

# **Voicing gay experience in South Africa (2002-2005): democratization, minorities and cyberspace**

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## **1) Introduction**

This paper wishes to determine the role and contribution of *Gay@Litnet*, a subsidiary platform of the broader South African online literary journal, *Litnet* within the socio-political context of a democratic South Africa. In order to achieve this it is necessary to give a brief overview of the development of gay rights in South Africa over the past decade.

Thereafter a descriptive evaluation of *Gay@Litnet* will be given wherein certain value-adding properties and shortcomings will be discussed.

I will refer where applicable to insights gained from an e-mail interview with Danie Botha, the initiator and editor of *Gay@Litnet*.

## **2) Contextual background**

The political transformation that took place in South Africa after the first democratically elected government in 1994 had a positive influence on the protection of gay rights in South Africa. The new Constitution adopted on 8 May 1996 makes provision for the protection of several minority rights. Section (9) 3 of the Constitution clearly makes discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation unlawful. The relevant section stipulates the following: “The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.” According to this stipulation South Africa became the first country in the world to include an explicit reference to “sexual orientation” in its Constitution.” So-called “horizontal discrimination” committed by ordinary citizens are forbidden by section 9 (4) which stipulates the following: “No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection 3.”

These stipulations are in sharp contrast with the situation before 1996 where gay South Africans enjoyed no legal protection and could be prosecuted for sodomy, unnatural offences and other statutory offences contained in the Immorality Act 23 of 1957.

For more detailed descriptions concerning the historical development of gay rights in South Africa *Male Homosexuality in South Africa: Identity formation, culture and crisis* (1992) by Isaacs & McKendrick and *Defiant Desire* (1998) by Gevisser & Cameron may be consulted. After 1996 the Constitutional Court luckily declared references to sodomy in the common-law unconstitutional and all other discriminatory statutes were abolished.

However, within the current democratic context the question remains: what influence does the new Constitution have on the daily lives of thousands of gay and lesbian people in South Africa? Discrimination (in direct violation of the Constitution) is still evident in contemporary South Africa on a daily basis, although improvements have been made to extend the rights of gays and lesbians including adoption rights, fair treatment in the workplace and anti-discrimination regulations with regard to immigration and same-sex partnerships.

The latest improvement was a ruling in 2004 by the Supreme Court of Appeal granting a lesbian couple the right to have their marriage legally recognized and registered. South African gays and lesbians currently await a final ruling by the Constitutional Court with regard to the legalization of same-sex marriages. If granted South Africa will become the fifth country in the world to legally recognize same-sex marriages.

With regard to recent acts of discrimination against gays and lesbians I will highlight a few examples. In September 2005 a 16 year boy, Theo Bosman, attending a large Afrikaans high school in Pretoria was verbally and physically abused by his peers on the school grounds because of his assumed homosexuality. His parents are currently filing for legal action. In April 2005 a well-known Afrikaans gospel singer, Danie Botha (not the editor of *Gay@Litnet* with the same name and surname) made discriminatory remarks at an assembly to the astonishment of church goers when he stated that gay people will open their eyes in hell.

In September 2005 a music teacher, Johan Strydom, at a large congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church in Pretoria was immediately expelled from his duties after his sexual orientation came to light.

The same happened to a Dutch Reformed reverend, rev. Laurie Gaum after his ex-lover revealed his personal lifestyle to an Afrikaans tabloid magazine in April 2005. This revelation had tragic consequences for all parties involved.

Rev. Gaum's ex-lover committed suicide soon after his revelations and in September 2005 the Dutch Reformed Church expelled rev. Gaum from his duties at the St. Stephen's Dutch Reformed Church in Cape Town.

It is clear from these recent examples that South Africans gays and lesbians still suffer discrimination on a grass root level in spite of a Constitution which prohibits such actions. Therefore the Constitution cannot be regarded as an absolute safeguard to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in their day-to-day existence. In stead gays and lesbians in South Africa need other platforms to raise their issues, experiences and frustrations in an environment where the right to freedom of expression and opinion are respected. To an extent *Gay@Litnet* strives to fulfill this need.

### **3) The role and contribution of Gay@Litnet to the democratization of post Apartheid South Africa**

#### **3.1) Gay@Litnet: a brief description**

*Gay@Litnet* was officially launched in November 2002 as one of the platforms on the established literary e-journal, *Litnet*, after Homeros Publishers (an imprint of the well-established publishing house Tafelberg) needed to discontinue its publishing program due to financial considerations. Homeros Publishers made a substantial contribution to give voice to an array of gay experiences since it started publishing gay orientated texts in 1999.

The first texts published on *Gay@Litnet* were three Afrikaans short stories by Neil Cochrane, Janie Smit, and Robert Young. An editorial column by Egonne Roth, focusing on Egonne and her partner Judith's experiences in Israel was the other pioneering initiative on *Gay@Litnet*.

*Gay@Litnet* is currently managed by three editors, Danie Botha (editor-in-chief), Rafiek Mammon (editor: English) and Janie Smit (editor: lesbian writing) Since November 2002 *Gay@Litnet* gained enormous momentum resulting in the expansion of different types of content which focuses on various manifestations of gay culture in South Africa.

*Gay@Litnet* differs from the manifold gay websites and online journals found in the global arena in two ways. Firstly it does not operate in total exclusivity like many other gay orientated websites. It is to a large extent integrated within mainstream culture alongside heterosexual erotic literature for example. An effective system of hyperlinks makes it easier for end users to navigate though different content thus stimulating constant interaction between straight and gay end users.

Secondly the content of *Gay@Litnet* is of such a nature that it gives an opportunity to gays and lesbian writers and readers to share their life experiences not only with each other but also with the broader South African community. It is not merely an informational web site but addresses deeper social and psychological needs of South African gays and lesbians as well. In this regard the content on *Gay@Litnet* should be seen as complementary to other gay orientated electronic media like *Q-online* (South African based), *Planet Out* and numerous other sites found on The Queer Resources Directory for example.

### **3.2) Value-adding properties**

#### **3.2.1) Wider audiences and diverse content**

The universal nature of the Internet creates the possibility for South African gays and lesbians to share their experiences with fellow South Africans. This is an important factor considering the fact that South Africa is a relatively large and outstretched country thus giving gays and lesbians in remote areas that do not have direct access to clubs, bars and publications entry to the gay subculture. Gross (2003:260) also points to this value-adding characteristic:

The potential for friendship and group formation provided by the Internet is particularly valuable for members of self-identified minorities who are scattered and often besieged in their home surroundings. A brief tour of the Web will reveal countless sites devoted to specialized interests that draw like-minded participants across national and international boundaries. Notable among the interests served by this (so far) uniquely egalitarian and open medium of communication are those represented by sexual minorities.

*Gay@Litnet* gives voice to a large amount of South African gays and lesbians living in other countries like the UK, Australia and New Zealand. In this regard it is important to note that two South Africans living in Israel and Taiwan respectively write a monthly newsletter for *Gay@Litnet*. Through these newsletters local South African gays receive insight to gay experiences in other countries from a South African's perspective and South Africans living abroad may on their turn share their experiences with fellow South Africans.

The fact that *Gay@Litnet* operates within the broader scope of *Litnet* also makes the target audience of *Gay@Litnet* per implication larger and more diverse especially considering those heterosexual readers who are curious about gay experience.

Since its humble beginnings in November 2002 the content on *Gay@Litnet* became increasingly more substantial. Provision is currently made for short stories, poetry, articles on a variety of interesting gay related issues, reviews on gay literature, book discussions, excerpts from drama texts, opinions from straight and gay readers, newsletters from gays living abroad, a column named “Out of the box” and a agony column. The amount of short stories for example increased significantly from 3 to 70 until November 2005. The following tables give an indication of literary output since November 2002:

Total number of short story writers (Afrikaans & English)	<b>56</b>
Total number of male short story writers (Afrikaans & English)	<b>50</b>
Total number of female short story writers (Afrikaans and English)	<b>6</b>
Total number of short stories	<b>74</b>
Total number of Afrikaans short stories	<b>70</b>
Total number of English short stories	<b>4</b>

**Table 1: Number of short story writers and short stories on *Gay@Litnet* (as on 2005/11/04)**

Total number of poets (Afrikaans and English)	<b>33</b>
Total number of male poets	<b>24</b>
Total number of female poets (Afrikaans and English)	<b>9</b>
Total number of Afrikaans poets	<b>24</b>
Total number of English poets	<b>9</b>

**Table 2: Number of poets on *Gay@Litnet* (as on 2005/11/04)**

### **3.2.2) Documenting South African gay and lesbian experiences**

During 2005 South African gays and lesbians were invited to document their life stories and to send it in for possible publication on *Gay@Litnet*. These stories are published under the sub link “Short stories” with a clear indication “This is my story”. Until now 8 of these life stories were published on *Gay@Litnet*.

This initiative enables gays and lesbians to share their individual stories with fellow readers, it enable heterosexual readers to gain access to authentic worlds of experience which they otherwise would not be aware of, but most importantly it helps to preserve the socio-political and personal histories of gay experience in South Africa. It fulfills an important psychological need in an affirmative manner giving South African gays and lesbians an opportunity to heal themselves of pain incurred in the past through a form of narrative therapy.

It may largely be considered then according to Botha (2005) as an exploration of the gay psyche, a therapeutically inclined self-investigation of the narrator with whom the reader may draw comparisons and perhaps receive some kind of vision or inspiration.

### **3.2.3) Catalyst of debate**

*Gay@Litnet* may largely be seen as platform where gays and lesbians share their opinions on a number of gay related issues with the rest of South Africa. The immediate nature of the Internet tends to facilitate this process in an effective manner where feedback can easily be given and received. The reaction to previous debates with regard to gay issues seems promising and supports the democratic concept of freedom of opinion. I will describe a few examples to support this claim.

In 2004 readers were invited to respond to the following statement on *Gay@Litnet*: “What will happen if gays are allowed to marry”. The reactions varied from those who thought it to be a sin to those who viewed it as a necessary step within the context of gay rights. The following headlines give an indication of the various perspectives on this issue: “Gay marriages are unbiblical”, “Yes, it is a sin!”, “There is a place in heaven for straights”, “The answer lies in a thousand forlorn relationships”, “I think it is wonderful” etc. The reactions were from both straight and gay readers where different opinions were raised under one umbrella.

Another positive aspect concerning this specific debate was the balanced manner the editors tried to accommodate conflicting opinions by giving a book prize for “the most exciting and intriguing supporting opinion” but also to “the best rejection of the proposed gay marriages”.

*Gay@Litnet* also does not shunt away from highly controversial issues. An example is a debate initiated in 2005 under the headline: “Married woman allows her husband sex with another man” based on the James McGreevey case in the US. This led to very strong reactions from readers. One reader, W. Bos had the following to say: “I do not know how you can be interested in such a subject and that normal people should give their opinion with regard to the text! It cannot be normal – against nature, in other words, highly abnormal activities of evil. Every thing is sick on your site. Those pure of heart will triumph!” According to this reaction *Gay@Litnet* succeeded in proving that ultra conservative and fundamentalist anti-gay sentiments are still very common within the South African community.

On the other hand this specific debate also gave a platform to many straight women who had similar experiences. By initiating this debate *Gay@Litnet* also gave voice to straight women to verbalize their anger, experiences and perspectives providing a vehicle for emotional and psychological release. The following response from a straight woman named Melissa serves as an example: “I think it is worse for a woman if her husband leaves her for another man rather than another woman. It does something to your humanness; it takes something away and your whole life changes” (my translation – NC).

Within the same context many heterosexual and homosexual South Africans who are frustrated with the conservative Christian ideology they grew up with, received an opportunity to raise their frustration within the public sphere. The following reactions from participants signify this. One participant, named Ciska (a straight woman) had the following to say in reaction to another participant’s ultra conservative point of view: “Get real, women, and think for yourself; stop to proclaim God and belief and the church and your own distorted views to your daughters and your family and friends and people” (my translation –NC).

Ciska also congratulated a straight woman's (Elmarie) attack on conservative anti-gay sentiments when she wrote: "Thank you! I think that all our Afrikaans speaking Calvinistic white people in this country have a large psychological problem" (my translation –NC).

The debates on *Gay@Litnet* focus on actual and relevant issues within the broader South African community.

Further examples is the debacle following the anti-gay remarks by Afrikaans gospel singer Danie Botha, the suspension of Rev. Laurie Gaum by the Dutch Reformed Church after his gay lifestyle was revealed and the usage of the word "moffie" (a Afrikaans word meaning "homosexual" considered to be derogatory by some).

### **3.3) Shortcomings**

#### **3.3.1) The problem with labeling**

Although *Gay@Litnet* operates within the broader structure and appeal of *Litnet* it still operates under a separate label as all other platforms on the journal like erotic literature, expiate literature, isiZulu literature etc. This situation is problematic in several ways. It is indeed very difficult to cater sufficiently for all the different viewpoints on gay identity. Some gays consider the group identity *Gay@Litnet* established as an important factor whilst others do not wish to operate in a secluded ghetto without sharing their perspectives with a broader South African readership. For this reason Botha (2005) states that he achieves to accommodate all personality types and attitudes.

Botha (2005) also points to the large involvement of so-called non-gays in controversial debates on *Gay@Litnet* due to the effective manner in which current debates on *Gay@Litnet* are announced on *Litnet's* newsletters and table of contents.

In this way many readers of *Litnet* who would otherwise not automatically access *Gay@Litnet* are attracted to the content available on *Gay@Litnet*. The dynamic navigational system of *Litnet* makes it easier to lead straight readers to *Gay@Litnet*, thus supporting their choice to access, ignore or leave the site at any time.

Another problem which arises from specific labeling concerns coverage within the broader media. Botha (2005) argues that *Litnet* as a whole received much media attention in previous years, but that *Gay@Litnet* only received coverage to the outside world on two occasions during the last three years despite the fact that gay-related issues featured constantly in the South African media during this time.

The fact that *Gay@Litnet* operates under an assigned label also has cultural drawbacks due to the fact that works of considerable literary importance are not readily marketed to the mainstream.

The fact that no clear distinction is made between literary and more popular works (which largely contains works with explicit erotic content) are a further point of concern especially to authors who publish works of considerable literary merit on *Gay@Litnet*. Botha (2005) states that he wanted to create an iconic system to distinguish between different content but decided not to implement it and gives the following explanation for this decision: “I wanted to implement an icon system so that readers immediately may know that it is their kind of texts, but decided against it, because texts can often not be categorized and it may be considered as condescending towards readers.”

One of the solutions to this “problem” would be to gradually introduce texts of higher literary merit via more marketable texts (explicit erotic texts for example) to readers who would otherwise not be interested in the former.

### **3.3.2) Lack of certain voices**

*Gay@Litnet* is currently dominated by white Afrikaans speaking males. The voices of other speakers of Afrikaans, especially from the Colored community (people with mixed origin) are largely absent even though more than 80% of the Colored community in South Africa uses Afrikaans as a first language. The imbalance becomes more problematic if one considers the vital and creative contribution made by gays and lesbians from non-white communities to gay experience in South Africa especially with regard to the Colored community as emphasized by Isaacs & McKendrick (1992:93): “A further paradox is that the ‘coloured’ population, a set of people with diverse cultural heritage, especially with regard to religion, contributed greatly to the original flavour of the gay scene in Cape Town.” Palmberg (1999:269) also gives a perspective on this:

The Cape moffies were indeed an important part of the culture of the colored community, with its hub in District Six in Cape Town. They also had a significant public presence in the annual Coon Carnival, organized from within the colored community of Cape Town and one of the major cultural events of the city.

One of the editors of *Gay@Litnet*, Rafiek Mammon were appointed in 2004 to commission more English contributions and although it was hoped that his presence will lead to contributions from other ethnic communities Botha (2005) accurately points out that such a situation would be patronizing, superficial and unnatural. Instead more spontaneous reactions from other ethnic groups are hoped for, especially after the first contribution from a Colored author was published in 2005.

The voices of other ethnic groups (like blacks and Indians) writing in English or in one of the other 9 official African languages are needed in order to stimulate diverse experiences. The problem of linguistic barriers may be overcome by means of translation. Such an endeavor will foster creativity even more and would give all gays and lesbians in South Africa some insight into different gay experiences.

The fact that the content on *Gay@Litnet* is largely Afrikaans is rather unique and a value-adding factor considering the dominant role of English within the global gay media industry but also within the South African public sphere. Afrikaans is a minor language within the broader arena as it is only spoken by nearly 6 million South Africans (although it is the third largest language in South Africa according to mother tongue speakers) but it serves as an example that gay experiences may be verbalized in a minor language. Hopefully gay experiences may soon be voiced on *Gay@Litnet* in other indigenous languages as well.

It is important to see the lack of contribution from other ethnic groups in historical context. It must be remembered that during the Apartheid's era gays from different racial groups to a large extent did not act or evolve as a united front against the previous homophobic government due to complex social forces as Palmberg (1999:268) observes:

We cannot understand gay and lesbian movements as organisms but only as varieties of individual and collective experiences in the complex and changing contexts of social forces.

The fact that South Africa was a largely divided society before 1994 was also true for gays and lesbians from different racial groups as Isaacs & McKendrick (1992:144) observes:

The homosexual collective in South Africa has no monolithic status with which to counteract the fragmented nature of society. Apartheid ideology has thus enforced separate identities among homosexuals as much as among heterosexuals.

This situation necessarily led to a pluralist society after 1994 in which gay experiences of whites and other racial groups still mark clear differences. By expanding its appeal to South African gays and lesbians *Gay@Litnet* can play an important role to integrate and assimilate gay experiences from different ethnic groups.

Lesbian writing are currently dominated by male gay experiences and lacking in multifaceted perspectives. More short stories and poems need to be published depicting lesbian experience in various contexts.

The works of straight authors writing about gay experiences also need to receive more exposure on *Gay@Litnet* especially considering the fair amount of straight authors included in published gay anthologies within the Afrikaans literary system like *Wisselstroom* (1990) and *Soort soek soort* (1997).

The voices of alternative groups within the gay subculture like transsexuals are absent on *Gay@Litnet* and need to be nurtured.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It is fair to say that *Gay@Litnet* had made a valuable contribution to the ongoing democratization process in South Africa by effectively facilitating debate and interaction between the gay and lesbian South Africans but more importantly by giving voice to gay experiences within a mainstream context. *Gay@Litnet* needs to enhance these value-adding properties further by giving those South African gays and lesbians without significant voices ample opportunity to share their authentic experiences in an affirmative manner. Only then will past divisions begin to dissolve into a combined future.

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