Sharpeville and its Aftermath: The Novels of Richard Rive, Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, and Lauretta Ngcobo

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BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE is closely tied to political developments, which it mirrors and which either advance or retard its growth. An appreciation of Black South African literature, at any stage in its development, requires some knowledge of the corresponding political developments. Thus the Sharpeville, Vanderbijl Park, and Langa massacres, and the political and cultural repression which followed, gave rise to novels such as *Emergency* by Richard Rive, *A Night of their Own* by Peter Abrahams, *In the Fog of the Season's End* by Alex La Guma and, more recently, *Cross of Gold* by Lauretta Ngcobo. Further (though outside the scope of this study), poets such as Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgositsile, and Arthur Nortje — and, at least, one major play by Lewis Nkosi — also emerged as a response to Sharpeville and its aftermath.

The immediate cause of the disturbances in Sharpeville, Vanderbijl Park, Langa, and other Black residential areas was the application of the pass laws. Commenting on passes as a perennial source of grievance among Africans, Edward Roux writes:

> Anti-pass law agitation in some form or other never completely dies down in South Africa, for the pass law is a perennial source of grievance . . . The pass laws . . . held the African people in conditions of abject poverty and subjection; . . . were the cause of sharp racial friction between the peoples of South Africa; upheld the cheap labour system which resulted in malnutrition, starvation and disease; and filled gaols with innocent people, thus creating widespread crime.[1]

He adds that the pass laws, which had become the symbol of the African people's oppression, roused Africans to new heights of protest and plunged South Africa into the Sharpeville crisis, "so that the name Sharpeville has become, like 'Amritsar,' 'St Bartholomew' and 'Peterloo,' a symbol of massacre."[2] Passes remain a burning issue among Africans and the subject recurs among Black writers of every generation.

At a press conference in Johannesburg on Friday, 18 March 1960, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, leader of the Pan-African Congress (PAC), a splinter group from the African National Congress (ANC), announced the launching of an anti-pass campaign, which would begin on the following Monday. PAC organizers met with their greatest success in Vereeniging, about thirty-five miles south of Johannesburg, and in Cape Town. In Vanderbijl Park, the centre of South Africa's steel industry, several thousand people gathered outside the police station and demanded to be arrested for being without their passes. The police tried to disperse them with tear gas. Some people retaliated with stones and the police opened fire, killing two people. The demonstrators scattered and dispersed. In Sharpeville, a number of demonstrators had been swelling outside the police station since morning. Around midday police reinforcements from neighbouring stations arrived. The police opened fire on the demonstrators and continued to shoot as the crowd fled. One hundred and eighty-seven people were wounded, including forty women and eight children. Sixty-seven died, many of them shot in the back. In Langa, near Cape Town, police with batons charged a crowd of about 10,000 people gathered to hear the official reply to their demands for better wages and an end to the pass system. Some people resisted and the police opened fire, killing two and wounding several others. The people turned on the police and set government buildings on fire.[3]

Demonstrations and strikes broke out in many parts of South Africa in response to the Sharpeville, Vanderbijl Park, and Langa massacres. The government retaliated in a way which was to have far reaching consequences for African politics and culture. Government spokesmen circulated reports to the effect that instructions had been issued to the police on 26 March to stop

arresting people for pass offences. However, the police intensified their secret raids on suspected leaders of the African resistance movement. They arrested many strike organizers and their followers. Armed vehicles patrolled the townships and public meetings were banned throughout the country. In defiance, Phillip Kgosana, a 23-year-old student at the University of Cape Town who was also the regional secretary of the PAC in the Western Cape, marched at the head of a column of 30,000 Blacks on Wednesday, 30 March. They marched the ten miles from the townships to the Houses of Parliament to demand the release of all the people who had been arrested in connection with the anti-pass campaign, an end to police harassment, and an interview with the Minister of Justice. The police promised to arrange the interview and asked Kgosana to dismiss the demonstrators, which he did. Two days later he was arrested and the promised interview never took place.

On the same Wednesday as the march a state of emergency was declared. The Minister of Justice, Mr. Erasmus, armed himself with sweeping powers, including the power to detain indefinitely without trial any person suspected of engaging in subversive activities against the state. Heavy penalties were imposed for distributing any publications or pamphlets critical of the state. In the next three years these censorship laws were to be tightened and applied in such a way as to make no distinction between imaginative writing and political writing of a purely polemical nature. In addition, the Unlawful Organizations Act was passed on 8 April 1960, and both the ANC and the PAC were outlawed.

By the middle of April Africans who had burnt their passes, following the example of Chief Albert Luthuli, President of the ANC, who had burnt his publicly, had begun to apply for new ones, as a result of police intimidation. An attempt by the ANC, now operating underground, to organize a general strike on 19 April met with little support. African morale was low and remained so for almost a decade during which government repression intensified. This low morale, in the years intervening before the rise of Black Consciousness, is a recurring theme in Black Consciousness literature.

In 1962 the General Law or Sabotage Act, providing for house arrest and the banning of individuals suspected of subversive activities, was passed. To this was added the General Law or No Trial Act of 1963, providing for detention without trial or charges being laid for ninety days, with these days increased to one hundred and eighty in 1965 and subsequently made indefinite by the Internal Security Act of 1976. The rights of *habeas corpus* were completely waived.

The African resistance movement modified its strategies as government repression intensified. In 1961 the liberation struggle entered a new phase, after its leaders had been convinced that passive resistance was no longer viable. The ANC formed a sabotage organization called MK or *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (the Spear of the Nation), with Nelson Mandela as its chief of operations. MK began as an organization dedicated to symbolic acts of sabotage against government installations. POQO, a Cape based organization with PAC links, emerged late in 1962 and carried out attacks on White settlements in the Cape. However, with a minimum of formal leadership after the arrest of Sobukwe and his ablest lieutenants, POQO was soon eliminated; many of its members were banned or arrested, while others fled into exile.

In July 1963 the police swooped on the hideout of MK in Rivonia, where members of the organization's high command were living. The Rivonia Trial, which ran until May 1964, ended with life sentences being passed on Nelson Mandela, already serving a five-year sentence for incitement and for leaving the country illegally, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Abraham Fischer, and four others. Thereafter, the organization of the ANC and the PAC fell into the hands of Oliver Tambo and Potlako Leballo, respectively, who had both gone into exile. By 1966 the old African resistance movement inside South Africa had been effectively suppressed. Radical opposition politics, outside the framework of apartheid, became hazardous. This repression is reflected in the sparseness of radical literature, written by Blacks inside South Africa, which addresses itself to the political problems of this period. The Sharpeville and Rivonia eras, however, also brought the protest tradition in South African literature, which flourished mostly in exile, to its zenith.

Richard Rive's *Emergency* (1964) is the only novel to fictionalize political events in Cape Town in 1960. In his autobiography, *Writing Black*, he explains how he came to write the novel: "I watched Phillip Kgosana's historic march from Langa to Cape Town with 30,000 Blacks, and attended protest meetings all over the Peninsula until these were banned. The following year I decided to write a novel spread over the three most crucial days of the Sharpeville unrest, 28 to 30 March."[4] His novel moves back and forth in time and encompasses the childhood years of the main protagonist, Andrew Dreyer, in District Six. These childhood sections are the liveliest parts of the book and recall Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom*. This section of the novel brings District Six to life in the best tradition of Alex La Guma, although Rive does not display La Guma's aptitude for reproducing dialect. There are autobiographical elements in the portrayal of Andrew Dreyer, who is darker than the rest of his family. As a result he is discriminated against. He distinguishes himself at school, proceeds to the University of Cape Town, where he graduates with a Bachelor of Arts degree, before taking up teaching. By following events in Andrew Dreyer's life, Rive takes the reader through some of the great ANC campaigns of the past such as the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of 1952-53, culminating in Sharpeville and Langa. The novel in its adult section contains lengthy political tracts, which are interesting in themselves but slow down action in the novel.

Lewis Nkosi's reaction to Rive's novel and other literature produced by Black South Africans, particularly in response to events during the Sharpeville and Rivonia eras, was to announce that: "It may even be wondered whether it might not be more prudent to 'renounce literature temporarily,' as some have advised, and solve the political problem first rather than continue to grind out hackneyed third-rate novels of which *Emergency* is a leading contender."[5] Mphahlele's assessment was more charitable, more understanding:

> The novelist in the South African setting has to handle material that has become by now a huge cliché: violence, its aftermath, and the responses it elicits. In this he travels a path that has

> many pitfalls . . . Richard Rive has avoided these pitfalls. He has chosen to pack the action and the politics into 233 pages representing a span of three days. His prose maintains its tension and its pressurized drive throughout. And the reader is pleasantly struck by the novelist's economy of diction and structure.[6]

Emergency remains Rive's major work in fiction. He stayed on in South Africa, after most of his contemporaries had left, and took more to literary criticism, after *Emergency* and his earlier collection of short stories, *African Songs* (1963), had been banned.

Although Peter Abrahams left South Africa for England in 1939, from where he went to settle in Jamaica, he has tried to keep track of political developments in South Africa. The theme of politics in plural societies such as South Africa and the West Indies is central in his work.[7] South Africa, in particular, has provided him with the setting for his novels. *A Night of Their Own* (1965) deals with political developments in South Africa after Sharpeville. The novel's main protagonist, Richard Nkosi, returns to South Africa as a courier for the underground resistance movement, now engaged in acts of sabotage against the South African regime. Richard Nkosi personifies the people's irresponsible craving for freedom: the security police fail to capture him, just as they fail to destroy the urge for freedom among the oppressed. His significance grows as the repressive measures increase and their campaign intensifies.

A Night of their Own is dedicated to Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and other freedom fighters. It takes cognizance of their gradual despair in bringing about a non-violent revolution and shows how they came to acknowledge the inevitability of a violent uprising. Abrahams does not condone guerrilla warfare but shows how political discontent, where an opposing side proves intransigent, inevitably culminates in violence. There is in the novel a strong didactic element, which is one of its major weaknesses. Richard Nkosi is not convincing as a character. As he moves through the Indian section of the Congress Alliance, he reveals the uneasy relations, suspicions, and prejudices which bedevil relations between the various sectors of the people, African, Indian, and others, engaged in the liberation struggle. However, nothing ever ruffles him personally. He is the embodiment of an

ideal and his image is blown beyond recognizable human proportions. Abrahams loads his vision for a multiracial future in South Africa on Nkosi, so that the very ideals that are propagated are almost deprived of their feasibility and credibility.

The failure of Abrahams's novel reflects the shortcomings of a great deal of South African literature, as Lewis Nkosi has observed. The South African situation provides Abrahams with ready-made plots and heroes from Sharpeville, Rivonia, and other real episodes. These leave him little scope to exercise his imagination in recreating character and situation, except in some melodramatic direction. The situation is generally made to override character. Writers in exile trying to depict conditions in the home country labour under another strain, and the longer the period of their exile the more obvious their shortcomings become. Writing by exiles is usually marked by political overtones. Distance sharpens criticism and perspective, but the conclusions are not always realistic. The exile writers suffer from having been removed from their primary audience and sources. The political overtones of their work, at once more radical and less realistic, are as much the driving force of exile literature as the cause of its deterioration and banality. This is evident even among the best of South Africa's exile writers such as Alex La Guma.

Alex La Guma, probably the most accomplished writer of prose fiction among writers of the Sharpeville era, was born in Cape Town in 1920. His father was at one time President of the South African Coloured People's Congress, so that La Guma was inducted into politics at an early age. He joined the Young Communist League, with whom Peter Abrahams had had a brief association in Cape Town before leaving for England, in 1946. He rose to become a City Councillor in Cape Town. He was among the 156 accused in the Treason Trial of 1956-61. After his acquittal, along with the rest, he was placed under house arrest but escaped from South Africa to England in 1966. He is now the ANC representative in Cuba.

"When it comes to the position of writers in South Africa, we find that we are in the same position as any ordinary person," La Guma told the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in 1969. "The South African artist finds himself with no other

choice but to dedicate himself to that movement which must involve not only himself but ordinary people as well."[8] The element of commitment in his work, both as a writer and a political activist, bears out his avowals. He is a Marxist. "La Guma resembles Ngugi in so far as his politics — frankly Marxist — seem as if they have grown out of a shocked response, an instinctive response, to human suffering and not from either library or lecture hall," Adrian Roscoe observes. "The human condition is sensed, examined and understood; then a politics is embraced to cure seen ills."[9] La Guma possesses a capacity probably no other writer of his time in South Africa possesses, the capacity to produce excellent art from the commonplace, moreover art which is mingled with an uncompromising sense of political commitment.

In the Fog of the Season's End (1972) depicts the political struggles of Blacks following the Sharpeville crisis. The three central figures in the novel continue to work clandestinely for a banned political organization. They meet with different fates: Elias Tekwane is arrested and tortured to death; Beukes escapes, after receiving a bullet wound in the arm; Isaac flees South Africa to a neighbouring independent African state. The novel resembles Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* in having no heroes, in the special sense of characters with outstanding qualities. They are all ordinary people, with whom La Guma identifies in their plight and struggles. Their hounded existence, fleeing from the police all the time, illustrates the burdens people engaged in the liberation struggle had to bear, in their attempt to organize and mobilize their communities politically. The novel's other outstanding quality is its dramatization of the polarization of attitudes between the oppressed and the oppressor, leaving the oppressed with no alternative but to resort to violence. The Prologue demonstrates, in a very painful way, the torturous methods employed by the police in interrogating political prisoners. Elias is the victim of such police brutality. One of his captors urinates in his face to revive him after he has passed out, and then beats him up again when he refuses to disclose anything about his political activities and associates. Instead of being cowed by his ill treatment, Elias becomes more defiant, in the firm belief that his people will triumph some day: "You are going to torture me,

maybe kill me. But that is the only way you and your people can rule us. You shoot and kill and torture because you cannot rule in any other way people who reject you. You are reaching the end of the road and going downhill towards a greater darkness."[10] Abrahams and La Guma demonstrate how events in South Africa will inevitably culminate in a violent uprising. Both writers support the armed struggle, Abrahams more tacitly than La Guma. Commenting on La Guma's conclusion that violence is the only way to purge South African society, Roscoe says:

> The violent solution at the end of *In the Fog* is drifted towards, not preached from the outset. From pointing out human and economic injustices to attacking the regime by way of ugly pictures of it and suggesting that the victims of oppression ought to band together, there emerges, tiredly and hesitantly, the idea of violence as the only course of action that holds out hope, the only course of action the regime will respect.[11]

La Guma's latest novel, *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979), about Shilling Marule's desire to avenge himself on his cruel former White employer, suffers somewhat from La Guma's enforced long absence from South Africa. The predicament that faces La Guma and other exile writers is brought out in Arthur Maimane's words, when he says: "I cannot write about South Africa . . . Changes have taken place since I left; but I do not know what degree of change. I might get the geography wrong now, even the boundaries have been moved."[12] Maimane, who has lived in exile since 1962, encountered the problems that plague the imaginative writer in exile when he wrote his novel, *Victims* (1976), which succeeds to some extent because it is set in the Sophiatown and Johannesburg of the 1950's. But its melodramatic plot, its handling of the theme of miscegenation, which has become a cliché among novelists of Maimane's generation, its failure to motivate characters convincingly, point to his long absence from South Africa, his loss of touch with the preoccupations that are current within the Black community in South Africa, and with new literary trends since his time. His novel is a nostalgic throwback which adds little to classical literature on the subject, as in William Plomer and Peter Abrahams. Maimane feels unequal to the task of handling more current South African

issues, where La Guma feels called upon to comment on the ongoing struggle in South Africa.

Time of the Butcherbird, which illustrates the fate of a community inexorably moving towards tragedy, lacks the sharpness of detail with which La Guma has hitherto delineated character and setting, perhaps most notably in his well-known collection, *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories* (1967). There is a certain placelessness, a lack of concreteness, about *Time of the Butcherbird*. To make his characters more authentic, he throws in the occasional expression from the indigenous African languages. A technique so atmospheric in *A Walk in the Night*, where he is dealing with District Six, whose topography, people, and their language he knows well, misfires in *Time of the Butcherbird*. There are mistakes, perhaps not very important in themselves, such as putting Sesotho words in the mouths of Xhosa-speaking Africans from the Cape where his novel is set. In common with other exiles of long-standing, La Guma has turned increasingly to a non-South African readership. *Time of the Butcherbird* lacks the authenticity and penetration of his earlier work in its evocation of the social milieu in which his characters move, a shortcoming which a number of his African readers close to the source will immediately recognize.

Lauretta Ngcobo is the latest novelist of the Sharpeville generation to come to prominence. She started writing three months after her arrival in England in 1969 to join her husband, a PAC activist. Her work bridges the gap between writers of the Sharpeville and Black Consciousness eras. Her characters come from people who were among the principal actors in the Sharpeville drama and their offspring of the Black Consciousness generation. Her work also provides an interesting cross between the urban novel, which has hitherto dominated literature in South Africa, and what may perhaps be a new trend in Black South African literature of English expression, a return to rural themes and a preoccupation with the poor quality of life in the African tribal reserves. Depicting life in the reserves has been the domain of writers in the indigenous African languages such as Sibusiso Nyembezi and White South African writers such as Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson and, more recently, Elsa Joubert.

Cross of Gold (1981) depicts the growth in political awareness of its young protagonist, Mandla (whose name means Power), as the tragic events which befall him impel him into politics in Sharpeville township, in prison, in the rural area of KwaZulu, and at the University of Zululand. The author establishes a strong narrative line early in the novel, with the young Mandla and his brother helplessly watching their mother, Sindisiwe Zikode, die from a bullet wound in her desperate attempt to get them across the border into Botswana to share her life in exile. Mandla's own struggle starts when he recrosses the river, back to South Africa, and begins a long series of initiations. He is introduced to the seamy side of township life, harassed by the police for his political involvement and confronted on every occasion with the pass laws. His experiences create in him an awareness of the prevalence of sickness, disease, starvation, and political persecution in the Black community. Thereafter the shape of his life turns in an agonizing direction, although he quickly learns from other veterans of African politics, now operating underground, that the turning of the Blackman's hatred upon himself is not inevitable. He carries on the struggle deep into enemy territory, visiting White farms, where Black labourers are cruelly exploited, to sow the seeds of revolution. When he is arrested, his endeavours to help others believe in their own strength and their ability to bring down the structures that enslave them are contined in the life of his son, Manqoba (whose name means Victor).

A disappointing factor, in what is generally a distinguished and valuable first novel, is that Lauretta Ngcobo, who is the first Black South African woman to publish a novel dealing specifically with the political situation in her country, should have missed the opportunity to concentrate on a female character. Sindisiwe Zikode, with whom *Cross of Gold* opens, is the prevailing influence in her son's life, more important than her husband, who is serving a life sentence on Robben Island for his involvement in the Sharpeville uprising. But her story is unsatisfactorily compressed into a long letter she leaves behind for her son. Thereafter we have only the marginal lives of Nozipo, the woman Mandla eventually marries, and other women who cross his life

presented to us. The novel does not live up to its early promise of recreating Sindisiwe Zikode's life.

The same failure to centre her work around her female characters was the disappointment of *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), the first novel by Bessie Head, one of the earliest African female novelists of stature to emerge. The prominence given in *When Rain Clouds Gather* to the exile from South Africa, Makaya, increasingly shifts to female characters in her subsequent novels, *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974), and in most of her short stories from *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). Lauretta Ngcobo has been influenced to some extent by Bessie Head, as evidenced by the sections in *Cross of Gold* which recreate life among the exiles in Botswana in a manner that is reminiscent of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Her work may well be moving in the direction of Bessie Head's in giving women characters a central role. Lauretta Ngcobo's women still have to be liberated and her views on their role in the liberation struggle are still to crystallize. She is still to work her views on the woman question more integrally into the texture of her work. She is working on a new novel, about women in the rural areas of South Africa, whom she thinks bear the weight of the structure of apartheid. The husbands are away in the mines or elsewhere in the cities, and often die young. The women raise the children, much of the time alone. They bring up the family, miraculously making something out of the near barren land in the Bantustan reserves. She says that their strength is admirable, yet the world knows nothing about them.[13]

Despite what some may see as missed opportunities, *Cross of Gold* is a powerful revindication of the countryside population, usually excluded from the work of earlier writers, especially those of the *Drum* generation in the 1950's. Most of these writers always distanced themselves from their rural cousins, in a pathological sort of way. They considered themselves detribalized and urbanized, an exaggerated assertion on their part arising out of their reaction to government measures to exclude all Black people in South Africa from the wealth generated in the cities through mining, industry, and commerce.

The impetus given to imaginative literature in South Africa by political developments is amply demonstrated by the varied literary responses to the events which were sparked by the Sharpeville revolt of March 1960. This spate of literary activity, in the midst of political and cultural subjugation, bears eloquent testimony to the people's unflagging will and their irrespressible desire for freedom. Novelists such as Richard Rive, Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, and Lauretta Ngcobo, working in line with what the liberation movements were trying to accomplish, emerged as champions of the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed, after the PAC and the ANC had been outlawed in April 1960. They have left behind them a political and literary legacy which their successors of the Black Consciousness era and the Soweto generation are carrying forward, despite the repressive apartheid climate of South Africa.

NOTES

[1] Edward Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 320. Other sources of information about events in Sharpeville and their aftermath are: Thomas Karis, Gwendolen Carter, and others (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge: Documents of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, 4 Vols. (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972-1977); Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-1971); and Gail M. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

[2] Roux, p. 405.

[3] An authoritative account of the events at Sharpeville and of the proceedings of the government commission of enquiry is: Ambrose Reeves, *Shooting at Sharpeville: The Agony of South Africa* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1960). A brief eyewitness account by Humphrey Tyler, who was then editor of *Drum* magazine in Johannesburg, first appeared in the May 1960 issue of *Africa Today* (London).

[4] Richard Rive, *Writing Black* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981), p. 19.

[5] Lewis Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans," *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), pp. 125-36 (p. 126).

[6] Ezekiel Mphahlele, Introduction to Richard Rive's *Emergency* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1970), p. xvi.

[7] Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, "Politics in Plural Societies: A Study of the Novels of Peter Abrahams," University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, 1975, Unpublished M.A. Thesis.

[8] Alex La Guma, Address to the Conference of African and Scandinavian writers, in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, edited by P. Wastberg (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969), p. 24.

[9] Adrian Roscoe, *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 233.

[10] Alex La Guma, *In the Fog of the Season's End* (London: Heinemann, 1972) (Prologue).

[11] Roscoe, p. 258.

[12] Arthur Maimane, From an article on exile writers by Andrew Graham-Yool in the *Guardian* (London) 20 November 1981.

[13] Lauretta Ngcobo, From the text of a draft article by Andrew Graham-Yool (London) 16 September 1981.