Literature and Politics among Blacks in Southern Africa

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To treat creative writing as though it were socio-political documentation, which is what I propose to do in this paper, would be considered anathema by many in my field. But at the risk of being thought old-fashioned, I must re-assert the Aristotelian belief in the instructional value of literature. Significant literature of all time is that which has the most to teach to the majority of readers. Since the most important lessons for South Africans are in the political sphere, a writer in that land is unimportant, irrelevant and probably alienated unless he is political. Art and politics in South Africa, as in many parts of Africa, have become inseparable for the simple reason that politics pervade all aspects of a Blackman's existence. You are born to parents who have had to beat the Influx Control regulations in order to live together and mate; you must live your whole life in certain 'locations' which have been divided along racial lines in accordance with the Group Areas Act; you are educated at ethnically segregated institutions, very often by teachers who really know no better, under the Bantu Education system - at University you are taught by third rate lecturers who

have failed to make the grade at Stellenbosch or Pretoria, and have therefore been relegated to teaching Blacks; when you complete you may not do a certain category of job, even if you are qualified for it, because of the Job Reservation Act; even when you die:

> Please note
> The remains of R/N 417181
> Will be laid to rest
> On a plot
> Set aside for Methodist Xhosas[1]

If literature is about life, it cannot help but reflect all these facets of a Blackman's existence.

Among Whites in South Africa only the Afrikaners understand this fact, although in some perverse kind of way, and their literature is accordingly political. Its major fault is that it propagates anti-human ideas which cause suffering to millions of people. In other words, it has the wrong things to teach to a minority of the people, who then use what they have learnt to suppress the majority. The literature of the other major white ethnic group, the English, attempts to be apolitical, with the result that it has the least to do with South Africa. From this sector of the populace you often hear of how obsessed Blacks are with politics; these elements argue that Black literature, the poetry for instance, is nothing more than 'shrill, hysterical, thinly disguised political propaganda'[2] In the cause of this paper an attempt must be made to answer this charge.

This paper therefore is concerned with that literature which has to do with South Africa, and which is therefore political. We can dismiss Afrikaner literature because, as already suggested, although political it is the wrong type of politics which is inimical to the interests of the vast majority of the people in that land. The paper is further limited to an analysis of Black South African literature of English expression, with only occasional references to literature in the vernacular languages. The reason for this sad state of affairs is that literature in the vernacular has largely been produced under the auspices of either missionary

institutions or the Bantu Education Department, to propagate missionary ideals or promote Afrikaner interests. It has not been a genuine expression of the Blackman's aspirations, has had little to do with life as Blacks know it.

From its beginnings Black South African literature has been associated with politics. A certain range of political subjects has occupied Black writers; subjects like the land question, labour exploitation, the living conditions in general, protest and the liberation struggle. The rest of the paper attempts to show how some of these political themes find expression in the fictional works of Black South Africans.

When the Whiteman first came to settle in South Africa, he found the land rich and fair, conquered the Blackman and systematically took away large tracts of his land, confining him to certain barren areas of the country which are today called homelands, giving the impression that those corners of South Africa were all that ever belonged to Blacks. By the end of the nineteenth century, following the routing of Mzilikazi's impi by the Voortrekkers at Mosega in 1837, Dingane's defeat at Blood River the following year and Cetshwayo's subsequent defeat by the British at Isandlwana in 1879, the process of land dispossession had been completed. This was to be followed by the effective deprivation of all political rights for Blacks, a process which led to protest from certain Black quarters. Political organization took the form of the establishment of what today we know as the African National Congress in 1912. At the same time as the emergence of Black political resistance movements, a handful of Blacks arose to articulate these grievances in their writings. These writers had come to realize that literature could be a powerful political tool in the service of their people, that it was an important handmaiden of politics. The first writing of a political nature by Blacks inevitably concerned itself with the important issues of the day. One of the most important of these was the whole problem of the land question, of white occupation.

Black pioneer novelists, particularly in English, Zulu and Sesotho, produced significant historical novels which were an important milestone in the evolution, not only of South African literature but also of African literature at large. One of the first novels in English by an African, which was also the first historical novel of modern African literature in English, was Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi, written around 1920 although not published until 1930. Thomas Mofolo's Chaka (1925), originally written in Sesotho, was translated into English in 1931. R. R. R. Dhlomo wrote a number of biographical studies of the life and times of important Zulu kings like Ushaka (1937), UDingane (1936) and UCetshwayo (1950).

In 1951 Peter Abrahams, who was to become Black South Africa's leading novelist, published Wild Conquest, a novel based on Plaatje's Mhudi. The novels dealt with the Great Trek and the confrontation between the Afrikaners and the AmaNdebele. In the novels a clear picture of white conquest emerges. The Afrikaners bulldoze their way into the interior, wiping out all opposition, expropriating land and spreading general panic. They triumph largely because of their superior weapons and the fact that they are given assistance by some of the native tribes like the Barolong, who had always suffered under Mzilikazi.

Against the Afrikaner invaders Mzilikazi considers himself 'the last guardian of African invincibility'.[3] The fear of terrible extermination through a mysterious weapon compels the AmaNdebele to fight for DEAR life. Peaceful negotiation is out of the question because the Afrikaners are determined to acquire land and their Barolong allies are bent on revenge. The Afrikaners are not like the harmless missionaries with whom kings like Moshoeshoe of the Basotho have had to contend. The AmaNdebele are further inflamed by Afrikaner arrogance. When the Voortrekkers meet the AmaNdebele guards of the southernmost post, they are warned to turn back lest they incur the wrath of

Mzilikazi. The Afrikaners only burst into laughter. This incenses the AmaNdebele, who warn that 'men who laugh at the great name of Mzilikazi do not live long after their laughter'.[4]

Thus in the confrontation between the AmaNdebele and the Afrikaners, the survival and the honour of Mzilikazi's people is at stake. The solution is to administer the same dose to the Afrikaners as the AmaNdebele have been accustomed to administer to their hostile neighbours, when either their honour was at stake or their survival threatened. The AmaNdebele also observe that the Afrikaners are so many that once allowed to settle they would squeeze the AmaNdebele out of their land. So that against Afrikaner arrogance, for fear of extermination and for the retention of their land the AmaNdebele have to fight. The exhortation of Gubuza, Mzilikazi's general, to battle aptly expresses the position of the AmaNdebele, one which has not altered in any substantial manner for the descendants of the great Mashobane in Zimbabwe today:

> 'Land is the life of the people. For that, all men fight. These men came with arrogance in their hearts. They kill our men and send mocking messages to us. If that is the meaning of their coming, then we must fight them. The land is ours. Let us call forth our soldiers and fight for it. They have a terrible weapon, but it is a weapon made by men. Let us go out and meet it. Land is the life of our people, of our nation. Mzilikazi those are my words.'[5]

The futility of restraining Mzilikazi's people is comparable to holding back the setting sun:

> The sun that had seemed motionless overhead was suddenly low over the western hills. The long shadows were everywhere. The short ones had gone.[6]

The symbol of the setting sun applies to the imminent disappearance of Mzilikazi's empire. The Voortrekkers encroach upon the land and cast 'long shadows', which spell a bleak future for Blacks. In battle the AmaNdebele suffer severe losses. Mzilikazi escapes northwards to present-day Zimbabwe with the scattered remains of his people. His defeat leaves him a tragic rather than the

villainous figure of white history textbooks. His defeat also marks the disintegration of traditional African society.

By the end of Plaatje's and Abrahams' novels all the facets of present-day race relations in South Africa are in evidence. The death of so many Blacks at the hands of the Voortrekkers - a phenomenon which was to be repeated more than a century later, under considerably less hostile conditions, in Sharpeville, Langa, Soweto and so on - creates hatred among the conquered. Tension is generated on the side of the white conquerers too, for they must always guard against a popular uprising. They have conquered by the rifle and must live by it. It must be clear from reading these novels and relating to the present that the only way of getting the land back is by resorting to an armed struggle, since the Afrikaner claim to land is itself based on the right of conquest. Both Abrahams and Plaatje see the fear and the hatred of the nineteenth century as the forces which moulded South African society and produced the hypertension that exists today.

Dhlomo's novels, especially UDingane and UCetshwayo, are also important in so far as they deal with the crises periods in the history of black-and-white confrontation, which continue to have a telling effect upon present-day race relations. A tradition exists in South Africa among the Afrikaners that the 16th of December is a day on which you should thrash your own Kaffir. We can trace the origin of the tradition to some fateful day in 1858 when the Afrikaner spirit of vengeance was let loose. The climax of UDingane comes with Dingane's massacre of the Voortrekkers at Mngungundlovu and the retaliation by the Voortrekkers later that year at Blood River on the 16th December, 1838 Dingane's motives were no different from Mzilikazi's. The Afrikaners were bent upon settling in Natal and edging the indigenous off the fat of the land to a little nook near the sea called Zululand (KwaZulu), of which

Gatsha Buthelezi is today so proud. The arrogance evinced by Piet Retief, the Voortrekker leader, was itself enough to cause war. His intimidation of Dingane by constantly reminding him of the fate of Mzilikazi and his people must have driven the Zulu king to near-frenzy. In exarcebating Dingane's fury he once wrote:

> The Great Book of God teaches us that Kings who conduct themselves as Umsilikazi does are severely punished, and it is not granted to them to live or reign long; and if you desire to learn at greater length how God deals with bad kings, you may enquire concerning it from the missionaries who are in your country.[7]

This sounds more like a declaration of war and it is unfair to blame Dingane for reacting to such excess provocation as he did. His only fault is probably that when the time to strike came he miscalculated and allowed one of his enemies, for that is undoubtedly what they were, to escape and call for reinforcements. So, in desperation Dingane invited the Voortrekkers to a feast at Mngungundlovu, requested them in the name of peace to leave their guns and horses outside, and killed them almost to a man. When the Afrikaners took their revenge at Blood River, a phase in the history of the AmaZulu had clearly come to an end. Their land and cattle were confiscated and the Zulu nation began to fall apart, a job which was completed by the British in the reign of Cetshwayo.

In UCetshwayo the main focus is on the Battle of Isandlwana, when Cetshwayo, for the same reasons as his predecessors, fought the British in 1879. It is clear from the novel that Cetshwayo, like the others, was very reluctant to pit his strength against the might of the British. But the British desperately wanted war, to justify colonizing Natal and taking the land away. However, Cetshwayo did manage to give the British one sound beating before his Kingdom was overwhelmed.

The most pressing issue, therefore, at the turn of the century was the land question. The Whites,

of both British and Dutch extraction, over-ran the land, mowed down traditional society and deprived the indigenous people of all political rights. The first political movement, when it was formed, was designed to fight such acts of injustice. The land question was given prominence in its manifesto. The pioneer novelists also addressed themselves to the land question by detailing the historical circumstances. Thus the historical novels are clearly protest, in line with what the resistance movements were doing at the time. Contemporary Black South African literature has not deviated from this revolutionary path, as will be seen in the following sections.

In the late thirties and early forties Peter Abrahams was to come under the influence of socialist thought, both in South Africa as well as in Britain. This manifested itself in his concern for the plight of the working class. In 1945 he published his novella, Song of the City, which dealt with the fate of migrant labourers and the under-privileged classes in general in the city. But his more substantial work on the subject, Mine Boy, appeared a year later.

In Mine Boy Xuma, who comes to work on the mines, and Leah, the shebeen queen who has made her home in the township, are both driven to the city by economic necessity. When Xuma arrives from the rural areas - these have now been re-designated 'homelands' and the Xuma's compelled to stay there, whether they can earn a decent living or not - poverty is reflected on his tattered clothes. He has no money because there are no employment opportunities in the country. After working on the mines for only a short time, he acquires a room of his own, better clothes and eats regularly. This shows the material benefits of the city to the migrant labourer. But these benefits are accompanied by physical and mental agony which is reflected no less among Xuma's fellow mine-workers than among the rest of the township residents.

On the mines a spirit of mistrust between employee and the employed prevails. The labourers are escorted from their compounds to work and back like dangerous criminals. On either side the marching columns are flanked by armed guards. The miners are like prisoners engaged in forced labour. When they strike for better working conditions they are pummeled back to work with batons - the only change in the treatment of demonstrators in South Africa is that today they are actually shot, as in Soweto.

Xuma personally tastes the sadism of his white overseers when, on his first day on the mines, he is set the impossible task of pushing a truck-load of sand. The work is normally done by two people. The exercise is designed to humiliate Xuma whose only pride is his strength. The muffled tones from Xuma's co-workers, as they protest against his illtreatment, illustrate their subjugation. They have become beasts of burden, toiling and sweating to no end, 'on and on and on'[8], till their strength sapped, they wear the blank beastly expression of 'sheep that talk!'[9] In other words, the system is dehumanizing.

The mine 'boys' risk their very lives in the dangerous depths and unhealthy conditions of the mines for the happiness and security of their families. Perhaps, the most pathetic of these cases in Abrahams' novel is the case of the old man who continues to expose his life to danger, despite the fact that he is already in the advanced stages of tuberculosis. He does not report his illness for fear that he might be dismissed and lose all that he has looked forward to. His moving plea is expressed to Xuma in the following terms:

'Listen Xuma, I have a wife and two children and I have worked it all out. We have a small farm and I owe a white man eight pounds. If I do not give it to him he will take the farm. And if he takes it where will my wife and children go? I have worked it all out, Xuma, really I have. For four months I have been saving and if I save another three months I will have the eight pounds and there will be a home for my wife and children. Please let me stay. Don't tell the white people. The others will not. They know. I know I am going to die, but if there is a home for my wife and children I will be happy'.[10]

The passage is also an indictment against underpayment. In seven months the old man can only save eight pounds and that to settle a debt. It equally demonstrates the power the white man wields over Blacks. At a single whimsical stroke whole families may be rendered destitute. The novel is a scathing attack on the blatant exploitation of blacks, even by those corporations that are supposedly controlled by white liberals like Oppenheimer.

Because the plight of the workers has not changed since Abrahams' days, and that was before Malan's Nationalists took over government, we find the poets of the late sixties and seventies still addressing themselves to the plight of the workers. The poems of Mtshali, Mbuli and Sepamlă deal with the miserable conditions under which Blacks work and live.

Abrahams' concern with the mine labour system is also shared by Oswald Mtshali and Mafika Mbuli. In 'The Miner' Mtshali deplores the fact that the miners work until their hands are gnarled and 'their armpits mouldy with (the) sweat of pushing a cocopan/down the rails into the ore crushing mill'.[11] For Mafika Mbuli, 'this dungeon', which is the mine pit, 'makes the mind weary'.[12] Unlike Mtshali, Mbuli is concerned with more than just the purely physical effects of the mine labour situation. For him the ultimate indictment against the system is that it undermines the whole of man, makes man soft in the head:

And so
Clap, scrape
With our hands manacled
With weariness
We mine
All our lives
Till the mind is numb
And ceases to ask...[13]

The pit, with its association with hell, corresponds to the countrywide situation which is repressive to Blacks. The life of the average Black in South Africa is hell.

In a different poem Mtshali relates to the drudgery of the washer-woman, who has to take care of the white man's laundry, in the following terms:

Look at her hands
raw, knobbly and calloused
Look at her face
Like a bean skin soaked in brine

For countless years she has toiled
to wash her master's clothes
Soiled by a lord's luxury.[14]

The pathos is the greater because not only is this a woman but she is also old. The same concern with the infirm and aged emerges in another of Mtshali's poems, which is also an indictment against religion:

I know an old man
who during the week is a machine working at full throttle.[15]

In the poem the old machine goes for greasing in church every Sunday. In this context religion is indeed the opium of the people. Finally we see in Mtshali's poetry the tremendous risks the black labourer must undergo in the service of his master. The night watchman in one poem is prepared to lay his life for his master, but when he dies all his master can say to his widow is,

'here's ten pounds.
Jim was a good boy'.[16]

Through such punch-lines does Mtshali expose the callousness and the absurdity of the system.

But if the impression so far created is that the workers are resigned to their fate - and Mtshali, in particular, often creates such an illusion - this impression is soon dispelled by observing the reaction of roadgangs at work. They are defiant; there is menace, rebelliousness and intolerance in their song:

It starts
as a murmur
from one mouth to another
in a rhythm of ribaldry
that rises to a crescendo
"Abelungu ngo'dam - Whites are damned,
Basibiza ngo Jim - they call us Jim."[17]

In one of Mtshali's very rare poems above, to actually use invective, the murmur of the miners, rising to a crescendo, reflects an upsurge of resistance among the workers. There's a militant spirit in the air. The reader is here reminded of Shakespeare's Caliban, that great prototype of the rebellious 'savage'. Occasionally this militancy breaks into action, as in the numerous Durban workers' strikes of 1974. Similarly in Sepamla's poem, 'The Work Song', the rise of a defiant spirit is celebrated in song:

I've heard the anguish of a chant
Heard rising in the air
Like orchestrated screams of a big band
The harmony of the labourer's (Sic) voice
Singing:

abelungu ngoddamn
abelungu ngoddamn
basibiza bojim
basibiza bojim[18]

First there is anguish in the poem, followed by screams of protest, and then the harmony in reaching an accord about the evils of the system, in consented action - here manifested through singing together. The poem represents not just the political reawakening of a people, but it actually spells doom to the cursed whites: 'abelungu ngoddamn'.

These poets are thus dedicated, to varying degrees, to the overthrow of the white oppressive and exploitative regime. Their poetry, like the work songs which are actually <u>war</u> songs, is meant to arouse the people, to mobilize the masses and to inspire the would-be liberator. This phenomenon should become even clearer from some of the works I now propose to end with.

The struggle for emancipation is depicted in the works of a number of Black South African authors: in some of the novels of Abrahams and La Guma; in the poems

of Kgositsile, Serote and some of the much younger ones like Lefifi Tladi; as well as in the plays of John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Mzwandile Maqina and others. As has come to be expected from the fascist, racist regime of South Africa, all of these works, where these have been published, are banned. Thus little is known about most of these artists because their works are either banned or simply unpublished, because every law-abiding publisher who knows which side his bread is buttered will not dare touch them.

To begin with Peter Abrahams again. He seems to have gradually despaired of a non-violent revolution in South Africa till he came to acknowledge, though still in very guarded terms, the inevitability of a violent and protracted struggle in South Africa. A Night of their Own is dedicated to Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela and all those who are at war against the evils of this 'night of their own'. Sisulu and Mandela, as came out during the Rivonia trial, were committed to a violent overthrow of the white South African regime. They, of course, still conceived of this in terms of limited acts of sabotage, which Abrahams would seem to endorse in his novel. In fact, the most radical step Abrahams can ever conceive of in a revolutionary situation is described in A Wreath for Udomo, a novel about the African revolution and the fore-runner of the contemporary political novel in Africa, when he writes:

> It is the traditional function of the most noble and the most heroic sons and daughters of an invaded and occupied people that they should harass the enemy, blow up his bridges and trains, cut his communications, put sand into his machines. It is only the psychologically enslaved or the traitors who behave otherwise. We must be negative and destructive until we are free.[19]

This still falls short of meeting the need for a constructive, positive, full-scale armed struggle, which alone will effectively liberate South Africa. Yet Abrahams' A Night of their Own is a prophetic novel. The following could have been a mild newspaper description of the Soweto uprisings in June 1976, more than a decade after Abrahams' novel:

> A bitter pitched battle was now in progress between police and gangs of blacks. In the main the blacks were using stones and bottles as weapons but a few had small arms. A dangerous new feature was that the blacks were becoming expert in the making and throwing of Molotov cocktails. So far twenty-eight Africans were known to have died in the fighting. And three policemen were murdered. Once a gang of blacks had even tried to storm the police station... These were well-armed and they retreated only when an armoured car was brought up.[20]

Throughout his works Abrahams remains wary of supporting the principle of armed struggle unconditionally, of the destruction of human obstructionists as against property. Nonetheless, A Night of their Own indicates some change of heart in a man who had for almost two decades advocated non-violent change through 'dialogue' - a term we saw lead to a sell-out of South African Blacks by President Banda and, more recently, of the struggle in Zimbabwe by Muzorewa and Sithole. A Night of their Own is based on post-Sharpeville experiences, when the government clamped down on the liberation movements and compelled them to flee or go underground where they evolved new and more aggressive strategies.

The Stone Country by Alex La Guma is dedicated to 'the daily average of 70 351 prisoners in South African gaols in 1964' - the figure has since risen precipitously. As in Dennis Brutus' prison poems, La Guma in The Stone Country suggests that for Blacks, South Africa is a prison. In the novel, George Adams is arrested for distributing anti-government pamphlets. He is placed in the same cell as common criminals, so that he begins to acquire some of their characteristics: their political apathy, coarse language and assumed brutality. Amongst the prisoners, there is also much rivalry, which makes George Adams feel impotent. His desire to conscientize and politicize such characters is clearly unattainable. We see in La Guma's character a defeatist attitude, which must be discouraged at all costs in a revolutionary situation.

The prisoners in La Guma's novel lack some of the grit and solidarity that is displayed by Bessie Head's

prisoners in her short story, 'The Prisoner Who Wore Dark Glasses'. In this story the prisoners turn their resources against the system. They engage the warder in a war of nerves. They always have the upper hand, but then these are all political prisoners. The spirit of the group never sags as they suffer together, steal cabbages together and sometimes blackmail their thief of a warder, who often steals prison fertilizer. Their confidence is so immense that we do not see them cringe before Whites the way most of La Guma's prisoners do. The prisoner who wore dark glasses, who is the central figure in the story, calls his warder by his first name and never 'baas', and even when the latter tries to intimidate him, the prisoner continues to threaten vengeance in the following terms:

> 'I'll tell you something about this Baas business, Hannetjie... One of these days we are going to run the country. You are going to clean my car. Now, I have a fifteen year old son and I'd die of shame if you had to tell him that I ever called you Baas.'[21]

La Guma's latest novel, In The Fog of the Season's End, is dedicated to the guerillas who died in the early stages of the armed struggle in Zimbabwe, although the novel's action takes place in Cape Town, where the real parliament behind Smith sits. The central figure, Beukes, makes secret house-to-house calls in an effort to gain converts to the African cause, to whip up enthusiasm and support for the liberation struggle. The novel depicts one phase of the liberation struggle in South Africa, mainly the distribution of pamphlets, which was a stage before the recent outbreak of urban guerilla warfare within the country. The burden of political organization and mobilization is manifested through Beukes' hounded existence, where he has to flee from the police at all times. The task of convincing and preparing the people is the central issue in the novel. The Prologue exposes the torturous methods which the police resort to in interrogating political prisoners such torture is most ably dramatized in a play jointly written by four young exiles in Botswana, which I'll

refer to at the end. Elias is the victim of this police brutality. One of his captors even urinates on him, when he passes out, to revive him, and then beats him up again when he refuses to disclose anything about his political activities. Instead of being cowered by this treatment, Elias becomes more defiant, heroic. For La Guma, liberation will surely come some day, as long as patriots like Elias still exist. In Elias' words, in the face of death:

> 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.[22]

As observed by both Abrahams and La Guma, events in South Africa inevitably culminate in a violent uprising, so that La Guma too tacitly supports the armed struggle. In Adrian Roscoe's words:

> ...the violent solution at the end of In the Fog is drifted towards, not preached from the outset. From pointing out human and economic injustice 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.[23]

Turning from prose to poetry, we find an even more uncompromising attitude. Kgositsile is probably the most radical of the poets to have emerged in the sixties, perhaps only rivaled by the new crop of poets who emerged after the Soweto uprisings, a sampling of whose writings we shall look at shortly. Kgositsile's poem, 'For Afro-America', is about Black Americans, but it also depicts the political re-awakening of Blacks everywhere. The name of Comrade Patrice Lumumba in the poem places the inevitable revolution, which is the subject of the poem, on African soil too. The writing is on the wall for the white oppressive and exploitative regimes. The Blacks, for too long relegated to the gutter, are about raising a stink, NOW:

Now
redhot truths
defiant like volcanoes emerge
taller than evening shadows
from ghetto magicians
Now from the asshole of America
gutter smells rush
the blood like
a stampede to the head
scorching centuries-long tears
up and down the land
Now
I see
Patrice and Malcolm
in your step as you
dance near the sun
your hand outstretched
to embrace that long
deferred day so close
Now
I can see
ghetto smells going
up in smoke up and down
the land exploding in
the asshole of America
I can see that day
teasing you like a whore
SCREAMING NOW[24]

As already suggested, the other poets who espouse the Black revolution as radically as Kgositsile have not yet been heard from by the larger world. Their voices, especially those who could not manage to escape from South Africa, have been stifled prematurely, some permanently. Their organization, called MEDUPE, which took revolutionary poetry to schools and public halls in Soweto, was banned in 1977, after being in existence for only a year. For an idea of the poetry which these young men and women were churning out, we must turn to Lefifi Tladi, who fled bail with some other youths to Botswana, where he continues to write, paint and play malombo drums to his ancestors in a revival of what was once his own cultural group in South Africa, the Dashiki poets. These poets continue to write hard-hitting and unambiguous verse, which continues to be read in private homes, at memorial services and on every other conceivable occasion - even from the exile platform of Gaborone.

In a poem entitled 'Our Spears are Immersed in Blood', which Lefifi calls 'a dedication, a tribute, to all those who were directly involved,' he writes:

Our spears are immersed in blood
We are on the warpath
of Blood River
The distance is long
The distance is strenuous
But the courage is thriced...
We are the elephant
We are the warrior
Transformed to a guerilla
The spirit of Sharpeville
Emerges from the past
And haunts the present
Wearing a new mask
Soweto, Soweto, Soweto
History repeats itself
We are the elephant
We move the way of no return[25]

In a fairly long poem Mongane Serote, now also living in exile in Botswana and collaborating culturally with Lefifi Tladi and others, reiterates Lefifi Tladi's message expressed in the preceding poem. In 'No More Strangers' he explains the significance of what happened in the 1976 student uprisings in the following terms:

it were us, it is us
the children of Soweto
langa, Kagiso, alexandra, gugulethu and nyanga
us
a people with a long history of resistance
us
who will dare the mighty
for it is freedom, only freedom which can quench our thirst -
we did learn from the terror that it is us who will seize history
our freedom[26]

Among all these poets, as among the novelists discussed, there is a steadfast belief in the inevitability of change, for as long as the people take their political destiny into their own hands. In such a situation everybody, the artist included, is either part of the problem or the solution. The poets, in the service of the revolution, have the function of articulating the people's aspirations, sustaining their spirits and generally working in line with the liberation movements. Revolutionary poets do not feel artistically stifled by this, as popular myth has it. In Barry Feinberg's words, as quoted in an essay by Kgositsile:

The revolutionary poet concretizes the dreams of people for a better life; the liberation movement fights to make these dreams a reality.[27]

This concept of the role of poetry in a revolutionary situation would dismiss as nonsense the view that such poets are wasting time anyhow by 'preaching to the converted'.[28] This is somewhat like telling the priest not to remind Christians of the message of Christmas. Anyhow, such poets are looked up to by members of their community, whether the misleading Western enemy critic likes this or not, they are listened to. Poetry in South Africa, as has been noted, is read at funerals, conferences, concerts and private parties, as part of a wide programme of conscientization. That it has produced a tremendous impact, especially in the minds of the youth, is evidenced by the vast following such poets command in the larger townships of Soweto, Tembisa and Kwa-Thema.

Finally, a word about the state of revolutionary theatre in South Africa. What has been said about poetry is equally true of drama. Virtually every high school after June 1976 produced its own crop of revolutionary dramatists, the majority of them undoubtedly immature and most undramatic. But a number of these, some of them predating this drama revival stand out.

Perhaps, the best known South African productions of recent times are John Kani and Winston Ntshona's twin plays, Sizwe Banzi is Dead and The Island. The first is based on the everyday plight of Blacks in South Africa. More directly, it is a scathing attack on the pass law and the operations of the South African racist bureaucracy. The other is about prison conditions in Robben Island.

Give us this Day by the Rev. Mzwandile Maqina, now banned (I mean the play and the person), was based, in part, on the assassination of Black Consciousness leader, Abraham Tiro, who died in Botswana when a letter bomb exploded in his hands. The play came to Johannesburg in 1975 from Port Elizabeth and would not

be allowed by the white township superintendents on municipality stages. It had to be staged in churches, to packed houses, sometimes running to two or three shows a day, by popular demand. Johannesburg was raving about it and a large measure of the political awareness which later swept Soweto must be attributed, at least to some small extent, to the tremendous impact of Give Us this Day. The play has never been published.

Another unpublished play is currently making its rounds in Botswana. You may never get to know about this, not even from the Botswana Daily News. It is a project by the Pelandaba Cultural Effort (Pelculef) and has been jointly written by Mongane Serote, Mandlenkosi Langa and the two actors, Tim Williams and Kush Modau. Called Shades of Change, it is a recreation, in the tradition of Kani and Ntshona's The Island, of prison conditions in South Africa. It is concerned with the torturous methods, as in the Prologue to La Guma's In The Fog of the Season's End, which the South African regime uses to extort confessions from political detainees. It shows the callousness which has led to the death in detention of men like Steve Biko - for one of the detainees in the play actually dies. It is as moving a play as it is touching. The regime never succeeds in breaking the spirit of the two prisoners. Even in death their spirit lives, the way Steve Biko's does today.

In conclusion, we want to observe that relevant artists in South Africa today - whether they are writers, actors or musicians - continue to lend their support to the liberation struggle. Let it not be said that we have anything to hide. We also have our share of irrelevant art, mainly white-inspired cheap sensational productions of the Ipi 'Tombi variety, whose main attraction would seem to be the bare breasts of African women - the title itself, which should be 'Iph' iNtombi', is an adulteration of African culture. But some of these Black actors who were first sold out on these productions are beginning to see the light now, as evidenced by the

large number of resignations from these plays once they go overseas. Thanks to the picketting in New York and London!

The bourgeois concept of culture as entertainment has been swept aside in South Africa. The concept of art for art's sake is dead.

Black South African literature therefore addresses itself to the problems of that country. Its peculiarity actually reflects the peculiarity of the system in that country. If the poetry, for instance, would seem to be 'shrill and hysterical', it is the situation really that is perverse. At any rate, it is ridiculous to expect sweet Handelian music from the oppressed unless the oppressed acquiesce to sing like the slaves of old, for their master's gratification.

A more authentic art form, unapologetically projecting a Black image, reflecting conditions from a Black perspective, expressing the people's needs and their aspirations, and supporting the liberation struggle, has evolved in South Africa in the last fifty years. In this context it has always been and continues to be the political barometer. The committed artist continues to battle for the betterment of his society.

A LUTA CONTINUA.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Sepamla, Sydney, 'To Whom it May Concern', Black Poets in South Africa edited by R. Royston (Heinemann, A.W.S., 1973) p. 96

[2]Pieterse, Cosmo, Preface to Seven South African Poets (Heinemann, A.W.S., 1971) p. xii

[3]Abrahams, Peter, Wild Conquest (London, Faber, 1951) p. 184

[4]Ibid., p. 348

[5]Ibid., p. 351

[6]Idem

[7]Piet Retief to Dingane, 8 November, 1933, in Bird, i, 362-4

[8]Abrahams, Peter, Mine Boy (Heinemann, A.W.S., 1963) p. 65

[9]Ibid., p. 67

[10]Ibid., p. 152

[11]Mtshali, Oswald, 'The Miner', Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (Johannesburg, Renoster, 1971) p. 36

[12]Mbuli, Mafika, 'The Miners', Black Poets in South Africa edited by R. Royston, p. 70

[13]Ibid., p. 71

[14]Mtshali, Oswald, 'The Washerwoman's Prayer', Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, p. 71

[15]Ibid., 'An Old Man in Church', p. 20

[16]Ibid., 'The Watchman's Blues', p. 46

[17]Ibid., 'A Roadgang's Cry', p. 13

[18]Sepamla, Sydney, 'The Work Song', The Blues in You in Me (Johannesburg, Donker, 1976) p. 50

[19]Abrahams, Peter, A Wreath for Udomo (London, Faber, 1956) pp. 74-75

[20]Abrahams, Peter, A Night of their Own (London, Faber, 1965) p. 230

[21]Head, Bessie, 'The Prisoner Who Wore Dark Glasses', On the Edge of the World, edited by Stephen Gray (Johannesburg, Donker, 1974) p. 76

[22]La Guma, Alex, Prologue to In the Fog of the Season's End (Heinemann, A.W.S., 1972)

[23]Roscoe, Adrian, Uhuru's Fire : African Literature East to South (Cambridge University Press, 1977) p. 258

[24]Kgositsile, Keorapetse, 'For Afro-America', Seven South African Poets edited by Cosmo Pieterse, p. 96-97

[25]Tladi, Lefifi, 'Our Spears are Immersed in Blood', Pelculef Newsletter (Pelandaba Cultural Effort) Vol. I, October 1977., p. 19

[26]Serote, Mongane, 'No More Strangers', Pelculef Newsletter, p. 17

[27]Kgositsile, Keorapetse, 'Culture and Liberation in Southern Africa', Sechaba, 1976, p. 12

[28]This view is expressed by A. G. Wright in an article entitled 'Dilemmas in Black Poetry', which reads: 'The Black South African poets are, to use a cliché, preaching to the converted'. Contrast, December 1977, Vol. II No. 44