

# Words of despair, acts of hope

Elleke Boehmer's *The Shouting in the Dark* is haunted by the ghost of Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This is not at all obvious in Boehmer's novel and yet it is obviously not accidental either, as the title of the novel suggests. Or as the author's CV suggests too: Boehmer is from South Africa and is now Professor of Literature at Oxford University, UK; her latest study was *Indian Arrivals: Networks of British Empire*. However, Elleke Boehmer has also published five acclaimed novels, *Screens Against the Sky* (1990); *An Immaculate Figure* (1993), *Bloodlines* (2000), *Nile Baby* (2008), and now *The Shouting in the Dark*, as well as a number of short stories in journals, magazines, and anthologies. Inevitably, her scholarship remains part of her creative writing, but it does so in subtle and often indirect ways.

Ostensibly, *The Shouting in the Dark* is a bildungsroman: it tells us the story of Ella, daughter of Dutch parents, growing up in apartheid South Africa. Ella's story is presented to the reader within the frame of her discovery, as an adult, now living in the Netherlands and involved in anti-apartheid activities, that her father, Har, had not registered her birth in the Dutch 'folk register'. In other words, there is no official evidence in the Netherlands, that Ella is her father's daughter — and the patriarchal logic of citizenship makes her motherhood irrelevant. This strange — and Ella is convinced conscious, if not consciously mean — omission means that Ella is not entitled to Dutch citizenship, and has to face the possibility of being repatriated to South Africa.

From here, we are moved back to Ella's childhood and adolescence in South Africa, a place of layers of repressed past and bottled violence, which evokes the earlier novels of JM Coetzee. It is a past dominated by a storm-prone house, with a veranda that gives a fantastic 'African' view outside: "[...] on the high rim of the African shield, on the shoulder of land that the great continent at its south-eastern edge hefts up from the deep-blue Indian Ocean." Inside, there is a large portrait. The portrait is that of Ella's aunt, her mother's dead sister, after whom Ella has been named, and whose eyes seem to follow Ella around the room.

Outside, on the veranda, with a bottle of Old Brown Sherry, Har, the father, rages in the evenings. A spectacled book-keeper, he had fought in the Second World War, and is sometimes joined by his friends from the time, who sit there on the veranda, enjoying its view of Africa, reminiscing about the exploits of their war vessel, the *Tjerk Hiddes*. The father — the narrative refers to both the parents far more often as 'the father' and 'the mother' than by their names, which powerfully suggests Ella's growing alienation from both — is the storyteller of his group:

The father breaks the seal on a fourth bottle of Old Brown Sherry. The men raise their heads, hold out their glasses. Ella's cheek has grown cold against the window. She takes her head away from the glass, uses the hem of the curtain to prop her other cheek, a vertical pillow. The father's chin goes up. She sees he's

gathering himself for a second wind. Even with more than one listener present, she notices, yawning, he talks over their heads, still addresses his invisible audience arrayed in the dark lawn.

But sometimes, when no war-friend is visiting, the father sits alone on the veranda, drinking and shouting in the dark. His audience is the darkness in the lawn. Like Marlow and Kurtz in Conrad's book, he is above all a 'voice'. With his insistence on dressing properly, and his preference for English, and his stories and strong, loud opinions, Har is Kurtz, if Kurtz had married and fathered a daughter. He is Kurtz mellowed down, and a covert part of Ella's story is about whether this has made him the worse man or the better.

Or he is the smaller Kurtz: his neuroses and violence are all smaller than those of Kurtz; there are no skulls around his storm-prone house. He is perhaps just as bitter and disappointed as Kurtz towards the end, but he is never hopeless: despite his incipient racism ("In this country it isn't for blacks to aim high. That's the country's strength. It's for the white to aim high," he declares), Har will never write those words, 'Exterminate all the Brutes!' Perhaps that is the reason why, when handed a copy of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Har is not interested in reading it.

But there is another Kurtz in Boehmer's novel, and just as carefully camouflaged and altered: Aunt Ella whose intricate, beautiful portrait looks down at all the three ordinary and estranged members of the family. As the mother puts it about her sister: "Oh, she was remarkable, Ella,

unforgettable." However, like Kurtz's much-vaunted genius in Conrad's novel, there is no real evidence of Aunt Ella being 'remarkable', except in the memories of her sister, who had grown up in her shadow, and of Har, who had married her first and holds her larger-than-life memory against the present, especially his daughter and wife.

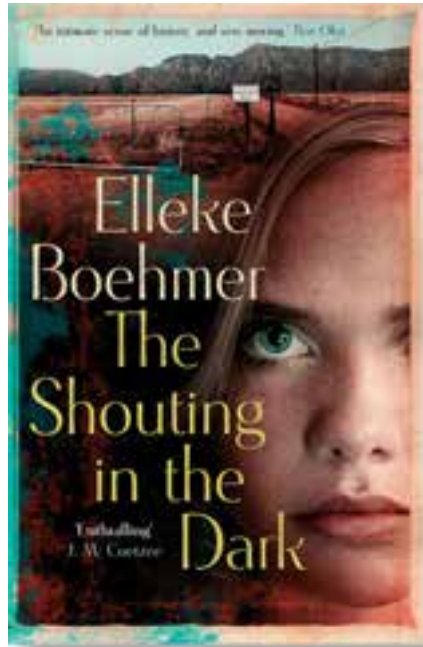
As Ella discovers, it is only when Aunt Ella died of cancer that Har married her timid younger sister. Unlike Aunt Ella, who had taken to Africa, though probably (like Har)

also without even dreaming to question its white privileges, her younger sister, Ella's mother, is haunted by nostalgia for the Netherlands and goes back 'home' once every two years as long as she can afford to do so. The father never accompanies her and Ella to the Netherlands.

Despite his racism and his belief that the world exists to be the white man's oyster, Ella's father, like Kurtz, has no wish to leave Africa. Feeling betrayed by his family, his wife's family, the Netherlands, Europe, civilisation, he vents his frustrations on a rigid and imaginatively limited wife, and a daughter who is teaching her heart to grow smaller and harder. And yet — Ella, the daughter, realises this in the final pages — his great legacy is that he sees Ella as belonging to Africa, something he tries and partly fails to do himself.

The father's white supremacist Africa is very different from the daughter's anti-apartheid Africa, and yet, unlike the mother, both have — like Kurtz — decided to be 'African' as they understand that term. That, Boehmer suggests towards the end of the novel, might have been the reason — and not just his anger and meanness, which could be considerable too — that had prevented Ella's father from registering her birth in the folk register of the Netherlands.

The father, like Kurtz, crawls off to die in Africa — in a hospital bed, but nevertheless. The daughter, years later, after her mother's death, in the Netherlands, realises that she has chosen to live with Africa. A haunting evocation of a childhood, this novel is also a confirmation of an identity that cannot be reduced to words. What can Ella be but South African? Though her notion of that contextualised identity is inevitably different — perhaps even poles apart — from her father Har's notion. Har's voice rages through this novel, browbeating his wife and daughter, but as was the case with Kurtz and Marlow in Conrad's great novella, what it finally reveals is the necessity and limitations of words. Except that in Boehmer's novel, what is brought back from Africa is not a lie made of hollow words. Instead, it is an experience — charged, brutal, contradictory, and yet containing within itself the possibilities of truth. ■



## The Shouting in the Dark


By Elleke Boehmer

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