



Post-Sharpeville poetry: A poet's view

Mongane Wally Serote

To cite this article: Mongane Wally Serote (1988) Post#Sharpeville poetry: A poet's view, Third World Quarterly, 10:4, 1600-1606, DOI: [10.1080/01436598808420127](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436598808420127)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436598808420127>



Published online: 15 Nov 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 17



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

MONGANE WALLY SEROTE

Post-Sharpeville poetry: a poet's view*

The world, particularly the West, seemed to take serious note for the first time that black people in South Africa are human after sixty-seven people were murdered by the apartheid regime in Sharpeville on 21 March 1960. Yet we as a people, like everybody else in the world, have never accepted discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. As a people, we have resisted from the very second when we noted that we would be robbed of our land, discriminated against and exploited. We have been denied our right to make culture and history as a free people. Yet, as we struggle against oppression, and as we defend and fight for freedom, so we enter history, and as human beings we redefine and create culture.

I do not share the view that art is for its own sake, or 'neutral', or that it has a freedom of its own in a vacuum. I take it that as the political situation deteriorated in South Africa, not only did methods of fighting oppression evolve, but the culture of the oppressed also developed, in writing, painting, songs and so forth. Therefore it is not for an obscure reason that ten years after the defeat of the people's fighting organisations in 1960, Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Spho Sepamla, James Matthews, Mafika Pascal Gwala, and myself, as well as the younger poets such as Mathe Diseko, Glenn Masokoane and Ilva Mackay emerged, their voices raised in defiance of the white man.

The cultural viewpoint I express here recognises a choice between being among the fighters or the defeated. Fighters and defeated look at the world differently: fighters for freedom, who know unity and democracy, and are ready to lay down their lives for their ideals, are forever optimistic— even in defeat; the defeated who have no high human objectives are a despairing people, ready to be crushed even as they play at fighting.

It is this point of view which post-Sharpeville poetry portrays. It is a vast body of work that I will not even pretend that I can examine in its entirety, but here is a typical voice from that time, a poem by Ilva Mackay:

To all Black People

Tongues that talked the truth
have been silenced
by men who
harbour hideous hatred
for truth
for justice

* Adapted by the author from a paper given in a seminar on Aspects of Commonwealth Literature, at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, in November 1987.

POST-SHARPEVILLE POETRY: A POET'S VIEW

BUT
the truth will be heard
We will be their tongues.

Arise from your comfortable shanty
from your cold cosy room
and shout
I am! Let ME BE!

There are similar sentiments of defiance and a new self-knowledge in a short poem by Mike Dues written around the same time:

You want
me to remain the same as ever
obedient and meek
what then
if the wind blows away
your dream
like the wind
I have changed
I am stronger
like the wind billowing sail
filling the power to move
then your dream will crumble
as my wind rips
for my wind knows
its force.²

One does not need a scalpel to search for the stubbornness, hope and readiness to fight for freedom in these two poems. They were written, one by a young woman from Port Elizabeth, and the other by a young man from Cape Town, in the troubled early 1970s. In those days, at universities, schools and cultural functions, the twenty-first of March was celebrated to mark the day of Sharpeville. In retrospect, I can state that the voice which articulated the atmosphere of that time was more than anything a voice searching, refusing to accept living in a vacuum, a voice plagued by being faced with a mighty force of repression, yet a voice knowledgeable about fights fought for freedom in the not-so-distant past.

The mid-1960s and early 1970s were a period in South Africa when apartheid had entrenched itself, and through the plight and state of its victims reached its highest form of expression. Thousands of people had been moved across the country to consolidate the Bantustan policy of creating more than nine 'nations'

¹ James Matthews (ed) *Black Voices Shout*, Cape Town: Blac Publishing House, 1974.

² *Ibid.*

of Africans in so-called Bantu reserves, which left 13 per cent of the land for the majority while according 87 per cent to the minority whites. The result was abject poverty and the tearing apart of families, with homelessness a general condition. Unemployment, the intensification of pass raids, permit arrests, even women and children being put in prison under the pass laws, were all marks of the time. The period was also marked by the fact that the leaders of the people, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu and others, had been imprisoned, and more were in exile or under house arrest. The banned people's organisation, the African National Congress (ANC) was operating underground, and was hardly visible except for its high international profile. Any opposition to apartheid was crushed ruthlessly and brutally. No one, in those days, talked much about the past; the young heard only whispers about it. This is Farouk Asvat's comment on the times:

The heart
Cloaked in onion peels of steel
Caught in the inertia of ideologies
Between swollen bellies smiling for the camera
And children disappearing into the rescue of graves.

In 'Cries and Whispers',³ Asvat is able to capture the state of mind, emotion and being of a crushed people. There is poetry, or prose, which can do this effectively to the point where it inspires despair itself. Some of the poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s, inspired by despair, cannot emerge above it.

Steven Smith is a poet standing on one side of an ocean of despair while on the other are the moans made by victims of oppression. In some of his work he articulates cynicism eloquently. In other poems anger abounds. Yet even then, he clings to the hope which the people of South Africa through bitter struggle have formed about their lives.

Come with me
I'll show you
A fallacy made a reality

I'll show you
Rats crawling around
Digesting our ghettos

I'll show you
Musty overcrowded shanties
Where men assault
and kill their brothers
in a bid for survival

³ Writers Forum (ed) *Exiles Within*, Johannesburg: Writers Forum, 1986.

POST-SHARPEVILLE POETRY: A POET'S VIEW

I'll show you
Our sisters get raped
And all we can do
is sympathise

Come with me
I'll show you
A fallacy
Made reality.⁴

A deception, he says, has been made a reality. That deception is crawling rats, murderous locations, fatherless children, raped women. To whom is this a fallacy? Certainly not to the victims of apartheid; they need only look at themselves in the mirror, or stare at their wounds to know this. Nor is this a fallacy to the poet. Who then regards it as a fallacy? The oppressor, the whites. Whites who are not on the side of the oppressed in South Africa, who live in dominance and privilege, are blind, deaf and mute as to the plight of their country's people. So are many Western governments. If the gruesome and gory conditions of the oppressed do not exist in the eyes of the coloniser, then the position of wealth and dominance of the mighty is justified. This is a theme which many South African poets have explored in 'protest writing'. Poets who identify themselves with the struggle for liberation have had to develop two tongues, one to expose and fight against the fallacy which the oppressor creates in order to justify his position of dominance and ignore the conditions of the oppressed; another to inspire the oppressed not to accept their condition but to fight for freedom.

It was these conditions of oppression that the young leaders of the Black Consciousness organisations, Stephen Biko, Barney Pityana and others, challenged. These organisations were founded by students when the previously existing struggles against apartheid had been ruthlessly crushed by the South African regime. They were at the height of their activity throughout South Africa in the early 1970s. In their search for ideology, direction and answers, the eloquence with which black American writers had articulated the condition of racism in the USA, and their experience of fighting against it, became, for a while, a point of reference. The differences were that Black Consciousness propagators were part and parcel of Africa, they were speaking for a majority in South Africa, and were consciously alluding to class politics: they incorporated Indians and 'Coloureds' into the definition of black, a 'state of mind' which had to be created to fight against oppression. At the same time, Black Consciousness was a rejection of the whites as a group, and of liberal paternalism which, at an international level, was represented by the West. In those days, a term, 'non-white', was used to identify blacks who by aspiration or living conditions were not part of the struggle for liberation, preferring to justify their non-participation, or collaboration with the whites.

⁴ *Black Voices Shout.*

Emerging Black Consciousness became a point of reference for writers. Writing from the period became a search for the unity of Africans, Indians, and 'Coloureds'.

Hate yourself black brother
for forgetting your people.
Your millions of brothers in
sandy streets
and barren homelands

says Ilva Mackay.⁵ She notes the plight of the oppressed, identifies some from among them who may, for whatever reason, be alienated from their kind, and she says that they must feel hatred for themselves.

The emergence of Black Consciousness writers at a time when the historical point of reference for struggle had almost been obliterated resulted, however, in a lack of ideological depth. The writing of that period relied heavily on anger, bitterness, and at times, cynicism and frustration. It was in those days that expletives such as 'fuck-off' and 'shit' became poetic terms. In other ways, through its narrow cultural nationalism, Black Consciousness had a degenerative influence on cultural expression, particularly writing. While it was positive for the Black Consciousness Movement to unite the oppressed blacks, and hence to isolate the apartheid regime, its ideology became negative at the point where potential participants in nation-building and cultural expression, or outside allies, were judged exclusively by skin colour. A people's history, and thus their cultural expression, depends on their material life, and not on their skins.

The victory of repression over mass activity by the people did result in the emergence of numerous writers. These writers equated writing with poetry. Everyone wrote poetry. The voice of that poetry, collectively, became a voice of resistance. It was a voice which searched the past, returned to the present the heroic deeds of the oppressed, brought from the dead the heroes of the people, and put them face to face with the oppressor. Such poetry urged the oppressed to resist and fight for freedom in the spirit of past heroes. The marching footsteps of the workers, students and masses, were therefore echoed through poetry. The poets read at meetings, rallies, demonstrations and cultural functions, giving writing a sense of urgency. In my own case I was part of a cultural group called Mihloti BT, which performed poetry in private houses, at meetings and at rallies; Molefe Pheto and the late Thami Mnyele were also part of this group. It was at events of this nature that, I feel, a poetic language grew which linked the poets and the people. As English was not the people's first language we felt we had to use a simple, direct English that would be clearly understood, and that it was this that became at one and the same time a

⁵ *Ibid.*

POST-SHARPEVILLE POETRY: A POET'S VIEW

language of the poets and a language of liberation.† The urgency of this writing was that it had to keep pace with the unfolding, impatient struggle; it had to reach the people quickly to put a mirror before them. It also had to be part of a large programme on these occasions, so short stories, novels, and even plays could not keep pace. However, other items, playing at being poetry also emerged; slogans put together in poetry form, popular sayings quickly assembled and read as poetry. The poetry emerging from the pace, rhyme and rhythm of the struggle broke many rules, ignored the forms of creative writing and progressed with the times. Many of the poets of that time, have since gone back to school, become Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) soldiers, taken up propaganda work, and so on. Yet, some are still writing; some now write plays, novels or short stories, if they have not become teachers or entered other professions.

Very few black people in South Africa are still bewildered or shocked by the fact that they are black. Yet, oppression and exploitation still stubbornly linger in the lives of black people. Perhaps black power poetry, like soap, has washed away the shame of those who were black and ashamed of that fact. Like soap, that poetry is finished, it has done its job; screaming poetry has rendered its poets hoarse, and those who wrote swearing poetry must only be a bit embarrassed by it now. South African poetry has, with many people throwing away their pens, emerged revitalised from its past. It has struggled with the struggling people of South Africa to become part of humanity. A poem by Don Mattera speaks with this voice:

the days burn bright
upon our tired eyes
as we scan the fire
for the promised fire

the only heat we know
comes from the pyres of pain
which forge the fetters
that blade our hearts to numbness

and like hungry dogs
we scrape the silent tombs
seeking hidden teachings
of a time long gone

there are no prophets left
to light our sacrifice
and lead us against Babylon
only shepherds with broken flutes
playing to timid and unwilling flocks

the days burn bright
as we watch the sky
for the promised fire . . .⁶

⁶ Don Mattera, 'Promised Fire' (for Zeph Mathopeng) in *Exiles Within*.

Since 1960 we have gone through 16 June 1976, with Soweto, and September 1984 when Sebokeng, a township near Vereeniging, exploded, the people destroying the structures of apartheid, and implementing the ANC's call to render the country ungovernable. Since then, the corridors of apartheid power have been shaken by a permanent crisis. In an attempt to recreate normality, the regime has had to rely heavily on violence and increasing brutality, while we have lived through two states of emergency and are currently—since June 1988—undergoing a third. Through this fierce passage, other lessons have been learned.

Meanwhile, a new crop of poets, who equate writing only with poetry, has emerged. As the fighters are buried, and as old songs change and define people's revolutionary lives, numerous oral poets have arisen, merging a poetic language with revolutionary song and the language of liberation. History is repeating itself. It does so when the time does not favour the oppressor. So the poets say.

†A note on language

English has been used as a language of liberation in the context of the South African regime's manipulation of language as a means of dividing the population and maintaining white domination.

During the earlier colonial period, English was a national language and the medium of education for all races; African languages were held in contempt and arrested in history along with the cultures they expressed. With the introduction in 1955 of Bantu Education, bringing differing education for Whites, Indians and 'Coloureds', English was retained as a subject to prepare Africans to work for white privilege as cheap labourers, while other subjects were taught in their mother tongue. Bantustans were also created on the basis of language and regions, and urban areas divided along linguistic as well as racial lines, as part of the attempt to entrench white domination.

This state of affairs will be corrected by a process of national democratic struggle. National liberation is a process through which the colonised define their oppression, make their own history and redefine their culture. It is through their language that the oppressed articulate their consciousness as they re-enter history and the world. It is for this reason that African languages must be promoted and given exposure and room for expression, alongside English—an international language which should also be made available to the masses. While it is only through the process of national liberation that the conditions can be created for the expression of African languages, that expression itself becomes part of the process of liberation.

All South Africans, no matter what language they speak, should be encouraged to write in the language in which they feel most articulate. Not only will this allow the oppressed to wield the weapon they know best how to use, but it will also ensure that the culture of a united, non-racial and democratic South Africa will be reflected through its literature.