

Writer's agenda: the nineties

The following is an edited version of an address by WALLY MONGANE SEROTE to the Oxford Literature Conference on March 20. The full text was read on Serote's behalf by Njabulo Ndebele. Organised by the Southern African Review of Books, the March Conference included such South African writers as Njabulo Ndebele, Mafika Gwala, and Hein Willemse

TWO ISSUES COME to mind as I ponder over the given title. Firstly, how to tell the story of apartheid and still ensure that the inarticulateness which has become as South African as the word apartheid itself is overcome by knowledge, so that the battles we fought for freedom can render us free? Secondly, how can we save that noble word, *democracy*, from becoming a cliché through a greater understanding of what we, the people, think, feel, want and are supposed to be doing on this earth? How can all these elements of democracy walk, gesture and become our gait on the streets?

The terms for fighting for this possibility have been recently changed drastically, not only in South Africa but in the world as a whole. We have had to come to terms with two realities over and over again., that, while no single idea is above us as people, it is also not only the fact that our stomachs are filled that makes us content. What do these two realities mean for a writer, if, as we should know and believe, writing, no matter how mediocre or excellent, becomes a mirror reflecting the tapestry of our fibre as a people?

I wish to state two other issues which are a point of reference for writers, even if the western world pretends ignorance of this. Writing is part of culture. Culture is a product of the people, and, at the point at which it is consensuated, life must change. Secondly, that change, while it is constant, depends on the calibre of the people who must bring it about so that they would constantly improve the quality of life. Having said this, a strange revelation and reality emerges regarding apartheid and its antithesis of democracy: *What is above the people?* Also: *What is inherent in people?*

Let me get back to the original first two issues raised earlier. I pose these issues in this manner for I am aware that civilisation as we know it, has been scorched by two bloody tragedies, the Middle Passage and the Holocaust. If these tragedies were hatched and nurtured by certain sections of humanity, and if they left such an indelible mark and painful memory on the human psyche, why has apartheid survived so long? Two writers, one black and one white respectively, James Baldwin and Primo Levi, have been eloquent in their attempt to create a conscience of humanity about the Middle Passage and the holocaust. But as they so did, so also did it appear that their record was not believed. I maintain that, as these disparate writers allowed themselves to be eyeball to eyeball with the horror, torture and despicable callousness, their motives were neither vengeance or reprisal, even if their forebears suffered hideously in the tragedies cited earlier.

Baldwin and Levi believed that, as humankind came to know what had happened —what was thought and felt by the perpetrators and victims of these tragedies— that knowledge would render intolerable anything that suggested a return to that terrible past. If my observation is true, then it is not an exaggeration that the two writers believed in justice and that human beings are capable of justice, a virtue inherent in all people. The writers believed that it is possible to create a civilisation based on tolerance, on an ability to live and let live – a commitment to making any present worth living.

It cannot be said that the two writers were naive in believing that humankind is inherently just. This is not a contradiction in that humankind has also produced its share of monsters; history has, at the same time, produced people who have given water to the thirsty when it was deadly to do so; people have cuddled and given succour and comfort to the ailing and dying in the full knowledge that such gestures of compassion endanger their own lives. Even within the exclusive civilisation which has been built on colonialism, racism and exploitation, the manner in which that civilisation contradicts life is also contradicted by life itself.

If one has been a freedom fighter, which means one has done everything possible to ensure justice – and justice is not and cannot be relative in the 20th Century – life continuously articulates itself as two possibilities. On the one hand, a conviction which is informed by compassion, shaped by a deep distaste for horror experienced and guided by a vision about a possibility of a livable world, makes life a possibility. On the other hand, impediments to life always bring home the danger which stubbornly clings to life with the intention of destroying it. It is a

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wise freedom fighter reads and understands these two possibilities and, while straddling them, keeps focus on nurturing and creating possibilities of a culture of live and let live.

Culture is a point of reference for writers. As I remarked earlier, there is pro- and anti-life culture. This is what I think is meant when terms like *third-* and *first-world* are used. Africa meets other *Third-World* countries in the Non-Aligned Movement. In the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement meets the *First World* countries. This is the theater where the saga of pro- and anti-life cultures is dramatised. The NAM and the UN represent the most developed intentions for a future which promises a bearable life. Both organisations were built on the ashes of the Middle Passage and the Holocaust. The League of Nations, the forerunner to the UN, emerged not so long ago after the jaws, vertebrae, nails, teeth and other relics which remain after life has been brutally and ruthlessly destroyed, were staring at the cabbages which were fat with the flesh they had consumed; some bodies were still, perhaps, at the bottom of rivers. And, if it is true that once flesh is burnt, its smell takes long to disappear, the stench still clung to the walls of the charnel houses. The forerunner to the NAM, the Bandung Conference of 1955 was – as was the UN – another attempt to come to terms with the fact that, once humankind becomes so obsessed with riches to the point where everything becomes meaningless – which, in essence, is the case made for embarking on the Middle Passage – life becomes extremely cheap.

On opening the Bandung Conference, President Sukarno said, “The people of Africa and Asia wield little physical power. Even their economic strength is dispersed and slight. We cannot indulge in power politics...” He had also said that no task is “more urgent than that of preserving peace.” It is not only the colonial issue with which these words get into terms. They try to address the issue of the Middle Passage. But the issue which concerns me as a writer at present is that humankind consistently tries to uphold, to preserve, to institute peace. This struggle for peace in itself has become a culture living alongside what is consistently opposing it, attempting to destroy it. Another issue which concerns me here is that the latter culture seems to persevere to become a constant of life. Is this why the literature which comes from the UN and the NAM, in the forms of resolutions, reads like a tragicomic tract? That is what the resolutions from those august bodies tell me.

They read so because – if, as I do, come from South Africa – on reading them, I sense an irresolvable tension

between what the words mean and what their authors do afterwards. And I must quote an old man, a tour guide at Goree Island in Senegal, to make my point clear. He said, “If

there were no African collaborators, there would have been no slave trade.”

For the wretched, the world remains the same as if the resolutions had not been passed. If an epidemic devastated humankind, the wretched are the first victims because they live in abject poverty; they are illiterate, are crowded and herded into small, unlivable spaces. And because they live nowhere near a clinic or hospital, the vicious cycle engulfs them. When, as they are engulfed, they appear on TV screens, devastated, helpless, homeless as they do, say, when the world is being shown the famine in Ethiopia, or the AIDS orphans in Uganda, or the large number of maimed men, women and children in Mozambique and Angola. When all this happens, I often want to know how the mind of a child works or, generally speaking, how the people of the West with their exclusive civilisation, who have been so racially socialised, think. I know what I as a black person think. At dinner tables with the civilised, I have to consciously listen to what is said. I must suspect every word, every gesture, every wink of an eye, for it may be at that moment that my friends with whom I dine, may recall one of the images they saw on TV about black people. I am my brother’s keeper, as the saying goes. And in helping me carry this burden – which is not of my making – I often hear that So-an-so is so lacking of bitterness, is so brilliant. Which is what is often said also about *Third World* literature.

Third World literature is not given criteria by those about whom it is written. It is given criteria, for life or death, by those who, like the controller of the door leading into the gas chamber, can say, to the victim, “Come in, please.” Why is this so? In addressing this issue, Ngugi has resorted to writing in Kikuyu. We have all attempted theater for communication in the villages. We have all been present when, in workers’ meetings, translations slowed down the progress for resolutions, so that every single participant contributes to the deliberations. It is when these happen that one realises the potential inherent in humankind. For, it is such moments which give a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the wealth of culture that has been canned and buried by oppression and exploitation. If the languages which people use only among themselves were to become the languages of the world, what would be said? In other words, what is it that we have not as yet

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heard? If there was no illiteracy, what would have been written, and what would we be reading? This question devastates the mind if one thinks that millions and millions of people are illiterate, that hundreds of languages have not been heard to describe and articulate for many, many years, what those who speak them think, feel, see, smell and want.

What then, is the writer's agenda in the 90s, given these odds?

As the 80s were shutting another decade into history, a spectre which I am certain raised all sorts of difficult issues for the wretched of the earth dominated the media. When last in history, did humankind witness streets, squares, every space, peopled by masses and masses through demonstrations and rallies as happened in the socialist countries? When last, when numerous powerful governments toppled one after the other, as if they were boulders swept aside by powerful floods? Given the history of events of this nature, one would have expected that there would be bloodletting on a scale never witnessed in the history of humankind. The Middle Passage, the Holocaust, the wars against colonialism, apartheid, exploitation and oppression are criteria used to judge what happens when a people rise and seek a better life. When they did so in Eastern Europe, we must note, as part of humankind, the smoothness with which people seized power, participated in reshaping their destinies and, most important, registered a new morality into civilisation: *It is possible for humane regimes to exist.*

The contradiction to this morality is that the regimes being swept aside earned that fate because of a history of not being humane. It is this two-fold reality brought about by the peoples of the socialist countries which must force all of humankind to re-examine and review history. The failures, distortions and crimes, both political and economic, which the different regimes perpetrated against its peoples, establish a stubborn fact which has articulated itself repeatedly in history that no system, no party, nothing, is above the people. Yet, there is another thing which some people in the socialist countries are going to learn: that the West – although now it seems to know more than anyone else about democracy – in fact knows very little about how to put that principle into action.

They will know that, in fact, millions of lives were lost when democracy was demanded in western countries. Some of those people in the socialist countries will learn very soon that the glitter and gloss that caught their eye in the West is as a result of absolute absence of what they in

the socialist countries are fighting for – democracy.

It is seeing this seeming ignorance of some people in the socialist countries which bewildered us, the

wretched of the earth. It is also because, somehow, we also harboured the ignorance that all was well in the socialist countries and questioned nothing, while we emulated these countries and governments and remained blind to the sufferings of the people.

All that I have said totally negates ignorance of any kind. Yet ignorance abounds in the world. What is the role of writing in negating ignorance? Put in another way, this question means that democracy – which is participation of all peoples in ensuring that the quality of life continuously improves for all – must be based on both an economic and political system which allows this phenomenon, democracy, to exist. Events of the 90s, as illustrated by the socialist countries, indicate that civilisation has not yet developed to the extent that it can allow for this to happen. Writing – a segment of culture which is life itself – cannot be divorced from politics or economics. It is how societies are organised which will determine how they can eradicate ignorance. It is for all these explorations in this paper that I can state that the first commitment of any writer is in politics; the second, which makes one a writer, is in writing.

Today, in South Africa, the oppressed people and the international support for a non-racial, democratic and united South Africa have put on the agenda the possibility for the creation of a livable country. This means a country where life can continuously improve. Among the many organisations which form the tapestry which has come to be called the Mass Democratic Movement, which is led by the ANC, is a small organisation, the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW). It has struggled for a place and role of writers in the broader struggle for justice and peace in South Africa. COSAW is young and emerged from hard and trying conditions and is faced by immense and complex issues which it has to sort out with a view of defining its role in South African life.

It is true that COSAW will be judged by how it promoted and exposed writing, as it provides conditions which will ensure that anyone, no matter what their political point of view is, will, as a writer, write and be read. But it is equally true that this can only be so if there is democracy in that country. The individuals who are members of COSAW, through COSAW, must fight for – and defend – democracy.

That is on the agenda!