

## The Suit – C. Themba

FIVE-THIRTY in the morning, and the candlewick bedspread frowned as the man under it stirred. He did not like to wake his wife lying by his side — as yet; so he crawled up and out by careful peristalsis. But before he tip-toed out of his room with shoes and socks under his arm, he leaned over and lieered at the sleeping serenity of his wife; to him a daily matutinal miracle.

He grinned and yawned simultaneously, offering his wordless Te Deum to whatever gods for the goodness of life; for the pure beauty of his wife; for the strength surging through his willing body; for the even, unperturbed rhythms of his passage through days and months and years — it must be — to heaven.

Then he slipped soundlessly into the kitchen. He flipped aside the curtain of the kitchen window, and saw outside a thin drizzle, the type that can soak one to the skin, and that could go on for days and days. He wondered, head aslant, why the rain in Sophiatown always came in the morning when workers have to creep out of their burrows; and then blistering heat waves during the day when messengers have to run errands all over; and then at how even the rain came back when workers knock off and have to scurry' home.

He smiled at the odd caprice of the heavens, and tossed his head at the naughty incongruence, as if: “Ai, but the gods!”

From behind the kitchen door, he removed an old rain cape, peeling off in places, and swung it over his head. He dashed for the lavatory, nearly slipping in a pool of muddy water, but he reached the door. Aw, blast, someone had made it before him. Well, that is the toll of staying in a yard where tw'enty . . . thirty other people have to share the same lean-to. He was dancing and burning in that climactic moment when trouser-fly will not come wide soon enough. He stepped round the lavatory and watched the streamlets of rain-water quickly wash away the jet of tension that spouted from him. That infinite after-relief. Then he dashed back to his kitchen. He grabbed the old baby bath-tub hanging on a nail on under the slight shelter of the gutterless roof-edge. He opened a large wooden box and quickly filled the bath-tub with coal. Then he inched his way back to the kitchen door and inside.

He was huh-huh-huhing one of those fugitive tunes that cannot be bidden, but often just occur and linger, naggingly, in his head, and the fire he was making soon licked up cheerfully, in mood with his contentment.

He had a trick for these morning chores. While the fire in the old stove warmed up, the water kettle humming on it, he gathered and laid ready the things he would need for the day: brief case and the files that go with it; the book that he was reading currently; the letters of his lawyer of a boss which he usually posted before lie reached the office; his wife's and his own dry cleaning slips for the Sixty-.Minutes; his lunch tin solicitously prepared the night before by his attentive wife. And, to-day, the battered rain cape. By the time the kettle on the stove sang (before it actually boiled), he poured water from it into a wash basin, refilled the kettle and replaced it on the stove. Then he washed himself carefully: across the eyes, along the nose bridge, up and down the cheeks, around the ears, under, in and out the

armpits, down the torso and in between the legs. This ritual was thorough, though no white man a-complaining of the smell of wogs knows anything about it. Then he dressed himself fastidiously. By this time he was ready to prepare breakfast.

Breakfast! How he enjoyed taking round a tray of warm breakfast to his wife, cuddled in bed. To appear there in his supremest immaculacy, tray in hand when his wife comes out of ether to behold him. These things we blacks want to do for our own . . .not fawningly for the whites for whom we bloody-well got to do it. He felt, be denied that he was one of those who believed in putting his wife in her place even if she was a good wife. Not he.

Matilda, too, appreciated her husband's kindness, and only put her foot down v/hen he offered to wash up also.

"Off with you" she scolded him on his way.

At the bus-stop he was a little sorry to see that jovial old Maphikela was in a queue for a bus ahead of him. He would miss Maphikela's raucous laughter and uninhibited, bawdy conversations in fortissimo. Maphikela hailed him nevertheless. He thought he noticed hesitation in the old man, and slight clouding of his countenance, hut the old man shouted back at him, saying that he would wait for him at the terminus in town.

Philemon always considered this morning trip to town with garrulous old Maphikela as his daily bulletin. All the township news was generously reported by loud-mouthed heralds, and spiritedly discussed by the bus at large. Of course, "news" included views on bosses (scurrilous), the Government (rude), Ghana and Russia (idolatrous), America and the West (sympathetically ridiculing). Boxing (blood-thirsty). But it was always stimulating and surprisingly comprehensive for so short a trip. And there was no law of libel

Maphikela was standing under one of those token bus-stop shelters that never keep out rain nor wind nor sun-heat. Philemon easily located him by his noisy ribbing of some office boys in their khaki-green uniforms. They walked together into town, but from Maphikela's suddenly subdued manner, Philemon gathered there was something serious coming up. Maybe a loan.

Eventually. Maphikela came out with it.

"Son", he said sadly, "if I could've avoided this, believe you me I would. But my wife is nagging the spice out of my life for not talking to you about it."

It just did not become blustering old Maphikela to sound so grave and Philemon took compassion upon him.

"Go ahead, dad" he said generously, "you know you can talk to me about anything"

The old man gave a pathetic smile. "We-e-e-ll, it's not really any of our business . . . er . . . but my wife felt . . . you see. Damn it all! I wish these women would not snoop around so much." Then he rushed it. "Anyway, it seems there's a young man who's going to visit your wife every morning . . . ah . . . for these last bloomin' three months. And that wife of mine swears by her heathen gods you don't know a thing about it."

It was not quite like the explosion of a devastating bomb. It was more like the critical breakdown in an infinitely delicate piece of mechanism. From outside the machine just seem ^ to have gone dead. But deep in its innermost recesses, menacing electrical flashes were leaping from coil to coil, and hot, viscous molten metal was creeping upon the fuel tanks . .

Philemon heard gears grinding and screaming into gears in his head . . .

“Dad”, he said hoarsely, “I . . . I have to go back home.”

He turned round and did not hear old Maphikela’s anxious; “Steady, son. Steady, son.”

The bus ride home was a torture of numb dread and suffocating despair. Though the bus was now emptier Philemon suffered crushing claustrophobia. There were immense washerwomen whose immense bundles of soiled laundry seemed to baulk and menace him. From those bundles crept miasmata of sweaty intimacies that sent nauseous waves up and down from his viscera. Then the wild swaying of the bus as it negotiated Mayfair Circle hurtled him sickeningly from side to side. Some of the younger women shrieked delightedly to the driver: “Fuduga! . . . Stir the pot!” as he swung his steering-wheel this way and that. Normally, the crazy tilting of the bus gave him a prickling exhilaration. But now . .

He felt like getting out of there, screamingly, elbowing everything out of his way. He wished this insane trip were over, and then again, he recoiled at the thought of getting home. He made a tremendous resolve to gather in all the torn, tingling threads of his nerves contorting in the raw. By merciless act of will, he kept them in subjugation as he stepped out of the bus back in the Victoria Road terminus, Sophiatown.

The calm he achieved was tense . . . but he could think now . . .he could take a decision . . With almost boyishly innocent urgency, he rushed through his kitchen into his bedroom. In the lightning flash that the eye can whip, he saw it all . . . the man beside his wife . . . the chestnut arm around her neck . . . the ruffled candlewick bedspread . . . the suit across the chair. But he affected not to see.

He opened the wardrobe door, and as he dug into it, he cheerfully spoke to his wife: “Fancy, Tilly, I forgot to take my pass. I had already reached town, and was going to walk up to the office. If it hadn’t been for wonderful old Mr. Maphikela.”

A swooshing noise of violent retreat and the clap of his bedroom window stopped him. He came from behind the wardrobe door and looked out from the open window. A man clad only in vest and underpants was running down the street. Slowly, he turned round and contemplated . . . the suit.

Philemon lifted it gingerly under his arm and looked at the stark horror in Matilda’s eyes. .She was now sitting up in bed. Her mouth twitched, but her throat raised no words.

“Ha”, he said, “I see we have a visitor.” indicating the blue suit. “We really must show some

of our hospitality. But first, I must phone my boss that I can’t come to work today . . . mmmmm-er, my wife’s not well. Be back in a moment, then we can make arrangements.” He took the

suit along.

When he returned he found Matilda weeping on the bed. He dropped the suit beside her on the bed, pulled up the chair, turned it round so that its back came in front of him, sat down, brought his chin on his folded arms before him, and waited for her.

After a while the convulsions of her shoulders ceased. She saw a smug man with an odd smile and meaningless inscrutability in his eyes. He spoke to her with very little noticeable emotion in his voice; if anything, with a flutter of humour.

“We have a visitor, Tilly.” His mouth curved ever so slightly. “I’d like him to be treated with the greatest of consideration. He will eat every’ meal with us and share all we have. Since we have no spare room, he’d better sleep in here. But the point is, Tilly, that you will meticulously look after him. If he vanishes or anything else happens to him ...” A shaft of evil shot from his eye . . . “Matilda, I’ll kill you.”

He rose from the chair and looked with incongruous supplication at her. He told her to put the fellow in the wardrobe for the time being. As she passed him to get the suit, he turned to go. She ducked frantically, and he stopped.

“You don’t seem to understand me, Matilda. There’s to be no violence in this house if you and I can help it. So, just look after that suit.” He went out.

He went out to the Sophiatown Post Office which is placed on the exact latitude between Sophiatown and the white man’s surly Westdene. He posted his boss’s letters, and walked to the beer-hall at the tail-end of Western Native Township. He had never been inside it before, but somehow the thunderous din laved his bruised spirit. He stayed there all day.

He returned home for supper . . . and surprise. His dingy, little home had been transformed, and the stern masculinity it had hitherto received had been wiped away, to be replaced by anxiously feminine touches here and there. There were even gay, colourful curtains swirling in the kitchen window. The old-fashioned coal stove gleamed in its blackness. A clean, chequered oil cloth on the table. Supper ready.

Then she appeared in the doorway of the bedroom. Heavens! here was the woman he had married the young, fresh, cocoa-coloured maid who had sent rushes of emotion shuddering through him. And the dress she wore brought out all the girlishness of her, hidden so long beneath German print. But no hint of coquettishness, although she stood in the doorway and slid her arm up the jamb, and shyly slanted her head to the other shoulder. She smiled weakly.

What makes a woman like this experiment with adultery? he wondered.

Philemon closed his eyes and gripped the seat of his chair on both sides as some overwhelming, undisciplined force sought to catapult him towards her. For a moment some essence glowed fiercely within him, then sank back into itself and died . . . He sighed and smiled sadly back at her. “I’m hungry, Tilly”.

The spell snapped, and she was galvanised into action. She prepared his supper with dextrous hands that trembled a little only when they hesitated in mid-air. She took her seat opposite him, regarded him curiously, clasped her hands waiting for his prayer, but in her heart she murmured some other, much more urgent prayer of her own.

“Matilda!” he barked. “Our visitor!” The sheer savagery with which he cracked at her jerked her up, but only when she saw the brute cruelty in his face did she run out of the room, toppling the chair behind her.

She returned with the suit on a hanger, stood there quivering like a feather. She looked at him with helpless dismay. The demoniacal rage in his face was evaporating, but his heavy breathing still rocked his thorax above the table, to and fro.

“Put a chair, there.” He indicated with a languid gesture of his arm. She moved like a ghost as she drew a chair to the table.

“Now seat our friend at the table . . . no, no, not like that. Put him in front of the chair, and place him on the seat so that he becomes indeed the third person.”

Philemon went on relentlessly: “Dish up for him. Generously. I imagine he hasn’t had a morsel all day, the poor devil.”

Now, as consciousness and thought seeped back into her, her movements revolved so that always she faced this man who had changed so spectacularly. She started when he rose to open the window and let in some air.

She served the suit. The act was so ridiculous that she carried it out with a bitter sense of humiliation. He came back to sit down and plunge into his meal. No grace was said for the first time in this house. With his mouth full, he indicated by a toss of his head that she should sit down in her place. She did so, glanced at her plate, and the thought occurred to her that someone, after a long famine, was served a sumptuous supper, but as the food reached her mouth it turned to sawdust. Where had she heard it?

Matilda could not eat. She suddenly broke into tears.

Philemon took no notice of her weeping. After supper, he casually gathered the dishes and started washing up. He flung a dry cloth at her without saying a word. She rose and went to stand by his side drying up. But for their wordlessness, they seemed a very devoted couple. After washing up, he took the suit and turned to her. “That’s how I want it every meal, every day.” Then he walked into the bedroom.

So it was. After that first breakdown, Matilda began to feel that her punishment was not too severe, considering the heinousness of her crime. She tried to put a joke into it. But by slow, unconscious degrees, the strain nibbled at her. Philemon did not harass her much more, so long as the ritual with the confounded suit was conscientiously followed.

Only once, he got one of his malevolent brainwaves. He got it into his head that “our visitor” needed an outing. Accordingly the suit was taken to the dry cleaners during the week and, come Sunday, they had to take it out for a walk. Both Philemon and Matilda dressed for the occasion. Matilda had to carry the suit on its hanger over her back and the three of them

strolled leisurely along Ray Street. They passed the church crowd in front of the famous Anglican Mission of Christ the King. Though the worshippers saw nothing unusual in them, Matilda felt, searing through her, red-hot needles of embarrassment, and every needlepoint was a public eye piercing into her degradation.

But Philemon walked casually on. He led her down Ray Street, turned into Main Road. He stopped often to look into shop windows or to greet a friend passing by. They went up Toby Street, turned into Edward Road, and back home. To Philemon the outing was free of incident, but to Matilda it was one long, excruciating incident.

At home he grabbed a book on Abnormal Psychology, flung himself into a chair and calmly said to her: "Give the old chap a rest, will you, Tilly?"

In the bedroom, Matilda said to herself that things could not go on like this. She thought of how she could bring the matter to a head with Philemon; have it out with him once and for all. But the memory of his face, that first day she had forgotten to entertain the suit, stayed her. She thought of running away. Where to? Home? What could she tell her old-fashioned mother had happened between Philemon and her? All right, run away clean then. She thought of many young married girls who were divorcees now, who had won their freedom. What had happened to Staff Nurse Kakile? That woman drank heavily now, and when she got drunk, the boys of Sophiatown passed her around and called her the Cesspot. Matilda shuddered.

An idea struck her. There were still decent, married women around Sophiatown. She remembered how after the schools had been forced to close with the advent of Bantu Education. Father Harringay of the Anglican Mission had organised Cultural Clubs. One, she seemed to remember, was for married women. If only she could lose herself in some cultural activity, find ablution for her conscience in some doing good; that would blur her blasted home life, would restore her self-respect. After all, Philemon had not broadcast her disgrace abroad nobody knew; not one of Sophiatown's vicious slander-mongers suspected how vulnerable she was. She must go and see Mrs. Montjane about joining a Cultural Club. She must ask Philemon now if she might . . . she must ask him nicely.

She got up and walked into the other room where Philemon was reading quietly. She dreaded disturbing him, did not know how to begin talking to him . . . they had talked so little for .so long. She went and stood in front of him, looking silently upon his deep concentration. Presently, he looked up with a frown on his face.

Then she dared: "Phil, I'd like to join one of those Cultural Clubs for married women. Would you mind?"

He wrinkled his nose and rubbed it between thumb and index finger as he considered the request. But he had caught the note of anxiety in her voice, and thought he knew what it meant.

"Mmmm," he said, nodding, "I think that's a good idea. You can't be moping around here all day. Yes, you may, Tilly." Then he returned to his book.

That Cultural Club idea was wonderful. She found women like herself, with time (if not with tragedy) on their hands, engaged in wholesome, refreshing activities. The atmosphere was cheerful and cathartic. They learned things and they did things. They organised fetes, bazaars, youth activities, sport, music, self-help and community projects. She got involved in committees, meetings, debates, conferences. It was for her a whole new venture into humancraft, and her personality blossomed. Philemon gave her all the rein she wanted. Now, abiding by that silly ritual at home seemed a little thing . . . a very little thing .... Then one day she decided to organise a little party for her friends and their husbands. Philemon was very decent about it. He said it was all right. He even gave her extra money for it. Of course, she knew nothing of the strain he himself suffered from his mode of castigation.

There was a week of hectic preparation. Philemon stepped out of its cluttering way as best he could. So many things seemed to be taking place simultaneously. New dresses were made. Cakes were baked: three different orders of meat prepared: beef for the uninvited chances: mutton for the normal guests: turkey and chicken for the inner pith of the club's core. To Philemon, it looked as if Matilda planned to feed the multitude on the mount with no aid of miracles.

On the Sunday of the party, Philemon saw Matilda's guests. He was surprised by the handsome grace with which she received them. There was a long table with enticing foods and flowers and serviettes. Matilda placed all her guests round the table, and the party was ready to begin in the mock-formal township fashion. Outside a steady rumble of conversation went on where the human odds and ends of every Sophiatown party had their "share".

Matilda caught the curious look on Philemon's face. He tried to disguise his edict when he said: "Er . . . the guest of honour."

But Matilda took a chance. She begged: "Just this once, Phil".

He became livid. "Matilda!" he shouted, "get our visitor!" Then with incisive sarcasm: "Or are you ashamed of him?"

She went ash-grey: but there was nothing for it but to fetch her albatross. She came back and squeezed a chair into some corner, and placed the suit on it. Then she slowly placed a plate of food before it. For a while the guests were dumbfounded. Then curiosity flooded in. They talked at the same time. "What's the idea, Philemon?" . . . "Why must she serve a suit?" . . . "What's happening?" Some just giggled in a silly way. Philemon carelessly swung his head towards Matilda. "You better ask my wife. She knows the fellow best."

All interest beamed upon poor Matilda. For a moment she could not speak, all enveloped in misery. Then she said, unconvincingly: "It's just a game that my husband and I play at mealtime." They reared with laughter. Philemon let her get away with it.

The party went on, and every time Philemon's glare sent Matilda scurrying to serve the suit each course, the guests were no-end amused by the persistent mock-seriousness with which this husband and wife played out their little game. Only, to Matilda, it was no joke: it

was a hot poker down her throat. After the party, Philemon went off with one of the guests who had promised to show him a joint "that sells genuine stuff, boy, genuine stuff."

Reeling drunk, late that sabbath, he crashed through his kitchen door, onwards to his bedroom. Then he saw her.

They have a way of saying in the argot of Sophiatown: "Cook out of the head!" signifying that someone was impacted with such violent shock that whatever whiffs of alcohol still wandered through his head were instantaneously evaporated and the man stood sober before stark reality.

There she lay, curled as if just before she died she begged for a little love, implored some implacable lover to cuddle her a little. . . just this once . . . just this once more.

In screwish anguish. Philemon cried, "Tilly!"