# **Some Aspects of South African Literature (1996)**

by

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It is difficult after a period of thirty-four years of exile to make a fair or even an educated judgment of South African literature. Besides, there are fundamental questions of definition to be asked about this literature, even if one is unable in the end to answer the questions adequately. One may indeed be required to ask as a primary question: when did South African literature become South African? Does a political entity called South Africa presuppose a literature that is South African? A partial answer may well be that South African literature is part of a definable intellectual past that has either culminated in the phenomenon of "a South African literature" or is in the process of doing so. Then one must look carefully at the cultural and intellectual threads that are on their way to becoming an integrated body of literature.

The first problem affecting the development of a South African literature in the past was simply prejudice. Prejudice has been so rampant in the South African political and cultural ethos that few things developed outside its colouring factor. By *prejudice* here I do not mean only the idea of rejecting another person because of his or her race, but rather the extreme quality of subjectivity which makes everything that is threatening or undesirable so powerful that it poisons the mind's judgment. Many causes led to this state of mind, including fear, questioning intellectual capacity, et cetera; but one of the consequences was a delay in the development of anything calling itself South African literature.

Consequently, one can argue that various cultural streams, antagonistic to one another, were unable in the past to construct an

integrated body of national literature. First of all, South Africa as the South Africa of our discussion was created as a convenience to meet the economic needs of an expanding or colonizing Europe. Europe was concerned with the available resources it so desperately needed in terms both of this expanding population and also of its industrialization project. It follows that Europe was not interested in expanding the intellectual horizons of peoples in regions "far and wide." The nature of its interest was in the development of some partially qualified artisans.

The colonizers themselves demonstrated little scientific or creative talent. They pursued physical goals of bravery in their search for resources, and a certain degree of curiosity combined initially with a sense of wonderment: hence the diaries and records of adventures by those who were literature. Even those who were part of missionary teams were primarily concerned with extending the interests of their colonial states and brought with them political identities that were primarily national interests couched in terms of religious dogmas. In a situation like this, how does an individual far away from home retain his/her culture, or what literature is likely to emerge in such a situation? We might suppose that, afflicted by homesickness, such individuals inevitably become subject to a fierce desire to re-create the world that has been lost. Imitation becomes a necessity. A sense of inferiority is compensated for by the recreation of the new Londons, new Bremens, new Englands, new Yorks.

What this means in terms of literature is a long-delayed process of cutting the cultural umbilical cord. In short, immigrants from England are English long after the actual reality of being English has been eaten up by the reality of time and distance from the cultural centre of the real English world. Further, a fixation develops that the English cultural reality which once constituted life is an ideal for all time. The England once idealized persists long after the dynamics of English cultural influence have been transformed at the original base.

As a consequence, the colonizing community is culturally unable to share and/or integrate with the local cultural community, which it inevitably views with disdain and contempt. In addition, this colonizing populace can no longer truly claim convincing access to the best of English culture. The tragic result is a gradual barbarization of the colonizers, who eventually are looked upon as more savage than the people they went out to "civilize". To the horror of the colonizers, the home or metropolitan culture secretly or even publicly may consider the natives more civilized than the barbarized colonizers. At the same time it modifies its controls over the colonized, leading to the horror that the mother country does not understand the mind of the natives.

At this point the hypothetical question is: how do the literary or artistic traditions of the colonizers respond to this challenging situation? The choice for them is either to participate in the spirit of revolt by the colonized or to identify with the liberalism of the mother country. And since it becomes clear that they can only hold on to the colonies with the help of the colonizing country or potentially with alliances that are anathema to the other country and to themselves, their reaction to any revolt is physical, brutal. And the intellectuals of the colonial society, still so deeply culturally indebted to the mother country, respond at best moralistically.

Early Afrikaner "documentary" literature is a record of personal and individual episodes. But the most vigorous literature is found in the powerful oral literature of the African populace, a literature celebratory of its values and traditions and history. It is a literature that is vigorous and satirical, lampooning the colonial life-style. As there is not much systematic study of the literature celebratory of its values and traditions and history. It is a literature that is vigorous and satirical, lampooning the colonial life-style. As there is not much systematic study of the literature of this era of Euro-African confrontation, we can only point out that much of the oral literature

which is available is concerned with a heroic reaffirmation of a society confronting a foreign invasion. This is powerfully represented in the oral literature of the Moshoeshoe era on the one hand and the Hitsa era on the other. The flourishing of this heroic oral literature is no better represented than in the era of the Cetshwayo among the Zulus. One stanza fully summarizes the relentless heroic resistance of the Cetshwayo era: "The proud calf Ndaba/That stabs even as it is bending on one knee." The stanza refers to the heroic wars against the English in which the English army was humiliated and defeated by the Zulus (only to recoup its reputation by a second onslaught, which caught the Zulus by surprise).

Our intention here is not to elaborate on the oral literature of this period but to summarize some of the aspects characterizing the heroic resistance against the invaders, in an era which is characterized by divisions and in which a segment of the African people is seduced by "Christian" affiliation which purport to bring a new humanistic era but in actuality are fundamentally concerned with reinforcing the colonial armies with political, cultural, and military alliances. The African world is depicted as deeply influenced either by those who advocate resistance or by those who advocate the "civilized" life-style that the colonizers were claiming to bring. Needless to say, this division served, as it was intended to, the interest and strategies of invasion. The converts, led by their chiefs, aspired to illegitimately constructed positions within their own society. Thus the African heroic poetry celebrates on the one hand the "Christian" hero (generally a prince from the Junior Royal House) and the heroic leader from the nationally endorsed segment of the society. The best heroic poetry is represented by the latter. The most cacophonic literature is that allied with the invaders claiming to fight the wars of Christ. The physical confrontation between the African world and the Western world is no better represented than in this division within the African world, projecting as it did the idea of the Christian in battle against the barbarian.

Needless to say, with the evolution of a literature culture the later records reflecting South African literature become more accessible, and this literature can therefore be better analyzed. It should not be assumed that the later South African literature was neatly divided along racial lines between those who espoused literary traditions and those who espoused nonliterary traditions. This literature comprised both oral and written literature. While the literary factor dominated the world of the official records, the nonofficial world flourished, particularly through the social and political song. The categories of song were and are both the "musical" song and the chanted poem.

As the South African state formally emerges in 1910, it boasts a heritage of literature dealing with a variety of themes, most dominantly about nature, personal matters, and political issues. Here again, a much deeper study is yet to be made of the relation between the African stream and the non-African-stream. The latter is characterized by what was later to characterize the bulk of South African literature. This non-African South African literature is characterized stylistically and thematically by an imitative quality derived from its European influence. This influence is even deeper than that which affected Australian, American, and Canadian literatures. The European influence persists in countries where European languages are spoken, particularly French and English. Only Latin American literature is vigorously trying to shed this influence and, in the process, create a powerful and original postcolonial literature. South African literature, particularly in English remains on the whole obsequious to the European models. Thanks to writers like Douglas Livingstone, the model has become less and less dominant and is in the process is being replaced by a more vigorous literature, native-born or natively anchored. Afrikaans literature, both in Afrikaans and in works written by Afrikaners in English, is more vigorously concerned with local themes and local episodes, and handles them more convincingly. In my opinion,

Afrikaans literature has shed the curse of Europeanism in literature except insofar it is a factor of relation in the world context. Its literature seems to have a future from within its native context, even in cases where it deals with European-based themes. Some of the greatest and most innovative South African writers of European origin are possibly going to emerge among the Afrikaners. This is not to say that they will be the greatest on the African continent but rather the greatest within the framework of the postcolonial writers. On the other hand, the seduction of Europe will remain a factor for some time or for many years. The Afrikaners may better resolve the problem of being Europeans in Africa and consequently fashion a literature which in spirit will be closer to Latin American literature. English literature in South Africa may run out of themes and be poisoned by Europeanism or Americanism.

This logically leads us to the question of what African literature will evolve into. Two powerful streams will continue to dominate: namely, the oral and the literary. South African oral literature, like many African oral literatures, is one of the most vigorous and most elaborate extant in the world today. As its credibility is gradually restored by more common usage and exposure via television, radio, the stage, and the desacralization of literality in modern life, oral literature and its traditions will earn a new respectability.

In recent years oral literature has flourished effectively in pubic stadiums and in more private venues. Unfortunately, there are numerous quacks rushing to the podiums, becoming famous for their second-rate oral performances. Usually these performers are latter-day converts who do not understand that the greatest oral literature requires a careful balance of theme and performance. In short, shouting a series of statements (usually of a sensational political nature) and prancing about the stage does not constitute a quality performance of this poetry. For the poetry to be great, the theme must be great and the style of presentation must correspond to that

theme. The performance of oral literature is an art requiring vigorous training both in the selecting of a public event and in its correct projection in performance. Also, the performance itself requires a participating and highly critical audience. Applauding on such occasions is appropriate only if the work is genuine, intellectual, and possesses potentially universal relevance. There is a mistaken view that the performance is the primary constituent, but in fact the art is in the intelligent interweaving of profound oral statements and their carefully organized projection in various controlled dance-like movements corresponding to the theme.

The best and the greatest artist of the oral tradition in modern times was without doubt Cijimpi Msomi of Zululand, who unfortunately was killed at an early age. Other oral performers do not by any stretch of the imagination equal this great genius of the oral tradition. Although I have listened to many such artists, I can say without qualification that Cijimpi Msomi will remain the greatest, equaling in stature such oral artists as Magolwane, Mshongweni, and their like. The greatest problem of the latter-day oral performers think, about the king or sensational themes, but rather bout lasting values; the king or theme is merely a peg.

Written literature by Africans in the earlier period, when literacy was low, had a surprisingly great significance and relevance. The reason was that Africans did not look at writing with a sense of awe. On the contrary, to Africans, written literature violated one of the most important literary tenets by privatizing literature. Literature was understood to possess value by being disseminated in communally organized contexts. Thus, people were curious about the new written literature, yet not impressed by the status of the exotic act of writing. What interested the old people of African tradition was the story and not the ideas of affiliation into a supposedly intellectual circle. It was in that sense that many old people who were not versed in writing asked those who could write to read the story to them. Literacy in the

sense of accessibility of knowledge was more rampant in the early periods than in the present era. Africans who could write wrote books of significance as a service to the community and the nation as a whole. In short, a sense of community and nationhood inspired those who wrote great and significant books more than did financial remuneration. In fact, many Africans used their land and stocks as collateral for their publications. This was particularly true of remnant aristocratic families that still had land. Strangely, then, there were greater and more significant literary works in the earlier period than in later years, when there was comparatively a wider degree of literacy.

The intervention of apartheid as a doctrinaire and controlling system of thought brought about a distorted phenomenon in African literature. Severe censorship and the emergence of government-controlled and –sponsored publications meant an increase in the output of written African literature but with themes carefully steered way from matters political. Those who were able to be published had to be careful to avoid themes that might be deemed suspect by the government monitoring systems. The government's policies thus encouraged a literature that was large in volume and thin in content. Only a few good writers survived the censor's pen. And the books still in use in schools today are in many cases the same ones that were used some forty years ago.

Thus was born the idea of a direct correlation between writing and the market. The market itself was government-controlled through its policy of Bantu Education, a lower quality education but large in volume and geared to producing poorly qualified black people. Further, the government indirectly and directly created a system of monitoring African-language departments through the appointment of whites only partially capable of speaking the African languages. The whole system of education was organized in such a way that an African child could only be exposed to his or her mother tongue at

the lowest levels. Thereafter the languages of competence were designed to be Afrikaans and English.

The African child was encouraged, sometimes in the name of language progress, to speak a *fanakalo* language—that is, a crossbreed language blending English and Afrikaans and one or more African tongues. Thus began the process of alienation from the mother tongue, combined with the idea of the non-functionality of these languages in places of employment. The new fanakalo African language (slang creole) challenged what came to be designated as Old Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Venda, et cetera—actually a reference to the classical variety of the language.

Needless to say, there emerged a generation which was only partially competent in the mother tongue. The weeding out of African students at the early level guaranteed cheap unqualified labour, people only semiliterate in the mother tongue. The result was that the African literature produced often was and is of low quality and centered on insignificant and innocuous themes. The outstanding works of this period are those written by such figures as C. Msimang, D.B.Z. Ntuli, Kubheka, and Nyembezi, the once great J.C. Dlamini. It should not be assumed that the censors lance killed only African writers. There were a sizable number of Afrikaans writers who were censored and/or driven into exile. Some dies, desperate and demoralized.

Finally, one must comment on fighting literature, mainly written and performed by ANC cadres. And there were others who wrote literature which we all looked forward to reading. Among the significant writers in this category are Alex la Guma, Ronald Segal, Nadine Gordimer, Wally Serote, Ingrid Jonker, Ingrid de Kok, Alfred Aqbula, Alfred Hutchison, James Matthews, and Dennis Brutus. Most of these wrote in English, a factor that tended to limit the circulation of their works to a certain percentage of the population—

an accusation, that might stick in the future. However, it must be borne in mind that the focus of these writers was on creating a significant critique of apartheid in order to mobilize the intellectuals.

We are now about to enter a new era, a golden age. The often-invoked New South Africa will be new only if its spirit and external reality is refurbished to give birth to a child whose spirit will be firmly anchored in the world in which it is born.