

From Resistance To Reconstruction: Culture And the New South Africa

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IN A GERMINAL essay published thirty years ago, entitled "Fiction by Black South Africans," Lewis Nkosi complained about the formulaic and mediocre in protest literature from South Africa. His scathing criticism was that with the best will in the world it is difficult to see in protest literature any work that responds with vigour of imagination to the oppressive situation in South Africa. In the past ten years, Njabulo Ndebele has been making similar charges against South African writers. Apartheid produced ready made plots, along with a sympathetic audience, which called for little talent to exploit. The literature generally failed to rise above story telling into the realm of fictionality. Nkosi described it as the documentary outrageously trying to parade as fiction. Indeed, the failure of most African fiction becomes quite apparent in comparison to recent documentary drama on South African television.

I. The Line

"Inkatha wants to kill me. Inkatha are dogs!" Harsh as they sound, these words were meant to entertain millions of television viewers in a three-hour series called *The Line*. Its authors hardly meant to offend anyone when they recaptured the pain that thousands of train commuters experienced at the hands of train killers on the Rand. Controversial as it may be, the drama would never have raised as much furore in many countries as it did in South Africa. It would have been dismissed as the product of artists who were responding imaginatively or crudely to, and making artistic/political mileage out of the past.

Inkatha Freedom Party, however, objected vehemently to the storyline of the drama. As a result, the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) was prevailed upon to suspend its premier show on Wednesday, 17 July 1994. The series was ultimately shown on CCV Television, however, on Saturday, 20 July and sparked a lively debate countrywide.

Inkatha argued that the series was a political ploy by the Mandela regime to denigrate the IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) as a bunch of killers in the violence that plagued the country for four years. IFP Transvaal leader and Member of Parliament in the National Assembly, Themba Khoza, said of it: "I've seen the entire drama at SABC . . . It's all about the Zulus and Inkatha. It was hatched long before the April general election to portray Inkatha as the perpetrators of violence." Dismissing the freedom of expression of the producers of the drama, Khoza said: "To ask someone not to insult you, not to distort facts about you, does not have anything to do with freedom of speech. As far as we are concerned the drama is a perfect excuse to insult Inkatha and the Zulus. Why was not there a drama about the Ikwezi Station massacre in Soweto after which ANC people were convicted? Why Inkatha and the Zulus?"

Brian Tilley, director of the docu-drama, explained its contents thus: "It's a combination of many factors, ranging from politics to the glittering social life of Hillbrow in Johannesburg." There is only one direct reference to Inkatha, in the statement already quoted. "I can't understand why Inkatha is making a storm out of a teacup," Tilley said. "We produced the film as artists and our intention was not to judge who was to blame for the violence. We left it to the viewers to draw their own conclusions."

"By suspending the screening of the drama, the SABC has actually set a precedent for more dramas to be interfered with at the slightest whim of any political organization," Tilley said. The spectre of censorship the controversy over *The Line* raised was not lost upon the actors, some of whom received death threats, along with the producers and some SABC officials. The lead actor in the series, Jerry Mofokeng, who plays the vicious Inkatha hostel

dweller who shoots commuters in the train, explained his predicament thus: "We the artists are in a difficult situation because it is suggested that if we agree to act in such dramas as *The Line* we have to solicit the help of political parties. If we dare do that we will be subjecting ourselves to censorship" (News 5).

Television will of necessity usurp the function of "documentation," previously seen as the proper province of protest literature. We have entered a season of television docu-dramas, particularly of our apartheid past (as the country purges itself), for the documentary technique which has dominated South African fiction is better suited to the big screen. The formulaic, upon which protest literature depended, does not work as well in fiction as in film.

The problem for South African writers and for South African society in general is one articulated by Antonio Gramsci: "The old is dying and the new cannot yet be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms" (276). The success of our elections notwithstanding, we are so young, so recent into our country's democracy that we still live in the past.

The novel, drama, and poem of note in South Africa today is being written in the dusty, treacherous streets of the still segregated townships, where the vast majority of Africans live, and on the shop floor, where the majority of our workers still spend their unrewarding days. Moreover, this significant novel, drama, and poem is not being written in ink anymore. It is being written, quite literally, with the blood, sweat, and tears of a mutilated people who are, nonetheless, schooled in the art of sacrifice and struggle.

All of this has a paralyzing effect on the South African writer, who is experiencing writer's block for the first time. The paralysis of the imagination is as manifest in what South African authors are writing about as it is in what they are not writing about.

At the 1994 and 1995 Grahamstown festivals, we watched new production after new production on the theme of reconciliation. South African literature has found another stock theme to supplant apartheid. Most playwrights have replaced protest with reconciliation. The result is a morality play with a political fla-

your. The many faces of South Africa are being explored by very few writers.

II. Transition

Our transition to democracy was like childbirth, complete with its agony and ecstasy. I left Fort Hare, in what was then the "Republic of Ciskei," on 22 March 1994, to attend the African Literature Association meeting in Accra. On arrival the following day, I telephoned home. I was given a number where I could reach my wife. "Guess where I am?" she asked. She had been drafted, in place of the former Ciskeian Minister of Agriculture, to oversee the affairs of the Ministry. The Ciskei's military dictator had abdicated. His Ministers, very sensibly, had disappeared from their stations, with the more imaginative among them helping themselves to such state assets as they could pick in their hasty retreat. Needless to say, incriminating records, which meant most records, had also disappeared in the process.

The many faces of South Africa for creative writers, researchers, and scholars to explore would include the transitional process and its peculiar psychology, as in the work of Chekov following the freeing of the serfs in Russia in the 1860s. The psychological trauma must first be addressed as a prerequisite to reconciliation.

III. Land

In an unpublished play, "The Dying Screams of the Moon," Zakes Mda features two women characters, one African and the other Afrikaner. They are both former combatants, the one with MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) forces belonging to the liberation movement and the other in the SADF (South African Defence Force). After demobilization, they both return to the farm where they both grew up which they both call "home." But it cannot be home to both.

The many faces of South Africa for creative writers, researchers, scholars, and politicians are seen in the insecurity of those who hold title deeds to the land and in the plight of the landless masses. The land issue must first be resolved before any meaningful reconciliation can take form.

IV. Exile And Return

On Sunday, 31 July 1994, when we stopped over in Johannesburg on our way to Harare, I picked up a car at Johannesburg airport and drove with my friend. I had planned to show my friend, Zolisa, Brakpan old location, where I grew up. The place was overgrown with grass.

I was reminded of a story I was told by another friend, Njabulo Ndebele, when he first returned to South Africa after three decades in exile. He had dreamed of this moment. He wanted to give his children a surprise. He took them out on a drive one Sunday afternoon. He had planned this drive in his mind, over and over again. They found ruins where his home had been. They had come home but could not even locate where their home had been.

The many faces of South Africa are reflected in the pained eyes of the returning exile who has come back home and is seeking a home he will never find. The theme of exile and return. The agony! The ecstasy!

V. Violence

The many faces of South Africa are seen in the pained expression of the Evaton couple in July 1994, who suffered “double hell in Vaal crime wave.” The wife was gang-raped on Saturday, July 23; her husband was assaulted and robbed the very next day.

“Meanwhile, three shacks were burnt down last weekend after an Orange Farm shack was petrol-bombed in a revenge attack following a fatal necklacing in the area. Residents claim necklace victim 24-year-old Stanley Mazibuko was killed after being found guilty by a kangaroo court of stealing a case of beer . . . His hands and feet were burnt” (News 7).

There has been a conspiracy of silence among progressive writers and politicians in South Africa when it comes to the question of black-on-black violence. Culpability was rightly ascribed in the first instance to agents of the apartheid state. The situation, however, is a great deal more complex than that. The oppressed, too, internalize violence, which they then unleash indiscriminately, sometimes against themselves—as Fanon

teaches. Writers, scholars, and researchers are supposed to know that the many faces of South Africa include the sadistic and masochistic—the sado-masochistic township thug who spills the blood of a brother or a sister as easily as saying “Voetsek.”

VI. Women

In a feature article in *The Herald*, “Women to the Fore in the New SA,” Arlene Getz for Gemini News Service reports on the improving lot of women in post-apartheid South Africa. Women were some of the worst victims of apartheid she says. “But in the new SA they are emerging in high-profile political and social roles. With nearly a quarter of the 400 parliamentarians being women, including the Speaker, there is a higher proportion of female MPs in South Africa than in the United States” (4).

While President Mugabe urges Zimbabweans to elect women to Parliament so that he will be able to pick some for his Cabinet, we are told women in South Africa enjoy greater representation. If that was the whole picture, even in Parliament, we would be singing “Hallelujah.”

The many faces of South Africa include the woman who was used by the revolutionary leader to minister to his sexual and material needs, and then spat out like stale, tasteless gum. Our women have been veritable heroines/heroes of continuance, who sustain life, making sure life continues from one era to the next. But while pious pronouncements about the plight of women, of our rural communities, of our workers and others fall from the lips of our politicians with the ease of Archbishop Desmond Tutu pronouncing benediction, betrayal, and exploitation are the order of the day.

Writers, researchers, and scholars are supposed to see beyond sanctimonious pronouncements; they are supposed to cast their eyes beyond the window dressing level to the inner sanctum of bedrooms where women continue to lie prostrate and on their backs to receive the sometimes bestial attention of their revolutionary husbands and lovers.

VII. Postcoloniality

In the final analysis writers, researchers, and scholars are supposed to interrogate the very assumptions by which we live.

The political lexicon of most South Africans is replete with such expressions as “the new South Africa” and “post-apartheid” South Africa. These phrases sometimes reflect our uncritical acceptance of statements from our leaders and shallow analysis from other quarters such as the media.

South Africans need to evolve a new form of greeting to reflect a more critical consciousness. We must greet each other with “Hi, sister! Hi, brother! What’s new?”—for we might then discover that the more things seem to change the more they stay the same. There is in South Africa an unspoken, uninterrogated assumption that we have entered a new “post-apartheid” era.

The experiences of the former colonized world in the LAC-AAP (Latin American, Caribbean, Asian, African, Pacific) countries teach that before we can build a postcolonial society we will, in all likelihood, need to negotiate our way through the labyrinthine path of a neo-colonial dispensation.

With the best will in the world, it is difficult to see in South Africa today a post-apartheid society. We must admit that it is too early yet to speak meaningfully of post-apartheid South Africa. On the contrary, the many faces of neo-apartheid South Africa stare at us everywhere we go. The faces of the new parliamentarians defending their six-figure salaries with the same zeal with which they once condemned the apartheid gravy train; the face of the new provincial MEC (Member of the Executive Council) arriving at a funeral, not in a chauffeur driven Mercedes but on a helicopter; the bright African face of a private multiracial school graduate heading for Wits (University of Witwatersrand) from a house in Parktown, or heading for UCT (University of Cape Town) from a house in Sea Point, thanks to the revolution led by his parents which saved him from enrolling at any of the Historically Disadvantaged Universities.

In many respects, the South African film is a replay of an old movie seen many times over in the LACAAP world since 1947, when India first attained its independence from Britain. Writers, researchers, and scholars in South Africa have the thankless and annoying task of telling their compatriots who are glued to their news screens, oblivious of all else, what is going to happen next in the movie they are all watching.

South Africa is at the crossroads toward a neo-apartheid or a post-apartheid dispensation. There can be no foregone conclusions yet. What we know for a fact is that the end of apartheid is for us the beginning of our second generation of struggles, whose driving force is the unfolding culture of our struggle. This culture is predicated upon our resilient culture which segregation and apartheid could suppress and distort but never eradicate. The new South Africa will anchor itself upon this resilient culture, which withstood three-and-a-half centuries of oppression by digging in its transplanted but firm roots into each new era.

The culture of liberation that has been unfolding in South Africa is accommodating and life-giving and not as moribund and exclusive as apartheid culture. The unfolding culture of liberation is thus best suited to forge a new identity from our culturally diverse universe. It has already provided the infrastructure for what will be a new South Africa.

The move from protest to challenge to reconstruction in South Africa has been accompanied at the literary level by a shift from the literature of surface meaning—dependent entirely upon spectacular events—to the literature of interiority with its concern with introspection and the inner life. The literature of interiority is concerned, too, with the entire human personality in all its complexity—and not only with the status of victim and victimizer. It is this turn away from the surface and the venture into the interior which will usher a new dawn for South African literature and society.

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