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The Children of Soweto: A Trilogy

by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane (Longman) 1982

It is ten years since the first Soweto uprising. But these are not forgotten years. Soweto is a living legend, a memorial to the fighting spirit of the youth who have taken the frontline of what Mazrui calls 'warriorhood'. But the events of Soweto, more than anything else demonstrates quite clearly, the determination of today's youth, to challenge the might of the apartheid state and its western supporters. It is an indictment to the career 'revolutionaries' who junket round the world and make news. To the rest of Africa, it is a symbol of resistance, of defiance in the face of repression, and a veritable proof that resistance is possible even imperative in the face of severe repression.

Those who had only heard of Soweto through the air waves might have been amazed at the courage and organisational ability exhibited in those days. The seventies however, was a period of intense struggles between rulers and student movements throughout Africa. Soweto gave this struggle a new impetus. Mbulelo did not only witness this historical saga; he was a participant, part of the process itself. He did not stand on the sidelines, only to write long stories and fairy tales of what was or might have been. Being part of the process gave him a greater insight into the inner feelings of the Soweto youth, their attitudes and spirit in those days. Mbulelo's account is chillingly compelling and captivating. Even though a real life story, Mbulelo does not glorify himself. It is much more about Soweto than an autobiography.

The book is divided into three parts: his schooldays in Soweto; the days of the riots; and finally the children of Soweto. In all these parts, Mbulelo gives an account of the political, social and religious undercurrents developing in Soweto before and during the riots, and how these affect the main actors: the children of Soweto. It is much about political economy as it is about social relations. He therefore explores all aspects of life in Soweto: school teachers and their relationship with their pupils; parents and their attitude towards their children, how these children see their parents; the state-pupil relationship; prison life and how it affects the combatants; how black

collaborators are treated; the socio-political role of funerals in Soweto; and how the state and its victims see violence in the South African context.

Two teachers whom one could find amusing are Pakade and Phakoe who incidentally were held in high esteem by the students. These characters also provide the most hilarious moments in the novel; a useful break from the tension that builds up in the book. The alcoholism of the two blends rather well with their serious moments. Unlike some of the elders, these teachers saw the students struggle in a positive light, and sometimes encouraged them. That makes them rare species in the trouble torn Soweto. Most elders were contemptuous of the "decadence of the new generation." On the other hand, the new generation also opined that had their fathers devoted 'more time to the overthrow of the system first, instead of trying to carve out a comfortable niche in this faggot ridden country, we wouldn't have been in this mess . . .' Perhaps the children are overstating their case. Their elders have not been passive or wilful accomplices in the colonising process. On the contrary, they resisted and fought hard against Afrikaaner intrusion.

Beyond this elder-youth wrangle however, Mbulelo delves into more soul searching questions such as what prison does to the detained. For the children of Soweto, 'detention confers a new status and authority'. For anyone who has gone through the mill of detention (a small cell, dark, threatening and oppressive) should be listened to. An example of this is one of the heroines of the struggle, Bella. She was a 'true witness to the struggle'. Bella was 'transfigured, metamorphosed, utterly transmuted by her gruesome prison experiences'.

Funerals are important political and social events. The funeral of a colleague could become 'some big religious revival, political rally, and a major social event. It is also a time when mourners become generous with praises — 'qualities would be discovered in him (the deceased) which if he were present, he'd have been surprised to know he possessed.'

But such is life in Soweto. For those who were in the frontline, it is an unforgettable experience, an ongoing one. Mbulelo does admit some of the glaring unavoidable excesses on the part of some colleagues, such as the treatment meted out to some black collaborators of the apartheid regime. But opportunism can only be combated by such severe punishment. To allow it to grow is to encourage a degenerate tendency in the liberation movement. Counterposed to the children of Soweto are the self acclaimed 'leaders in exile', some of whom are too far away from the firing line and can never appreciate the immense sacrifice of the Soweto youth. The real makers of history in South Africa today will be the youth, now called 'the comrades'

and their organisations. African history is replete with leaders in exile who are always the first to sell out to the enemy when victory is in sight.

One has no choice but to agree with Mbulelo that when 'the history of Soweto in those few weeks is written, our struggle will be shown to have been plagued by fratricide, senseless carnage, and considerable duplicity.' Sitting on a hotel balcony in exile, Mbulelo's mind is still in Soweto, his home and roots.

Soweto changed the political map in Africa and brought a new awareness to the problems of living under apartheid where Botha and his group seek to impose their neurosis on Africans. Perhaps, it is true that 'peace will come when we have the power.' The whole work is summarised in the following words: 'We the children of the new diaspora, we, the children of Soweto, germinating everywhere we went', little new seeds of vengeance, hatred, bitterness, wrath, on the fertile soil of our hearts, watering our cherished seeds with our blood, sweat and tears and that of our people.' Truly, liberation will bring peace to the children of Soweto.

Zaya Yebo
Instimism