

# Removing Yourself from the Personal

Review of 'A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid'



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Eugene de Kock, a former colonel and counter-insurgency expert in the South African police force, gave his best years to torture, kidnapping and murder. Under apartheid, at a time when so many people behaved so badly, de Kock stood out. Throughout the 1980's and early 1990's, he held a horror movie-like notoriety (the media since dubbing him "*Prime Evil*"), personally killing hundreds of people and terrorising an entire nation (well eighty percent of it anyway). When the transition to democracy finally came, de Kock – with remarkable candour – testified in front of the made-for-purpose Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the full scope of his atrocities; criminally connecting those above him (all the way up to then-President Frederik de Klerk), and morally implicating the entirety of white South Africa who slept easy on the benefits of that violence.

De Kock was sentenced to 212 years behind bars, and it is in the C Max section of the Pretoria Central Prison that Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela enters the story. Making regular visits to his cell, over a number of months, Gobodo-Madikizela sat in conversation with the man that would have once seen her as the enemy, and so a legitimate target for limitless cruelty, or death. The set-up is fascinating: an insight into the crimes that scarred a nation, the type of mind capable of such behaviour, and the soldierly reflections upon a faded battle; a man now abandoned, an enemy to both sides, and an overburdened symbol of universal hatred.

But we never get there! From the outset, Gobodo-Madikizela is keen to remind the reader of her resume, in completely unnecessary detail; where she studied, the degrees she received, who supervised her, who she worked with, what grants she was awarded, how wonderful of an experience it was, and above all, the overwhelming importance of her chosen field: psychology. And so things become a little distracted. She forgets almost immediately that her reader is being promised something unique, and something beyond herself. What de Kock describes as: "*I can tell you that the dirtiest war you can ever get is the one fought in the shadows. And I was there in the middle of it. There are no rules except to win. There are no lines drawn to mark where you cannot*

*cross. So you can go very low – I mean very low – and it still doesn't hit you. It's not like you stop and think. No. Your goal is to get it done."*

Gobodo-Madikizela begins with a struggle to understand trauma, and so a struggle to approach the man before her – changed, humbled, and seemingly remorseful. Beginning with a memory of her own, a massacre in the township of Langa, the author shows, impressively, just how fragile and poorly designed for the extremes we all are. Gobodo-Madikizela has a vivid recollection of the killings and brutality of that day in Langa, when as a child she saw the fear and helplessness of her own parents up close. The trouble is, the massacre never was. As a panel member on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she sat through days of witness testimony (the victims) showing that only one person died that day. The honesty behind this discrepancy is refreshing, how many people would instead keep quiet about such a personal misconception out of fear of ruining their credibility.

Yet from this high point of academic rigor and integrity, everything begins to quickly collapse, starting with her self-exploration: *"I asked myself, what does this tell us about remembering traumatic events? I can only suggest that when the safe world of a child is shattered by the violent invasion of police, the intensity of the moment is something that the experience of a five-year old cannot absorb"*. As someone who has sat through the testimony that she has, she ought by now to understand that adults are really no better at processing such distress than children. It is not something that we grow into.

For someone so keen to hawk her credentials, Gobodo-Madikizela spends much too much time on a single reference point; especially one that she understands so poorly: Hannah Arendt, her thoughts on the totalitarian mind, and specifically the trial of, and insight into, Adolf Eichmann. Most people have heard, if not understood, the phrase 'banality of evil', before they have left high school, but here it is thrown around like the insights are not fifty-plus years old, and as if the author has just stumbled onto a secret truth, accessible to her eyes only.

But more often than not, she gets it all wrong. Gobodo-Madikizela draws a moral distinction between people like de Kock and Nazi prison guards: claiming that a Nazi has never expressed remorse in the way that de Kock has (not true), and that de Kock's instructions from above were never explicit, and so he never had to confront the morality of his behaviour in a way that someone being openly told to murder would. The distinction is highly questionable, and could easily be interpreted the opposite way: because South African commands were couched and unspoken, those people inferring violence from them deserve all the more moral blame, as they could have easily ignored the intentions under the personal protection of ambiguous messaging. However, the argument breaks down before this point, or should do, considering the post-war autopsy into German command structures has always been hampered by an inability to pin certain atrocities on specific orders. Instead, they found the same wink-and-nudge type of behaviour, and the same willingness to decipher the worst possible of intentions.

Reading Arendt as a psychologist first, Gobodo-Madikizela pays little attention to the philosophical groundwork involved. By taking issue with the claim that Eichmann, despite all that he was (and all that he had done while hunting down Jews and overseeing the network of extermination camps), still had a conscience, Gobodo-Madikizela stumbles into deep water. She thinks Eichmann's lack of contrition, and lack of concern for his victims, is proof of the opposite. In its etymology, a 'conscience' is a moral grounding, a centre that justifies behaviour, and criticises aberrations. Eichmann's morality was limited, and distorted by the war he believed in, but it still existed. He was not a psychopath unmoored to anything beyond himself, but rather just a man doing what he thought was right, with a completely false understanding of what constituted 'right'. Gobodo-

Madikizela understands the word 'conscience' only as a metaphor for 'shame', and so she misunderstands Arendt.

She gets herself in a similar mess again when taking issue with the word 'forgivable': "*Hannah Arendt writes that 'radically evil' acts 'transcend the realm of human affairs' and are therefore neither punishable nor forgivable*". For her own practice, and hope for the world, the author needs to think forgiveness is always possible, without asking what the word actually entails. The point being made, that she misses so completely, is that no punishment could ever adequately *punish* someone like Eichmann – or de Kock – for what he did, and no manner of absolution could ever normalise your relationship with them, and so they could never be 'forgiven'. If you simply change language to suit an argument, then you are playing a game in your own head. Words, and their meanings matter, if only to ensure we don't waste our time talking past each other.

The mistake is all the greater, when it dawns on the reader, at about the midway point of the book, that this is all the author really wants to talk about: dialogue, forgiveness, apology, empathy, transformation, and contrition. Eugene de Kock is always an afterthought, and so much of a prop that, inexplicably, his crimes end up with very little mention. When he does make an appearance, it is often as a caricature, and an excuse for Gobodo-Madikizela to bring the story back to herself.

There is a scene during one of their prison interviews, where the author reaches out and touches de Kock's hand in an attempt to comfort him. Innocuous you might think, but if we are to take Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela seriously – and her constant assertions of expertise and authority – then how should we approach a claim like this: "*Something odd did happen the morning after the interview. I was awake and lying in bed. Then it dawned on me that I couldn't lift my right forearm. I immediately 'knew' why. It was the same hand with which I had reached out to consolidate de Kock, and now it had gone completely numb*". If true, then she has, astonishingly, stumbled onto a brand new psychological phenomenon... or perhaps an old one – solipsism. But let me be the first person to say it out loud – I don't believe her!

So caught-up in writing about herself, Gobodo-Madikizela doesn't seem to notice what her readers can't avoid – the feeling that de Kock is manipulating her. She does entertain the question briefly when it is asked by an audience member at an academic conference (never missing a chance to pad-out her resume). However, she lets someone else answer the question for her, and as moving as he is in that response, he only speaks about the need for compassion and healing; shooing the question away rather than answering it. And yet the background noise of *A Human Being Died That Night* feels like the slow-play of a murder mystery; clues constantly dropping, hinting ever so steadily toward deception, the victim oblivious to the end.

No doubt noticing Gobodo-Madikizela's original reaction to touching his hand, de Kock tells her quietly on their next meeting that she had embraced his "*trigger hand*", letting her know – without having to say so – that he too views his actions as separate from himself. But never in a way that implies a lack of ownership of who he was: "*I've been meaning to ask you this, right from our second interview. Have I ever killed any of your friends or family?*" He offers apologies for his appearance in order to impress that he is acutely self-aware of his imprisonment, but always so that he presents as a victim of circumstance: "*One was not in a position then to talk to a person like you. If I met you ten years ago...*" He even crosses directly into near-pleading for the author's help in receiving clemency: "*What are my chances, Pumla...*" "*I mean, is there hope for me?*" It is worth remembering at this point, that de Kock is someone with an intimate understanding of interrogation, and how his comments, patterns of speech and body language will likely be affecting his novice questioner.

Once imprisoned as de Kock was (he has since been granted that pardon), what else was there for him to do – reformed or not – than to play the game of apology, remorse and rehabilitation. It was his only chance of release, so he dished all the dirt he could and played the only part available to him. It is impossible to know how genuine de Kock is, but with a single-directional incentive before him, the choice he made should not have shocked anyone. Gobodo-Madikizela, someone with psychological training – and someone familiar with the case of Adolf Eichmann – should have noticed the echo of an old Nazi prison guard’s defence in the occasional words of de Kock, excusing things by way of desensitisation and routine: *“In that second or two seconds, you are automatic because your training takes over. You don’t allow yourself to think of the faces you see”*. Eichmann might have behaved a little differently at his trial, perhaps sobbing and grovelling approvingly, if even for a moment he thought he might be a free man again one day. That same logic also runs against de Kock – might he be behaving a little differently today if he were certain that all avenues for early release were closed.

Reading through *A Human Being Died That Night*, it is hard not to be struck by Karl Popper’s criticism of psychology and psychoanalysis as not representing a hard science. His reason: it doesn’t have a category of refutation, and so can be used to explain all things at all times. This begins to ring large in the reader’s ear when early-on Gobodo-Madikizela tries to pin de Kock’s abhorrent behaviour on his relationship with his father, who always *“equated Afrikaner nationalism with the ANC’s [African National Congress] struggle for liberation”*. She refuses to hear de Kock when he tells her that this doesn’t fit in his case – that his father was a racist, sure, but no more so than anyone else; indeed someone that comingled, studied their languages, and even respected the motivation of the ANC. Gobodo-Madikizela tells us that she blames the parent, regardless. So we have a theory without an end: a monstrous father makes a monstrous child; a kind and tolerant father makes a monstrous child by way of rebelling against that upbringing; and anything in the middle makes a monstrous child because he suffers from both directions.

How easy academia can be when reasoning like this is allowed to pass, and how convenient it is to create theories about *how* people are, without ever needing to explain *why* they are like that. And so this becomes a circular meditation on the author’s mind, and that alone. Contrary ideas, such as the psychological benefit of ‘forgetting’ – advocated by people like David Rieff in his book ‘In Praise of Forgetting’ – and avoiding unnecessarily rubbing open old wounds, and that the idea of reconciliation or healing through remembrance is actually a harmful, toxic process, are given little credence by Gobodo-Madikizela.

After flirting with this idea, Gobodo-Madikizela explicitly tells the reader that she will return to the fatherly issue later on, after her talks with de Kock reveal its true import. She doesn’t! Similarly, she entertains symbolism from the movie ‘The Silence of the Lambs’ – she being the Jodie Foster character, and de Kock the imprisoned serial killer, Hannibal Lecter, played by Anthony Hopkins – saying it doesn’t quite fit, but promising that later it will all return in an eerie parallel. It is never mentioned again! These lapses in concern for the flow of writing, and for the readers’ attention, are symptomatic. The prose is repetitive, numbing, and almost entirely without proper punctuation. And as the writing style noticeably changes from page to page, you begin to get the feel that this book was an afterthought, stuck together – with a little story-telling filler – from previously published journal articles and lectures. At the end of the book, in the acknowledgments, this suspicion is confirmed – explaining the mostly irrelevant, and certainly over-drawn end note references.

This also reveals why so much personal resume building, overt advertising for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and deference to people of influence was included: *“There was probably*

*no one more suited to the role of chairman for the historic process of the TRC than Archbishop Tutu”...“who has continued to support and encourage me”.*

Gobodo-Madikizela is desperate to make this a story about forgiveness and personal transformation. It's not! The harsh reality is that Eugene de Kock is a free man today, only because the crimes he committed were the crimes of a nation as a whole; and those that cut both ways. *A Human Being Died That Night* does stumble onto this territory in moments such as the appearance of Winnie Mandela at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to answer for the backyard torture and murder of her fellow black South Africans, but it never lingers long enough, or catches the real message. The larger and more widespread a crime is, the harder, and more inappropriate it is to punish. In 'My Traitor's Heart', Rian Malan captures the problems facing South Africa today, through a fictitious look at the journey his ancestor, Dawid Malan, took in 1788; a white man 'returning' to Africa, and confronting the black inhabitants for the first time:

*“What now? If I lower my gun and open my arms, will the Africans embrace me as a brother? Or will they take advantage of my position to plunge their spears into my chest? The South African tableau remains frozen in that moment.”*

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\* Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2004) *'A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid'*. Mariner Books: New York.