

## **"Playing with words while Africa is ablaze"-- an overview of South African Literature.**

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Since its beginning in the nineteenth century up to the present day, South African literature has been dominated by the issues of race, politics and national identity. In fact, no literature written in or about South Africa has been able to avoid dealing directly with the system of Apartheid. Initially an Afrikaans word meaning 'Separateness', Apartheid was coined by South African Dutch descendants (Afrikaners) to describe the system of government in operation in the country from 1948-1992, devised to keep the numerous races living in South Africa apart. Apartheid philosophy decreed that cultures were not to mix on any level--political, social or economic--and so the country's population was divided into roughly eleven ethnic groups, each having its own system of government, its own land, its own laws. In effect, however, what Apartheid did was separate the country into two primary groups: Whites (English and Dutch descendants) who retained most of the political and economic power in the country; and Blacks (comprising the 11 local indigenous races) who were denied basic human rights such as land ownership, freedom of movement, right of association and access to political platforms.

South African literature is itself divided into basically three groupings. To generalise: White English literature is, for the main part, written by urban, cosmopolitan English-speaking European descendants, and deals with liberal critiques of Apartheid and the attempt to harmonise race

relations in South Africa. Its audience is the small minority of English-speaking white South Africans and more importantly, an overseas (European and North American) readership. Black, indigenous literature, influenced by a strong African oral tradition, is written mostly in English, addresses mainly a local, African audience, and deals with problems of urbanisation, race relations, and strategies needed to overcome Apartheid. Afrikaans literature (in the language of Afrikaans) has a much more limited readership and, born of a "defensive posture"<sup>1</sup>, by and large attempts to legitimate the Afrikaans culture and language. Only in the 1960's did Afrikaans literature take a more critical stance against Apartheid. These three South African literatures have developed independently of each other, often antagonistic to each other, and perhaps have only one thing in common--a culturally limited viewpoint, and an inability to understand aspirations, perceptions and traditions of other race groups in the same country.

Literature about South Africa was at first largely in English by white settlers and colonials from Europe, whose perceptions of Africa were polarised--Africa was either a "dark continent" of disease and hostile natives, or an unspoiled paradise where riches were there for the taking. Ryder Haggard's series of extremely popular Victorian novels in English chronicle a fictitious, romanticised South Africa where anything is possible for the white man. King Solomon's Mines, for example, locates the mythical treasures of the ancient king in South Africa. These treasures are guarded by a jealous tribe of Zulu warriors, who are ultimately defeated by the brave English explorer, Allan Quatermain. Such writing is still very popular, and a contemporary South African novelist, Wilbur Smith, writes about a highly romanticised, white man's Africa, with some 100 million copies of his novels sold to date

worldwide. Such literature justifies colonial domination of South Africa and its peoples in terms of a "lost paradise" myth. The myth recreates Africa as an Eden, given to the white settlers by divine right, and into which an evil has come in the form of Black native invaders.

Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm (1883) was seen as the first South African novel to seriously critique this myth and paint a more realistic picture of the settler population. It was also the first novel to proclaim its "South Africanness" in terms of setting, character and plot. Although the author apologised in her introduction for not using Europe as a reference point, she was deliberately breaking with the colonial tradition of seeing Europe as home (later described as Eurocentrism).

A trickle of local South African writing followed Schreiner--William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe (1925), Pauline Smith's The Little Karoo (1925), Laurens van der Post's In a Province (1934), with realist and revealing tales of the tensions in the white settler community, though still portraying South Africa largely as a white man's paradise.

Written indigenous literature first appeared at a crossroads of South African political history. 1910 saw the independence of South Africa from Britain, and the implementation of the Land Act, which effectively took away land from black people who had lived on it for years, and gave it to white settlers. The justification for this Act was an early form of Apartheid--the races had to be separated; and each ethnic group had to have its own homeland. In practice though, it meant that the white minority (10% of the population) received the best arable land (some 87%) and the black majority (90% of the population) received just 13%. Blacks could not own land in white areas, had to have permission to work and live on

white land, and were forcibly removed from land declared to be white. In 1912 the ANC was formed, a primarily black political party organised to safeguard black interests and to protest the Land Act.

Mhudi, the first black novel, was written in English by a missionary educated man, Sol Plaatje. A founding member of the ANC, Plaatje could only protest the Land Act indirectly. Instead of accusing white settlers of stealing land, he wrote a tale of the Zulu king, Chaka, who had some fifty years earlier stolen land and property from the Xhosa tribes in central South Africa. Similar to early colonial writing, Mhudi described Africa as a paradise, but this time Plaatje subverted the myth: South Africa was a black paradise, where indigenous people lived happily and harmoniously until evil intruders from foreign cultures invaded.

Following this early success in indigenous literature came another novel about Chaka, this time in a local language, Xhosa, by another missionary educated man, Thomas Mofolo. On the surface, the novel Chaka was a moral condemnation of the savage African dictator's usurpation of other African tribes and land, and because the author was heavily influenced by Shakespeare, Chaka was portrayed as a kind of African Macbeth. Mofolo's tone set a precedent--he assumed the role of a prophet, with the insight and wisdom to criticise and judge governments for their misuse of power.

From the beginning then, the black writer, though not directly attacking white colonial interests, saw himself as a political protester who took on the responsibility of his people's moral enlightenment. Here is an extract from an early Black newspaper, Umteteli wa Bantu:

The duty of all Bantu [black] writers...is to call attention of the leaders to the things that are detrimental to the interest and welfare of the people. A writer who does not criticise and correct the mistakes of his people does not fulfil the purpose for which God endowed him with the power of the pen. A writer is a prophet.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the writer as prophet and spokesman against political injustice became entrenched as the primary mode of South African writing, both black and white. It was generally assumed that writers, as the conscience of the people, should take sides morally and politically against Apartheid. White and black romantic idylls were condemned as supportive of a deceptive and inaccurate view of history, so to correct this mythical, romanticised view of Africa, critics argued that writing needed to be more rooted in socio-historical reality. Thus protest literature was born, its main aim to shock, expose the injustices of the emerging Apartheid system to its people and to the world, and to rouse people into political action against it.

From 1910 until 1948, South Africa was governed by an uneasy coalition of English and Afrikaners. But with the defeat of the liberal English United Party and the coming to power of the Nationalist Afrikaans party (NP) in 1948, Apartheid was officially augmented. The new government policy became to preserve the nationhood of the Afrikaner and to implement more seriously the idea of "separateness". Hendrik Verwoerd, the new Prime Minister and brainchild of Apartheid, divided the country into eleven separate states, each with its own government, laws, land, language; and in "white" areas, divided each amenity (police station, hospital, toilet) into "black" and "white". Blacks were forcibly removed from white areas and were condemned to live in their homelands--semi-arid desert

areas which soon became overcrowded and barren. They were only allowed to work in white areas with special permission.

In the same year that Apartheid was implemented, Alan Paton (of the United Party) wrote the highly successful Cry the Beloved Country (1948), a moral protest novel against the injustices perpetrated by whites on blacks. This novel established Paton as the voice of liberal humanism, gave him international repute, and put South African literature on the map, spawning a train of white protest realist novels in the same vein (Nadine Gordimer's The Lying Days (1953), Dan Jacobson's Beggar my Neighbour (1954), Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing (1958). These "white" novels were largely appeals to the European conscience in the West to put pressure on the South African government to change the system, and attempted to expose white South Africans to the injustices occurring in their own country.

There was also a resurgence of black writing in the fifties, largely because of a group of journalists working on a black newspaper, Drum. These journalists, also active members of the ANC (and sometimes the black consciousness movement PAC) lived in Sophiatown, a small neighbourhood of mixed races and cultures in the heart of white Johannesburg. Sophiatown, a thriving centre of culture, jazz, writing and street drama was seen by many as the hope for an emerging integrated South African culture. The writers (Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Don Mattera, Lewis Nkosi, James Matthews, to name a few), soon gained the reputation for being at the forefront of a new "black renaissance" in literature.<sup>3</sup> In particular, they developed the short story form into a sharp protest realist genre, attacking Apartheid and espousing non-racialism and a common South African culture for all as their goal. The "Drum School" training in

journalism had equipped its writers for immediacy and aggressive marketability, so the new "fast realism", "shock poetry" and "words-as-bullets" writing typical of South Africa was born here. The Drum School however was short lived. In a swift act of parliament, Sophiatown was designated a white area, the whole town was demolished, and its residents removed to shanty towns in Alexandra and Meadowlands (in Soweto).

The writers floundered. Most Drum writers were banned; some writers went into exile to Europe and the USA, one committed suicide, and others were detained without trial for long periods; but Protest Realism and the short, sharp, immediate new genre was alive and kicking. A popular black magazine Staffrider continued the trend by publishing poetry, reviews and short stories in the Drum vein; and Mphahlele in exile wrote the highly successful autobiographical protest realist novel Down Second Avenue (1959) which for the first time gave the outside world a clear picture of what it was like for a black person to live under Apartheid.

In the 1950's and 60's, black South African writing was also fuelled by the phenomenal output of African literature (particularly novels) from the rest of the continent. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka (who later was the first African writer to receive the Nobel prize for literature), Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah inspired South African writers by their unequivocal stand against Apartheid, and their insistence on the African writer's active political participation in the struggle against both colonialism and neo-colonialism. Soyinka had been jailed for his part in an attempted coup in Nigeria (he commandeered the State radio station); Ayi Kwei Armah was exiled from his native Ghana for his criticism of Kwame Nkrumah; and Ngugi's novels were banned in his own country, Kenya. An African

writer, they were saying, is first and foremost a prophet, who is often persecuted, but who has to stand for the truth at all costs, and to fight for political rights in his country. South African writers were also challenged by the so-called "language debate" in African literature. Should an African writer write in English (or French), the "language of the oppressor" or in their own language? Achebe and Soyinka claimed that English would reach a wider audience than say, Fante or Gikuyu, which weren't even understood by Africans living in nearby areas of the same country, but Ngugi called English the "tool of the oppressor, used to subjugate and colonise"<sup>4</sup>. In South Africa, the debate was a little more complex. Vervoerd's Apartheid policy had forbidden the medium of English in Black schools and homelands, claiming that students had to learn in their own languages. Therefore English in South Africa was ironically seen as the "language of liberation" used to unite ethnic groups that had been separated and disempowered by Apartheid. South African black writers then took to English avidly, in spite of its colonial associations. In reply to Ngugi's accusations, South African writers argued that English was an "African language". Dambudzo Marechera, an experimental writer comments:

I took to the English language like a duck takes to water. I was therefore a keen accomplice in my own mental colonisation. But for a black writer, the language is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga-duels with the language before you can make it do all you want it to do.<sup>5</sup>

Ezekiel Mphahlele, acknowledging the colonial associations of English, also advocated that it be transformed and used as a weapon of the "struggle against Apartheid". His words inspired a new generation of inventive black poetry.



Taking the white man's language, dislocating his syntax, recharging his words with new strength and sometimes with new meaning before hurling them back in his teeth, while upsetting his self-righteous complacency and cliches, our poetry rehabilitates such terms as African and Blackness, Beauty and Peace.<sup>6</sup>

Chris Van Wyk, a poet from Soweto, described the English language as "slippery as soap", and in a celebrated poem, shows how the governing authorities used words to manipulate and lie about how political prisoners like Steve Biko supposedly died in detention. English, he argued, needed to be manipulated by black people to make it their own.

#### **IN DETENTION**

He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself  
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He hanged himself  
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself while washing  
He slipped from the ninth floor  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He slipped from the ninth floor while washing  
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping  
He hung from a piece of soap while washing

But the dynamism of this type of writing could not survive the relentless and continual political onslaught on the part of the State to squash it. By the mid-eighties,

under two succeeding states of emergency, the leading poets and writers in South Africa were banned or in exile, or both. The two leading Black consciousness poets Wally Mongane Serote and Sipho Sepamla were in exile; Ezekiel Mphahlele and the remaining Drum School also fled into exile; and Nadine Gordimer was placed under a banning order which forbade her to speak in public to more than two people. Even Afrikaans writers, who had until now been allowed more freedom than their English or black counterparts because they were considered as supportive of an Afrikaans culture, were now placed in the same category as other dissidents. Andre Brink's A Dry White Season was banned in both English and Afrikaans, and Breyten Breytenbach, the anti-Apartheid Afrikaans poet was imprisoned then deported.

Yet South African literature continued to thrive outside the country. Athol Fugard, a white Afrikaans playwright working in black townships with black actors, was in the Eighties the second most performed playwright in the world; and Nadine Gordimer's banned novels (A World of Strangers, The Conservationist, Burgher's Daughter, July's People), a chronicle of Apartheid "from the inside", were popular with European and American audiences and were translated into more than thirteen languages.

Inside the country, however, literature went underground. Possessing Steve Biko's I Write What I like or Nelson Mandela's No Easy Walk to Freedom was a serious crime. Yet black consciousness poetry and township theatre thrived at illegal political gatherings, the poets sometimes paying with their life for their recitations. The poetry was understandably sloganeering, aggressive and radically persuasive, the "equivalent of a black power salute" as one critic describes it. Style was sacrificed to content, and any ornamentation or experiment viewed as

unnecessary indulgence getting in the way of a clear "message". The writer's task was simply to mobilise the masses into overthrowing Apartheid, nothing more.

In this time of crisis and the radicalisation of South African literature (the 1970's and 80's), when all black political activity was banned (ANC, PAC, for example), an underground movement called the United Democratic Front, and later the Mass Democratic Movement, formed a literary/cultural branch named COSAW (the Congress of South African Writers) which began to make policy and rules for what should constitute South African literature. COSAW based its prescriptive formulation of literary policy on the 1930's Russian Literary theorist Georg Lukacs. Lukacs advocated Socialist-Realism, prose that demystified the false superstructures of the State and exposed the "Reality" and "Truth" of the political and economic situation.

COSAW, under guidance from the MDM issued the following rules for South African Writers:

- 1) Be accessible to the masses, to an underclass audience and readership
- 2) Aim to build a national culture uniting different oppressed groups under a common symbolic framework
- 3) Emphasise a concrete documentary form of realism that depicts the life experience of the oppressed
- 4) Cultural workers [writers] should submit themselves to the discipline of a formal alliance with the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM)<sup>7</sup>

Further radicalisation prescribed that whites couldn't write about blacks, or vice-versa. A conference in Gaborone, Botswana in 1980 concluded that "because whites do not share the total living conditions of blacks, it

is not possible to write about them with any degree of accuracy"; and further, that Athol Fugard's theatre was "invalid".

Nadine Gordimer, later to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, was the best known writer to join COSAW and legitimate its policies. She followed Lukacs's ideas, particularly where it came to characterisation and message. Characters, according to Lukacs, were to be recognisable types, and Gordimer among others followed this formula, creating recognisable South African types to fill her novels--The Oppressor, the Liberal, the Oppressed, the Sell-Out. The message should be clear--the content should not be obscured by elaborate styles such as Modernism, experiment or artifice. Realism is the "window" through which readers see the truth of the writer's words.

The first to protest this stultification of writing into formula was Ezekiel Mphahlele, who had now returned to South Africa as the professor of a new African Literature department at a prominent university. He complained that South African literature was dying because of a too rigid formula, and that the message was always the same:

The main weakness in South African writers is that they are hyper conscious of the race problem in the country. They are so obsessed with the subject of race and colour that when they set about writing creatively they imagine that the plot they are going to devise, the characters they are going to create and the setting they are going to exploit, must all subserve an important message or important discovery they think they have made in race relations.<sup>8</sup>

The new president of COSAW in the late eighties, Njabulo Ndebele, who succeeded Mphahlele as Head of African Literature, and also a recently returned exile from the USA, attempted to deal with this deadlock by criticising Lukacs's Character Types. Types, he said, do not transform society or say anything about a real South Africa at all.

Little transformation in reader consciousness is to be expected since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition: recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms.<sup>9</sup>

But it appeared that it was too late for reform. South African writing was now stuck within the parameters of a narrowly defined, heavily prescribed Protest Realism. Staffrider critics scorned experimentation as reactionary, and publicly mocked writers who indulged in "playing with words while Africa was ablaze". The important thing was to mobilise mass action against Apartheid, to conscientise and shock; and in such a climate there was apparently no room for any "indulgence". Some black writers called this equation illogical. Why should Realism = authenticity/political commitment and experiment = irrelevance? The experimental writer Dambudzo Marechera, who was working hard to transform English into an "African language" attacked realism for its rigidity, and Socialist Realism for its naive attempt to mirror the "Real" South African situation.

To write as though only one kind of reality subsists in the world is to act out a mentally retarded mime, for a mentally deficient audience.... If anyone is living in an abnormal society such as South Africa, then only abnormal

expression can express that society. Realist documentaries cannot.<sup>10</sup>

James Matthews, one of the Drum School who had also worked for the playful transformation of the English language and the inventive use of style to create an "Africanness" in English literature, complained too in a poem.

they say  
writing poetry at  
this stage of  
our struggle is  
absurd, and writing  
black protest poetry  
is even worse  
people need direction  
and not words  
poets, black poets  
have written themselves  
into a dead end

they say  
my neighbours do  
not even read

what i've written  
and that poetry  
will not bring

about any changes  
in our situation  
a revolution can  
do without poets  
poets should switch to  
things more constructive  
furthering a revolution  
offer a solution  
to the problem

(their contempt  
is acid eating  
the flesh of  
my poetical work)

Joining this protest against the rigidification of South African literature was the Afrikaans writer writing in English, winner of the 1984 Booker Prize, JM Coetzee. Internationally, he had become the most important writer after Nadine Gordimer precisely because of his decisive break with the realist conventions and traditions of early South African writing. Coetzee used allegory, humour (rare in South African literature), and experimental stream-of-consciousness techniques in his novels, claiming to "dissect the myths of South African society" at a deeper level than mere liberal protest at injustice. Coetzee was criticised and condemned by the MDM and South African literary critics alike because he was not portraying a Realist South Africa, and so was condemned to "irrelevance". But at a public literary festival in 1986, where he received the Booker Prize for fiction, JM Coetzee gave the strongest public condemnation of the MDM's policy yet, and the evening turned into a heated debate between Gordimer (for Socialist Realism) vs Coetzee (for the freedom of the writer to write what and how he likes). Gordimer, consistent with the COSAW policy, argued that a

close, journalistic Realism was the most effective way to apprehend the South African reality, whereas Coetzee argued that South African literature should not be confused with either South African history or South African journalism.

A novel operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusion. It does not operate in terms of the procedures of history or journalism and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history or journalism as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, Coetzee's novels do deal with the South African political reality, but also cleverly criticise the whole South African literary debate as well. His first major novel (In the Heart of the Country), deals with the plight of the Afrikaner who lives under the illusion that South Africa is a romantic paradise; Foe criticises the notion that the writer can be a prophet prescribing moral dictates to his people; Waiting for the Barbarians describes the predicament of the white liberal who thinks that protest can change political realities; and Life and Times of Michael K deals with the inability of the white writer to write about black experience.

The end of Apartheid and the coming to power of the ANC in 1992 saw the unbanning of literary works in South Africa, the loosening of restrictions on writers and the disbanding of the MDM. The deadlock was over. But, perhaps not surprisingly, this led to the birth of a new crisis in South African literature: what do we write about now? The mode of writing since the early twenties had been protest over Apartheid. Writers were fuelled on the outrage, anger and injustice of the political situation and the task to conscientise, correct, struggle against a common enemy. Further, narrow prescriptions of what constituted



literature had given security and definition to a writer's aims. It had been effective, but had severely limited South African literature in its viewpoint, its purpose, and its direction. The moral task of protest had stimulated literature up to a point, yet, in Mphahlele's words, its preoccupation with race problems and its insistence on a political role may have proved inimical to its growth. It never really flourished into a truly authentic South African national literature. In some way, it merely reflected the crisis, and simply perpetuated Apartheid (by its insistence on divisions of "Black", "White", "Afrikaans" and "English" writing and its fixation on the political nature of human existence.

By contrast, there appears to be a dearth of new, dynamic writing in post-Apartheid South Africa. New aims and goals need to be found and old ones discarded if the literature is not to flounder. The ANC cultural leader Albie Sachs, on his return from exile, in response to this crisis has suggested that all rules on writing in South Africa in his words "be banned a period of five years to allow a new freedom in writing to emerge." But this type of thinking remains caught in the old prescriptions and polarisations. Perhaps dictating new rules about what should and should not be written is exactly what is strangling new talent.

Gordimer continues to write realist portrayals of what is now a post-Apartheid "struggle" for justice; Coetzee's latest novel, on the other hand, has no direct reference to South Africa at all, being the diary of a Russian writer caught between writing what he "ought" to write (political protest) and what he "wants to write" (the personal tragedy of the death of his son); Mphahlele, Ndebele and the Black protest poets have been silent; and Breytenbach has chosen to remain in exile after a swift condemnation of the literary climate in South Africa.

One hopes that the end of Apartheid will in time allow a new South African writing to emerge that is not restrictive, or polarised into camps, or obsessed with race to the exclusion of other issues. But what will emerge from a post-Apartheid, New South Africa remains to be seen....

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