

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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Poets in exile . . . Willie Kgositsile and Jeremy Cronin.

Writers start journey to new SA

'It is not heroic to oppose apartheid - it is normal'

In many respects it was a case of the "gatvol" meeting with the "gatkant" of literature in South Africa. For four days with the Victoria Falls roaring like an angry sea in the background, the writers talked, and talked — and listened. The air was thick with Afrikaans, eagerly spoken too by the Xhosa, Tswana and Zulu veterans of the struggle.

It was the Afrikaans writers mainly who were concerned about the repetitive "gatvol with the system" refrain in "white" Afrikaans writing. The other delegates —

In July, IDASA hosted a SA writers' conference at the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. RONEL SCHEFER reports.

many of them members of the ANC — represented the neglected, ignored and silenced — but vibrant and liberatory — "gatkant" of literature in South Africa.

Many of them had travelled far, and long. From Leyden in the Netherlands came the diminutive and delightful literary academic Vernon February who left his home town of Somerset West nearly a quarter of a century ago. From London, Wally Serote, the sober poet who above all wants his fellow writers "to dream" in the struggle. Poet extraordinaire Breyten Breytenbach, his "tongue itching" to speak Afrikaans, travelled from Berlin. A string of "listed" and therefore (damn!) unquotable delegates came from Lusaka, among them poet Jeremy Cronin, ANC cultural head Barbara Masekela and poets Willie and Baleka Kgositsile. The rest came from south of the Limpopo. They were black and white writers and academics, the majority of them Afrikaans-speaking.

Their opposition to apartheid had brought them together. But was that sufficient to keep them together? Would the Afrikaans writers, especially, be able in large numbers to throw in their lot with the broad democratic movement



From London . . . Wally Serote in conversation with Cape Town writer Ingrid de Kok and Stellenbosch academic Annie Gagiano.

in their search for the much desired "united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic" South Africa? And if some of them should decide to take a different route to achieve a new order? Would that be acceptable to their new-found friends in the struggle against apartheid?

Not all the questions were answered conclusively. And more could probably have been asked. But first meetings with ANC members in exile are emotional occasions for South Africans, regardless of race. And the reluctant "oracle in Lusaka" also has an annoying (democratic) tendency to suggest that questioners thrash out certain issues with the democratic movement inside the country!

But some firm points were made and conceded in relation to the state of Afrikaans writing, the role of the writer in national liberation and the necessity of establishing an inclusive, truly representative South African literature.

As a starting point, some Afrikaans writers said the four-day meeting had helped them to

shed some of their "feelings of impotence" about the future of their country. The rising star among Afrikaans novelists, 33-year-old Etienne van Heerden, will never again accept the Hertzog Prys, the prime award made by the Afrikaans literary establishment. "It (the Hertzog Prys) had to be demystified for me, and that has now happened," he said on our last night at Vic Falls. Many of the Afrikaans writers are already members of the progressive Congress of South African Writers, and some of those who currently belong to the more conservative Afrikaanse Skrywersgilde said they might resign if the organisation failed to commit itself to the goal of a non-racial democracy in the near future.

These initial responses from delegates seemed to fulfil the expectations which the funders, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in West Germany, had of the event. In a message sent to the conference, the foundation said the gathering was "black and white and bound to

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Black woman's voice too faint in SA literature

"The ANC is a South African organisation and I don't think the idea of women's emancipation comes naturally to South African men," one of the ANC's female veterans told the writers' gathering.

Novelist Mandla Langa seemed to concur — without conceding anything personally of course. "Yes, the Bible says Eve was created to minister to Adam's needs — and many adhere to that very dearly," he smiled.

Women's liberation was also an issue in this particular discussion, the main focus of the session being on "women writers" in South Africa. And the topic infuriated — to put it mildly — at least one of the writers of feminine persuasion present. "Why are women allotted



Antjie Krog and Wits academic Ena Jansen.

a separate little category as if there were certain little things only women writers would feel like discussing!" fumed Antjie Krog. "Why is there no man present to come and explain where this stupid subject comes from!"

When her anger had evaporated, the poet from the Free State produced evidence of the "big silence" coming from black women in the field of poetry. There were signs that collectors were ignoring the black female poetic voice, but they also seemed to be in serious under-supply, she said.

She wondered (aloud) why the "doubly oppressed" did not use poetry today as a survival strategy — like Jeremy Cronin and Breytenbach to survive imprisonment. "If the unthinkable happens, poetry can be that small escape, that gasp of air that affords survival of another day or week," she said.

"Or is it possible that a woman's life can experience such destruction, agony and onslaught that can render words impotent? That survival can take place on such a debasing level that the woman abdicates her power over words, because she indeed realises that it is a useless power." Answers to Krog's questions were not immediately forthcoming.

The ANC's most senior woman representative at the conference gave a brief outline of the movement's views on women's emancipa-

tion which, she said, was dealt with as an integral part of the national liberation struggle. Practical steps were being taken to include women at all levels of decision-making, and an affirmative action type of quota system may be implemented in the near future.

But despite that, the fundamental work still had to be done in the home, said Barbara Kgositsile, a poet working in the women's section of the ANC. "The home is a very private arena where women's oppression goes on very quietly. It has nothing to do with organisational policies but that is what happens," said Kgositsile.

Replying to a question as to whether there was a specific role for women writers in a South African literature, Kgositsile said women had a unique experience "but they don't form part of a separate society".

"Her role in literature should not be to recreate what's happening in the labour ward and in the kitchen. Motherhood should not be held against her."

Krog said a literature in which everybody sounded "like either a man or a transvestite" was a neurotic literature. "A literature which busies itself esoterically with human life while three quarters of its horizons are not granted a decent existence, is a literature with no right to existence itself."

She said in spite of a few attempts by novelists like Nadine Gordimer and Elsa Joubert, literature in South Africa still confirmed the law: the black woman does not exist. "As a woman writer I dare not usurp the privilege of androgyny, not until all women exist in the literature of Southern Africa."



'Our role is slogans' sa

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make a difference" to the conflict in South Africa. It added that writers had a duty to provide crucial support to the community and to stimulate constructive interaction. "Most people in the world will not come closer to the pains and, more so, the potential of South Africa than what is written," the message concluded.

Early on in the conference, IDASA's executive director, Dr Alex Boraine, placed a crucial issue on the agenda: "We are all part of the tragedy in our country — and we can all be part of the healing," he said. "We all have a responsibility not just to act against apartheid, but also to build a new society."

This theme was later taken up by several senior ANC members, who emphasised that a new South Africa — like a new authentic South African literature — would not "spring up" spontaneously. It would have to be built up with the sweat of people, writers included.

There was much agonising during the conference about the role of the writer in national liberation. Would the struggle convert creative writing into pamphleteering? Should writers have strategy manuals clipped to their word processors? "Is the writer a strategist with a plan, doing things according to reason — a rhetorical agent in the service of national liberation?" asked Marlene van Niekerk, a literary academic from Wits University. A colleague from Wits, Wilhelm Liebenberg, who is also a member of the cultural desk of the United Democratic Front, suggested that there may be a problem with the emphasis of the question. "One is firstly a comrade in the struggle and then a writer. There is no directive to writers how to write, but rather a need to write from an informed position," he said.

ABOVE: Vernon February and Fanie Olivier, poet and academic from the University of Venda.

LEFT: Barbara Masekela, Essop Pahad and Nic Borain, IDASA's Western Cape regional director and the organiser of the conference.



LEFT: Breyten Breytenbach with fellow Afrikaans writers and academics.
 RIGHT: Alex Boraine and ANC executive member Steve Tshwete.
 BELOW: Jeanette Ferreira, from the University Zululand, and Hein Willemse, from the University of the Western Cape.



ot to make ANC writer

Essop Pahad, of the international staff of the ANC in London, took it further. "There seems to be a fear that if one belongs to an organisation it will stifle creativity," he said, countering that the opposite was true. "There will be no liberation without struggle. There has to be organised structures. Cosaw will derive its strength from those who participate in it."

Breyten Breytenbach felt that white writers, in particular, would benefit from participation in democratic structures. "Whites are too a large extent still immune to the texture of suffering in South Africa. Organisational involvement has a tremendously civilising influence," he said. His fellow poet, Wally Serote, argued that there was an inter-dependence between writers and national liberation. "The struggle gives writers opportunities to dream, but it must be a dreaming of reality — it must be located in the world."

And how do writers who work within the ANC see their role? One of them commented:

FROM WRITERS' FINAL COMMUNIQUE

"As writers together, from both inside and outside South Africa, intensely aware of our shared concerns and deploring the way in which our culture is impoverished by our enforced separation, we commit ourselves to work for

- the unbanning of the ANC and all other political organisations
- the lifting of the state of emergency
- the release of all political prisoners
- the removal of troops from the townships
- the abrogation of all legislation that illegalises legitimate political activity.

"Entering the struggle is the means of beginning to be a South African. It is not heroic to oppose apartheid — it is normal."

"Our role is not to make slogans, but to define and project the positive values which the movement represents — not only do we criticise, we celebrate our achievements."

Prof Ampie Coetzee, of the University of the Western Cape, offered a sharply critical view on the role of Afrikaans literature as co-determinator of the Afrikaner culture and the eventual rise of the ruling class. (André P Brink suggested that Coetzee's analysis was too harsh — in fact, almost as devastating as "an SADF raid"). In spite of his criticism, Coetzee cautioned against excessive "tinkering" and prescriptiveness as a way of getting Afrikaans writing onto the right path. "Perhaps the most that can happen, is that we can carefully attempt the reinterpretation and rewriting of it — to fit into the context of a national culture."

Writer and lecturer Jeanette Ferreira, of the University of Zululand, urged Afrikaans writers to take a close look at themselves. "I am not so sure how many Afrikaans writers are willing to demystify their labour, to admit that their writing is a calculated act, aimed at a certain reader with a certain intention," she challenged. "I think they can contribute by changing readers' view of what is normal, abnormal, by redefining history, by writing about violence in a different way . . ."

She noted that this was already happening in Afrikaans. From the Cape Flats and the West Coast, a non-hegemonic literature was emerging. It takes its Afrikaans readers on a journey through a familiar landscape, but highlights different historical places and makes the old and familiar ones irrelevant. In this literature, the verses of Die Stem is supplemented with references to "teargas filling the lyric blue sky" and, the "land of our forefathers" happen to have been taken away by the "the law".

An exponent of this new genre was at Vic Falls. Ds Patrick Petersen, of St Helena Bay, is an unrepentant writer of what a critic has called "sonbesie poesie". The dominee motivated, in rousing Afrikaans, why his poetry was not a "gegil en geskreeu" as the critics asserted, but the epitome of relevant writing in South Africa. "Black poetry in Afrikaans challenges traditional views of what constitutes literature and what should be canonised," he said.

"Art must return to the people and poetry (must return) to active involvement in the mass democratic movement. It must be quite clear that political involvement is unavoidable to me as a word artist. It is not a fashion fad, it is life important."

And what about standards, so often said to be slipping badly in "black" writing? Jeanette Ferreira quoted Nadine Gordimer on the subject: "As a fellow writer, I myself find it difficult to accept, even for the cause of black liberation to which I am committed as a white South African citizen, that a black writer of imaginative power, whose craftsmanship is equal to what he has to say, must not be regarded above someone who has emerged — admirably — from political imprisonment with a scrap of paper on which there is jotted an alliterative arrangement of protest slogans." Ferreira herself added that "to read or to write in a non-critical manner was to reduce the power of language, and at its utmost, it is patronising".

Vernon February pointed out the irony of the alienation of black Afrikaans writers from the mainstream of Afrikaans literature — their ancestors were, after all, the first people to speak the language around 1700. "Afrikaans is my skryftaal, my leeftaal, maar die literatuur is nie myne nie," said February. Brink, however, said he believed that the "gatvol" anti-establishment voice in Afrikaans writing was fast becoming the mainstream of Afrikaans literature.

The conference also discussed political issues like the ANC's armed struggle and its position on negotiations and sanctions. In a special debate on the cultural and academic boycott, the ANC leadership declared itself totally opposed to censorship "whether it is done by PW or by the Ayatollah Khomeini". They argued that the cultural boycott was not censorship per se, but that it was aimed at isolating "apartheid culture" and curbing an influx of culture which may strengthen apartheid rule.

By the end of the conference most of the writers had started "dreaming". The final communique reflected their ardent wish for a new society. It spoke of "realising the dream of a truly representative South African literature" which would reflect a shared cultural identity "unique in the richness of its sources, expression and diversity of language". An Afrikaans freed of its racist connotations would naturally find its place within this literature.

The last word (of advice) belonged to Breyten Breytenbach. Addressing his fellow Afrikaners, the "off-white Afrikaans-speaking South African living temporarily abroad", said:

"You have as much cause, perhaps more, to be involved in the process of transformation as those against whom apartheid is aimed. You need nobody's permission to join the struggle. Guilt feelings and self-flagellation are self-indulgent sentiments, but an understanding of responsibilities gets you moving. It is in walking that you learn how to walk. Watch out for the exultation of the hairshirt. Clean out the cellars. Watch out for the corruption of suffering, of self-pity. Don't go and sell yourselves as brave warriors. To be against apartheid is normal, it is not heroic."

□ Ronel Scheffer is IDASA's Director of Publications.