

THOUGHTS ON LITERATURE AMONG AFRICANS

By **EZEKIEL MPHAHLELE**

IT is always very difficult to say at any time what people like to read. Just as in dress and food, popular taste in literature is a slippery element to deal with. Often it can be tyrannical, or tame, or indifferent, or downright crude and vulgar, or just stupid.

And so we keep shifting our literary standards, taking up new positions in judging this or that literary work. And more often than not, modes of life determine what we want to read and therefore what we want to write for our readership.

One may get the impression that the reading public is always at the mercy of writers and what they give us. And yet, I think, political and economic systems play an important role in determining what people shall write and read.

The Victorians gave us a literature greatly affected by industrial revolutions, the religious and moral outlook of the age on major experiences of life like death, birth, love, family (where the father is the boss without any apologies), etc.

Read Dickens, Thackeray, Carlyle, Meredith, Hardy, George Eliot or any other Victorian writer, and you see Victorian morals reflected in them. And naturally, because a writer cannot and dare not try to live outside his age.

It is worth noticing, however, the different aspects of life that interest writers of the same age. Dickens' sympathies are with the underdog, the poor, the feeble-minded and the like; he shows the sham of snobbery and corruption among the rich and highly placed for what they are; and often the aristocrat turns out to be the father of an illegitimate child who is really a victim of a brutal man-made social machine.

Thackeray focuses his attention on Victorian snobbery. Thomas Hardy reveals the fatalistic scepticism of his age. All these and others are various facets of Victorian morality and life.

But even the more rebellious English writers like Dickens, notwithstanding his insight into the sordidness of Victorian society that creates poverty, feeble-mindedness, etc., never really shakes off his loyalty to the ruling class. Dickens never suggests in his novels a revolution in the status quo to upset the political and social tenor of the British. Instead, he seeks reforms in existing laws, and suggests individual philanthropic kindness towards the poor.

To show further how the true artist cannot help but give expression to the best that he looks forward to against the background of his environment, we may refer to writers like Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Chekov, Tolstoy, Gorky. The writer of this article is not familiar enough with post-revolutionary Russian creative writings to comment upon

them, but he cannot imagine it otherwise. In the writers mentioned we get the pattern of Czarist oppression and the social injustices it bred. When we read them, we see a bigness that goes beyond themselves. They are dissatisfied with the world they live in, and they think of the society of their times in relation to the rest of the world. The conflict between good and evil with which they are preoccupied assumes in their works immense proportions—larger than life.

Our age is still too close for us to judge its writers objectively. But there are a number of writers who are discontented with ruling class ideas. D. H. Lawrence gave a close-up picture of domestic conflict against the background of British coal mines; he had a contempt for success, which he referred to as a bitch after which men chase with tongues hanging out. Then there are writers like the American, Howard Fast; the British, E. M. Forster and John Galsworthy; the Indian, Mulk Raj Anand; the Italian Ignazio Silone—to mention only some.

And what literature do we, Africans, want to produce? Vernacular writings have been confined to school readership up to now. This is a disaster, because school inspectors must advise publishers on any book written in the vernacular on its suitability or otherwise for pupils. If it contains anything that is likely to “put the reader wise” on the South African political set-up, it cannot be published. And so, writers like Mofolo, Segoete, Vilakazi, Plaatjie, Mqhayi, Jolobe, etc., limit their literature to harmless if charming romances, versified praises and other lyrical vapourings and love stories. They hardly touch the fringe of the poetry of our social evils and injustices.

Their works are gems for their own sake, “lying in state” as it were, or standing still like statuettes, if you like. They lack the dynamic force that hits all the planes of our experience—the emotional, physical, and intellectual; they are parochial; not because the writers lack force, but because they had to limit their literature to the school market dictated by “educationists” and missionaries. They do not tell the whole truth about life.

From an analysis of the story as told to the writer by those who read Xhosa, I realize that Mr. A. C. Jordaan’s novel “Ingqumbo Yeminyanya” (The Wrath of the Ancestral Spirits) is a significant departure. It brings in the intellectual interest, so absent in our other men. It is a great pity that he has not given us more of his powerful creative genius.

He portrays the clash between two sides of our life—the Western Christian and the traditional. In a sense it is an allegory of the mightier ironic conflict between systems of life that may need each other to create a greater world.

Except for Peter Abrahams, the short story has now become the common medium of the younger African authors who write in English. And what short stories! They teem with kissing men and women whose “eyes hold” while “time stands still”; characters swoon and languish

and dissolve in their sentimental tears, and "smoke raised with the fume of sighs" clouds everything else.

The lovers end up sweetly and live happily ever after; and everybody in the story, the writer included, suffocates helplessly under the tyranny of poetic justice that screams hoarsely in well-known American fashion: "crime does not pay!"

The pattern is so well known, that we yawn over it. It's purely a mathematical response: a breathtaking meeting and a sigh; a heart-break and tears; a solution and happiness. Typical escapist literature that is a poor copy of Hollywood and half-crown thrillers.

It is as if the magazines produced for our reading were sick with the smell of pin-ups and sex and crime that fill so much of their pages, and then became contrite and sought some atonement and peace of conscience in sickly moralising as we see it in their short stories.

We should like to think that this is a passing phase, and that Africa will yet produce a virile literature born of its sufferings, its weakness, its trials and its strength.

Morals don't come into the picture at all, especially the preachers' ethics. Crime often pays: that is the tragedy of life worth portraying. How many loves have a happy ending? Is life not full of loves and hates that promise no reward or punishment at all? Is life not pain and hope as well? Do "good" men get a "just" reward and do "bad" men get what we think they deserve?

Any literature that gives wrong answers to these questions falsifies the scheme of things, and it is good for the rubbish bin. We know now that morals are always dictated by the ruling class. If the ruling class justifies oppression on "moral" grounds, then the rest of society, its organization, its newspapers, its literature, if its members are not on the alert, adopts corrupt political systems as morally acceptable.

What should guide the African writer then? No clique should tell a writer or any other artist what to do. If he is a true artist, he will express the longings, aspirations, loves and hates, hopes and frustrations of his people, without necessarily writing as if he were composing a political treatise.

The writer should be guided by **truth**. And truth, as Howard Fast says, **is only valid in its historical context**. One writer may write a novel with a plot based on a location riot. If he does not like to tell the truth or even fears it, he will give us a picture of Africans going on a riot because they are depraved (through their own fault), or peace-haters, or neurotic malcontents, or the sort of political crank Alan Paton would like us to see in Rev. Kumalo's brother.

Now, in a historical context, this could not be a true account, knowing the origin, development of locations and the purpose and motives of their creation as well as we do.

The correct account would be one that shows the real causes of the riot; the sense of insufficiency and overcrowdedness and limitation which breed desperation and so on, as we know them in location life. That is truth.

This element of truth is part of what we call **tone** in writing. If we write in order to startle the reader by some false alarm; or jolt him by a sensational trick; or bluff him; or flatter him; or talk down to him; or insult his intelligence, then the tone is false, truth suffers, and the whole work crumbles.

Lastly, a slave or fascist mentality violates truth, and cannot produce literature worth thinking about, because of its attitude to the reader, i.e. its bad tone.

All of us who have a slave mentality are apt to accept others' ideas without question; to make stock responses to what we read, hear or see; to say "how beautiful!" of what we do not **feel** is so; to have ready-made formulas in our response to all or most things. No great literature can come of such a mentality.

ADVENTURE, 1955

By **HILDA WATTS**

WHEN I was young, we were fascinated with the idea of 'Adventure.' As children, adventure to us meant exploring countries that had not been explored—jungles, frozen wastes, deserts—or discovering something new. It seemed to us that there would not be much left for us when we grew up, the world was shrinking, there were no 'new' or 'undiscovered' places.

Then, when we grew older, 'adventure' had a different meaning. Science advanced with giant strides, opening up to mankind so much that had always been secret or unknown: discovering the causes of, and conquering diseases that had once menaced humanity; controlling nature; exploring the universe and uncovering new theories of the development of mankind; until within the past few years our horizons expanded boundlessly with the control of the atom, opening up breathless vistas for the future.

With this one, but tremendous, reservation: that these new secrets wrested from nature should not be used to destroy us.

Every new scientific and technical advance brings with it a tinge of fear. What wonders could be performed with atomic energy—provided it is not used for our own destruction; how exciting to think we are beginning to conquer outer space with the proposed launching of satellites round the earth—provided this is not merely for the development of some new, horrible weapon of war. We are racing against time: will we be able to reorganise society, to eliminate all wars and end all poverty, backwardness and ignorance, before the world is destroyed?