*The Effects of Elias van Rooyen’s Behavior on Benjamin Komoetie’s Identity*

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Elias van Rooyen from *Fiela’s Child* is a hot-headed character who always expects to get nothing less than what he wants. When Benjamin Komoetie first entered the lives of the van Rooyens, Elias took it upon himself to forcefully ensure that Benjamin quickly adapted to life in the Forest. For this to occur, Elias needed to make Benjamin forget about his life in the Long Kloof with the Komoeties, and become Lukas van Rooyen – an obedient boy who acted in a manner that was fitting to the white family. As the newfound son of Elias, Lukas was expected to rapidly become a motivated woodcutter who earned his keep in the family, and did not have habits or manners that were similar to those of dark-skinned Africans like the Komoeties. Benjamin often was not readily willing to act in the manner expected by this family, but Elias had the ability to inflict physical punishment, which later proved useful – to an extent. Dalene Matthee uses Elias van Rooyen’s abuse to cause Benjamin to overlook his identity as a Komoetie, while he is in the Forest.

Elias van Rooyen wanted to show Benjamin that Forest life was not easy, and that he had to adapt to it – even if by force. This point is illustrated when Elias states, “The Forest did not ask you whether you fitted in or not, it was bend or break and that was that. It was not the Kloof, where you had the whole day to sit in the sun” (Matthee 130). Matthee’s use of the phrase “bend or break” communicates a sense of harshness, with the idea that if Benjamin did not strive to adapt to the Forest, he would not successfully survive in the Forest (Matthee 130). Matthee uses personification in this quote by making it seem that the Forest itself condemned people who did not adapt to it. She did this to make it seem that the sternness on Elias’ part was just because he was abiding by the laws of the land. Mathee chooses to have Elias describe the Long Kloof as a place that is very different from the Forest, in the sense that Kloof people have “the whole day to sit in the sun” (Matthee 130). This communicates the idea that Kloof people do not work as hard as Forest people, in Elias’ opinion, and proves his resentment of the Komoetie family and the natives of the Kloof. An idea with such a negative connotation was meant to cause Benjamin to develop a negative opinion about life in the Kloof, and specifically, the Komoeties. This strategy was favored by Elias, for he felt that it would help Benjamin forget about the Komoeties and favor life in the Forest. Elias did not have the patience to give Benjamin the time to adapt and gradually fit into the role of Lukas.

Elias van Rooyen made sure that Benjamin would never reencounter the Komoetie family, as long as he lived in the Forest. This is proven in the novel when Elias says, “The Coloured woman has gone and I told her, and the person with her, that if they ever set foot here again, I’d go straight to the magistrate and have them arrested! No Coloured will mess about with Elias van Rooyen!” (Matthee 199). This was said by Elias to Benjamin, when he was asked about Fiela’s visit to the Forest, and where she was. She had visited to drop off Benjamin’s belongings, with hopes of catching a glimpse of him as well. She was unsuccessful, however, as Elias threatened to have her arrested if she ever came near Benjamin again. Elias’ racism is clearly depicted in the quote, as he referred to Fiela as a “Coloured”, for he felt that dark-skinned Africans were not worthy of being referred to by their actual names (Matthee 199). Matthee also likely chose to not have Elias refer to Fiela by name so that Benjamin would not remember it, and would eventually forget it. Elias went to great lengths to keep Benjamin and Fiela apart, in hopes of making Benjamin forget about his life with the Komoetie family and adapt to the Forest, as Lukas van Rooyen. Elias showed that he was proud of his mistreatment of Fiela when he said, “No Coloured will mess about with Elias van Rooyen!” (Matthee 199). This quote makes it seem that Elias did a noble thing when he drove Fiela away with a threat, and his exclamation of such a phrase illustrates his pride in doing such a thing. Elias van Rooyen was racist and rude towards Fiela Komoetie, to ensure that she did not reenter the life of Benjamin and remind him of his life with the Komoeties.

Even while in the role of Lukas van Rooyen, Benjamin Komoetie always dreamed of his life in the Long Kloof – but these dreams rarely went uninterrupted. This is proven where Matthee writes, “The crack of a whip, higher up in the Forest, jerked him out of his dream. He turned quickly and took the sled-path home, to the Island” (Matthee 220). This event occurred to Benjamin one day, as he was on his way home from escorting Nina to the village, reminiscing about his life with the Komoetie family. He was considering going to visit the Long Kloof, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a cracking whip. Matthee uses this auditory imagery to trigger Benjamin’s painful memories of Elias’ abuse, which caused him to stop thinking about his past and his longing to live with the Komoeties. The sound of the whip reminded Benjamin of the physical punishment that Elias would unleash upon him, if he knew that Benjamin was still thinking about the Long Kloof. In this quote Matthee specifies that Benjamin was heading home – home being the Island with the van Rooyens, as opposed to the Long Kloof. Elias’ influence had affected him so much that he now referred to the Forest as his home. Elias had planted a deep fear in Benjamin, as Benjamin knew from experience that Elias was very capable and willing to punish him at any time, for any small blunder. Elias had entered Benjamin’s mind to such an extent that Benjamin could not even think clearly about his past life.

In the end, Elias van Rooyen exhibited racism and used physical abuse to the best of his ability, in his attempt to make Benjamin forget about the Long Kloof and keep his focus on the Forest. Elias made sure that Benjamin understood that the Forest and the Long Kloof were extremely different places, with extremely different mannerisms. He even gave Benjamin the idea that people from the Long Kloof were lazier than Forest people, to influence him into having a greater appreciation for Forest life. Elias also prevented Benjamin from ever coming into contact with Fiela, by threatening to have her arrested the one time that she did attempt to visit. As time went on, Benjamin grew to fear Elias’ abuse to the point that he could not even reminisce about the Long Kloof in peace, and felt obligated to refer to the Forest as his home. Elias van Rooyen’s harsh personality caused Benjamin to keep his actions and feelings in check, in fear for his survival and well-being.

Works Cited

Matthee, Dalene. *Fiela's Child*. Chicago, Illinois: University Of Chicago Press, 1992.