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Abstract

I believe that I have been asked to find out, to ponder over what the fate of the word is in my country, South Africa. Well, it is said that, that which does not come to an end must be ominous. What starts as being ominous is also ominous; what continues being endlessly not ominous is ominous; in other words, the essence of life is the fact of it always being under change.

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I believe that I have been asked to find out, to ponder over what the fate of the word is in my country, South Africa. Well, it is said that, that which does not come to an end must be ominous. What starts as being ominous is also ominous; what continues being endlessly not ominous is ominous; in other words, the essence of life is the fact of it always being under change.

As freedom fighters, in the long dark days of apartheid we knew this; we had to know this; and all who did not know this, came round also to know that that which does not come to an end must be ominous. What this also means is that, human beings are and must be intrinsically optimistic, hopeful and must not only know but understand that in fact they are the agents of that which characterizes life, and is of the essence of life.

It is my view that the large body of South African literature – whether it is that which is written in African Languages; that written in black Afrikaans, or black English or that written in white Afrikaans or white English, the San San, or the Khoi Khoi literature, or any other which qualifies as South African, is essentially and eventually part and parcel of human literature. It is even as some of it degrades human nature. It will have said what was thought and done in that time.

It is said that you can point at a person and take that back, but that you can never take back what you have said to others. If writers had something to say and have said it, the world will never forget it. The word then, is always ominous. I know what those who deal with the word said before the white man arrived in South Africa, they said: *he who walks the night with me, I thank at dawn*; I also know what those who lived at the time of the coming of the white man and the long period of nightmare of his stay said. They said: *No easy walk to freedom*. Then, also, another recent milestone is when you discover that freedom is not an event but that it is a process: *Change is pain*, the word maker has said. These are the milestones of South African literature. If life in South Africa is at the crossroads, yes, then South African literature *is* at the crossroads. I do not think that to mean crises, nor do I think it means dilemma. I do think though that it means challenge. It is a challenge to the South African word maker.

We must as South African writers ponder: the past, the present and the future. We must reflect, on the expressions – of the eyes, faces, gaits and silences of the citizens of this land. They, as agents of change, brought about a shift from the past, and live in a new present which spells and articulates the possibilities of a new future which is different from the many futures of their past. The energy of the high drama of struggle, and the energy to resist it, have both affected the citizens, to the point where even their own chemistry has been transformed.

There is a new feel in the land. What is it? A rainbow nation – is that an event? One nation, many cultures: who did not know this, about this old country? Why is this a discovery? But also, what does it mean if we know that, these are articulated and stated against the backdrop that apartheid is three centuries and a half old; that, the San San, the Griqua and the Khoi Khoi have almost been wiped off the face of the earth; that even as revolution, of uniting the different South African black tribes is more than eight decades old, in Kwazulu Natal the spectre of tribalism rears its head; that some Afrikaans speakers, who are white, seek a Volstaat and elsewhere there are rumblings from among the English who still claim to be *the* tribe of the world, and others in South Africa who are restless about the fact that the new dispensation may not be giving them a deserved attention.

What do all these realities say about human beings; about human relationships; about human nature? Given the seeming ability of human beings, of human nature, of human relations, to leap and qualitatively develop to being the noble ideals of human civilisation, which we all cherish, what remains then to be said about human beings; about war, about the future of life if backwardness, and reaction seems to stay with us even after such mighty happenings as the emergence of a new South Africa? I say this, keenly aware also, that the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, which is a heavy burden, a humiliating experience, a ruthless and brutal journey for black South Africans, will not vanish, but will be here with us for a very long time indeed. Yet, also, a cursory look and listening to the world outside of South Africa where blacks live – a look also and listening to the African continent – even as we are on the eve of the 21st century, – says nothing is said from those lands, from those peoples, from that experience, nothing is explicit about where we are headed, or whether, as the old word said long ago: we will love our neighbours as we love ourselves. The dilemma then is, the South African crisis then, is also the world crisis is also the crossroads of the world. South Africa has then, dared, and pioneered!

There is a lot that is brand new in South Africa but there is also, a lot that is old, all of which manifest and express themselves at present. The nation, the people who claim to be of the rainbow nation, are at

the crossroads, and yet also they are not. In one sense the black people of South Africa are at the crossroads. The natives, kaffirs, the bantoes, the blacks, the Africans, of the humiliated African continent, which is savage, pagan, crude, cruel, awkward, famined, which commits genocide in broad day light, the Africans, are at the crossroads. But so are white South Africans: the masters, the baases, sirs and madams, the master race, the special – African tribe of European descent on the African continent, the race which owns knowledge, privilege, and are of and by civilisation, are also at the crossroads. South Africa is at the crossroads. The new South Africa, the country of many Cultures, the rainbow nation, all of these phrases, engineer the country out of a prophesied doom, into a possible life span. Elsewhere in my writing, I have contested the view that the birth of the new South Africa was a miracle. It is not a miracle. In as much as the birth of a child is a result of the mating of a male and a female. Yes indeed, for many years, and much more so in 1994, the nation must have gone on its knees, raised its hands, closed its eyes, – and prayed, in as much as it did chant, dance, clap hands, sung, that South Africa must be saved!

There is a lot that is brand new in South Africa. But there is also, as I said, a lot that has been here, which is old and stubborn, backward, evil and inhuman, which stares and stares us in the eye all the time.

We did as a nation pray for the leaders, for peace, and when we did, we were weary indeed of blood letting and of war. We borrowed from, as we also became creative with human knowledge, – civilisation – asking it to become a catalyst in our seeking wisdom for peace to fall on our land. We laboured for this peace. We died for this peace. We wept for this. And some as we talk now, will never ever be the same again. Their sanity snapped, was severed, by the weight of that time when everything was uncertain. When it seemed that, as people we would, as we had done before, break limb with impunity and tear life apart with raving anger.

It would not be true, it would not be honest to think that that spectre is behind us. No! And that is another reason why there will be no miracle. We laboured and are still called upon to further labour, to build peace, to build the land, and build friendships and possibilities of becoming members of the community of nations.

Therefore then, the issue for us is about how we can take the leap out of the morass and quicksand of racism, of prejudice and of injustices. I know that South Africa will contribute, in theory, significantly to civilisation in the resolution of these problems. I hope, in doing so, it will contribute to the emancipation of the Africans and the African continent, by not compromising on the fundamentals of the philosophy of ubuntu, as also, Africa will not be shy to learn, to be influenced, and to engage with the ideas of other people. Ubuntu says

simply: human beings are human beings. Meaning: *you cannot treat human beings as anything else but as human beings.*

The South African nation has now, been freed as it also has been bound. It is my hope that all South Africans are now free to be who they want. That means that none of us in a group, or as individuals will even attempt to try and tell others who they should be. However, there are certain facts which are begging for recognition and attention: the Amazulu, Amakhosa, Basotho, Mapedi, Amaswati, Amashangane, Mavenda, Amandebele, Batswana who form the basic of the Africaness of South Africa, and who collectively form the majority of people, but also, who, because they were the most oppressed collectively, ask, and must ask: what is freedom?

The parties and celebrations are over, and the day has dawned as it always has in the many pasts. On the one hand, reality is the same, on the other our reality is different. It is the same because we are bound by being South African, who are a diverse people, but who also are, because of this diversity, conscious of being different; but, our reality is also different because where it meant African and different it also was synonymous to saying, outcast, downtrodden, glorified slave.

A writer must know all these things I have said, and more; but then that knowledge does not make a writer, nor is that knowledge useful if it is left as knowledge. How does the writer utilize this knowledge? It is in my view, the role of the writer, to confront the contradictions of life; to know and understand and recognize them. It is also the task of the word maker, to shore them and to create the light at the end of the tunnel, – if there is, or, to say, it is so dark, so dark, that hope can only be in the spirit of human being.

I am here, trying to find a way out of the crossroads. I may have put the useful rules in place, I may not have done so, but at the end, I have said I hope, that, because at the crossroads it is a melting pot, – that is the stuff of the richness of life. Also, I want to have said that, what does not come to an end, is ominous, and therefore that as people, we must not only accept change, but also become its agents and its catalysts. I hope I have escaped the clichés which are normally said about writing. The South African situation is about making the new, the foundation of the future. So many things which we were afraid of no longer matter now. A little Afrikaner girl, who lives where blacks must not live in South Africa, made it her business to see Mr. Mandela thrice and thrice she shook his hand, and declared, *I love that old man.* Her forebears heard her say so, and she is still alive? A little black boy once asked me at a school where I gave a lecture: why did the white people lock you up for nine months? I said whatever I said in answer, and his reply as he sat down was: *we must never allow white people to do that again.* It is my wish to write a novel, a play, a poem or make a film which these two very civilized young ones – one, a white little girl,

the other a little black boy – will read. I want to be that young and so optimistic !

Earlier on, I said that a lot has changed in South Africa. However, change like everything in life, as I said in the beginning of this my statement, is not permanent. It cannot be if change is a constant of life, and if also, change is an issue of human beings, that is of human nature. There are many dark moments which still await our great and easily, most beautiful land in the world, where, some of the bravest sons and daughters of the human race live. We are just about to open a long closed door – the past! And – we are going to ask – about the bloody past, about some moments which will illustrate the degeneration of the human mind and state to being basic, simply cruel, and utterly incredible in callousness and disregard for life. We must learn, know, and come to accept that so is another side of the human race. It is cruel. It is unkind. It is merciless. It hates. It is full of intrigue and conspiracy. It cheats and betrays. It is evil. We must come, once more, to learn and to know these things about ourselves. If we forget that, then, as this world has done, over and over, we will repeat these evil deeds – for, what is the difference between apartheid and the middle passage – of what significance is the difference?

There is another patch – a dark patch, which we must as a people traverse: one day, the little black boy here, will be a man, and the little white girl a woman. We must give them the vocabulary to speak to each other. As it is now, they may not have it later because vocabularies are a result and issue of experience. It is true that that white little girl must be able to love all human beings, maybe because they *are* tall, maybe because they are black, but most important and most certainly as human beings, because we have no choice but to live with and around other human beings. We must have a let-live relation with them. She, and my little black boy must know this. He must know this. He must know that because he will not allow himself to live under apartheid ever, that does not mean that white people have no right to live. Ah, these then are my beloved country people who are pioneers in the 21st century!

The dark patch for them then, is when they are eye-ball to eye-ball and they do not have the vocabulary, – to say what they think and feel; and to talk of what they see and hear, when there is too much which remains inexplicable. That is the perilous moment. I expect that for a while in South Africa, there will be these dangerous encounters. South Africa, through its diverse landscape: its mountains, ravines, bush, jungle, vast and empty patches, and through its wide seas and blue sky, its pitch dark nights, and at times quiet rural footpaths, has to find a place for itself on the African continent. Everything of itself, has to, if it will be at peace with itself at all, fit and locate itself in Africa; that is what its freedom, which it fought for, for so long, must mean and that

is what binds it. It is this process of self-identification, and the seeking of an identity which must also define the freedom of my country. It is only when we examine who we are, that we can then embrace freedom. That is the dark patch we were afraid of – I asked a Griqua lady recently: Where do Griquas come from? From, she said, the San San, the Khoi Khoi, the white and the black. This is a dynamic which caused us great pain, but it must now, release us, we must emancipate ourselves from it – we must, go! And that in a sense is the fate of the word, that, it has the potential to be final, but also, to be dynamic. That, in my view, is the new find of South African literature.

I thank you.

Cape Town 6.9.95

