

Independence as the Creative Choice in Two South African Fictions

MARGARET LENTA

BOTH *The Story of an African Farm*¹ and *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*² investigate the need of women in particular societies to become economically independent, autonomous decision makers. It is true that this theme forms the subject matter of thousands of other works, but the fact that both books are set in South Africa with its diversity of cultures has allowed their authors to place the lives of their heroines and the choices which face them against a background of other patterns for life, existing simultaneously with their own, yet not available to them. Lyndall and Poppie are both aware of a traditional pattern for life, within which the lifestyle and the roles of individuals are so fixed that no possibility of questioning exists for those involved.

In *The African Farm*, Tant' Sannie is the traditional woman, her understanding of life fixed by her inheritance from her Boer ancestors. Unable to sympathize with the English-speaking children she must care for, she is a comically unattractive figure during the childhood of Em, Lyndall, and Waldo. When she returns after her remarriage and the birth of her child to advise Em, who plans to marry Gregory Rose soon, her attitudes seem more attractive, because they are merely a formula for life to which she adheres, not one she wishes to impose on others. At this point in the novel, Em is apparently conforming to Tant' Sannie's belief that marriage is God-ordained for all and that a life of child-nurture and domestic administration is woman's only good. Tant' Sannie's advice to her is ironic as well as comically inept; it is absurdly unrelated to the lives and problems of Em and the man she is to marry, Gregory Rose, and yet they appear to be following it.

"There's nothing like being married," said Tant' Sannie, as she puffed toward the door. "If a woman's got a baby and a husband she's got the best things the Lord can give her; if only the baby doesn't have convulsions. As for a husband, it's very much the same who one has. Some men are fat, and some men are thin; some men drink brandy and some men drink gin; but it all comes to the same thing in the end; it's all one. A man's a man, you know."

Here they came upon Gregory, who was sitting in the shade before the house. Tant' Sannie shook hands with him. "I'm glad you're going to get married," she said. "I hope you'll have as many children in five years as a cow has calves, and more too. I think I'll just go and have a look at your soap-pot before I start," she said, turning to Em. "Not that I believe in this new plan of putting soda in the pot. If the dear Father had meant soda to be put into soap, what would he have made milk-bushes for, and stuck them all over the 'veld' as thick as lambs in the lambing season?" (pp. 293-94)

Em's resigned sadness as she watches Tant' Sannie leave — "there was no use in going to sit with Gregory; he liked it best sitting there alone, staring across the green karoo" (p. 294) — shows how inadequate Tant' Sannie's ideas are for those who do not belong to her cultural group. Although she spends years of her life in physical proximity to Em and Lyndall, whereas the people of the land, as the rural Xhosas are called, are geographically as well as culturally remote from Poppie, Tant' Sannie is as unable to understand the conflicts and struggles in which Em and Lyndall are involved as Poppie's family-in-law are to understand her problems.

In *Poppie Nongena*, the people of the land certainly avoid the problems which beset Poppie — the need for residence and work permits in urban areas, the need to obtain formal education for children, perpetual anxiety, and shortage of money — but even for them, the traditional life is shown to be a shrinking possibility. They are moved out of their kraal, where they have access to farm land, to a trust village. Poppie's father-in-law becomes dependent in his old age on money that his son sends him from Cape Town (p. 179).

A second kind of figure also appears in both novels; she is the woman who adapts to new circumstances, preserves what she can

of traditional attitudes and relationships, and is always willing to sacrifice herself for the good of the group. Ouma Hannie, living in Upington and therefore cut off from tribal life, nevertheless appears to Poppie extremely conservative in her attitudes to family matters and to religion, although she is a Christian. She allocates tasks among her descendants according to traditional sex divisions and wields the authority of a family head even over her adult children. Poppie as a child does not register, though the reader does, the extent to which Ouma Hannie is a new variant on traditional ideas of family heads, who have in the past been male. Poppie herself, though during the period of her young life until she is a married woman with a child she follows the pattern which Ouma Hannie would recognize and approve, is gradually forced by pressures from outside her group to become a completely new type of woman, a decision-maker, independent of the family.

In *The African Farm* it is Em who preserves what she can of the life of the farm (symbolized in her roaster-cakes) for the comfort of those who return from the world outside. Like Ouma Hannie, she has been affected by the changes which have made the traditional lifestyle appear irrelevant; in her case these changes have been the deaths of her parents and her separation, presumably because these parents were immigrants, from any family group in which she could perform a fixed and traditional role.

In neither *The African Farm* nor *Poppie Nongena* does the heroine see herself as choosing between different patterns for her life: the other patterns simply exist as lifestyles contemporary with or close in time to her own, but no longer available as possibilities for her. Ouma Hannie dies during Poppie's adolescence and Poppie's own possibility of becoming a woman of her grandmother's type disappears when she is forced to move to Cape Town and begins her long struggle for a secure home in the Cape.

Lyndall cannot choose to play the role of conservative woman like her cousin Em, partly because her own nature leads her to insist on knowing the world outside the farm, and partly because, as she says, she is poor and must make her own way in the

world. We are not told exactly what relationship there is between her determination to know the world and her knowledge that the farm does not belong to her, that she is almost destitute, but it is certainly true that like Poppie, she is forced by circumstances towards independence. In both cases, there is an alternative available to the women: for Poppie, it is inertia and degradation; she can despair and cease to struggle, as do her brothers Plank and Hoedjie and her sister-in-law Muis. She is, in fact, finally reduced to such a state of despair, but the woman that she has become before she is struck by the last catastrophe shows her author's belief in the possibilities of women of Poppie's kind.

Olive Schreiner is certainly not equally optimistic, if one can use the term optimistic for Joubert's verdict that black women can transform themselves, to the gain of their society, so long as the state does not intervene to destroy them. Schreiner's heroine is destroyed by a failure in herself, an incompatibility between the needs of her own nature and her commitment to a particular theory of independence. Both writers see their heroines as taking the heroic, the creative role in their societies, and the question of why Poppie succeeds in transforming herself while Lyndall fails is therefore of particular interest.

Like Poppie, Lyndall has an alternative to independence which she finds detestable. She tells Waldo

"... we have always this advantage of you — we can at any time step into ease and competence, where you must labour patiently for it. A little weeping, a little wheedling, a little self-degradation, a little careful use of our advantages, and then some man will say — 'Come, be my wife!' With good looks and youth, marriage is easy to attain. There are men enough; but a woman who has sold herself ever for a ring and new name, need hold her skirt aside for no creature in the street." (p. 190)

Because we know that it is marriage of this kind that would represent the worst kind of failure for Lyndall, her death does not seem a defeat for her ideas, but the question remains of why she does not more actively strive for success. Much of her energy goes into rejection of the ideas which controlled the parasitic lives of middle-class English-speaking women, but she tells Waldo that she looks forward to a time

“ . . . when love is no more bought and sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman’s life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found. Then, but not now.”

Waldo waited for her to finish the sentence, but she seemed to have forgotten him.

“Lyndall,” he said, putting his hand upon her — she started — “if you think that new time will be so great, so good, you who speak so easily — ”

She interrupted him.

“Speak! speak!” she said; “the difficulty is not to speak; the difficulty is to keep silence.”

“But why do you not try to bring that time?” he said with pitiful simplicity. “When you speak I believe all you say; other people would listen to you also.”

“I am not so sure of that,” she said with a smile.

Then over the small face came the weary look it had worn last night as it watched the shadow in the corner. Ah, so weary!

“I, Waldo, I?” she said. “I will do nothing good for myself, nothing for the world, till someone makes me. I am asleep, swathed, shut up in self; till I have been delivered I will deliver no-one.” (pp. 195-96)

There is a contradiction present in Lyndall’s beliefs about herself and about the obligation on women to strive for change. She believes true sexual love will only come to women who have achieved independence, yet she herself feels absolutely unable to work for that necessary state of independence until there has been some intervention from outside herself in her life, and her words suggest strongly that the intervention which she needs and desires must be a sexual one.

Waldo’s claim that she is possessed of the gifts that will allow her to become a reformer is confirmed by what we have seen of her in the novel. Her strength of will in childhood was such that Tant’ Sannie and Blenkins could not oppose her when she decided to release Waldo, whom Blenkins had locked in the fuel-house (pp. 126-27), and she compelled Tant’ Sannie, again by the simple pressure of her will, to send her to school. Her account of her life at school makes it clear that although she heartily despised the kind of instruction offered there, she was able to provide herself with the reading matter which would inform her

natural abilities and strengths and allow her to understand herself and the world. The bitter account of the lives of women which she gives to Waldo (pp. 185-96), which parallels the letter containing an account of his experiences in the world written to her after her death (pp. 252-63), shows that she is at least partly equipped for the career of a reformer.

There is a temptation for the reader to make too close a parallel between Waldo's experiences and his eventual verdict on himself and Lyndall. Waldo comes to believe that he cannot intervene in the world: "I am very helpless, I shall never do anything; but you will work, and I will take your work for mine" (p. 262), he writes at the end of his letter. Em, knowing she has "a deadly fruit to give," tells him that Lyndall is dead; she has been defeated even more completely than he, though not by the world.

What Waldo means by the distinction which he makes between himself and Lyndall is that she is, as he is not, strong-willed and articulate. She does not, as he does, retire from the world with the feeling that she has not the abilities to change it. Yet the key passage on pages 195 and 196 shows that she believes that she is in some way inadequate, compelled to remain inert until some intervention frees her. I have claimed that there is a strong suggestion, even in her own words, that the intervention must be a sexual one, that in order to become active she needs a man who would complement her, and her affair with the stranger suggests that she is a passionate woman.

Ruth First and Anne Scott claim that her problem is that she sees it as necessary, in the present state of her society, to choose between love and independence:

She endures the moral isolation of a feminist in a world, whether South Africa or England, in which feminism is very problematic indeed. But in her struggle to make herself different as a woman — in mocking the classic wiles of the feminine — she makes herself different as a person. Hence the paradox of her rejection of love and attachment in the context of an apparently freely chosen relationship, seemingly neither mercenary nor opportunist. The price she pays for her commitment to learning and rationality, to the development of herself, is her inability to accept or trust any loving feelings that others might have for

her. In her mind they interfere with, distort or crush whatever chance of autonomy she feels she has.³

What is interesting in their assessment is the way in which they see Lyndall as prevented, by the nature of her society, from forming or preserving any loving bond within it if she wishes to remain a feminist or achieve autonomy. Besides Waldo and his father, who are carefully presented as non-sexual beings in their relationship to Em and Lyndall, the men of the novel are Bonaparte Blenkins, Gregory Rose, and Lyndall's lover. All three expect to exercise power over the women they marry: Bonaparte Blenkins is merely crudely acquisitive, but the other two will, or so they think, control the lives of their women. Gregory Rose's letters to his sister are a foolish and immature man's version of current ideas but they are suggestive of the restrictions by which man prevented a woman like Lyndall from achieving independence.

"... I don't think it's at all the thing for a woman to be going about with a man she's not engaged to. Do you? ... If I had a wife with pride I'd make her give it up, *sharp*. I don't believe in a man who can't make a woman obey him."

Lyndall herself explains her understanding of the dangers which would attend a woman's route to independence in South Africa when she describes to Waldo the different treatment he and she could expect if each arrived alone at a Boer farm.

"We stand here at this gate this morning, both poor, both young, both friendless; there is not much to choose between us. Let us turn away just as we are, to make our way in life. This evening you will come to a farmer's house. The farmer, albeit you come alone and on foot, will give you a pipe of tobacco and a cup of coffee and a bed. If he has no dam to build and no child to teach, tomorrow you can go on your way with a friendly greeting of the hand. I, if I come to the same place tonight, will have strange questions asked me, strange glances cast on me. The Boer-wife will shake her head and give me food to eat with the Kaffirs, and a light to sleep with the dogs. That would be the first step in our progress — a very little one, but every step to the end would repeat it." (p. 190)

But it is not social censure that she fears, as her decision to leave the farm with her lover shows; it seems rather to be isola-

tion. Her decision to leave with the stranger shows that she is very close to despair: whilst she is at school, she has allowed herself to be seduced by this man and has become pregnant by him. For a while she thinks of marrying Gregory Rose — “If I marry him I shall shake him off my hand when it suits me” (p. 236) — to obtain protection for her child, but when her lover comes to the farm she agrees to live with him in the Transvaal because “that is out of the world. People we meet there we need not see again in our future lives” (p. 239). She seems to be expressing a determination that their liaison shall take place outside the mainstream of life to which presumably she intends that both will return when it is over.

Her relationship with her lover, in fact, does not seem to have the value that First and Scott claim for it, as “an apparently freely chosen relationship, seemingly neither mercenary nor opportunist.” There are strong suggestions that his behaviour to her, though certainly not mercenary, has been both unscrupulous and opportunist, even though the double standard in sexual behaviour might preserve him from condemnation by society. What Lyndall feels for him is a strong physical fascination, so strong that he seems, when he is present, unique to her.

“But it is all madness. You call into activity one part of my nature; there is a higher part that you know nothing of, that you never touch. If I married you, it would arise and assert itself, and I should hate you afterwards, as I do now sometime.” (p. 237)

She is identifying sexual feeling unaccompanied by any other kind of rapport as a lower feeling, insufficient as a basis for any kind of permanent relationship. Her problem in fact is that her encounters with the men in her society have not allowed her to form any strong idea of a sexual relationship which would satisfy her whole nature: no idea of a mutually satisfying relationship, in which each party would leave the other free, yet contribute to his or her development exists in the novel. Even of Em we are told, “her idea of love was only service” (p. 180). Even Little Piet Van der Walt “whose wife died last month — two farms, twelve thousand sheep” (p. 200), comic figure though he is,

epitomizes the idea of a marriage based only on the economic advantage of the parties, an idea rooted in a culture which is alien to Lyndall.

Yet the necessity of choosing between sexual love and the independence in which Lyndall believes is fatally unrelated to the needs of her own nature. The temporary compromise which she tries to effect between the two is one which she herself condemns as she makes it, and there can be no doubt that she already foresees the quarrel and the separation between herself and her lover. Immediately before she leaves with him, she says good-bye to the grave of the old German:

“Dear old man, good old man, I am so tired!” she said (for we will come to the dead to tell secrets we would never have told to the living). “I am so tired. There is light, there is warmth,” she wailed; “why am I alone, so hard, so cold? I am so weary of myself! I cannot bear this life! I cannot breathe, I cannot live! Will nothing free me from myself?” She pressed her cheek against the wooden post. “I want to love! I want something great and pure to lift me to itself! Dear old man, I cannot bear it any more! I am so cold, so hard, so hard; will no-one help me?” (pp. 241-42)

The absolute separation which she makes between sexual satisfaction and love is causing a split in her own personality: “alone, so hard, so cold,” she is the observer and condemner of the liaison in which she is involved.

In *Poppie Nongena*, the heroine's achievement of economic independence and the role of independent decision maker is not related to any body of theory which makes her earlier role unacceptable to her, but to pressures from outside her group, economic and political, which destroy or disable the male members of the family. At the beginning of the book when Poppie reviews her family history, she sees that her great-grandmother, “a rich old woman who grazed her goats on the koppies the other side of Carnarvon” (p. 11), was already an effective family head, as was Poppie's own grandmother, Ouma Hannie. The men of the family have died or disappeared too early to exercise authority over children and grandchildren. In Poppie's own generation we have a closer view of what happens to the

males: her brother Plank becomes an alcoholic, and his wife leaves him with her child; Hoedjie, also a drinker, achieves an unsatisfactory, off-and-on, childless marriage with a half-coloured, half-Xhosa woman; the youngest brother, Mosie, marries fairly satisfactorily. Poppie herself marries a man from the reserves, thereby involving herself in decades of disputes about her right to reside, first in Lamberts Bay, where she lives as a young married woman, then in the Cape. The events of Poppie's life until and including her marriage are determined by her family in terms of custom as they understand it; she spends her infancy with her grandmother, because that is proper for a child whose mother works "sleep in"; she goes to Doringbaai with her mother because the family agrees that someone must care for the ailing sister, Hessie; she marries "because they were all set on getting me married" (p. 64), and goes through the rituals of being a "makoti," a new wife, in a way that suggests that although she cannot be a traditional wife in the sense that her in-laws would understand the role, she will be a conservative, supportive wife in the urban setting of Lamberts Bay. Political pressures on Xhosas to move from Lamberts Bay to the Cape compels Poppie's mother and brothers to leave, though her husband remains there to work. A year later she makes her first independent decision:

But she was homesick for her mama and her brothers and later on, when she was the only woman left in her street and all the houses around her had been flattened, she couldn't feel at rest. Early in 1956, a year after her brothers and her mama had left, she packed up to go. (p. 89)

It is certainly significant that she makes this decision independently of her husband and family, but it marks the degree of her dependence on the family that she cannot remain alone with her husband. As soon as she arrives in the Cape, economic hardship begins to force her to a further decision, to take a sleep-in job, because the family is uncomfortably short of accommodation and income. In their struggles for work and a separate home she finds herself arguing with her husband: "She was ashamed to think she was talking to her husband in this manner, but she thought: I know the Cape better than he does" (p. 103).

Poppie's husband, whom she calls tata-ka-Bonsile, suffers greatly from anxiety, about his wife, children, and work — from a sense, in fact, of inadequacy because he cannot successfully provide for all his dependents. But his anxiety is counter-productive; he becomes weaker, contracts tuberculosis, and is eventually forced to go to hospital, leaving Poppie in charge of the family. The decision that he must be hospitalized is hers, and he resists it ineffectively, like a fretful child. Poppie is forced to work whilst he is in hospital, though she has three children, of whom the eldest is seven. She worries about their safety in her absence; she has, in a very acute form, the guilt of a working mother about her children: "I was always tired and worried when I got home, perhaps I didn't always treat the children right" (p. 137).

She tries in this period to enlist the help of the authorities to regularize her pass, by explaining her case to them. They give her short extensions — a month, a week, two months — but refuse to give her security of residence in the Cape. After ten years of bitter struggle to remain there, she is exhausted:

Then my husband was very dissatisfied. I told him I had now just had enough, I couldn't take any more with this last child. The nine months I was pregnant, I spent all my time walking. Then my husband was very dissatisfied. I told him I had now to the office and back from the office. So I told him, I couldn't stand it any more. I must go away. . . . I felt that if there was a life for me somewhere else, I would go and live there. (p. 182)

It is of course the inhumanity of the pass laws which is giving Poppie the idea that she can live separated from her husband, not any dissatisfaction with their relationship, but the economic pressures which have forced her at times to earn the family's living have helped to reinforce this idea. She has never, as I have said earlier, been a theorist as is Lyndall, but when she reflects bitterly on the pass laws, "What the law wants is for the wife and children to leave and the man to stay" (p. 192), the situation which she envisages is not one for which she is totally unprepared.

Nevertheless she experiences a kind of collapse after her journey to Mdantsane, near East London, related no doubt to her exhaustion and sense of defeat after the years of struggle to stay

in the Cape, as well as to the new sense of physical aloneness. Though she does not weep when she leaves her family, she suffers very greatly when she spends her first night as the only adult in the new house. With an effort of will, she forces herself to face the new situation.

She thought: I am here now. They tore up my papers in front of me. They took me from the house my husband built for me. They took me from my husband and my mama and my brothers. They can do what they will, but I am not dead yet. Now I go forward. I go forward with what I have kept, and that is my children. And the first thing I must do, is to see that my children get their schooling. (p. 203)

Tata-ka-Bonsile dies from anxiety and hard living conditions during their separation, and Poppie's brother Mosie in Cape Town makes an effort to take responsibility for the family, but the authorities insist that her children cannot be admitted to Cape schools. Poppie, in order to earn a living wage, must stay in the Cape. Her daughters Nomvula and Thandi she is forced to send to their grandparents on "the land"; her son Bonsile must go to school in Mdantsane. She has a series of dreams which show her longing for dependence on her husband.

She dreamed she was searching for tata-ka-Bonsile. She walked past rows of old men smoking their pipes. She looked for him but did not find him, and the old men turned their faces from her and would not show her the way to go.

Must I find the road myself? thought Poppie. (p. 241)

During this period of hard work and loneliness, Poppie continually forces herself to greater strength and self-reliance. "But then Poppie made herself strong again" (p. 249) is a typical phrase in the aftermath of disaster. She resolves the conflict between her duty to her family-in-law and her wish that her children remain urban dwellers by allowing her eldest son to undergo circumcision on the land. Her brothers protest at her increasing alienation from them; "You are too independent, my little sister," Mosie said. "You keep your children away from us, you take your own decisions without discussing it with us" (p. 298). Poppie's understanding of her actions is that she is the first of the family group to be subjected to a process which they all,

as urban Xhosas, must undergo, that of being forced out of the Cape into some alien "homeland." The arrangements which she has been able to make for her children are far from satisfactory; tata-ka-Bonsile has died as a result of their separation, but she and the children are surviving: her brothers have yet to undergo the trial through which she has already passed.

The arrest of Poppie's children, in Mdantsane and Herschel, on the suspicion that they aided her half-brother who has been involved in the riots, finally reduces her to despair. She no longer believes that any effort of hers can be successful.

I have found my way through everything, she thought, but through this I can find no way. Because this has been taken out of my hands, it has been given over into the hands of the children. It is now my children who will carry on.

Peace will not come, she told Mosie. Even those that wish for peace will be dragged into the troubles. We will have to grow used to that. About that we can't do nothing. (p. 354)

The fact that Poppie is finally crushed by the operations of laws which regard her and her people merely as units of alien population, to be disposed of to the advantage of the legislating group, must not blind us to the fact that she has transformed herself from a woman dependent on her group to a fully independent individual. The transformation is by no means entirely a happy one, nor do I wish to suggest that the Poppie of the book's last sections is a better or worse woman than the young wife who was gratified by her husband's approval of her cooking. The circumstances of her life have altered, and she has been able to respond positively to the changes.

Poppie's route to independence is evolutionary and at no time do theories about the desirability of independence precede the achievement of a particular stage. She does not become a self-supporting decision maker without some conflict between her and her husband and brothers, but her new role is closely related to changes and needs which are occurring in the group, and however painful it is to male family members to recognize that they cannot fill traditional roles themselves, any more than she can, they admire and depend on the new strengths which she develops. Moreover, her route to economic independence does

not represent any threat to them and she can become a domestic worker for whites without being despised by her own group. Though the work is poorly paid and physically very demanding it does allow her to feed herself and her children and send them to school, achievements valued by the group.

Does Lyndall's story suggest, then, that to be a precursor, to respond to a need not yet felt by one's society as a whole, is dangerous? Both Gregory Rose, weak and self-deceiving, insisting on his right to dominate women in order to convince himself that he has some kind of strength, and Lyndall's lover, who has seduced a school girl, are figures of decadence, as suggestive of the decline of patriarchal authority as buti Plank with his drunkenness. But the males of settler society in nineteenth-century South Africa possessed, however unworthy they were, powers enshrined in legislation relating to property and control of women's persons during marriage and their exclusion from professions, powers which ensured the continuation of male dominance: *The Story of an African Farm* is, amongst other things, a picture of what must happen in a society when outworn ideas continue to receive institutional protection. In *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* it is both the strength and the weakness of Poppie's society that its traditions and the necessary changes in them which occur are ignored by the law of the country — a strength, because Poppie is free to evolve, and a weakness because she is finally destroyed by the operation of that law which neither knows nor cares what she is.

A simple way of explaining the difference between the two novelists' visions might be to say that Joubert is able to work from what *is*, from the observable phenomenon that black women actually do become autonomous family heads in urban South Africa, whereas it is likely that Olive Schreiner felt that colonial society, even more than metropolitan society, offered almost no hope of economic independence to a woman. In her first novel, *Undine*, the heroine, returning almost penniless to South Africa, travels to Kimberley where in the midst of a boom period, not only in mining but in the demand for all the services that a rapidly growing population can require, she can find no more rewarding way to support herself than laundry work. She

is regarded as a profligate because she nurses a sick miner, and eventually dies of overwork and grief. And it must not be forgotten that Olive Schreiner herself had to go to England to publish *The Story of an African Farm*. Her life as a governess does not seem to have given her any belief that teaching could provide a route to independence for a woman. At Colesberg with the Weaklys she was called on to perform any task which needed doing, as though she were a humble dependant of the family.⁴ At Klein Ganna Hoek with the Fouché family, where she was happier and did a great deal of writing, she was nevertheless almost completely cut off from the world, and so poorly paid that she could not see her work there as a stepping-stone to the travels she longed for.⁵ She also remarks in a letter written at this time that she will never be fond of teaching, though she likes it better than she expected, which may be part of the reason why she never in any of her novels considers governing as a route to independence, as it was for so many nineteenth-century women.⁶

But this explanation must not be accepted too simply in a way that relegates *Poppie Nongena* to the category of biography since both books are in the literal sense fictions, that is to say, visions of life created in terms of an individual's theories and beliefs. Elsa Joubert's "To the reader" at the beginning of *Poppie Nongena* contains the statement "this novel is based on the actual life story of a black woman living in South Africa today," but the fact that she calls her work a novel and not a biography, nor even a case study, must be taken as seriously as her claim that it is based on the life of a real woman. Joubert has also said that her involvement with women in Poppie's predicament, deprived of the right to live in the Cape with their husbands and to seek work where it is available, began many years before the book was written. She did a considerable amount of research into their living conditions and the legislation which controlled their lives, but was unable to find a satisfactory way of writing about them; an account of the life of blacks by a white was not what was required. When she met the woman whom she has fictionalized as Poppie, she felt she had found the form her book must take, the right vehicle for her own reflections on black women.⁷

There can be no doubt that Joubert's commitment to what emerges from Poppie's life-story is the same as Olive Schreiner's commitment to what emerges from Lyndall's. There is a touching fragment of a letter, dated 1894, from Schreiner to W. T. Stead:

Neither on the subject of Christianity nor of sex have I gone from the standpoint of *An African Farm*, as people will understand if ever I publish one of my larger books.⁸

The fact that she categorizes the ideological components of the novel as Christianity and sex makes it clear, as Johannes Meintjes suggests in his *Olive Schreiner, Portrait of a South African Woman*, that Lyndall and Waldo are facets of their author's personality⁹ and that the problem of reconciling sexual fulfilment with personal independence was one that preoccupied Schreiner.

Both Schreiner and Joubert, then, are offering in their fictions their own beliefs and hypotheses about women's roles in particular societies; both, as I have suggested earlier, place other female figures around their heroines to show from what base they have evolved, what pressures have produced their evolution, and to what extent their choices are creative. But Joubert's sense of Poppie's career — that it is rooted in the needs of her whole group, needs which, however the males may seem to resent them, are felt by them all, and which allow them to approve of the woman who has evolved in a way that enables her to minister effectively to them — is very different from Schreiner's sense of Lyndall's. As much as Xhosa society in the Cape in this century, settler society in the Karoo and elsewhere in South Africa in the last century is shown as inadequate to the requirements of individuals. None of the relationships shown within the novel is complete or absolutely satisfactory to those involved. Tant' Sannie and Em's father, Tant' Sannie and Blenkins, Tant' Sannie and Little Piet Van der Walt, Gregory and Em, both as they envisage their marriage before Lyndall's return and as it eventually is after her death, Lyndall and her stranger — all these are maimed and partial unions, symptomatic of the failure of the group's beliefs and customs to supply effectively their changing needs. Pathetically adherent to the group's beliefs about marriage and equally pathetically exposing by his behaviour how little those

beliefs relate to his own personality, Gregory Rose is from the first strongly attracted by Lyndall, who appears to represent new possibilities. Her last message to him, that he must marry Em, is both a verdict on him, that he is not capable of a new and demanding relationship, and on herself, that the prospects which she seemed to offer were false.

Joubert thinks that Xhosa society in the 1960's and 1970's really does have the dynamism to change its structures, and she embodies that dynamism in Poppie, but Schreiner, though she sees settler society as equally desperately needing to change, can envisage no individual produced by that society possessed of the singleness of mind which will allow her to be a creative innovator. Lyndall's sense of her society's hostility to her if she attempts independence is important, but it is not the crucial deterrent for her; that is her sense that she must choose between sexual fulfilment and independence, even though without that fulfilment she cannot be creative.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 Olive Schreiner, *The Story of a South African Farm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). Page numbers refer to this edition.
- 2 Elsa Joubert, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, in association with Hodder and Stoughton, 1980). Page numbers refer to this edition. *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* was first written by Elsa Joubert in Afrikaans and published in that language by Tafelberg in Cape Town in 1978, under the title of *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. Since the author herself wrote the English version, I have felt entitled to assume, as far as concerns the purposes of this essay, that it represents her intentions fully and accurately.
- 3 Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: A Biography* (London: André Deutsch, 1980), p. 105.
- 4 She wrote to her mother about her life in the Weaklys' household soon after her arrival:

I get up pretty early and always find many little things in the house to be seen to till breakfast-time. As soon as that meal is over, and it like all the others is a very hurried one, I go into school and we don't come out until one, which is the dinner hour. When dinner is over I dress at once and go down with Mrs Weakly to the shop where I stay till sunset. This is the hard part of my day's work and I like it less and less every day. By the time we go up to the house supper is generally on the table and that being over and the little ones put to bed Mrs W and I get to needlework which we keep on till half past ten.

Quoted by S. C. Cronwright Schreiner, *The Life of Olive Schreiner* (London: Fisher Unwin Limited, 1924), pp. 99-100.

- ⁵ Cronwright Schreiner quotes a letter to her sister from this period:
I have quite given up all idea of going to America. Getting a salary of thirty pounds a year I might save till I was eighty before I have got enough to take me there. . . . (*Life*, p. 105)
- ⁶ *Life*, p. 105.
- ⁷ This account of the origins of the novel is taken from the review article, "Wie is Poppie," by Petra Grütter (*Sarie*, 1 November 1978).
- ⁸ S. C. Cronwright Schreiner, ed., *The Letters of Olive Schreiner, 1876-1920* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924), p. 213.
- ⁹ Johannes Meintjes, *Olive Schreiner: Portrait of a South African Woman* (Johannesburg: Hugh Keartland, 1965), p. 55.
- ¹⁰ I should like to thank Professor E. M. Preston-Whyte, of the Department of African Studies, University of Natal, for the information which she supplied about the position of black women in urban black communities in South Africa.