape and has disappeared from the area.

While the company is denying the authenticity of the old woman's story, the first-person narrator and novelist sets out to prove its truth. With the help of the journalist, she searches for evidence. In a dilapidated building which formerly contained the schoolroom, she finds a number of small reddish handprints on the walls, as if children had left them there with their tiny hands soaked in blood. When she follows the course of the newly sprung river up the mountain, she comes to a cavern that the old woman has mentioned in her story. She again finds traces of blood that confirm the truth of the old woman's tale. Finally, the old woman gives her a piece of skin with reddish hair that Eve is supposed to have cut from the head of her rapist.

Back in the city, she tracks down Eve in one of the female penitentiaries. She also finds the address of the guard by visiting the hospital in which he received eye surgery. When Eve has spent her term, the two visit the flat of the company guard who turns out to have become blind in the meantime. Eve confronts him with what he has done, putting a knife to his throat and injuring him in the process. Before the women leave, they

destroy the orientation system of strings which he has installed, and Eve opens the water tap to flood his rooms.

On a company plane the first-person narrator and Eve fly back to the mountain valley to which the old woman was allowed to return. The plane crashes, caught in a twister. The pilot is killed in the plane crash, but the two women are only slightly injured. Eve stays behind with 'the woman', while the life of the first-person narrator is saved by a rescue party.

### **3. Local and global issues**

Karen Jayes is a South African, Cape Town-based novelist, and there can be no doubt that South Africa is at the centre of her novel (cf. Steenkamp 2013; Sofianos 2013). South Africa belongs to the countries with the highest rape rates in the world; in recent years, there have been severe periods of drought; and 'state capture' has been a hotly discussed political issue and has become highly topical in the present.

However, beyond these South African issues, the novel has a global relevance. The rape of women is an urgent problem, not only in times of war and in the so-called 'Third World' or 'developing countries', but also in our apparently 'civilized' Western societies. Climate change and global warming have been put on the agendas of governments over the last two generations and seem to have become an even more burning issue in the days of Donald Trump. Although the United Nations Organization (UNO) in a resolution from 2010 declared that free access to clean water is an inalienable human right, there have been attempts on various continents to privatize water distribution and sanitation, which increases the risk of excluding those who cannot pay for it. Last but not least, looking at the political situation as it presents itself in countries such as Turkey, Russia, Hungary, or Serbia, one gets the uncanny feeling that a phenomenon such as state capture, which goes hand in hand with the undermining of democratic institutions, corruption, and the manipulation and suppression of a free

press, is not only taking place in African, South American, or Asian countries but is happening at our doorstep.

#### **4. Privatization of access to clean water**

In 2010, the United Nations Organization declared the access to free water an inalienable human right (cf. UNO Resolution no. 64 from 2010). Jayes' dystopian view builds on the fact that not all the states in our world are able or willing to guarantee this human right and provide potable water for their population. For financial reasons, some of them have authorized private companies to handle this difficult task, but the privatization of water is a highly complex and controversially discussed political issue.

In the past, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were only willing to give loans to developing countries for piped water projects if they took private water companies on board (cf. Mason and Talbot 2002) – with all the consequences appertaining to it. The supporters of the privatization scheme point out that privatization brings in technological know-how and increases efficiency, while its antagonists claim that it means selling off one's natural resources to global money grabbers. In many cases and in various countries, the attempts at privatization did not prove to be successful. In the present, the trend or tendency of handling the task of providing clean water is actually pointing in the opposite direction. Nationalization instead of privatization seems to be called for (cf. Kattnig 2017). As far as South Africa is concerned, the existing water supply system is better than that of other African states, although it is far from being perfect.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When I was writing this paper in June 2017 and it should be raining in Cape Town during the winter season, the city's dams were almost empty, the water restrictions had been raised to level four, which cuts down the daily per head allowance of drinkable water by two thirds, and people were getting restless because ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation) showed no mercy. In this respect, too, Jayes' *For the Mercy of Water* is highly topical.

However, we are not dealing with the annual water report of the Department of Water Affairs but with a dystopian novel that projects actually existing and notable trends and tendencies into a future that is imaginable and serves as a warning about what may become reality. In the novel, the water company is laying its hands on whatever water resources can be found. Tolerated by the state, its paramilitary troops wage a cruel war against all those who try to undermine or circumvent its water schemes. In the valley that is visited by the journalist and the first-person narrator, rebels have repeatedly tried to sabotage and reroute the water pipes. The two writers are on their side:

‘But everybody’s forgotten that we all have a right to water,’ I said. ‘That we shouldn’t have to pay for it.’

He turned to me. ‘There are not many people left who believe that,’ he said.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I feel like some kind of ancient being sometimes.’

He smiled. ‘Not ancient,’ he said. ‘Just logical. The government has sold the very thing that keeps us alive, into a business and a security concern run primarily by international shareholders, who are their benefactors. It’s suicide.’ (*For the Mercy of Water* 54)

## 5. Rape

South Africa has been repeatedly called the “rape capital of the world” (King 2014), but so have the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, or even the USA. Comparing statistics does not help very much in this respect, for rape is defined differently in all of these countries, the statistical figures are unreliable, women who have suffered rape are unwilling to report to the authorities, and the dark figure concerning rape is great (cf. Wilkinson 2014). Suffice it to say that rape is still a huge problem in South Africa and in Africa in general, but also in our Western world.

When in Jayes' novel *For the Mercy of Water* the protagonist is raped on her trip to the deserted valley, the author's reason for inventing such an incident is obviously to equip her first-person narrator (and the reader) with some kind of understanding of what rape means for a woman, and the trauma that arises out of it. In a letter to the journalist whom she has begun to love she cautiously indicates what happened to her (Jayes' italics):

*But now I know how the body really is; we remember the part that is broken or that holds the wound. Its memory and its pain spills from the point of invasion through all our parts, and through all of us, even those parts who pretend they will not see the pain, or turn from it because they think they can be immune. (For the Mercy of Water 292)*

Being traumatized herself, the narrator afterwards becomes an empathic listener to – and a sensitive recorder of – the old woman's and Eve's testimonies. When Eve is better acquainted with her, the girl trusts her with her own story, at the centre of which is a most atrocious gang rape that Eve describes explicitly and in the minutest details. She remembers how her legs were tied apart, fastened with ropes to a rock and a tree:

'When he was inside me, it was like I was being stabbed or bitten. I was shaking, my whole body ... It was like he was tearing me in half, splitting me open, and making a passage for this evil thing to come, this long line of ants ... And they did come. One after the other. There were seven of them.'

She was breathing fast and her body shook.

'They kept on until the middle of the night,' she said. 'When they couldn't do it any more because they got too drunk or too tired, they used bottles and guns and branches. I fainted. Sometimes I tried to make myself choke. I was moving my neck on the rope so I would die.' (For the Mercy of Water 308)

Shocking the reader seems to be the narrative intention behind episodes of this kind. Winning the reader's empathy with



the fate of Eve and the other women is necessary, for Eve and the narrator go on a crusade to revenge themselves – a revenge they do not really carry out because in the confrontation with the company guard they recognize how commonplace and banal evil may look in broad daylight, an insight which Eve and the narrator share with Hannah Arendt (cf. the subtitle of Arendt 1963) and many survivors of Hitler's concentration camps.

## 6. State capture

In South Africa, 'state capture' has become a burning political issue. It concerns the former ANC underground fighter and current South African president Jacob Zuma and his shady connections with the Gupta family. In his case, it seems that his former solidarity with the people, which was the starting point for the ANC in its fight against the apartheid regime and helped to overthrow the apartheid government, has turned into a solidarity with the 'company' that has captured the state, and that Zuma's talk about 'white monopoly capital' and 'radical economic transformation' (Bendile 2017) just puts up a smokescreen behind which he and his ilk can go about undisturbed in their business of private enrichment.

Strong evidence for this comes from the former Public Protector's report (Madonsela 2016), titled

*State of Capture*: Report on an investigation into alleged improper and unethical conduct by the President and other state functionaries relating to alleged improper relationships and involvement of the Gupta family in the removal and appointment of Ministers and Directors of State-Owned Enterprises resulting in improper and possibly corrupt award of state contracts and benefits to the Gupta family's businesses.

While the Public Protector is still very cautious with her statements and only mentions 'possible corruption' and the likelihood of office abuse by the President, a group of researchers

from various South African universities have been much more outspoken and (surprisingly) clear on these matters in a report that was presented in May 2017 (Bhorat et al. 2017):

In our view the South African case is just one quite typical example of a global trend in the growth of increasingly authoritarian, neopatrimonial regimes where a symbiotic relationship between the constitutional and shadow states is maintained, but with real power shifting increasingly into the networks that comprise the shadow state. Understanding the South African context and challenge, therefore, is an important contribution to our understanding of this global phenomenon. It is also our contribution to the broad struggle to save South African democracy and development practice from a power elite that pursues its own interests at the expense of South African society, in particular the poorest people who will suffer first and most from the consequences of what is in reality a *de facto* silent coup.

## **7. Conclusion:**

### **Rape of women, rape of the country, rape of the truth**

*The Mercy of Water* sheds light on an uncanny conjunction between the rape of women, the rape of a country and the rape of the truth. According to Jayes, the ‘antidote’ against this kind of ‘rape’ is courageous journalism and novel writing. Both attempt to tell an alternative story that is not corrupted by the power of the ‘company’. Journalism and novel writing are both forms of truth-telling that become increasingly important in a time of growing totalitarianism, when the ruling powers have not only captured important institutions of the state but also attempt to capture the truth. This is the case in *For the Mercy of Water*, where the water company sends in its own PR people in order to save the reputation of the company:

‘I’m PR,’ he said. ‘I’m here to maintain the reputation of the company in this, but also, of course, to see that the truth be told.’

‘I’m not quite sure what you mean,’ I said.

He looked around, back at the tents. ‘The recent web reports that have been coming out of here are, well ... The company wants the news to be a bit more objective.’” (*For the Mercy of Water* 91)

The private water company not only has a private army of soldiers but also an army of PR officers that rewrite reality in such a way that the reputation of the company is not endangered, which practically means that they construct a web of lies, denials, and falsifications while the government tries to intimidate the media by open threats or the imprisonment of “journalists who scratch too close to the truth” (107). Karen Jayes uses the medium of the novel because she feels the urge to tell us something about us:

‘I felt that there was something important in what she had to say,’ I said. ‘I felt the glimmer of a story, a bigger story – about the water, about us. I approached a publisher I know overseas. They gave me a small advance, and a commission letter and, well, here I am. Pretty desperate, huh?’

He smiled, a white bright smile that lit up in his eyes. We listened in silence while the plane landed and slowed.

‘What you’re doing here is good,’ he said, turning to me. (*For the Mercy of Water* 88)

The “glimmer of a story, a bigger story – about the water, about us” has resulted in *For the Mercy of Water*, an admirable and topical novel which is uncannily close to what is happening around us. In her search for the truth, Jayes reminds us of the brittleness and fragility of evidence, and the unreliability of memory in an increasingly totalitarian and ‘closed’ environment, where writing becomes an act of remembering, of defiance, and also of self-assertion and -construction. In this way, it is complementing the healing powers of nature in which Jayes also believes:

The tiniest parts of the earth remain beautiful in the presence of human cruelty. Even when the blood washes over them and the cries of children run over them and the mothers pick up pieces of

their wombs and gather the flesh of others in piles, and the bones of men dry up and disappear, for the mercy of water the life is still here, the sand is still soaked with rain, the seeds are still heavy with life and the stem that rises up from them carries, every time, the first perfect green vein. (*For the Mercy of Water* 378)

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