

# Women writers: a separate entity

This paper was delivered by SANKIE NKONDO at the Victoria Falls Conference of ANC and Afrikaner writers. It puts into sharp focus the conundrums facing South African women writers.



**T**HE TOPIC SUGGESTS that the woman in South Africa is a separate entity. This position attaches a false status to the woman writer because she remains part and parcel of the South African society and the community of the writers both within South Africa itself and the world. The concept of 'separate' presupposes geographic demarcation, distance in space and time, and this is not the case. What distinguishes her from the other writers in South Africa as determined by the political system is race, gender and class. Therefore, if we accept 'different' as the operative term, we allow ourselves a broader scope for interpretation. Writers within South Africa are still referred to in racial terms and their literature is black or white, simply because their conditions in life are different. Their interpretations of the apartheid experience tend to be different because they come from different milieus. It is correct then for the moment to speak of white, African, Coloured or Indian woman writers as special entities.

Apartheid discriminates against all women; in South Africa it is the black woman in particular who in addition to gender discrimination suffers from national, race and social inequalities. Because of this, black and white women writers in South Africa find themselves in a disadvantaged situation. Their life experiences are limited by racial segregation. Racism has denied women a broad life-view; they exist within an atmosphere of racial antagonism. Black and white remain strangers within a common geographic setting.

Apartheid is structured along definite lines: patriarchy is a legalised form, women and men are regarded unequal at work, in the home and in political and educational institutions. The system makes for women's subordination which provides the flesh and blood of female subjectivity and ensures male supremacy. Women as a gender group have been encouraged to pursue non-academic fields of study so as to channel their ambitions to inferior institutions. But those women who manage to disturb the patriarchal traditions by acquiring profitable standards of education which enable them to write, face yet other problems because the male-female relationship continues to maintain a hierarchical pattern. The time and atmosphere contributing towards creative writing is absent.

The South African woman writer has shown a great determination to create, despite the absence of adequate

***The South African woman writer has a painful story to tell to her countrymen and women and the world at large, especially the black woman writer who has to give birth for the graveyard.***

facilities and the appropriate atmosphere. The circumstances for sustaining creation are especially demanding on her if she is a mother. Motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsible and responsive. Children need a mother and, in our volatile country, the family must often be the centre for love and health. Destruction has become a habit. There is no continuity in work started, interrupted, deferred or postponed. This makes for blockaged, and poor literary output. The result has been that what needs to be written in most times is never written. And if between breaks the black writer manages to create, then the product is doomed to become feeble or affected by her exhaustion. She is utterly devastated and only the urge to write keeps her going because she has a story to tell.

The South African woman writer has a painful story to tell to her countrymen and women and the world at large, especially the black woman writer who has to give birth for the graveyard, see men and children die in agony and pain. As hers is a life of struggle and survival, her sensitivity then becomes greater. This does not mean that she is a better writer but that her life is constantly providing themes. She lives amidst poverty, hunger, squalor, want, daily arrests, ruthlessness and death. For her to be part and parcel of the developments in that country, she sets herself the duty of exposing the flagrant injustices perpetrated by the regime and ultimately contribute towards finding solutions to the prevailing problems. The realities of the South African situation provide themes for the writers and chart out a pattern of their relevance.

What then can we say is the role of the female writer in South Africa? Can she commit herself to that particular role? The situation inside our country demands of us to be part of the coming change, to be part of the harmonious future. Our situation demands that all women writers create a literature that expresses the wishes and aspirations of the masses of the South African society. Women writers cannot be a separate entity; they ought to be part and parcel of those forces working towards a non-racial, democratic, non-sexist unitary society. These positions will enable us to write about universal human issues, particularly the inhuman conditions of apartheid colonialism. She has to commit herself to a political consciousness encompassing the understanding of the interrelatedness of colonialism, imperialism and apartheid and how these affect and determine the destinies of people. She needs to know the dialectics of human society, the role and effects of patriarchy and traditional practices against women, the effects of poverty and ignorance. The writer should understand how women, like other minority groups,



*Left; Tears of Africa, charcoal and collage, 1988, by Mmakgabo Mapulo Helen Sibidi  
Above; Where to Go?, linoleum relief print, 1986, by David Hlongwane*

have adopted various forms of accommodation to conceal whatever power and strength they have to avoid anything that looks like a threat or competition.

The history of oppression has subjected women to feeling defenceless about their situation. The role of the concerned writer is to project women as acting and perceiving, not only as acted-upon and perceived. The woman writer has to contribute to the process of transformation and the improvement of male-female relations that are nothing but products of apartheid colonialism. This is politico-literacy choice and commitment, which should discard and displace the culture of fear, insecurity, aggression, pain, tears, discomfort, hostility and death. Her task includes correcting all those distortions identified with South African culture. The process of rebuilding through literature a truthful literary history entails reforming the women's image as portrayed in male-dominated literature.

Apartheid has limited the women's image to stereotypes, of course this is not different from the general approach by capitalist literature. The woman is always being seen in the eyes of the men with attributes of instability, confinement, irrationality, compliancy, passivity, piety and spirituality. She is always painted as a whore and a shrew. The woman writer may want to mention female genitalia. The women's biology therefore becomes an important and necessary aspect for her but it



is not all she is and this should not be used to devalue or limit her in her everyday activities. The women's biology has been made her destiny over the ages.

The South African woman writer cannot be a separate entity, she too has been affected by apartheid. Some female writers choose the comfortable path of producing for apartheid institutions and thus contribute towards the entrenchment of the Bantu Education system. They have produced literature orientated towards shaping a racial society. The content of most of this literature is generally racist, commercial, and inferior in outlook. The literature is for primary and secondary schools and very little for university students where the market is limited. Here the reality of our racist literature of *Amakeia*, Sir Rider Haggard's *Nada the Lily* and his concept of noble savage, *King Solomon's Mines*, are part of this dehumanising literature.

There is another aspect of South African writing, and this is liberal writing. More and more writers are beginning to ask themselves what role are they to play at this historic moment. Nadine Gordimer, one of the prominent women writers, accepted the limitation of the white writer in South Africa and has in fact made the lack of communication and understanding the theme of her writing. Lewis Nkosi describes Nadine's development as that 'which was largely concerned with the need for private morality and individual choice, (*The Lying Days, A World of Strangers*) to that which developed towards the politics of public writing, liberal in outlook as in *July's People*.'

Nadine's writing, reflects her power of observation and concern for the dispossessed lot. Olive Schreiner, through her writing addresses the issue of women's oppression in a skillful manner.

Her story *Three Dreams in a Desert* ( under a Mimosa tree), gives a travelogue of women's oppression through a dream. The story unfolds in three parts or phases where firstly a female beast of burden waits under the desert sun and sand. The beast has been burying its head under the sand for what seemed like centuries. But at the end the beast rises against her suffering and, despite the weaknesses caused by years of inaction, she staggers to her knees.

The second part of her author's dream portrays a woman standing on the bank of a river. The bank is steep and high. An old man meets her and asks her what she wants. She replies: 'I am a woman; I am seeking for the land of freedom.' He says to her, 'It is before you.' The woman shades her eyes, scrutinizes beyond the horizon and sees trees and hills and the sun shining on them. He says to her: 'That is the land of freedom'. The man

explains to her that there is only one way of reaching that land, and the path goes down the banks of labour, through the water of suffering.

She is advised to take off the clothes she wore in the desert, remove the mantle of received opinions; the shoes of dependence. As she is about to swim across she hears the sound of thudding feet of those who would follow across the water's edge and beat the ground flat ten thousand times. The entire human race would pass across the bridge formed by those who will fall along the way. Olive Schreiner ends her story by projecting a hopeful future where men and women would march together hand in hand. She touches on women's conditions without lecturing. She is very skillful and thorough in her approach. This skill and approach is what perhaps lacks in some well-intended works of art.

Professor Nkosi, in his viewing of South African liter-

*Above; Crossroads, detail of Hector Pietersen and Crying Pain, by Sydney Holo Below; Baleka Kgositsile photo by Basetsana Thokoane Right; detail from the cover of Bessie Head's 'When Rain Clouds Gather'*



ature comments strongly on the subliminal nature of our literature. He observes that most of it lacks profundity. What it does, he asserts, is to repeat the everyday happenings in apartheid South Africa. He claims that most of present day writing in South Africa lacks the mediation of artistic language and form, it fails to illuminate what is going on in the dark recesses of the national psyche. He cites Miriam Tlali's *Amandla* and Lauretta Ngcobo's *Cross of Gold* as examples of superficial works of art. He goes on to describe their prose as being as dead as the tomb in which language itself is imprisoned.

Miriam Tlali, in her novel *Amandla* has taken a resolute approach to South African problems. The easy humour, the irony and the tolerance found in *Muriel at the Metropolitan* is gone. All characters in the novel know that they have to unite against apartheid. Miriam's literature reflects life and its realities. The political message is carried across, for she declares through one of her

***The entire human race would pass across the bridge formed by those who will fall along the way.***

characters that '... Talking about this land is talking about ourselves.' Miriam and Lauretta and many others may not be as skillful as Olive Schreiner, they still do not have the literacy experience she had. All they are engaged in now is to present the story.

But Bessie Head, a much more experienced writer presented her message in a rather unique form; her stories are in fact novelettes of standard quality. In her novel *Maru*, Head shows the woman as a victim of society's prejudices, worst of all belonging to a minority group. Tribal injustices are part of Margaret's humiliating circumstances of suffering. The society and its internal contradictions are seen in this women's loneliness. *A Question of Power*, another of Bessie's novels, sharply points at the psychological effects of apartheid politics. Elizabeth, a young girl, begins to have nightmares when the headmaster at her school tells her that her mother has been put away in an asylum because of her affair with Elizabeth's father, a black stable boy.

Whether or not this is Bessie's own origins, her nightmare doubtlessly began as soon as she was old enough to perceive that the country that spawned her was unbelievably insane.

Bessie Head always wrote for a hopeful future. She wrote amidst gloom, despair and death, a world created by racists. Her writing expands to the areas of literature

which also interpret the history of her people. She moves from tribal manifestations as experienced by Margaret to mystical and mysterious complicated passages of dreams in *A Question of Power*.

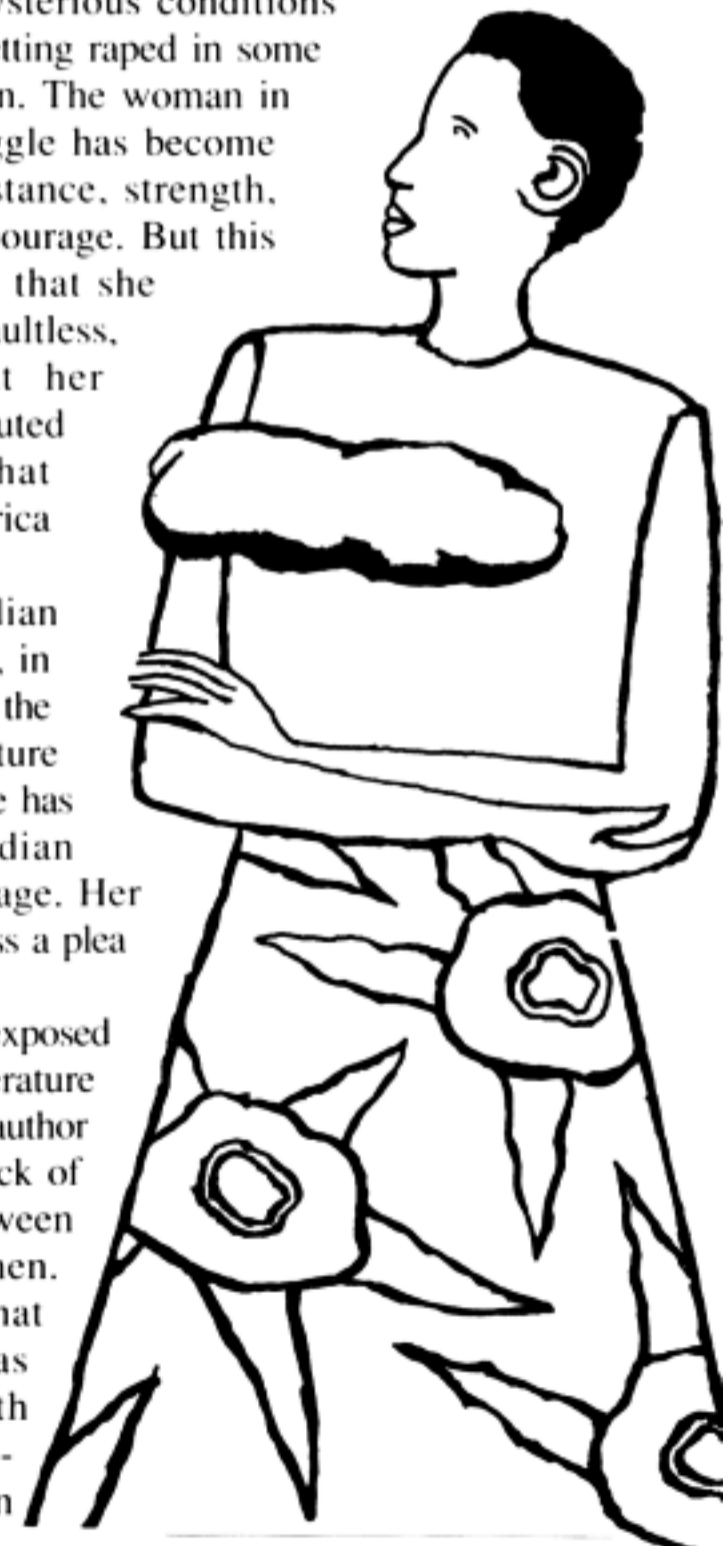
She creates strong convincing characters and she spreads out her theme to cover everyday foibles of man. Head felt very strongly on the issue of segregation and it is understood when she says:

'If I had to write one day I would just like to say people are people and not damn white or black. Perhaps if I was a good enough writer I could still write damn black and still make people live.'

Black South African literature is dominated by the 'mother-stereotype', a figure that is a result of intense suffering of women in South Africa. If it's not their husbands who are detained under all these atrocious apartheid laws, or dying from unprovoked situations, it is their sons who disappear under mysterious conditions or their daughters getting raped in some South African prison. The woman in South African struggle has become the symbol of resistance, strength, determination and courage. But this should not suggest that she is an ideal being, faultless, but to mean that her strength has contributed immensely to what we see in South Africa today.

Amongst the Indian writers Brenda Kali, in her novels, brings out the aspect of Indian culture telling us how culture has for years kept Indian women under bondage. Her books are more or less a plea for liberation.

One has not been exposed to any Afrikaans literature written by a female author in English, due to lack of communication between South African women. But we must say that our liberation as women and South Africans lies in communication. We can



achieve self-realisation and freedom only when the fears are dispelled. Communication implies growth. Ideas and thoughts must be shared especially by those that need to create a reliable future.

The South African woman writer cannot afford to be a separate entity in conditions that so much demand of her to be the voice of the people. Literature mirrors the life of the country, its creeds and customs, the character of the people and their ideals and aspirations.

It is not surprising then that South African literature by progressive authors shares certain features and common themes. Some of the themes and subjects may sound commonplace and recurrent – the objective here is to communicate with the world.

Female writers have also expressed their views through the genre of poetry. This medium seems to have taken preference in the South African literary scene perhaps because poems can be read to large audience at a time; they are faster to create and easier to destroy when danger looms; poetry also, when read, bridges the distance between the author and the audience. The decade of the seventies gave birth to poets like Christine Douts, Thembeke Mboobo, Jennifer Davis and others. Within the liberation movement female poets have surfaced. We have names like Phyllis Altman, Dee September, Lindi-

we Mabuza, Baleka Kgositsile, Susan Lamu, Gloria Mtungwa and others associated with what may be called exile. When we look into the writing of Jennifer Davis, we are engaged by themes which are usually mental experiences, though at times we get a picture of her as a teacher, factory worker and a person living in present-day South Africa. Her world view is wide and she marvels in dealing with realities.

The female writer in the liberation movement talks of hope and the future life, experiences of war, love, hate, peace, blood, the trench, heartbeat, pulse, the long road, the night, dawn and sunrise. These writers write for the perpetuation of life, the development of peoples, for the extermination and elimination of the genocidal system and racial prejudice. Female writers are part and parcel of the inevitable revolution that seeks to take the people back to their truthful history, to put it in its proper perspective and also to contribute towards the new history which the majority of the people envisage. The female writer should commit herself to correct all false images created about the woman in South Africa. The delicate, sophisticated tender city girl portrayed in some of the unrevolutionary literature from South Africa has to be regarded as literature diverting the woman from her real problems. Writing and relating to women's problems presupposes an in-depth understanding of the woman, giving her courage when her partially acquired rights are threatened. Some women have tended to withdraw to their shells when they are accused of behaving like men whenever men's positions are at stake. Molara-Ogundipe Leslie comments on this type of woman:

'Womanhood is not only gender because there are situations existing where a woman adopts other gender roles ... women who are called 'men' when they attain certain levels of economic and social independence.'

Part of the commitment in this discussion is what one can comprehend in some lines of the following poem such as Lindiwe Mabuza's 'Faces of Commitment':

**'I thought of you  
In the theatre of war  
which all must enter  
To find exits to life  
Especially because when it broadcasts  
And scatters us apart  
It also defines precisely  
To bind us closer'**

In Baleka Kgositile's poetry we are confronted by a rich imagery used in describing fertility, pregnancy and the



***The female writer in the liberation movement talks of hope and the future life, experiences of war, love, hate, peace, blood, the trench, heart beat, pulse, the long road, the night, dawn and sunrise.***

Left; *Shebeen*, linoleum relief, 1982,  
by Tommy Motswai  
Right; *Woman washing dishes*,  
enamel paint on clay, 1985,  
by Noria Mabasa



pangs of childbirth. She relates these experiences to the absence of justice in our country. Though in her poetry she talks of joys of motherhood, she also refers to the blood, that flows in the country; hope recurs in her poetry – growth and life too. Lindiwe Mabuza in her anger and frustration addresses us to institutionalised genocide of apartheid laws and chambers that manufacture death. The art of these writers has been put to the service of the people because it talks of the people.

Irony and satire are literary devices greatly favoured by South African writers in general. Irony has been used to depict the racially divided country and its practices. Apartheid is absurd and needs exposure for us to reveal the convulsions that have gripped the regime which is teetering on the crevices of an open grave. What can the female writer write about if not this? But this not all, it is the larger part of what makes her suffers. Satire has been used to ridicule the inhuman system. The element of urgency lingers in South African literature and most of the imagery functions in a way to search for a solution.

The themes dominating South African literature are poverty in the slums, deaths in detention, arrests, deaths in the streets, forced removals, etc. On forced removals Ponki Khazamula, in her story 'We Will Not Be Moved', published in *Whispering Lands*, successfully portrays the doubtless, courageous African woman who dares to defy authority by refusing to leave her home. The strength of Khazamula's story is not the tale of the woman refusing to leave her place but in how she addresses the subject, the skill with which here pride and humanity is projected. The writer avoided being superficial.

Njabulo Ndebele on the question of skillful writing emphasises what Nkosi criticises and reflects as a weakness in South African literature. He elucidates:

'One major effects is that the writing's probing into the South African experience has been largely superficial. This superficiality comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can be easily characterised as one of either good or evil, or even more accurately, symbols of evil on the one hand, and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand...'

Autobiography is also one form which women writers attempt to narrate the conditions of women.

Female writers may be encouraged to write about issues affecting women mostly, but this is not the beginning and the end of themes for them. Female writers are whole beings, women, citizens. They are part and parcel of the society and its history, they live within the socio-political-economic realities of South Africa.

### **Female writers are whole beings, women, citizens, they are part and parcel of the society and its history**

After all, culture does not in any way consist of individual superficial aspects of human life, but also has to be understood as the total being and consciousness of people's interaction with nature as well as with other people. Within that interaction one can identify women's specific conditions that should concern all sensitive beings. Female writers will write about women's issues, but should not suggest that female characters created by women writers are automatically more superior and reflective than those formed by men. But it should be understood to mean that female writers are in a better position to address those issues that affect women as women, those issues that may miss the attention of the male writer due to patriarchal influences and orientation and attitudes that have made men take things for granted.

Achmat Dangor's observation of the woman character in his story 'Jobman' illustrates this very clearly. The dumb male character through sign language translated by his wife becomes articulate and eloquent, but the wife who is able to speak is practically dumb. Her husband's dumbness had silenced her too. 'Men writers silence their women characters.' He elaborates: 'I found that the way to describe a person who is robbed of their powers of articulation is 'emasculate'.

All power of decision has been ripped off from women through subjugation of women by systems that exploit one gender as against the other. The most acceptable practice would be that which infuses women characters with the integrity that is demanded of all characters. There have been men who portray female characters positively (Tolstoy in *War and Peace*; Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savanna*; Ayi Kwei Armah in his novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*) but these are in the minority.

What then would we say is the commitment of the South African female writer in view of the foregoing-problems? The female writer is to be committed in three ways: first as a writer, as a woman and as a person aspiring for a better world; her womanhood is implicated in all three. The South African woman writer has to be committed in her art; she should seek to demonstrate and do justice to her craft. She has to be committed to her vision; she should be willing to stand up and fight injustice. There is very little room or none at all for art that is

produced for art's sake. The masses are on the march, so is the writer's pen. The writer should be able to say 'I am', echo a testimony of a vital, vibrant humanity.

The censorship board is ready with sharpened fangs to pounce on such a writer but the best art is that which can subtly pass on the message, that will be read by politicians; good art should be able to survive storms. South African literature though has not been free of politics. Critics have criticised our literature for being dominated by political themes. What is politics if not life, if not the everyday bread and butter issues? Any reasonable critic or person should realise that apartheid exists and it dominates people's lives. The female writer cannot write about the social ills without situating her awareness and solutions within the broader context of colonialism and imperialism. The writer has obligations both moral and social towards her people. But the most important of obligations she must fulfil to the nation is that of a truthful, literary nature.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Hadjor buenor Kofi and Martin Trump, *Third World Book Review*, Vol. 2, Number 1 & 2, 1986, London. p. 43.
2. Bruner, H. Charlotte, editor, *Unwinding Threads – writings by Women in Africa* (Zimbabwe Publishing House, Zimbabwe) 1985, p. 104.
3. Hadjor buenor Kofi, and Trump, pl 42.
4. Barnett, Ursula, *A Vision of Order* (Sinclair Browne Ltd, London, Great Britain), 1983, p. 120.
5. For this summary refer to spacks, Patricia Meyer. *The Female Imagination* (New York, Avon Books) 1976. Quoted from Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in her paper: *The Female Writer and her Commitment*.
6. Quoted from the Holland paper produced for the CASA Conference by Dutch Women of the AABN.
7. Hadjor, Buenor Kofi and Martin Trump, p. 43.
8. Buang Basadi - conference on Women and Writing Congress of South African Writers, Transvaal Region, p. 58
9. Guettel Charmie, *Marxism and Feminism* (Women's Press, Toronto).
10. Evans Mary, *The Woman Question* (Fontana Paperbacks, London Britain), 1982
11. Ojo-Ade Femi, *Dominated, Disadvantages, Exploited and Excluded*, 'African Literature Today', No. 13.

*Below: one of a triptych called Mama let me go, linocut by David Hlongwane*

