

Africa and the Literature of Unfreedom

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Introduction

When I grow up I'd like to be a dog . . .
(A little girl in a Warsaw Ghetto)

The muse as endangered specie

In their book, *Extreme Situations* . . . David Craig and Michael Egan write, detailing the behaviour of literature in the interwar years: "In the ghetto in Warsaw in 1914, Ludwik Hirszfeld asked a little girl, 'What would you like to be.' She answered, 'A dog, because the sentries like dogs'."

Literature continues to recount and transform experience, such as has been described above. No doubt, literature has over the ages ^{been} constantly affronted, largely because it stokes the imagination. Imagination continues to serve as a cypher for a universal language; and, in a way, it is not particularly surprising that workers of the imaginative enterprise have also had to contend, simultaneously, with a universal language of applause and censorship.

Long before the age of writing, our

forebears found allies in other genres for creative expressivity. For instance, by playing the codifier, through speech surrogacy, music became a viable nest for treasured information, and hidden critique. The early jester, "remembrancer" and court poet all comingled, yet finding a little space to get at the Centre. Even great minds in history will eventually want the poet banned from the Republic; and over the period, they did get banned, even harmed in ways too shameful to recount to contemporary civilisation. And it was not a habit contained by the diversity of our geographies . . . just wherever power relations felt threatened sufficiently enough. And the infamous apartheid system of South Africa was yet one such case in point.

A bit of the anti-apartheid literature got smuggled out and the rest of the continent held its breath, reading lines written in blood, describing sanguine tales of horror, in lonely, lonsome cells – homes of the extra-judicial killings of that era, etc. And, then, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, will occasionally

cross the wall of the divide, and bring down the prison walls for the Madiba, Nelson Mandela. *Tell Freedom, Mine Boy, Children of Soweto*, also from the South, fired the imagination of the African youth across the continent. And it became clear, suppress as you may, the imagination has ultimate triumph. I thought we could go through all this and capture this rare era in the literary history, as well as the conceptual-theoretical impulse of Africa's response. An initial draft with writers in exile from apartheid, especially after the Soweto uprising of 1976, could no longer be found, so I itemised five broad thematic areas and went on field in 1994, to assist in the reconstruction of our history, albeit literary and existential, and projections on the future of literature on the continent and South Africa particularly. One after the other from their different venues of presentation, I got the writers to respond to those similar themes the African Literature Association (ALA) conference of the same year, held in Accra, Ghana. The areas of emphases were regional cultural forms, exile, repression and writing, publishing and national literature and post-apartheid literature; and the writers were Mmbulelo Mzamane (South African), Lupenga Mphande (Malawian), Claudia Braude (South African), Lokangaka Losambe (Zairean) and Odia Ofeimun (Nigerian). I am indebted to their sharing of their time, this rare archival experience and insight which, hopefully, will be of benefit to the researcher on literature under repression, and the capacity of the human agency.

Regional Cultural Forms

Braude

The major player in organising writers now is the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), which has regional groups throughout the country and is organised nationally. Then you have an affiliate publishing house called The COSAW Publishing which actively looks for contemporary and primarily black writers. They come out probably with about five titles a year and that includes all the genres. They also run essay and short story competitions.

Lupenga

Malawi was a pioneer in the establishment of a forum for writers. They started the Malawi Writers Group in 1961, which then became a model for several others in the region and Africa. The pioneer members were made up of Malawian writers and many other writers from different parts of Africa such as Sudan and Nigeria.

I had the honour of being part of that effort. This organisation had functioned very well, but because of the very oppressive regime of Banda, it had to adopt specific tactics of survival. This specific contexts therefore bore on the form of the poetry, short stories and drama that emerged; it is indeed a credit to that form that we survived till date. A lot of us got into trouble of imprisonment and banning; some had to leave – including Frank Chipasula who left immediately he was released. I and Jack [Mapanje] stayed on for a while until he

was picked and locked up for four years; a similar fate I suffered.

These are symbols of resistance which I think are very commendable for the writer in Africa. These writers owe a lot to the writers' group; this is the forum through which they expressed themselves when Banda deliberately trampled on them.

Mzamane

We must remember that the South African regime has been hostile to the movement of progressive forces in and out of South Africa, so there has not been a possibility at all by the simple experience of refusing people passport of moving and interacting regionally. Therefore, you may not, owing to this fact, have a regional association as such. But there are regional associations at another level economically speaking, one of which is the South African Development Coordinating Commission (SADCC). It has been a very viable configuration of various countries as well. In other words, there is something on the ground already of a regional nature. Now that South Africa is poised to join and become part and parcel of that region, it stands to gain and contribute very significantly to that process. One can assume definitely that what you are going to see at other levels: economic, political, cultural and academic will also rub on the writers themselves. The most recent issue of the *Staffrider*, which has been most representative of writers in South Africa, is in fact a Southern African issue with writers from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola, Zambia – the entire South being very prominently represented there.

Exile, Repression and Writing

Losamba

It has been a problem in Zaire, and that problem has not been solved. Gradually, people are now able to criticise in journal articles and some other media, unlike in the mid-seventies. Emasculated opinions are reemerging due to a certain kind of liberalisation that has been forced by democratic movements. Even in Malawi, this shift is evident.

I am at the moment putting up a collection, which I have not yet found a title for. It's a long epic poem on the Zairean history, recording the history from pre-colonial times to the present. I am also collaborating on a project on African writings and the discourse of Other; tracing all the shades of that discourse in African literature right from its inception.

Mzamane

I am not sure it is very easy to describe how the exile situation has affected intellectual output because, for me, it is like asking one if they burnt more effectively inside an oven or on top of the stove. For me, burning is burning.

The responses in these situations are contiguous with survival and you don't have much time for anything else but that. I have had to work in most parts of the African continent. I never had the luxury to be in any one place in a rooted sort of way. I was not just an exile, I was also an expatriate. My children too had to take that particular impact so that my youngest daughter by the time she had spent nine years in school, had been to as many as nine different schools.

I am not saying all has been negative; people

have raised the negative sides of exile. When I think of it now, I obviously garnered a great deal of experience, and I use that word as an all-encompassing sort of theme. My eyes were opened to many situations which otherwise may not have been the case. I think from the perspective of the writer I can only think of P Asheley's metaphor about how when you really want to see a tree you move back a little and then you can take in the whole tree, but that may also mean that you cannot touch it, you cannot smell it; then you move closer and then you are able to exercise those senses. It has been both processes, I think I have been able to cultivate an objective perspective, but simultaneously I've lost that kind of intimacy.

Lupenga

Malawi has over the years produced some very outstanding writers like David Rubadiri, Jack Mapanje and so on. The problem has always been the political atmosphere. Don't forget, Banda is still alive, even if not hale and hearty. He collapsed recently and the rumour mill had it that he had died, but no, after three weeks he came back having been rushed to Johannesburg. Perhaps people would have to wait for a while on that. He once said he will never die, that he is poised to live forever. The reality of this situation has condemned some of us into exile.

The situation has been changing gradually though, largely because of the struggle within the country. These struggles have in the main been championed by the university students, the Catholic Bishop, the workers and the international community which is also fed up with Banda. As a result of all this, concessions

have been made by Banda, so we are going to have elections in May.

But having said that, the situation for the writer hasn't changed very much, even if it is true that the room for self expression has widened. There are newspapers now, unlike in the past when there was only one newspaper which belonged to Banda. The danger that the Malawian writer faces goes beyond Banda. The writer still faces harsh conditions largely because of the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. This has really sapped the energy of the Malawian writer because it is very difficult to find newsprint; it is therefore difficult to buy books. The university has the only bookshop, but because the prices of books are so high, people couldn't afford them; hence, the bookshop was closed down. School fees are very high while salaries are very low. All these have implications for the writer.

Publishing and National Literature

Mzamane

I think on the one hand one can talk of a recession which generally even in international circles has made publishers wary of taking out more books than they can sell. So there is something related there, it has to do with the international monetary context in which we are all operating.

In the context of South Africa one is talking of a transition, and a transition by definition is a time of reassessment, a time of relative inactivity and so, there might appear to be a kind of calm in the process itself. But I think it would be deceptive not to see this as a

way of getting ready for the next great leap.

There is a great reorganisation of civil society in South Africa, that is best exemplified by the manner in which the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) has reorganised itself. In the past, it was working hand-in-glove with the liberation movement. Recently, they have realised that the liberation movement of yesterday is poised to be the government of today. Therefore, as artists, they see their autonomy, they see their independence as particularly important, and therefore they are repositioning themselves.

And similarly, new publishing houses that are COSAW-sponsored are on the count and definitely making great in-roads into the publishing arena, and there are new publishing ventures which are a combination of commerce, a combination of companies set up by the liberation movements, a combination of NGOs as well that are in the offing. I think the future for us is indeed very, very bright in some aspects.

Braude

A lot of publishing going on is primarily at this point in English, but there is a very strong recognition of the need to nurture and promote indigenous literatures. So, for example, the government has recognised eleven official languages in the country, unlike in the past when only English and Afrikaans were the only official languages.

The idea behind that is that these languages have been under promoted in the past such that it is now necessary to be putting resources into promoting these literatures. On a national

government level this is an acknowledgement of the need to be promoting indigenous literatures. I feel that it might be a process that would be clearer than people might like.

I do not know of any projects to translate. I know however that in my publishing house, we've been talking about translating Athol Fugard from English to Xosa, for example. Even though I talk of an active literary scene, I must also acknowledge the recession. This simply implies that it is difficult to publish as often as people would like, but at the same time, stuff is being published. There are some interesting projects, one of which might interest the discussion is a Comic Project put together by a story-teller group in Johannesburg. They are involved in adult literacy projects and have been reducing materials to easy-reading for adults. Of late they have produced a book of graphic short stories, with short stories by Can Themba and Bessie Head, all South African writers, in graphic form, and it is very sophisticated, visually interesting, and easy to read. They have black super heroes, but generally they are very realistic and historical in approach.

Post-Apartheid Literature

Braude

That is what everyone has been asking and I think a lot has to be defined. It is quite unclear at the moment. Will literature witness a strong movement away from anti-apartheid protest literature and theatre? I see people writing more on the psychological impact of apartheid, history, language, women, exile and the environment. It is so uncertain.

Losambe

Literature in Southern Africa is really becoming very, very vibrant. It also has a radical edge to this development. New writers are emerging, and there is a magazine called *Staffrider* which is published by COSAW, in order to encourage new writings. It is increasingly assisting more writings, even in the local languages. At the moment, Mzamane's work is being translated into Xosa. Zaire does not have a long tradition of creative writing partly owing to the nature of the repression. Others like Mudimbe, Ngao and some young writers are however emerging; and their tradition is different from the missionary educated writers of old.

I think post-apartheid literature will now shift its focus. There is bound to be a re-alignment of the class equation with middle class blacks now moving into areas hitherto reserved for whites. This would obviously become an issue in the emerging literature. It could in fact follow the pattern of Nigerian literature and those of other post-independence African countries, which after decolonisation had to reorientate its criticism towards the new elite. I can already see that satirical tinge that would emerge.

Lupenga

A lot of people have asked me that question about what would happen to South African literature after the elections in April. I think a lot of people are very mistaken about what's going to happen. I have heard people say because South African literature has been largely resistance literature, therefore post-apartheid literature would be irrelevant and people would go back to abstract notions such

as truth and beauty. I do not agree at all. Resistance culture is there to stay in one form or the other.

Secondly, people who have made these claims have been using the European models, citing Spain, Poland, Soviet Union and so on. But what has happened in Eastern Europe is too recent to be used as a model. In other words, the best model for South Africa may be Africa itself. Within the South African context itself, there is a very organic cultural process, then within the Southern African region, the continent and finally the black diaspora, you can find parallels. People should not miss this and jump to models in Eastern Europe.

If you take the example of Kenya (the Mau Mau, and Algeria, the FLN), it becomes very interesting to see what happens, after independence. The resistance culture did not die with independence; it reformulated itself, and in very different ways. In the case of Kenya, it moved towards radical left. So you have Ngugi wa Thiong'o concentrating on what is happening in culture within the Kenyan political scene. But in Algeria, its reformulation was in a diametrically opposed pattern – from what happened in Kenya. What you got was Islamic fundamentalism. So the resistance would still be there, right wing, left wing or whatever. Here, the resistance process has arisen organically from the social and political context of that country.

Shangaan music is in a way the reformulated genre of South African music, which affirms indigenous modes. Don't forget also that the forces of oppression won't cease after liberation and some sections of society would feel oppressed.

Ofeimun

It will be a literature of disillusionment for some classes of South Africans, no matter how well the post-apartheid state works; some people who had advantages before and may now have to lose them are bound to respond in certain ways.

But there is another side to it; there would be those literatures which may be initially celebratory until they discover that building does require more than celebration. Perhaps because of the violence that would announce the new state, it may not be possible for literature to be as celebratory as it should be. That function of literature to help simply galvanise people may become something of a different nature in the sense that literature may enter this very period already divided. That is, instead of having a common conception of citizenship, it may begin by recognising those differences that need to be bridged.

A parallel can be drawn with the Nigerian experience, even though many people may not see it that way. Remove the issue of pigmentation and all the problems are also in Nigeria. This similarity has not come to the fore because in the bid to defeat apartheid, many Nigerians would not emphasise our own internal problems in order not to give comfort to apartheid.

Mzamane

As I have been arguing of late, the way to characterise the present conjuncture in South Africa is to think in terms of what Gramsci says, I am quoting very loosely: that the old is dying and the new has not yet been born. And

he argues that in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms. That almost suggests the pains of giving birth. The process is painful, the process is agonising, the process is uncertain, so what you are likely to see then is multiple-layered. I want to propose that we are going to have to contend with the transition itself. The psychology of transition such as people like Chekov deal with when the Russians were freed from Serfdom, there are problems that come with it. When the African slaves were freed in America, there are problems that come with it. So, you are likely to have transitional themes of that kind. Some themes from the past that people vocalise now since they have always wanted to do so; in other words, apartheid themes are also likely to endure. This is what happened in Kenya when even after independence people returned to themes on the Mau Mau experience. But also as people come back home, they bring various experiences. So you are also likely to witness the exile novel, the exile poem being retold now for the consumption of our people.

You are also bound to have writings dealing with everyday experience; I think what is going to be exciting about the era we are entering is that thank God, we can now whisper sweet nothings into the ears of our sweet hearts. And I think that is something to look forward to.

But other people would be wrestling with the nature of the new regime itself as watchdogs, which is one task of the writer in a context; while others would be searching for solutions of a far reaching nature as well. I think we are entering a stage of normalcy known elsewhere in the former colonised world.