

HISTORICAL PROBLEMATICS IN BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

by

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Raymond Williams, the brilliant English Marxist and cultural materialist, has convincingly argued that the historical range, conceptual depth and textural quality designated by the concept of literature, is constantly undergoing modification, transformation and restructuring. The central determinants of this process of evolution and progression are a complex ensemble of political, cultural, historical and economic factors. This elasticity of the concept of literature is very much apparent and evident in the historical structure of South African literature, especially in our present time, a context in which political stresses and forces impinge dramatically on the figuration of cultural formations. The structure of South African literature consists of several major components: literature written by blacks and whites (mostly of English ancestry) in the English language; literature written by mostly white Afrikaners and some so-called Coloureds (people of mixed parentage) in the Afrikaans language; and literature written exclusively by blacks in the various African languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Sothe, Venda, Ndebele, etc.), which is contiguous to oral literature realized in these languages. The people of Indian and Jewish ancestry have contributed mainly to the mainstream of English literature. This elementary breakdown of the unified structure of South African literature clearly indicates the complex nature of South African national literature .

Though the present essay will confine itself to the component of black South African literature, it is imperative here to register the fact that it is the secret war, mostly fought underground, between the South African literature written in English and that written in the African languages which has been the shaping force of our national literature and its literary history. It will only be beyond the border lines of Apartheid, when its walls would have crumbled under the weight of the political storm unleashed by the people, that the rivalry between these two literatures would find the point of their mutual reconciliation. At the moment, the literature written in the English language exercises hegemony over other literatures. The survival and importance of Afrikaans literature in a post-Apartheid era, and perhaps post-revolutionary epoch, will undoubtedly be a fascinating and taxing question because today the peculiar dominance of this literature is largely due to it being nurtured by the ideological state apparatuses of Apartheid. The very same ideological state apparatuses that have literally destroyed black literary culture in South Africa by repressing and scattering into

exile two outstanding literary movements or schools: in the 1950s, the Drum writers (Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane, and many others) who had initiated the Sophiatown Renaissance modelled after the black American Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; in the 1970s the Staffrider writers (Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane, Assop Patel, and many others) who had revived the literary brilliance of black culture which had nearly perished in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.

It is within this historical contextual background that contemporary black South African literature should perhaps be examined in and of itself. Within the structure of black South African literature two literary traditions converge and contest each other's right of existence and beingness: the English language literary tradition founded by Olive Schreiner passing through Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head to Laurette Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali; the other literary tradition in the African languages has many complex tributaries, but in the main stretches from Ntsikana passing through Thomas Mofolo and Mqhayi to Mazisi Kunene. Though not much will be said about it in this short sketch, oral literature is the sub-stream of all literary writing in South Africa we usually refer to the English language writing tradition within it, since it exercises hegemony over all literary production realized there. The political crisis in which the South African Apartheid State finds itself, has extended to the cultural sphere of literary creativity, in that the hegemony of English language writing by black writers is in a state of severe crisis, as it will be apparent in a moment.

All the component forms of black South African literature are unified by their total opposition to Apartheid. The first literary season of modern black South African literature was that constituted by the Drum writers in the Sophiatown Renaissance which last approximately from 1954 to 1960 within the geographical borders of South Africa. In this first literary season one finds a constellation of particular literary genres. Here perhaps the predominant literary forms are the autobiography and literary criticism; predominance is meant in the sense of qualitative brilliance and not necessarily in the sense of productive abundance. Forming a particular lineage, are the following autobiographies: Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*, Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me On History*, Alfred Hutchinson's *Road to Ghana*, among many others. In these autobiographies the evilness of Apartheid is profoundly lamented, and all express a wish of escaping its rule and oppression. Within the structures of their autobiographies these writers seek to deflect Apartheid in contrastive ways: while Mphahlele counter-poses Modernity against Tradition, Modisane juxtaposes Art against History, and Hutchinson reigns Pan-Africanism against Nationalism. All these writers ended in exile, where their literary fortunes were to vary remarkably. Hutchinson died early in exile, while Mphahlele returned to South Africa in 1977, and Modisane died recently (May 1986) here in West Germany

in Dortmund. Another important literary lineage of the Sophiatown Renaissance was literary and cultural criticism: the representative works here are Lewis Nkosi's *Home and Exile* and Ezekiel Mphahlele's *An African Image*. Both of these books are the first of literary criticism written in the English language by Africans on the continent. Lewis Nkosi in his book was centrally concerned, among other concerns, with drawing into a complementary whole the Harlem Renaissance and the Sophiatown Renaissance (in other words, attempting to draw parallels between the cultural textures of black Americans and black South Africans). Mphahlele, on the other hand, was concerned with searching for a proper and correct black image of the African in the writings of white writers, principally American (e.g. Faulkner) and South African (e.g. Paton). The only work of creative writing which was of outstanding quality were the short stories of Can Themba: they show him to have been a stylist of tremendous poetic power and ample imagination.

This literary season and these writers perished in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and were in the terror which accompanied the State of Emergency of 1960-61, both of which perpetrated by the state forces of Apartheid. In this literary and cultural graveyard of black writing, the interregnum between two black literary seasons, white writing in the form of Afrikaans literature emerged and flourished, not in the least concerned with the cultural tragedy that had befallen their black compatriots. Breyten Breytenbach, Andre Brink, Etienne Le Roux, and others, were part of the Sestigers writers who in a genuine way brought about a renaissance of Afrikaans literary and today culture. If Breytenbach in *The True Confessions Of An Albino Terrorist* violently rejects the Sestigers literary phenomenon as a horrible travesty of literary justice, it is understandable why. The occupation of the center stage by white writers went unchallenged for fifteen years, 1961 to 1976, that is until the Soweto Rebellion. It must be emphasised that starting from the Sharpeville crisis of 1960 to the present, the literary work (consisting of novels and criticism) of Nadine Gordimer has been politically interrogating our national history. It is here that lies the great uniqueness of her work.

If writing in the English language was felt and perceived by the Sophiatown Renaissance writers (e.g. Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi) as an elected natural choice rather than as an imposed historical choice, the next generation of black writers, the Staffrider writers, were too troubled by many unconscious eviscerations. But for the moment, it is necessary to map the positioning of literary genres within the space of this second literary season. This season lasted from the Soweto Rebellion of 1976 to about the re-emergence of free black labour unions in 1983. The Staffrider writers excelled in the literary genres of short story and poetry; and some distant behind, the novel. The really high-waters of this literary season are the following collection of short stories: *Mtutuzeli*

Matshoba's *Call Me Not A Man* and Njabulo S. Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories*. In the main, the stories assembled in these two books not only indict the cruelty of Apartheid and its many attendant horrors, but also, with deep empathy, portray the resiliency of black people and the solidness of African cultures. What is even more important historically, is that they announce obliquely that Apartheid is in its dying moments. Staffrider writers also produced poetry of real quality, thereby re-establishing poetic continuity with the poetry of H.E.E. Dhlomo, which had appeared forty-years earlier. The important poets here are Mongane Wally Serote, Mafika Pascal Gwala, and perhaps, Siphe Sepamla. Mongane Serote and Sipho Sepamla were subsequently to write novels which lacked qualitative brilliance.

When one compares the two literary moments, the Sophiatown Renaissance writers and Staffrider writers, it is clear that there has been a marked shift in the importance and spacing of literary genres within the literary relationships of contemporary black South African literature. Whereas in the earlier era literary criticism and autobiography were predominant, in the later era, it is the short story and poetry which are premier. What was happening in South Africa more than confirms the theory recently developed by the Italian Marxist literary critic Franco Moretti which conceptually theorises the geographical and literary spacing of literary genres within a particular historical moment. Moretti had in mind the displacing of each other, the novel and the tragedy, within the cultural and geographical space of Modernism.

At the high-point of the Staffrider writer season, two women writers appeared, whose historical importance is becoming clearer and clearer with the passage of time. Miriam Tlali with her three novels, *Muriel At Metropolitan*, *Amandla* and *Mihloti*, and Laretta Ngcobo with *Cross of Gold*, have indicated a serious crisis in our literary culture today. The historical importance of these novels lies in having had the integrity of question the historical and cultural validity of blacks writing in the English language when the African languages are in a state of abeyance. They do this not theoretically but by collapsing and exploding the English language in the very process of writing. It is the exploding of the English language brilliantly realized by Tlali and Ngcobo which has blinded Lewis Nkosi in believing that their novels are stylistically colorless are only documentary tracts devoid of a creative narrative drive. In a series of recent articles in a Nigerian weekly, Lewis Nkosi is persisting in making these false literary accusations (Lewis Nkosi: "Writing under Siege: Literature and Liberation in South Africa", *The African Guardian*, April 9, 1987, p. 27; and *The African Guardian*, April 16, 1987, p. 22). The real issue posed by the writings of Laretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali is not their stylistic quality or lack of it, but rather, whether the writing in the English language by black South African writers is a natural choice decided by the writers themselves or a historical dilemma imposed

on the writers by the forces that dominate South Africa today. What Lewis Nkosi really reacts against in the novels of Loretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali is indicating that African writers was a false historical undertaking which may prove more and more detrimental as the hour of political liberation nears. This then, is the real reason for the persistence of Lewis Nkosi's hostility to these women writers. It has nothing to do with misogyny, but everything to do with a colossal historical misapprehension. To be fair, Nkosi is also hostile towards the novels of Sipho Sepamla and Mongane Wally Serote, who evince a similar crisis of the English language in black creative writing in South Africa today. On the other hand, writers like Njabulo S. Ndebele and Ahmed Essop feel secure and undisturbed by the poetics of the style of the English language. The recent great novels by Nadine Gordimer are weakened by her refusal of incapability of confronting the great literary traditions in the African languages. It is here that she will be held to account to the judgement of history. The affinities between Loretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali, who do not belong to the Staffrider school of writers, with some members of this school on the question of the crisis of the English language in black creative writing, clearly shows that is an issue with deeper historical coordinates. In his recent appeal to black writers to abandon the English language and write in the African languages, Daniel P. Kunene, has failed perhaps to register the historical depth of this problem (Daniel P. Kunene: "Language, Literature and the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa", Staffrider , vol. 6 no. 3, 1986).

Whereas previous to the Soweto Rebellion of 1976, not even a small iota of Afrikaans literature could be considered part of the black South African creative writing, the political consciousness which has enveloped the country since that historical trough line, has made possible the incorporation of the Afrikaans literature by the so-called Coloureds (children of our black mothers) as part of the black literary experience. Since the political definition of blackness since 1976 has widened to incorporate a wider historical space by including Indians and so-called Coloureds, invariably their literature also is incorporated within the black literary space. For a large portion, if not a majority of the so-called Coloureds, their mother tongue is Afrikaans. If Adam Small yesterday belonged to another socio-literary category, today unquestionably he is a central part of black South African literature. What all this proves is that the contemporary distinction between white literature and black literature in South Africa today is historically determined by political forces re-drawing and re-mapping literary boundaries within our cultural space . Beyond class politics and exploitative economic relations characteristic of capitalism, these designations will lose their historical relevance. Their aberrations will then be more than apparent. Then the great novels of Nadine Gordimer would no longer be necessary, except as literary masterpieces in various museums in a liberated South Africa, and it would be possible for a future Mazisi Kunene to write an epic on Bram Fischer in Venda or

Ndebele, or whatever language may suit her (or, him).

With the subsistence in originality of some of the Staffrider school of writers, there developed a great efflorescence of theater work. Plays like *Woza Albert*, *Asinamali*, *The Children of Asizi*, and many others, by Matsemela Manaka, Mbongeni Ngema, and others, have transformed our literary culture in South Africa today. It could safely be said that it has never happened before in our literary history that theater has held a hegemonic position within the complex literary relations of literary genres. Even the outstanding work of H.E.E. Dhlomo and R.R.R. Dhlomo in the late 1930s and the 1940s never held such a dominant position in South African literary culture. The recent (1985-1987) international success of these plays from South Africa is not accidental and fortuitous. In them, historical veracity and ideological struggle is primary. To be sure, the certainty of victory and the mocking of Apartheid ideological crisis celebrated in them, could only have been possible and is possible in relation to the recent re-emergence of combative political consciousness in the black working class. The effervescence of theater within the structure of black South African literature is organically connected to the trade union activity within the black working class. In relation to the literary lineages of South African cultural politics, these plays carry forward a particular continuity: if in the novels of Lauretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali we encounter the questioning of the legitimacy of writing in English by Africans, then in the plays of Matsemela Manaka, Mbongeni Ngema and of others, in their intermixture of English with Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Venda, etc., or in collapsing English syntactic structures into Zulu or/and Xhosa expressive forms, a transition is effected toward possibly realizing the predominance of African languages in black writing. A transition towards realizing this noble goal will not be easily effected because of a central contradiction: while internally in South African and in the context of the developing political crisis, the internal logic of these plays point toward the necessity of writing in the African languages in order to interconnect the emerging forms of political consciousness and in order to solidify emergent structures of popular culture, meanwhile externally in the international forum dominated by American economic interests in cultural matters, the very success of these plays would seem to compel Manaka, Ngema and others to continue writing in English. Here is a classic contradiction between political responsibilities and economic interests. Today in August 1987 we have to pose a question to this brilliant developing black South African theater: which way?

Meanwhile, within the last year or so, a new theater from , about and within the working class, has emerged in South Africa. The cultural and political coordinates of this new black theater is deeply tied to the unfolding political situation and to the present general strike of mine workers presently radiating throughout the country. Most of these plays, *Usuku (The Day)*, *Itheshu (The*

Job), Qonda's Vigilantes , Gallows for Mr. Scariot Mpimpi ('Mpimpi' is a scab and/or traitor), most of which are collectively written in an African language, are a direct product of the developing political crisis. They are a process on intervention into and giving direction to South African history. Their artistic value may be temporary, but their fundamental importance lies in their introducing at a critical moment a particular form of historical consciousness into our literary systems and cultural process. Their singular literary value will be more apparent in a post-Apartheid and democratic South Africa.

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