Jan Sebastian Rabie was born on 14 November, 1920, at George in South Africa. He started to publish his first poems while he was still a student at Stellenbosch University, where he studied Dutch and Afrikaans. Rabie moved to Johannesburg to work as a full time writer before he left for Paris and travelled across Europe. He returned with his wife to South Africa in 1955. Jan Rabie felt strongly about the injustice of apartheid. He translated more than forty books, mainly from French, and was active in the conservation of South African coastal areas and sea life. He was co-author of an encyclopedia of marine flora and fauna. He died in 2001.

DROUGHT

Jan Rabie

Whirling pillars of dust walk the brown floor of the earth. Trembling, the roots of the withered grass await the rain; thirsty for green love the vast and arid plain treks endlessly out to its horizon. One straight ruler-laid railway track shoots from under the midday sun's glare towards where a night will be velvet-cool with stars. The landscape is that of drought. Tiny as two grains of sand, a white man and a black man build a wall. Four walls. Then a roof. A house.

The black man carries blocks of stone and the white man lays them in place. The white man stands inside the walls where there is some shade. He says: "You must work outside. You have a black skin, you can stand the sun better than I can."

The black man laughs at his muscles glistening in the sun. A hundred years ago his ancestors reaped dark harvests with their assegais, and threshed out the fever of the black sun in their limbs with the Ngoma-dance. Now the black man laughs while he begins to frown.

"Why do you always talk of my black skin?" he asks.

"You are cursed," the white man says. "Long ago my God cursed you with darkness."

"Your God is white," the black man angrily replies. "Your God lies! I love the sun and I fear the dark."

The white man speaks dreamily on: "Long ago my forefathers came across the sea. Far they came, in white ships tall as trees and on the land they built them wagons and covered them with sails of their ships. Far they travelled and spread their campfire ashes over this vast barbaric land. But now their children are tired, we want to build

and teach you blacks how to live in peace with us. It is time, even if your skins will always be black…."

Proudly the black man counters: "And my ancestors dipped their assegais in the blood of your forefathers and saw that it was red as blood. Red as the blood of the impala that our young men run to catch between the two red suns of the hills!"

"It's time you forgot the damned past," the white man sadly says. "Come, you must learn to work with me. We must build this house."

"You come to teach me that God is white. That I should build a house for the white man." The black man stands with folded arms.

"Kaffir!" the white man shouts, "will you never understand anything at all! Do what I tell you!"

"Yes, Baas," the black man mutters.

The black man carries blocks of stone and the white man lays them in place. He makes the walls strong. The sun glares down with its terrible eye. Far, as the only tree in the parched land, a pillar of dust walks the trembling horizon.

"This damned heat!" the white man mutters, "if only it would rain."

Irritably he wipes the sweat from his forehead before he says: "Your ancestors are dead. It's time you forgot them."

Silently the black man looks at him with eyes that answer: Your ancestors, too, are dead. We are alone here.

Alone in the dry and empty plain the white man and the black man build a house. They do not speak to each other. They build the four walls and then the roof. The black man works outside in the sun and the white man inside in the shade. Now the black man can only see the white man's head. They lay the roof.

"Baas," the black man asks at last, "Why has your house no windows and no doors?"

The white man has become very sad. "That, too, you cannot understand," he says. "Long ago in another country my forefathers built walls to keep out the sea. Thick, watertight walls. That's why my house too, has no windows and no doors."

"But there's no big water here!" the black man exclaims, "The sand is dry as a skull!"

You're the sea, the white man thinks, but is too sad to explain.

They lay the roof. They nail the last plank, the last corrugated iron sheet, the black man outside and the white man inside. Then the black man can see the white man no more.

"Baas!" he calls, but hears no answer.

The Inkoos cannot get out, he thinks with fright, he cannot see the sky or know when it is day or night. The Inkoos will die inside his house!

The black man hammers with his fists on the house and calls: "But Baas, no big water will ever come here! Here it will never rain for forty nights as the Book of your white God says!"

He hears no answer and he shouts: "Come out, Baas!"

He hears no answer.

With his fists still raised as if to knock again, the black man raises his eyes bewilderedly to the sky empty of a single cloud, and stares around him at the horizon where red-hot pillars of dust dance the fearful Ngoma of the drought.

Alone and afraid, the black man stammers: "Come out, Baas… Come out to me…"

Questions

1. How would you describe the genre of this story?
2. What are some prominent symbols and metaphors that emerge in the text?
3. Research apartheid in South Africa and discuss its importance for this short story.
4. What is the message that emerges from this story?