

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS POETS IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1967-1980,  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MONGANE SEROTE AND SIPHO SEPAMLA

by

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SUMMARY

The Sharpeville, Langa, and Vanderbijl Park massacres of 21 March 1960 were an important watershed in the political and cultural history of South Africa. Political persecution and cultural repression followed. Censorship and the imprisonment, banning, and exile of leading Black literary figures retarded the growth of South African literature between 1960 and 1966. Many Black writers of this period either ended up in exile or published their work outside South Africa. With the rise of Black Consciousness in 1967, a new group of writers emerged in South Africa, the majority of whom were poets. This study deals with the poets of the Black Consciousness era between 1967 and 1980, with special reference to the two leading poets of the period: Mongane Serote and Siphho Sepamla.

Chapter One reviews existing critical literature on Black writers from South Africa; places the work of the Black Consciousness poets in its historical, political, cultural and literary context; and gives an exposition of Black Consciousness mainly through Steve Biko's writings, which were seminal in the development of writers of the Black Consciousness era. Chapters Two and Three are detailed studies of Serote and Sepamla respectively, tracing the development of their ideas through their poems and arguing that Black Consciousness provided the main springboard for their work. Chapter Four traces the poetic renaissance after Sharpeville to the emergence of Dollar Brand as a poet, provides a survey of the remaining major poets of the Black Consciousness era, and ends with a discussion of the Soweto poets who emerged in response to the Soweto massacres of 16 June 1976. Chapter Five reassesses the impact of Black Consciousness on the poets who emerged in the period covered in this study, summarizes the characteristics of their poetry, and evaluates their contribution to literature.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress.
APDUSA	African People's Democratic Union of South Africa.
ASSECA	Association for the Educational and Cultural Advancement of the African People.
AWA	African Writers' Association.
BCP	Black Community Programmes.
BPC	Black People' Convention.
CLP	Coloured Labour Party.
FUBA	Federated Union of Black Arts.
IDAMASA	Inter-Denominational African Ministers Association of South Africa.
MDALI	Music, Drama, Art and Literature Institute.
MK	Umkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation).
NEUM	Non-European Unity Movement.
PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress.
SASM	Southern African Students Movement.
SASM - high schools	South African Students Movement.
SASO	South African Students Organisation.
SOWETO	South- Western Townships.
SSRC	Soweto Students Representative Council.
UBLS	University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.
UCM	University Christian Movement.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### REVIEW OF CRITICAL LITERATURE

Black South African literature of English expression can be divided into four overlapping periods. The first period, which began at the turn of the last century, produced such pioneer writers as Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, R.R. Dhlomo, H.I.E. Dhlomo, and Peter Abrahams. The second period can be traced to the publication of Ezekiel Mphahlele's short stories, Man Must Live (1946), or even further back to the publication of Dark Testament (1942) by Peter Abrahams, who is a bridge figure between the pioneer writers and writers of the post-war era; this period gathered momentum with the foundation of Drum magazine in 1951 and reached its zenith during the Sophiatown renaissance of the 1950s. The third period is associated with the Sharpeville uprising and the exile writers who wrote in response to the repression which followed Sharpeville. The fourth period is the Black Consciousness era, which sprang out of the cultural and political malaise induced by repression after Sharpeville and culminated in the Soweto epoch.

Several commentaries have been written on the work of Black writers who emerged during or wrote in response to the Sharpeville crisis. Their predecessors of the Sophiatown renaissance and Drum generation, and other earlier writers in English, have also received considerable critical attention in numerous reviews and articles and in several books and dissertations. However, the available criticism of writers of the Black Consciousness era is weak in many respects. Few studies, mainly reviews and survey type articles, have been produced on the writers of the Black Consciousness era. Their work has not been studied in terms of its truly unifying principles: the underlying political credo, consciously or unconsciously absorbed, in their work; their peculiar social, cultural, historical and political circumstances; and other socio-political and poetic traits peculiar to them and their work.

The African Image by Ezekiel Mphahlele, in both its 1962 and 1974 editions, encompasses most of the writers of the Sharpeville era and their predecessors. The two texts differ radically particularly in the first part of the book, in which Mphahlele discusses the cultural and political situation in South Africa. The difference is a measure of the urgency of the immediately pre-Soweto years. In the 1974 edition, Mphahlele includes writers from South Africa and other parts of Africa

who were not yet well known in 1962. 'As a critic of Black African literature he holds perhaps the first place,' Anne Tibble thinks of Mpananlele. 'As a critic of white African literature he offers a much needed balance to white criticism ... Particularly useful are the chapters in which the author is concerned with the white man's image of the non-white and the black man's literary image of himself.'<sup>1</sup>

Mpananlele's fresh approach and insights derive, in large measure, from his eye for significant personality traits in most of the Black writers he discusses, traits which illuminate their work. He knows the majority of them personally and is in a privileged position to determine the extent to which each writer's temperament, life experiences, political and other activities have influenced his writing. But he never allows his passing acquaintanceship or intimate friendship with any of the writers concerned to blur his objectivity. However, his attempts to trace the origins of written literature among Blacks in South Africa are not far reaching enough. He does not demonstrate the transition from oral to written literature, as A.C. Jordan does in Towards an African Literature, or show how various African writers employ oral motifs, folktales, legends, African speech patterns and rhythms in written composition. He attends to some of these problems in articles such as 'The Language of African Literature' and 'African Literature: Dialogue of the Two Selves', and his current research has turned in this direction. But the huge unexplored area is the matter of what is expected of different forms and how far, for instance, the praise singer can go in criticism and how far these assumptions about oral performance are carried over into assumptions about the purpose of written literature. Mazisi Kunene, Dan Kunene, A.C. Jordan, Sam Guma, all of whom pay some attention to these problems in as far as they affect their own ethnic or other literature written in the indigenous African languages, do not relate oral traditional forms to written literature in English. As criticism of African literature, The African Image and Voices in the Whirlwind (1973), which complements Mphahlele's work on the South African writers of the diaspora, suffer from paying insufficient attention to African literary modes. Mphahlele was also among the forerunners of the anti-Négritude school, which grew in the 1960s, particularly among writers from Anglophone Africa such as Wole Soyinka. Ironically, the poets of the Black Consciousness era veer towards Négritude, which is denounced by older South African writers such as Mphahlele and Lewis

Nkosi. Mphahlele's discussion of Black South African poetry in English concentrates on the exile poets such as Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, and Arthur Nortje. Until the new writers emerged after 1967, Black South African literature in English thrived almost entirely in exile, at a time when the criticism of African literature was gaining respectability as a serious academic discipline. When conditions once again proved conducive to the growth of a vigorous literary tradition in South Africa, the attention of critics and academics, following the lead of Mphahlele and other influential scholars, had already turned almost exclusively to the exile writers and, with few exceptions, has remained fixed on them.

Vernie February's Mind Your Colour: The 'Coloured' Stereotype in South African Literature (1981) deals with stereotypes in the literature, culture and politics of South Africa, with special reference to people of mixed races. His primary objective is to show how the 'Coloured' character in White South African fiction is stigmatized. As in Mphahlele's treatment of 'Literary Images' in The African Image, February's book divides into two sections. Chapters 1-4 deal with White images of 'Coloureds' in the writings of English and Afrikaans writers, and Chapter 7 reverts to White portraits of 'Coloureds' in fiction by Afrikaans writers of the Sestigers movement, a movement of writers from the 1960s considered radical in Afrikaans literature. He exposes the prejudices which are projected in the unflattering portraits of 'Coloured' characters in the fiction of these writers, from the earliest period of Dutch-Afrikaans literature, which begins in 1832 with the publication of E.C. Boniface's play, De Temperantisten. He is critical of the English writers, too, even those of Sarah Gertrude Millin's stature, for propagating the same stereotypes as their Afrikaner counterparts. He argues that the 'Coloured' character in the work of these English writers of ostensibly liberal inclinations remains lazy, full of lies, irresponsible, garrulous, an incorrigible drunk, and fond of fighting. Using an argument borrowed from Laurens van der Post, February points out that at best these English writers evince an attitude of benevolent neglect, so that he takes Olive Schreiner to task for her novel, The Story of an African Farm, in which 'the black ... people of Africa who were with her from birth and far outnumbered the whites are not naturally and immediately in it'.<sup>2</sup> The remaining four chapters of February's book deal with 'Coloured' writing. He



observes that the dominant theme in such literature is the 'Coloured' people's rejection of the roles ascribed to them by Whites, even in Adam Small's work, which he thinks is sometimes inaccurately faulted for projecting an image of subservience among 'Coloureds'. His discussion of the 'Coloured' writers is rendered incomplete by his omission of Bessie Head, who is rivalled only by Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma as the leading 'Coloured' novelist South Africa has produced and in whose work the 'Coloured' character looms large.

Other surveys which complement Mphahlele's include Vladimir Klima's South African Prose Writing in English (1971), which resembles David Rabkin's thesis in the excellence of its exposition of the ideological position of the writers of the protest tradition up to and including writers of the Sharpeville era; and Ursula Barnett's dissertation, 'African Literature in English in Southern Africa', submitted in 1971 at the University of Cape Town. Ursula Barnett's study goes beyond the writers dealt with in Klima to the emergence of poets of the Black Consciousness era. She has updated this work in her forthcoming book, A Vision of Order, which is to be published by Sinclair Browne in London. She has also written a book on Mphahlele entitled Ezekiel Mphahlele (1976), the first full study on Mphahlele. It includes discussion of Mphahlele's little known poems, collected for the first time in The Unbroken Song (1981), and his second novel of exile, Chirundu (1979), which was in manuscript form when she wrote her book.

Peter Abrahams's fiction has received even more critical attention than Mphahlele's. Full studies on Peter Abrahams by Michael Wade and Kolawole Ogungbesan have been published in book form. Wade's doctoral dissertation, 'The Liberal Tradition in South African Fiction in English', submitted in 1973 at the University of Sussex, includes a chapter on Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma. Numerous articles have been written about Abrahams, such as Christopher Heywood's assessment in Perspectives on African Literature (1971). However, the available studies on Peter Abrahams lack intimacy with his poetry. He is, in some ways, the precursor of the Black Consciousness poets in South Africa, alongside B.W. Vilakazi, H.I.E. Dhlomo, A.C. Jordan and several other poets who wrote mainly in the indigenous African languages. Two recurring themes in Black Consciousness poetry appear in Abrahams's poems. The first is Black pride, expressed in 'Black is tabooed', a gentle mockery of people who view Whites as the standard, which was published in the

Bantu World of 21 March 1936. 'To a Brown Girl' first appeared in the Cape Standard of 21 January 1939 and is written in the tradition of 'Black Woman', Senghor's glorification of African womanhood. The second recurring theme, expressed in such poems as 'To the Last Man' from the 21 March 1936 issue of the Bantu World, is the need for solidarity among the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. In other respects Abranams differs from the Black Consciousness poets he foreshadows. He has one leg in the colonial era and the other in the contemporary political struggles of his people. His attitude towards the British colonial administration is as ambivalent as S.E.K. Mqhayi's. His style was influenced by the English Romantics. However, the Afro-American poets of the Harlem renaissance, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and others, had an even deeper influence on him. He helped to transplant into South African soil the traditions of Afro-American literature, which has remained the dominant influence on many Black South African writers in English. The first booklet of his poems appeared under the title Here Friend and was followed in 1940 by A Blackman Speaks of Freedom. Both volumes show influences of socialist thought particularly in their protest against the exploitation of Black workers in South Africa, a theme developed in his earliest novels, Song of the City (1945) and Mine Boy (1946). Despite the affectation of his diction, the syrupy tone of his voice, his poems have 'a deep, solemn and reflective strain'.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the monographs already mentioned on Abranams and Mphahlele, there are no other published studies of individual Black writers from South Africa. Stephen Gray, as general editor of a new series published by the South African subsidiary of McGraw Hill on Southern African Literary Studies, is trying to remedy the situation. The format of books in the series will be: editor's introduction, socio-political and literary background, press reviews, interviews and statements, and a symposium of critical articles.

Black South African writers of prose fiction who began their literary careers mainly in the 1950s receive their fair share of attention in David Rabkin's doctoral thesis, 'Drum Magazine (1951-1961): And the Works of Black South African Writers Associated with It' (University of Leeds, July 1975). Rabkin discusses the work of Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Alex La Guma, with the last two mentioned seen as the major writers

of the period. In addition, he discusses writers of mixed racial origin from the Western Cape: James Matthews, Peter Clarke and Richard Rive, who form a special case as a result of their peculiar position in South Africa's racial hierarchy. He makes a spirited defence of the preoccupation of Black South African writers with political issues and argues that such a preoccupation for people in their position is inevitable and that any writing which by-passes, ignores, or transcends these over-riding political questions is more likely to turn out as 'wholly formalistic coterie writing, more probably trivia'.<sup>4</sup> He appreciates the fact that any meaningful assessment of Black South African writers, or that of any other group of writers, must take into account the social, political, and historical bases from which their work springs. Their writings point outside to a real world and the reader is grateful to Rabkin for his demonstration of the structures and operations of that world. The strength of his work lies in its reasoned, informed, informative and, in the last resort, ideological base to the discussion. His work vindicates the assertion made by Georg Lukacs, whose disciple Rabkin is, that the outstanding writers of any age 'concern themselves with the central social and human questions of their age, both directly and in their innermost intentions'.<sup>5</sup>

Several other dissertations on Black South African literature have appeared from South African, British, European, Canadian and American universities. Moses Gessler Nkondo's is among the most impressive of these and is argued with decent lucidity and considerable inner authority. His leverage comes simultaneously from a standpoint that invokes universalist standards and from a standpoint inside the energy system of the culture to which he belongs. His doctoral thesis, of which his article, 'The Human Image in South African English Poetry', in the Third Quarter 1980 issue of Africa Today is a summary, was accepted at the University of Yale in 1979. It is significant for the manner in which he treats South African poetry in the last century and a half in terms of its underlying principles. He demonstrates how superficial racial tags can be and how a critic who stresses racial criteria too heavily can obscure fundamental similarities between poets of different racial origins, such as Arthur Nortje and Wopko Jensma. He shows how the best modern South African poets, concerned with intricate human issues and creativity, have developed apart from such racial categories. He argues that:

In their work, we find a deepening of sensibility to the point where the land is conceived and imagined in terms which are at once spiritual, moral, sensory and directed to the drama of human existence. In Oswald Mtshali, it leads to a vision of society and of the artist representing society. In Mongane Serote, it touches the delicate webbing of human perceptions. In Pascal Gwala and Wopko Jensma, it is first socially conscious, and then gustily ironic. In Kgositsile, memory and prophecy merge into an implacable revolutionary voice. In Arthur Nortje, it strives desperately to wed hard thought to a myriad powerful impressions and to a squad of undisciplined emotions. We get, as we have never got before, a poetry of which man is the effective centre - man as the poet lives and represents him; and we get with it a greater variety of moods and talents than we have had at any one time before.

Other studies of Black South African literature consist of numerous articles and conference papers, most of which deal with the established writers who began writing or who came to prominence before 1967. Among such studies, Lewis Nkosi's 'Fiction by Black South Africans' in Home and Exile (1964) remains the clearest and most provocative exposition of the weaknesses of imaginative writing by Blacks from South Africa and the problems they face in having to reflect conditions in a politically stagnant society such as South Africa. However, his sweeping generalizations and disparaging remarks, particularly about Rive's novel, Emergency, are not substantiated convincingly by evidence from the texts discussed. We must take his word about Rive's 'bad jerky writing', without examples of such writing being produced as evidence.<sup>7</sup> Although some of his more incisive remarks about the state of Black South African literature are as true today as when he first wrote them in 1965, his article is largely dated. Such statements as he makes about the technical deficiencies of South African writers and their inability to merge their political commitment satisfactorily with their creative writing require some qualification in the light of new work by poets from Dollar Brand to Fhazel Johannesse, Christopher van Wyk, and Ingoapele Madingoane.

Lewis Nkosi's book, Tasks and Masks - Themes and Styles of African Literature (1981), deals with themes and styles in African prose fiction, poetry and drama. In the Preface, Nkosi explains the significance of the title in the following terms:

Since the early 1960s I have been obsessed with the idea that African authors were easily divisible into two main groups: first, those who looked at African society in an essentialist way as unchanging in its important elements, rather like a 'mask' one turns perpetually in one's hands, each time revealing nothing more than what it is, the work of some skilful carver who originally imparted to it its outstanding features; the

second group consists of those writers who for the most obvious political reasons are to be found mostly in East and Southern Africa; they have conceived of the act of writing as the carrying out of social tasks, almost desperate ones, without which understanding the development of African societies would be handicapped ... In some of the writers the two functions, that of simple representation and that of active criticism of African society overlap.

Tasks and Masks presents a panoramic view of African literature in European languages. The discussion ranges from Negritude, through themes and styles in African prose fiction, drama and poetry, to protest and commitment in South African literature. The book is also, in part, Nkosi's attempt to clear misunderstandings arising from his first book. However, Nkosi continues to write as provocatively as before and, in the process, he sparks off old controversies anew. He has old scores to settle with Rive, Mphanlele and Soyinka. He invokes old professional jealousies. He reviews Soyinka's The Interpreters in completely negative terms, a kind of repayment for Soyinka's equally devastating remarks in Myth, Literature and the African World about Nkosi's play, Rhythm of Violence. Nkosi's discussion of Mphanlele's first exile novel, The Wanderers, is subjective. In a typical passage, all the more damaging for being couched in half-truths, he writes:

Mphanlele seems to have given up the cool objectivity of his short stories for a prolonged bout of self-justification and self-worship which do nothing to enhance the quality of this turgidly voluminous prose-work. Indeed, his constant demands upon us to see the hero as a man of superior qualities produces exactly the opposite effect. Finally, in the author's hands this novel turns into the deadest tomb of self-love.

We are distracted from an examination of the text, in literary terms, to a spiced account of what Nkosi sees as the author's egocentrism. Granted that Mphanlele's work is semi-autobiographical and, therefore, reveals something of his character, its fictitious elements warrant consideration of the work as imaginative writing rather than autobiography. For instance, Mphanlele had no son who died in a border clash between guerilla forces and the Rhodesian-South African army the way Timi, the main protagonist in The Wanderers, has. Some of Nkosi's personal remarks are irrelevant to textual criticism and to an assessment of imaginative literature. Nkosi's views on Mphanlele's egocentrism are not shared by critics who have no personal axe to grind. 'Mphanlele strikes no poses, sees himself in the role of neither prophet nor messiah, and the following remarks are as revealing of his humility as they are of the general difficulties facing the artist as a black South

African', Adrian Roscoe says. After quoting from Mphahlele to illustrate his modesty, Roscoe proceeds to discuss Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue, which he regards as 'the least ego-centric autobiography ever written'.<sup>9</sup> That does not tally with Nkosi's image of Mphahlele as a self-inflated megalomaniac. Tasks and Masks does not introduce us in sufficient detail to any of the various new poets who are mentioned in the book, although Nkosi's work is the first major study by a South African Black to recognize Serote as the major poet of the Black Consciousness era in South Africa.

Tasks and Masks illustrates the major strengths and weaknesses of writings by exiles. Writing by exiles is usually marked by its emphasis on radical politics. Distance sharpens criticism and perspective, but the conclusions are not always realistic. Writers in exile suffer from having been removed from their primary sources and audience. The political overtones of their work, at once more radical and less realistic, are as much the driving force of exile literature as the cause of much of its deterioration and banality. This is evident even among the best of South Africa's exile writers, such as Alex La Guma and Dennis Brutus. From exile, Nkosi, like the other exile writers, has not been able to keep proper track of literary developments in South Africa.

Other uncollected essays dealing with Black South African literature include Bernth Lindfors's 'Popular Literature by African Writers from South Africa' and 'Post-War Literature in English by African Writers from South Africa'; Lionel Abrahams's 'Black Experience into English Verse' and 'The Blackness of Black Writing'; and Tim Couzens's 'Black South African Literature, 1900-1950' and his other essays on early literary trends in Black South African literature, the field covered by his doctoral thesis. Collections of articles and conference papers appear in Christopher Heywood's Aspects of South African Literature (1976) and Kenneth Parker's The South African Novel in English (1978). Both range over certain key works by Black and White writers in the historic and recent past. The claim of the publishers about the fifteen articles in Heywood's Aspects of South African Literature being 'the first major consideration of all South African writers' is incorrect.<sup>10</sup> It is by no means a consideration of all South African writers. Among the general studies of African literature which give considerable attention to Black South African writers, mainly of the Sharpeville era, there is Adrian Roscoe's Uhuru's Fire (1977), which contains a chapter on Black

South African verse and prose; Standpoints on African Literature (1973), edited by Chris L. Wanjala, who also contributes an essay on La Guma; in addition, Wanjala's book contains an essay on Dennis Brutus's prison poems by Bahadur Tejani, who finds Letters to Martha unredeemably bad and accuses Brutus of writing verse that is self-pitying, rhetorical, and politically naive; Literatures of the World in English (1974), edited by Bruce King, contains a survey of South African writing by John Povey; Anne Tibble's survey introduction to her anthology, African/English Literature (1965); Exile and Tradition (1976) edited by R. Smith; Martin Tucker's Africa and Modern Literature (1967), based on his doctoral dissertation, 'A Survey of the Representative Modern Novel in English about Africa' (University of New York, 1963); Protest and Conflict in African Literature, edited by Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden; several other studies of similar scope by Charles Larson, Wilfred Cartey, Dathorne, and others; plus the pioneering work of scholars such as Anne Rutherford and Janheinz Jahn. John Olney's chapter on 'Politics, Creativity and Exile', from his book, Tell Me Africa (1973), provides a unique survey of autobiography by Blacks from South Africa. The majority of the writers Olney discusses are established writers, mainly exiles, who have been published abroad.

Robert Maclaren's doctoral dissertation, 'Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa; Aspects of Theatre on the Witwatersrand between 1958-1976' (University of Leeds, April 1980), deserves special mention. Although drama has tended to lag behind prose fiction and poetry, the performing arts have not been altogether absent from the South African literary and cultural scene. In 1958 King Kong inaugurated a vigorous tradition of Black musicals, modelled after such Broadway successes as West Side Story, featuring predominantly Black casts. Gibson Kente, music composer and playwright, became the leading figure in township theatre in the period covered by Maclaren's study. Experimental theatre thrived in productions such as Survival by Workshop '71 Theatre Company and Phiri by the Phoenix Players. The box office success of King Kong ensured a steady output of theatre for export, usually with a tribal (exotic costumes, songs, and dances) or sexist (bare breasted women) flavour, of which Ipi Tombi is a leading example. Black Consciousness emphasis on cultural regeneration and Black identity brought about a different crop of politically motivated playwrights such as Mthuli Shezi. This is the scene painted in Maclaren's

dissertation. He was well placed to undertake the study. He had been intimately involved with Black experimental theatre groups such as Workshop '71 Theatre Company, whose performance of Credo Mutwa's UNosilimela, a recreation of a Zulu traditional myth, he was responsible for as producer. He founded the first and only theatre magazine, Sketsh, to be devoted to Black theatre in South Africa. He has a good command of Zulu and some speaking knowledge of Sesotho, the two most widely used indigenous African languages in the Witwatersrand and in the plays of African writers from the area. He edited South African People's Plays (1981), which contains Kente's Too Long, Shezi's Shanti, Mutwa's UNosilimela, and Survival. Maclaren's work can be advanced through further research by incorporating theatre developments from other areas outside the Witwatersrand, among groups such as New Brighton's Serpent Players, who worked with Athol Fugard in The Coat, Sizwe Banzi is Dead, The Island, and other productions. Maclaren's cut-off point has also meant that he had to leave out theatre trends after the Black uprising of 1976, a period which ushered significant innovations in the work of the young Soweto playwrights, Matsemela Manaka and Maishe Maponya. Manaka's Egoli and Maponya's Hungry Earth deal with the plight of migrant workers, in a conscious effort to create a working class theatre which projects the workers' fears, hopes and aspirations.

Nadine Gordimer's survey, 'New Black Poetry in South Africa' (1973) deals with most of the leading poets of the revival period, but omits Siphos Sepamla and Mafika Gwala. To date, Gwala has received less attention than he deserves, although he was as responsible as any other poet for the poetry upsurge in the late 1960s. At the time Gordimer wrote her article, only three individual collections had been published: Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (1971) by Oswald Mtshali; Yakhal' inkomo (1972) by Mangane Serote; and Cry Rage (1972), with poems by James Matthews and Gladys Thomas. In addition, there was Robert Royston's anthology, To Whom it May Concern (1973), reissued the following year as Black Poets in South Africa. Other surveys include Douglas Livingstone's 'The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and others in English' (1976) and Arthur Ravenscroft's 'Contemporary Poetry from Black South Africa' (1977). Ravenscroft's article does not examine any new material, although, in addition to the books on which Gordimer's study was based, he adds four others to the list: Serote's second collection, Tsetlo (1974), and his 54-page poem, No Baby Must Weep (1975); Black Voices



Shout (1974), an anthology of Black Consciousness poetry written mainly by young poets of mixed racial origin from the Cape and edited by James Matthews; and Sipho Sepamla's first collection, Hurry Up to It (1975). Livingstone looks at some material from Tsetlo and Hurry Up to It, and introduces the work of a new poet of Indian extraction, Shabbir Banoobhai, whose first collection, Echoes of My Other Self, appeared in 1980.

Other surveys such as Cherry Wilhelm's 'South African writing in English' (1977), which contains an assessment of Gwala's Jol'iinkomo (1977) and Sepamla's The Soweto I Love (1977), exhibit Black poets as curiosities and appendages of secondary importance in the tradition of English poetry in South Africa. Three notable exceptions from papers read at the University of Cape Town in 1974 are: 'Black Poetry in South Africa' by Tim Couzens, 'Satire in Contemporary South African English Poetry' by Walter Saunders, and 'A Question of Black and White?: The Contemporary Situation in South African English Poetry' by Geoffrey Haresnape. Couzens links the new poets to their predecessors such as I. Citashe and H.I.E. Dhlomo; Saunders deals with Mtshali, Gwala and Mandlenkosi Langa, and introduces the work of an unknown poet, Paul Vilakazi; Haresnape devotes considerable space to Serote and other Black poets, alongside his discussion of poets from the mainstream of the English tradition, and illustrates how the work of some Black and White South African poets transcends racial barriers in its appeal. Haresnape's argument, which is propounded more exhaustively in Nkondo's doctoral dissertation, is that, although South African poets are mainly concerned with Blackness and Whiteness, 'there are poets (both Black and White) who resist being swamped into opposing camps, and who block their ears against the temptation of presenting a black-and-white vision in their art.'<sup>11</sup>

The quest for self-transcendence in South Africa's racially divided society and the debate about whether such a goal is attainable or not continue to exercise the minds of politicians, artists, critics and commentators. But nobody shows how such transcendence can be effected while South Africa remains sharply divided along racial lines. Mike Kirkwood, whose contribution to the 1974 Cape Town conference was a scathing attack on 'Butlerism' or the preconceptions of the English-speaking South African writer about the innerent superiority and centrality of their literary tradition, urged writers and critics from the dominant

culture to cultivate a less self-inflating consciousness. 'The attempt to realize such a programme in the arts will demand, we contend, a self-transcendence in the colonizer writer,' he said, and then dodged the issue: 'We stop short of advocating the techniques of that transcendence, but we point out that a life-technique, as well as an art-technique will be required.'<sup>12</sup>

The tendency in the remaining Cape Town conference papers, collected in Poetry South Africa: Papers from Poetry '74 (1976), edited by Peter Wilhelm and James Polley, is to tag Black poets at the tail end or to discuss them in parenthesis, as some useful diversion, in the course of discussing English poetry from South Africa. The subject is seldom seen as a respectable academic pursuit in its own right. 'South African Poetry/Verse' is used by the rest of the contributors to the conference, such as Guy Butler and Jack Cope, as a synonym for poetry written by Whites. The phrase hardly accommodates poetry written in the indigenous African languages. Such a Eurocentric tendency is repeatedly manifested in anthologies such as Butler's A Book of South African Verse (1959) and the Penguin Book of South African Verse (1968) edited by Cope and Uys Krige. In Cope and Krige, African poets are left to the tail end and there assembled into tribal kraals according to their ethnic origin, an irrelevant division which has little bearing on their poetry and continues to make English verse the exclusive preserve of writers of European origin. A New Book of South African Verse in English (1979) edited by Butler and Chris Mann contains twelve Black poets out of the hundred poets represented. African poetry and the tradition from which it springs continue to be regarded as peripheral and commentaries on these poets remain scanty.

The study of the Black writers who emerged in South Africa after the preceding generation of Black writers had been intimidated into silence, banned, imprisoned, or forced into exile in the first half of the 1960s continues to rely heavily on essays such as Gordimer's. The second edition of Mphahlele's The African Image discusses Dollar Brand and Oswald Mtshali, among the writers to emerge from South Africa since 1967. In his Selected Writings (1976) and Writing Black (1981), Richard Rive refers fleetingly to the work of Mtshali, Serote, Gwala and Sepamla. In Tasks and Masks, Nkosi's examination of the poets of the post-Sharpeville revival period in South Africa is largely based on Royston's anthology; however, his assessment of Serote's first three collections

is slightly more detailed than in all the other studies mentioned. In Mind Your Colour, February omits all the Black Consciousness poets of mixed races represented in Black Voices Shout and does not mention Adam Small's Black Bronze Beautiful (1975), Christopher Van Wyk's It is Time to Go Home (1979), and Fhazel Johannesburg's The Rainmaker (1979).

This state of affairs, whereby most of the definitive studies of the poets of the Black Consciousness era continue to be produced by critics who are outside the culture from which this poetry springs, is felt by the poets concerned to be a regrettable trend. Except in a few exceptional cases, the process leads to distortions and misrepresentations, where the critics concerned harbour prejudices against Black writers or do not understand the political, cultural and literary milieu from which the work springs. Sepamla laments such shortcomings in the critics he has to deal with, when he says: 'It seems I'm in a position which I cannot change at the moment, having to deal with whites as my critics. I think the fact that there are no experienced black writers leaves me with very little choice but to work with white critics, white editors.'<sup>13</sup>

There are two recently completed studies of significance. Ursula Barnett's forthcoming book, A Vision of Order, contains a historical outline, a chapter on poetry, and separate chapters on the novel, autobiography, short stories, and drama. Chapman's book, misleadingly called Soweto Poetry, although it includes Gwala and others who neither live in nor write about Soweto, brings together 'biographical pieces, interviews, lectures, articles, reviews, in fact just about anything that is (a) informative, (b) challenging along a wide spectrum of different critical opinions and evaluations'.<sup>14</sup> Contributors include Serote, Sepamla, Gwala, Gordimer, Livingstone, Leshoai, Ndebele, Mutloatse, and Madingoane. It is planned to be of use mainly to students who need factual and opinion-making background and critical material. However, Chapman's book still falls short of providing a systematic and comprehensive study of the writers, individually and collectively, whose work has been contemporaneous with the rise and spread of Black Consciousness in South Africa. Moreover, such literary collections are not substitutes for concerted systematic, linear, and definitive critical assessments.

There are a few recurring errors in the existing commentaries. 'Black South African writers have not turned to the past for any image

of their national revival', Rabkin says. 'The reason lies not only in the depth of the white penetration but also in the extent of its impingement, through urbanization and industrialization, upon the African present. The absence of a modern myth of the black past - even in contemporary 'black consciousness' poetry - is striking indeed.'<sup>15</sup> While this may be true of most writers of the Drum generation and the Sharpeville period, it has no foundation in fact among numerous other writers before and after the period covered by Rabkin in his study. Plaatje's Mhudi, Abrahams's Wild Conquest, and Kunene's Zulu Poems, Emperor Shaka the Great, Anthem of the Decades and The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain supply just such a myth of the African past as Rabkin finds lacking in their work. Numerous writers in the indigenous languages, such as the Dhlomos, do the same. Serote and Sepamla occasionally turn to historical themes, concerned with early resistance to European penetration; while Ndebele, Gwala, Madingoane, and a few others, explore and try to cultivate an alternative African poetics, in the manner of Kunene, by sometimes turning to historical themes. A short poem by Montlogelwa reads:

I would  
Shaka awoke  
to see the land turned out in search of gold  
all the men  
turned into donkeys  
pulling chariots of gold.<sup>16</sup>

Lefifi Tladi, prominent in the cultural renaissance through his group, the Dashiki Poets, who dramatized rather than wrote their poems down, cultivates the following myth of Black invincibility, by dipping into historical times:

Our spears are immersed in blood  
We are on the warpath  
Of Blood River ...  
The spirit of Sharpeville  
emerges from the past  
and haunts the present  
Wearing a new mask  
Soweto, Soweto, Soweto,  
History repeats itself  
We are the elephant  
We move the way of no return.<sup>17</sup>

The historical perspective, which admittedly has never been strong among Black South African writers, is not altogether absent from the work of writers of the Black Consciousness era.

Another inaccurate observation sometimes made by critics who have written on these writers is that they, despite their protestations to

the contrary, use English in a completely orthodox manner and that their poetry employs the conventional techniques of English poetry. The drum-beat of the poems of Tladi, Madingoane and others; their conscious adaptation of traditional poetic modes; the linguistic experiments of Sepamla, Van Wyk, Farouk Asvat, and others; the firm ideological base of the majority of these writers; all these features contradict the view, propagated by Jean Marquard in 'Racial Stereotypes in South African Writing', that the new crop of writers lack a distinctive identity. Fresh insights into the work of these writers are necessary to balance the views of the majority of commentators who have written on them so far. The task of evaluating the writers of the Black Consciousness era, in the proper cultural and political context, has to take into account the rise and spread of Black Consciousness out of the stagnation which followed Sharpeville; its ideology, particularly as propounded by Biko; and the cultural renaissance fostered by Black Consciousness.

#### THE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

Black Consciousness and the literature it inspired emerged in the midst of the political and cultural repression which followed Sharpeville, where on 21 March 1960 sixty-seven Africans had been shot dead by the police and 187 others injured during a demonstration against apartheid legislation.<sup>18</sup> Both the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-African Congress (PAC), accused of fermenting the disturbances which led to Sharpeville, had been outlawed in April 1960 under the Unlawful Organizations Act. Subsequently, many members of both organizations and other radical opponents of apartheid had been banned or arrested, while others fled into exile, including most of South Africa's leading Black writers. By 1966 the old African resistance movement inside South Africa had been effectively suppressed, alongside literature which was identified with radical opposition politics, outside the framework of apartheid. The majority of writers of the Black Consciousness era after 1967 began from a near-vacuum, with few works in circulation by older Black writers on which they could model their own writings. They had no surviving, virile literary tradition of their own which they could follow, besides literature written in the indigenous languages for schools under the Bantu Education system. This literature in the indigenous languages was unacceptable to them, as it tended to reinforce apartheid and to inculcate attitudes of inferiority and dependence among

Blacks. It helped to propagate the government myth that Africans would develop along their own lines, in the impoverished and overcrowded tribal reserves called Bantustans. It encouraged Blacks to renounce their claim to the rest of the land and the wealth they had helped to generate in industry, mining and commerce. In an interview he gave to Bernth Lindfors at the University of Texas, Austin, on 20 March 1979, Richard Rive summed up the position the new writers found themselves in in the following terms: 'Black writers in South Africa today haven't got much of a precedent to fall back on, because most of the older writers have been banned, so that the young people have no access to them. There is a big gap in South African literature between 1963 and 1971. The new generation really doesn't know much about us, and they don't know much of the writing that is going on outside.'<sup>19</sup>

When the new writers emerged, the Sopiatawn renaissance had died with the destruction of Sopiatawn between 1955 and 1958. Ezekiel Mphahlele, the leading spirit behind the Black writers' movement of the 1950s who had been the literary editor of Drum magazine since 1956, left for Nigeria on an exit permit in 1959. The exit permit meant that he could not return to South Africa without special government permission. Nat Nakasa, the founding editor of the Classic, in its first issue in 1963 mentioned other leading writers who had been associated with the Sopiatawn renaissance and had already left South Africa: Alfred Hutchinson, Arthur Maimane, Todd Matshikiza, Lewis Nkosi, and Bloke Modisane. In 'The Purple Renoster: An Adolescence', which was published in the September 1980 issue of English in Africa, Lionel Abrahams states that in a Government Gazette of 1966 there were forty-six exiles mentioned, including all the exiled writers, whose works could neither be read nor quoted as they had been banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. Kelwyn Sole estimates that 'by the mid-sixties at least 15 black writers [had] gone into exile in various ways, some of them after incarceration in jail'.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the writers already mentioned, Sole's list included Mazisi Kunene, Bessie Head, Arthur Nortje, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Cosmo Pieterse, Dennis Brutus, and Alex La Guma. However, Sole's list did not include Peter Abrahams, South Africa's first exiled Black writer; Noni Jabavu, author of Ochre People (1963) and Drawn in Colour (1960) and the first significant Black woman writer in English from South Africa; A.C. Jordan, whose Xhosa classic, Ingunbo Yeminyanya (The Wrath of the Ancestors), was published in 1940; Jordan

Ngubane, whose Zulu novel, Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi (Frowns which Strike Terror), appeared in 1957; Sam Mbizo Guma, Dan Kunene, and Gideon Mangoele, all of them academics and writers in the indigenous languages; and the poet, academic, and literary critic, Vernie February, who left in 1963. It is true that, when the new writers started, few of them were aware of these writers who had been their predecessors.

In 1961 King Kong, a play devised by Harry Bloom, left for London with most of South Africa's top Black entertainers. Among the musicians who left, never to return to South Africa, were: Todd Matshikiza, author of Chocolates for My Wife (1961) and composer of the musical score for King Kong; members of South Africa's leading music groups, the Manhattan Brothers, the African Inkspots, and others; Miriam Makeba, who was the leading lady in the play; Hugh Masekela, Caiphus Semanya and Jonas Gwangwa, who were all in the band before they settled in America and formed the Union of South Africa; Letta Mbulu, who married Caiphus Semanya; and Alton Kumalo, who later worked with Athol Fugard before forming his own theatre group in London, Temba Productions. As repression had intensified in South Africa after Sharpeville, these actors and musicians stayed on in London. Others settled in America. Over the next five years more actors, dancers, and musicians who left South Africa with productions such as Sponono, a play based on Alan Paton's story by the same title in Debbie Go Home and dealing with an African boy at a reformatory in Johannesburg, which was taken to New York in 1964, decided to settle abroad permanently. This large-scale emigration of Black actors and musicians paralleled the drainage of Black intellectuals, writers and politicians. At the same time as government retaliation after Sharpeville was stifling Black political and literary expression, voluntary exile was also taking its toll on South Africa's Black public entertainers. Sepamla has described the cultural stagnation brought about by these developments after 1960 in the following terms: 'A combination of factors brought a change of course in the arts in the mid-60s. With king kong, Sponono and Alfred Herbert's acts dispersing black artists overseas, the jazz and popular music scenes suffered a great deal. Couple this with the laws against having mixed audiences and the Liquor Act, the black artists who remained operated in a vacuum within limited areas. Development was halted painfully.'<sup>21</sup> The literary scene suffered similar setbacks.

Before the rise of the poets of the Black Consciousness era, most

of whom had been in their early teens during the Sharpeville crisis, there was as much stagnation on the cultural scene in South Africa as there was on the political front. The credit for keeping Black culture alive in the 1960s and for making young Blacks aware of their cultural heritage belongs to a small but distinguished group of artists. They include the pianist from Cape Town, Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), who was also at the head of the new wave of poetry; Kippie Moeketsi, a saxophonist living in Johannesburg, who used to record with Dollar Brand and had also been with King Kong; Mackay Davashe, another Johannesburg saxophonist and the band leader in King Kong; Mankunku Ngozi, the jazz saxophonist from Cape Town, who achieved instant fame in South Africa with his composition, 'Yakhal' inkomo' (The Cow Bellows), which gave Serote's first collection its title; the Malombo Jazzmen from Pretoria, who came to prominence when they won the 1964 jazz festival in Soweto and whose music combined jazz with traditional Venda and Bapedi rhythms and sounds, thereby showing the way to what young Black artists could accomplish by reaching back to their traditions and fusing traditional elements with Western influences; jazz singers, Abigail Kubeka and Sophie Thoko Mgcina, who had both been to London with King Kong; the jazz players, Gideon Nxumalo, Early Mabuza, Elijah Nkonyane, and Tshukudu, all four of whom, together with Mackay Davashe, are the subject of Sepamla's 'Encore: The Quintette' in Hurry Up to It; and Dumile Feni, a sculptor from Port Elizabeth whose work is the subject of Serote's short story, 'When Rebecca Fell', which appears in Mutloatse's Forced Landing. The continued presence of these artists, writers and musicians made possible the cultural renaissance, the retrieval of Black culture, and the assertion of Black identity, which are celebrated by Serote in 'Hell, Well, Heaven' from Yakhal' inkomo. Sepamla, who was a jazz impresario during this period, pays similar tribute to the musicians of this era in 'Encore: The Quintette'. The rhythm of the new poetry derived as much from jazz as from the African beat which was resuscitated and made popular by the Malombo Jazzmen, Dollar Brand, and others. The African drum-beat became a prominent feature in the poetry recitals organised by Black Consciousness cultural groups such as the Dashiki Poets, Mdali, and Mhloti.

Despite the fact that Serote, Sepamla and their contemporaries had been unable to read most of the work of the earlier writers, they emerged as the spiritual inheritors of their predecessors' mantles. This was



achieved through the mediation of the few established writers who stayed on in South Africa, such as Richard Rive and James Matthews. Although the early work of Rive and Matthews, published in Quartet in 1963, Rive's collection of short stories, African Songs, issued in the same year, and his novel, Emergency, which came out the following year, had been banned, these writers were still well known to their people, who mixed with them every day. Moreover, their new work continued to circulate in South Africa, unlike the exiled writers who could only be read outside South Africa. Rive's stories trickled out more slowly after his earlier books had been banned but his articles continued to pour out in literary magazines such as Contrast. Matthews, who had lived in Alexandra (Jonannesburg) and Cape Town, spoke to and was consulted by many aspiring young writers. With the publication of Cry Rage in 1972, he effectively switched from the short story medium to poetry, a change which influenced many of the aspiring writers. In 1974 he established Blac Publishing House in Athlone near Cape Town and became the first Black person to venture into publishing in this way. In the same year, he published Black Voices Shout, an anthology of Black Consciousness poems, and a collection of his short stories, The Park and Other Stories, which included some of his stories from Quartet and others written in the 1950s. Casey Motsisi and Stanley Motjuwadi, both of whom had emerged towards the end of the Sophiatown renaissance, were also among the writers who bridged the gap between the evolving writers and their exiled predecessors. They provided some degree of continuity in Black South African literature in English. Both were journalists in Jonannesburg. Their articles and imaginative writings appeared regularly in Drum, the Classic, and the World, a Jonannesburg daily. Casey Motsisi, who had become well-known as a columnist from 1958 until his death in 1977 in Drum and the Weekend World, a sister paper of the World, providing witty and comical sketches of township life, published his poem, 'The Efficacy of Prayer', in 1963 in the first issue of the Classic and subsequently in Royston's anthology. Motjuwadi wrote a weekly column for the Jonannesburg Rand Daily Mail and eventually became the editor of Drum. During his brief period as co-editor of the Classic in 1968, he wrote poetry, which appeared in the Classic and subsequently in Playboy magazine and Royston's anthology. The inspiration and the example these writers provided made the literary revival possible. However, these earlier writers who were still in South Africa were primarily prose-writers, despite the occasional poem they produced.

The new writers still had to teach themselves to write poetry and struggled to learn the craft, without reference to any Black South African poetic tradition in English.

Parallels to what the new South African writers were trying to achieve appeared in the outside world, from writers in other parts of Africa and among people of African descent in the Caribbean and the Americas. Literary developments in Africa and among writers of the African diaspora had some bearing upon the work of writers of the Black Consciousness era, a few of whom were not totally ignorant of such literary trends. Though educationally deprived and culturally impoverished, through a system of education which sought to suppress his political and cultural reawakening, the young Black writer in South Africa in the 1960s could still identify with the political, cultural and literary trends in the rest of the Black world, developments which could not be altogether kept away from his knowledge, eager as the young Black writer in South Africa was to counteract such ignorance and disabilities as the system sought to impose upon him. The winds of change which the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, had spoken of in 1960 in Cape Town, which were sweeping across Africa, could not be shut out from South Africa. Nor could the history of the heroic struggles of Black people in other parts of the world be hidden permanently from their inquisitive disposition and probing minds. Black Consciousness literature in South Africa, together with the ideology which inspired it, evolved by assimilating disparate influences and modifying them to suit conditions in South Africa. These influences can be traced back to the beginning of the century and have their roots in the Pan-Africanist movement; they have continuously provided inspiration and strength to Blacks in South Africa, in their moments of frustration and political demoralization.

The year 1900 saw the first Pan-African Congress convened under the leadership of such prominent Blacks as the Trinidadian lawyer, H. Sylvester Williams, and the Black American leaders, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. This was an important year in the history of Black political thought and struggle. The feeling of solidarity engendered by Pan-Africanism led to political interaction between Afro-Americans and Black South Africans. In the second decade of the

century, during travels on 'research journeys through several farms and cities of nineteen different states' to compare conditions under which Blacks lived in America with conditions in South Africa, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, the first Black South African novelist in English, met and held discussions with many founder-members of the Pan-Africanist movement. He wrote a fifteen-page pamphlet against the prohibition of mixed marriages in South Africa. 'It was a disquisition on a delicate social problem known to Europeans as the Black Peril and to the Bantu as the White Peril,' he later wrote.<sup>22</sup> The pamphlet sold 18,000 copies in New York in 1921. Such political interaction as Plaatje had initiated with Blacks from other parts of the world continued under the umbrella of Pan-Africanism. At the fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945 and attended by such figures as Nkrumah and Kenyatta, who were to lead their respective countries to independence, Peter Abrahams was the co-secretary with George Padmore, widely regarded as the father of African emancipation. Pan-Africanism stirred Black nationalism and set the political tone to Black writing from the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa. This influence was passed on to writers of the Black Consciousness era in South Africa.

In the 1920s writers of the Harlem renaissance in America began to assert their identity as Black people, some by trying to reach back to their African roots. Although Pan-Africanism remained an important aspect of their political programme and despite Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' call, the Harlem renaissance never became a roots movement the way Negritude, Rastafarianism and some of the American Black Power organizations of the 1960s were to become. Writers of the Harlem renaissance, who had a profound influence on Abrahams and other Black South African writers who emerged after him, were more concerned with the problem of being Black in America, with the affront to their dignity as Black Americans, than with the liberation of the African continent as such and of the people of African descent universally. That task was left to writers and political activists of the Black Power and civil rights movements, who had a more direct and deeper influence on Black Consciousness writers in South Africa.

Black Power and the civil rights movement precipitated some of the most tremendous struggles of the post-war era by oppressed groups. From the civil rights campaigns in Montgomery, Alabama, in the early 1950s to the upheavals of the 1960s in Watts, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, and other parts, Black communities threw up important leaders

such as Martin Luther King, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Le Roi Jones and others. Many had no university education. As pointed out in 'The Call to the Sixth Pan African Congress', a document written in America and first circulated in 1972, 'Malcolm X, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Rap Brown, are more closely associated with the jails of the United States and not with universities.'<sup>23</sup> Yet they had risen to become important spokesmen for the Black cause; their autobiographies had made a significant impact on the American political and literary scene. Their example struck a responsive chord in the souls of the emerging Black South African writers. Many of the new writers, such as Mtshali, Sepamla, Gwala and Serote, had themselves had the doors of the universities in their country slammed in their faces; a few of them were not strangers to prison either for petty offences under apartheid legislation, as in the case of Mtshali, or for suspected political offences which were never proven, as in the case of Serote. The Black struggle in America provided precedents. Black writers in South Africa could emulate their Afro-American counterparts by stirring people's hearts and reactivating the fighting spirit among Blacks, through their poetry. The new writers in South Africa, like their counterparts in America, maintained the Pan-Africanist concept, which was essentially an exercise in self-definition by the Black people, 'aimed at establishing a broader definition of themselves than that which had so far been permitted by those in power'.<sup>24</sup>

The shift from a concern with purely political matters to a preoccupation with the retrieval of culture among writers of African descent began with writers of the Negritude movement. They saw the assertion of their cultural identity as people of African origin, their psychological and cultural emancipation from European domination, as a prerequisite to the political liberation of the Black race. In the 1930s Negritude as propounded by Aime Césaire and Leopold Senghor spearheaded the attack on European civilization and the quest for an African orientation and influence in their writing. In the first period of Black writing in French, there was a deliberate attempt, by writers such as Rene Maran, Birago Diop, Bernard Dadie, and Maxmillien Quenem, to dislodge their European disorientation and return to their African cultural heritage, to preserve and to introduce this African heritage into their writings by transcribing and translating into French the legends, myths and folklore of their own people. This formed the basis

of a valid literature in the French language. Negritude filtered through to South Africa, through the work of writers of the Black Consciousness era. In Tasks and Masks, Lewis Nkosi observes that, 'What we find in South Africa, therefore, is that nearly forty years after the fierce manifestos of the negritude poets in Paris, a Black Consciousness Movement is once again spawning a whole generation of artists and poets whose outlook has been shaped by the most intense kind of repression.'<sup>25</sup>

Besides the traditions of Afro-American and Negritude literature, modern African literature in English, especially since the 1950s, has also exercised considerable influence on and exhibits parallels with the literature of the Black Consciousness era in South Africa. The concerns and traditions of African literature in this period, the analysis of Africa's socio-political and economic problems, and the celebration of the cultural identity of Africans, all found their way into Black Consciousness literature in South Africa.

The publication of Amos Tutuola's The Palm Wine Drinkard in 1952 was an important event in the development of African literature in English. In his work, Tutuola narrates in English such traditional tales as we find in D.O. Fagunwa's Yoruba tales. This concern with folklore was a beginning of a concern with the retrieval and preservation of tradition among writers from Anglophone Africa. The poets who emerged in the late 1950s, such as Gabriel Okara of Nigeria and Kwesi Brew of Ghana, added more African substance to their poems than such earlier West African poets as Roland Dempster and Michael Dei-Anang had done, whose old-fashioned style had been borrowed from such English poets as they had studied at school. Okara, Brew and others, whose work appeared regularly in Black Orpheus, were more modern than their predecessors; their work also showed more awareness of the cultural problems of Africa. However, it was Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark who, by mastering the modern poetic idiom, were able to bring and to integrate the resources of oral poetry into their writing. This movement was in line with what Black Consciousness poets in South Africa were to attempt from the late 1960s onwards.

Developments in prose fiction by writers from other parts of the continent also had some bearing upon the development of literature in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Things Fall Apart (1958) by Chinua Achebe put a distinctive African stamp on literature from the

continent written in English. Achebe 'africanized the novel by its use of Ibo idioms and a narrator who, like the story tellers, represented the communal point of view'.<sup>26</sup> His novels and those of many other African writers who soon followed him were part of the cultural nationalism which accompanied political independence, just as Black Consciousness poetry was a literary expression of a political and cultural reawakening among Blacks in South Africa.

Creative writing in English in East Africa began later than in West Africa. Its hostile attitude towards White settler colonialism brought it closer to the tradition of protest literature in South Africa than to the preoccupations of the West African writer with tradition and the peculiarities of the new African brought about by independence. In Kenya, a great deal of the new literature celebrated African heroism during the Mau Mau uprising against the European settlers who had dispossessed the Africans of their ancestral land. Transition, a literary magazine started in 1961 by the staff and students of Makerere University, was more politically oriented than its Nigerian counterpart, Black Orpheus. Ngugi wa Thiongo's plays, short stories and novels of the 1960s employed Achebe's communal point of view. In his portrayal of traditional life and in his awareness of the dynamics of social change, Ngugi was influenced by Achebe. However, Ngugi's work, while aiming for objectivity of presentation of the African past with all its imperfections, also had a didactic contemporary political purpose. Ngugi subscribed to the view that Africa's cultural traditions, such as the circumcision of women, must be preserved to bind African society together. In addition, he emerged as a strong advocate of reconciliation, so that the rivalry, animosity, jealousy, grudges and suspicions aroused by the Mau Mau were of liberation against the European settlers and their African decoys could be contained and the resources of the Kenyan people harnessed towards nation-building.

Okot p'Bitek emerged after Ngugi as the most significant poet in East Africa. The publication of the English version of p'Bitek's Song of Lawino (1966) pointed at the direction African literature was taking in its use of the techniques of oral literature and its attack, a recurring theme in Black Consciousness poetry, on Africans who have lost their cultural heritage and become carbon copies of Whites. The Ghanaian writers, Ama Ata Aidoo in No Sweetness Here (1970), Kofi Awoonor in This Earth My Brother (1977) and Ayi Kwei Arman in Two Thousand Seasons (1973) and, more recently, in The Healers, followed the example of p'Bitek in using the structures and stylistic features of the oral tale, heroic narrative poetry, and traditional laments and dirges.

By grafting in the techniques of oral literature and adapting Western techniques these writers contributed significantly towards the decolonization of African literature. They used tradition as a point of reference, an unvarnished style, and images and metaphors drawn from the flora and fauna of Africa to respond to their environment and to produce literature written primarily for Africans. These various trends in African literature were echoed by South African writers of the Black Consciousness era. As in other parts of the continent, Black South African literature was striving with increasing vigour for a hearing side by side with African nationalism. Although repression had not eased to any considerable degree since Sharpeville, in other directions conditions were conducive to a literary revival, so that by exploiting weaknesses in the system Black South African writers could still function as a special group to speak on behalf of the population as a whole.

In South Africa, the literary revival after 1967 was greatly facilitated by the availability of a number of literary magazines, some of them under the control of Blacks. The Classic, which had become the forum for the more established writers and the new crop of writers, was in its fourth year when it published Dollar Brand's poems in 1967, the first substantial body of poems by a Black writer to appear in South Africa in this period. Other magazines and periodicals encouraged new talent and became the home of the new Black writers as fully as the Classic had been. The SASO Newsletter, which first appeared in 1970, accepted a certain amount of poetry which projected a Black image. When the Classic stopped in 1971, it was replaced by New Classic in 1975. Donga appeared in July 1976, but was banned in March 1978 after eight issues and replaced by Inspan. Staffrider, the most representative magazine of writers of the Soweto era, came out in March 1978, followed by Wietie in 1980 edited by two Black poets of the new generation, Fhazel Johannesburg and Christopher Van Wyk, under the auspices of a new publishing company they had formed called SABLE (South African Black Literature) Books. There were Black people in the editorial boards of all these magazines.

Several other magazines edited by Whites regularly published work by Black writers and gave an added impetus to creative writing within the Black community. The Purple Renoster was founded by Lionel Abrahams in September 1956 and continued in existence until 1972, despite the intimidation by the Security Police in 1963 of Barney Simon, who was on

its editorial board, and a ban by the Censorship Board of the Number 5 issue (Summer 1962/63). These difficulties threw Lionel Abrahams, Barney Simon and their associates into temporary disarray, until they could regroup their forces and launch the Number 6 issue in 1966. Concerning the rise of many poets in South Africa during this period, Lionel Abrahams has expressed the sentiment that, although 'The Purple Renoster was technically pipped by ... The Classic, still they feel like Renoster discoveries because we knew their work before it saw print'.<sup>27</sup> Lionel Abrahams and two of his colleagues, Robert Royston and Eva Bezwoda, were also responsible for the publication of Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (1971) and Serote's Yakhal' inkomo (1972) under a new company they called Purple Renoster Publications. The other magazines to promote the work of the new writers were: Contrast, founded by Jack Cope in 1960; New Coin, which first came out in 1965 and was followed by Ophir and Bolt; and Izwi, which appeared in twenty issues between October 1971 and December 1974. Some of these magazines, such as Ophir, were devoted exclusively to poetry and, by so doing, encouraged its growth.

In the case of many of these White-controlled publications, relations were sometimes strained between the White editors and their Black contributors, who privately resented the idea of Whites having to dictate terms all the time. However, on the whole, these editors and some White publishers were willing to take the risk of incurring the displeasure of the government. They did not always stick to unexciting and innocuous work, devoid of any political content: what Nadine Gordimer has described as 'Sare biography with a collector's piece savour of Africana of the good old kind; carefully vetted anthologies; safari adventure'.<sup>28</sup>

Black poets of the revival period after 1967 stopped writing for a predominantly non-Black or outside audience, as Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgositsile, and Arthur Nortje had been forced to do by their circumstances. In their bid to reach the ordinary African, the poets of the revival period achieved what Brutus had set out to achieve by writing poetry which could be read and understood by the ordinary people. Brutus had wanted to write 'for the man who drives a bus, or the man who carries the baggage at the airport and the woman who cleans the ashtrays in the restaurant'. His early poetic creed was summarized in his statement that: 'If you can write poetry which makes sense to



these people, then there is some justification for writing poetry. Otherwise you have no business writing.'<sup>29</sup> The poets of the Black Consciousness era were able to realize Brutus's ambition more satisfactorily, since their work had been written primarily for publication in South Africa, to be read mainly by Blacks; whereas Brutus and his contemporaries had been cut off from their primary audience and compelled to write for external readership by the fact of exile, censorship, and the obligations imposed on them by the protest tradition from which their work sprang. Protest literature is writing by Blacks which is primarily addressed to White readers in an attempt to elicit their sympathy and support against discriminatory laws and practices; while the 'liberal tradition' is an expression used to describe literature written by Whites appealing to Christian liberal humanistic ideals in race relations and for a fairer deal for Blacks. Protest had imposed on those writers working within its tradition the burden of writing for an essentially White readership. However, the writings of the Black Consciousness generation were addressed directly to the Black community. Their aim was to liberate Black people as much from White oppression as from their vicious selves: the self-inflicted pain and suffering, and the senseless and devastating violence of the townships. Their audience and preoccupations affected their language and other stylistic features of their poetry. For instance, they had to take into account the fact that many Blacks in the townships had probably not had the benefit of more than four years of formal education. However, despite their rudimentary education, they would have acquired some speaking knowledge of English and Afrikaans from the factories where they worked or wherever they were employed. Employers of Black labour in South Africa, from the most menial tasks to the most highly skilled jobs, are predominantly White. Blacks cannot expect to find employment unless they learn to speak a European language, so many blacks can follow the simple English in which the new poetry was written, more so as a great deal of the poetry by the new writers was read to the public. Many poetry readings, which attracted moderately large crowds and were reported in the press, were held in Black townships. These public readings grew in popularity after the June 1976 uprising. On every conceivable occasion organised by advocates of Black Consciousness, poetry was read: during funerals and at memorial services, at public performances and in private houses.

There is another important point of contrast between the exile

poets, such as Brutus and Nortje, and the Black Consciousness poets, arising out of their respective situations. For instance, writing from exile, Brutus and Nortje have produced mournful poems tinged with self-pity. In Brutus, exile is depicted as being both sweet and sour; sweet as a place of refuge from oppression and sour as a result of the painful nostalgia developed. The predominant mood is melancholic. A tone of depression sets in. 'By the Waters of Babylon', written by Brutus from Bamako in Mali, typifies his mood. The likeness of Bamako to places he has known in South Africa evokes a tragic sense of loss and longing. His joy at the sight of Bamako is tempered by his inability to identify emotionally with his new environment. The alienation and self-pity in the work of the exiled poets are replaced in the work of the poets of the Black Consciousness generation by complete identification with their environment and its problems and by a spirit of self-assertion, which is approximated only by Kgosisile and Kunene among the major poets who are identified with the Sharpeville era. Black Consciousness poets convey the Black community's feeling of groping in the dark, sometimes confusedly, at other times painfully, but always with elation. Their writings capture the people's aggressive search for a Black identity and their attempt to rescue their outraged dignity and sensitivity, to resuscitate the tradition of militant politics in the Black community. They are largely successful in shaking off the feeling of stagnation and strangulation which had afflicted Blacks since Sharpeville; whereas Brutus and Nortje are still caught in the gloom which enveloped the Black community after Sharpeville.

Despite these various differences between the old and the new writers, the poets of the revival period returned to some of the thematic concerns of their predecessors, with bridge figures such as Rive, Matthews, Motsisi, and Motjuwadi providing the rather tenuous link between the old and the new writers. The subject of White liberals and the attitude towards them evinced by Serote, Gwala, Sepamla and their contemporaries were not new to South African literature. Mphanlele in 'Mrs Plum', from his collection of short stories in In Corner B, had also exposed the paternalism of South Africa's White liberals. Mrs Plum belongs to the Black Sash, an organization of White women who see themselves as champions of the rights of Black people. She is often entangled in contradictions, when her immediate interests are threatened, in a way which demonstrates her limited commitment to the advancement

of her African servants and other Africans whom she professes to love. Like the Black Consciousness writers, Mphahlele demonstrates that there can be no equality between a master and his servant. The nature of the relationship precludes that. However, Mphahlele's biting satire against the White liberal establishment is an exception rather than the rule among writers of his generation. Judging from their writings and life-styles, his contemporaries were not only prepared to strike a truce with White liberals but they were also willing to accept White patronage and were easily flattered by the attention they received from White liberals. In an article entitled 'When VIP Weds VIP', which first appeared in Drum in 1961, Nat Nakasa reported with pride on the wedding of his friends, the first Black couple to have a White bridesmaid at their wedding, where Nat Nakasa was 'Bestman Number two'.<sup>30</sup> Nakasa considered it an honour to feature alongside Whites, even as number two. The writings of Lewis Nkosi, as in his play, Rhythm of Violence, abound with scenes of multiracial parties, which younger writers would scoff at. Love across the colour line is an important theme in the works of Nkosi and other early writers, from Peter Abrahams to Arthur Maimane. Others, such as Noni Jabavu and the late Alfred Hutchinson, had to flee South Africa to settle abroad in order to marry their White lovers. Joyce Sikakane is alone among the younger generation of writers who emerged contemporaneously with Black Consciousness to see the prohibition of mixed marriages as one of the most pernicious pieces of legislation ever enacted by the White parliament to discriminate against Blacks. She shares this view, which she expresses in A Window on Soweto, with White liberal writers, such as Athol Fugard in Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act, whose political outlook she has embraced. She left South Africa for Britain to marry a White man.

In 'The Fabulous Decade: the Fifties', which appeared in his collection of essays, Home and Exile, Lewis Nkosi explained the differences between South African society in the 1950s, when open political dissension was still possible and multiracial organizations a powerful catalyst for reform, and the Sharpeville era, which brought about a polarization of attitudes between Blacks and Whites. He recalls now he often betrayed a predilection for White liberal patronage. He was susceptible to their flattery, as when he describes his reaction upon being invited to his first mixed party in 1956. 'I had never been to a politically disinterested party where white men danced with white

women,' he says. He wrote about the hope of transforming South African society, a hope which would sound extravagant to the younger Blacks brought up after Sharpeville but which he and his contemporaries pinned on multiracial political organizations such as Alan Paton's Liberal Party, of which Jordan Ngubane was Vice Chairman, and student organizations such as the National Union of South African Students: 'It was a time of mass student rallies at the universities, the storming of prison barricades by students demanding the release of political leaders; and in the avenues leading to the Universities of Johannesburg and Cape Town there were mile-long marches in favour of more academic freedom at the time when the government was threatening to bar coloured students from all "open" universities.'<sup>31</sup> The politics of protest such as Nkosi describes had produced protest literature addressed mainly to these White liberals who were in the forefront of the struggle for the extension of certain concessions to Blacks. The political situation described by Nkosi changed drastically after Sharpeville. The politics of protest were replaced by the politics of challenge, to use Gwendoline Carter's and Thomas Karis's categories. A corresponding development occurred in literature and, with the advent of Black Consciousness, a rejection of White liberalism and patronage set in. To this generation of writers Nkosi's optimism would have appeared misplaced.

Cultural assimilation and the rejection of apartheid institutions dealt with in the work of the Black Consciousness poets are themes commonly found in the writings of their predecessors. They identify more with the cities than with their tribal reserves in a manner which negates government claims, made on behalf of urban Blacks, that every African belongs to some homeland or Bantustan. Seen against the background of their poems, the Homeland policy, which claims to restore Africans to their true roots in the tribal reserves, achieves the opposite effect. It uproots urban Africans, whose ties with the reserves have been undermined by generations of living in South Africa's industrial heartland. In The African Image Mphahlele asserts, in line with the rejection of tribal consolidation found in the work of the Black Consciousness poets, that, 'The White man has detribalized me. He had better go the whole hog. He must know that I'm the personification of the African paradox, detribalized, Westernized, but still African.'<sup>32</sup> By locating their roots in the city, as in the work of Abrahams and Mpanelele, the new poets neither mean to glorify city life nor are they

being disparaging about tradition. They want to retain their values as African people, which are fast being eroded by city life. 'Some of us consider this issue of ethnicity, which in many ways defines our Africanness, needs re-examination,' Sepamla writes. 'We need to take from our past those things that can be fitted into our present. No one can survive without a reference to one's past.'<sup>33</sup> At the same time, they want to assert their right to stay on in the city where most of them were born and where they grew up.

There is a similarity between Mphanlele and the new poets in the way they all portray women. Among Africans, whether in the city or in the rural areas, women continue to be the mainstay of the community. In his autobiography, Down Second Avenue, Mphanlele showed the role his grandmother, his mother, and his aunt, Dora, played in providing for and keeping his family together. His grandmother, in particular, provided the link with the traditional past, like the grandmother in Serote's poems. Serote's depiction of women in urban African communities is close to Mphanlele's; while Sepamla writes sympathetically about the women left in the impoverished rural areas by their husbands who scrounge for a living for themselves and their families in the cities.

Other similarities between the poets of the cultural renaissance after Sharpeville and their predecessors lie in their depiction of the shebeen queen, who trades illicitly in alcohol in order to feed, clothe, and educate her children. The shebeen queen is a stock figure in Black South African literature. Her appearance as an embodiment of grim determination can be traced back to Peter Abrahams's Song of the City (1945) and Mine Boy (1946). In Mine Boy, Leah, the shebeen queen, is presented as tough and resourceful. She is the livewire of the community. She dispenses love, protection and generosity to all those around her. The shebeen queen is the prototype of the market woman in West African literature. In Casey Motsisi's stories from Casey and Co, shebeens become more than simply a subculture. They are an institution, as portrayed in the work of the new writers. In Serote, Sepamla and Gwala, the shebeen queen appears in a similar role to Leah's in Mine Boy. The Black Consciousness writers do not dwell upon the kind of evil in city life and in shebeens which early, church-inspired writers such as R.R.R. Dhlomo, Guybon Sinxo, Sibusiso Nyembezi, S.S. Matlosa and others writing especially in the indigenous languages portrayed in their work. However, the new writers do not idealize conditions in the city either.

The high degree of violence, which figures prominently in the poetry of Mtshali and Serote, is a striking feature of life in the townships. Among their predecessors, township violence is best captured in the short stories of Can Themba in The Will to Die. However, whereas Can Themba handled the theme of violence in the Black community almost with fatalistic resignation, Serote and, to a lesser extent, Gwala show a determination to halt the senseless violence. Their approach to the problem is an outcome of Black Consciousness. They appreciate the fact that it would be an act of lunacy or suicide for an ordinary person to step in between two township thugs engaged in a knife fight, but they also assert that it is not enough for them to stare helplessly at the scene while one Black person molests another. Both Mafika Gwala and Serote are not content to lament over, abhor or depict violence in all its shocking manifestations, in the way Can Themba and Oswald Mtshali did. In keeping with the aims of Black Consciousness, Serote and Gwala want to purge Black society of its senseless violence. Their poems, which are addressed to the Black community, particularly the youth, are a direct appeal to them to desist from slaughtering one another like cattle. The impact of these poems can be gauged from the reaction of Blacks at the funeral of a young man who died of stab wounds in kwaThema, Springs, in January 1981, at which Serote's poem, 'My Brothers in the Streets', was read. At the end of the funeral many requests were made by the people present for copies of the poem. Others requested that it should be made available again to a wider public through Staffrider.<sup>34</sup> That was the kind of rapport the new poets established with their readers in the Black community. Black Consciousness provided a good deal of the energy and the ideological guidelines to the majority of the new writers after 1967.

Two theories have been advanced to account for the popularity of poetry among writers of the Black Consciousness era. The first of these theories was first advanced by Nadine Gordimer. She argues that, in the light of censorship after Sharpeville, 'Black writers have had to look for survival away from the explicit if not to the cryptic then to the implicit; and in their case they have turned instinctively to poetry.'<sup>35</sup> Their need for self-expression amidst repression, she says, has led them to adopt a form of expression less vulnerable than the

explicit medium of prose, which had invited censorship upon the writings of their predecessors. The second theory has been advanced by Richard Rive, who does not subscribe to the view that the reason poetry became a popular medium was that by its very nature it is cerebral and therefore more difficult for the censors to fathom. He points out that the poetry of some of the leading figures of the revival period, following the lead given by James Matthews, is straightforward, explicit, and more prosaic than poetic. For instance, in Mutloatse and in the work of other short story writers turned poets, we get prose cut up to look like poetry. Rive's explanation for the popularity of poetry in this period is that, 'What may have happened is that the person of moment who started off the ... wave was Oswald Mtshali, and Mtshali chose poetry, for whatever personal reasons. Because of his success with it, we have had a wave of poets writing.'<sup>36</sup> Sepamla endorses Rive's opinion on why poetry became the mouthpiece, when in the 1950s Black writing in English had been almost exclusively prose fiction. He attributes the upsurge of poetry among the new generation to the fact that many aspiring writers rubbed shoulders in the townships with Mtshali and Serote, who had become successful as poets, and these aspiring writers were seized by a desire to emulate them as the only models they had. 'Those fellows were a great inspiration, because of lot of the people who are writing today saw them, talked to them; they know their experiences and they know how they translated their experiences into poetry,' he says. 'And I think that the writing that is being done today is an extension of what those guys started.'<sup>37</sup> He adds that few of the new writers had the time or the inclination to write lengthy prose, and so they chose to say what they had to say through the most cryptic medium at their disposal. There were other factors responsible for the upsurge of poetry during the post-Sharpeville cultural renaissance: the existing outlets for publication favoured poetry; there was still the tradition of oral poetry to emulate, which never completely dies out, even in the cities; and, above all, the new writers derived their impetus from Black Consciousness.

#### BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

In Black Power in South Africa, Gail Gernart has the following comments to make on the state of African politics in South Africa, following the suppression of African resistance after Sharpeville:

Silence pervaded African political life in the 1960s to an extent which had not been known since the years before 1912. Though Africans were free to join the Liberal and Progressive parties until 1968, it was whites in these organizations who for the most part took on the task of articulating African grievances and demands. Blacks who spoke up invited martyrdom. To liberal whites it seemed a matter of duty to shield politically-motivated blacks from government retaliation.<sup>38</sup>

After Sharpeville, Gernhart further explains, African students tried to revive the legacy of the PAC and the ANC. The students who were loyal to the ANC formed the African Students' Association and those who were loyal to the PAC formed the African Students' Union of South Africa. Due to the victimization by the Security Police of the students who identified openly with any of these banned organizations, none of these student organizations survived for long. Between 1963 and 1966 many African students began to drift towards the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), an anti-apartheid multiracial organization. For a brief period from 1967 others joined the University Christian Movement (UCM), led by Basil Moore, a White Protestant priest, and Colin Collins, a White Catholic priest.

Moore and Collins supported Black Theology, introduced from America and adapted to suit conditions in South Africa. Black Theology propagated an Afro-centric interpretation of Christianity which would accord a place of honour to the African traditions and customs which had been denounced by succeeding generations of European missionaries as heathenish. The Federal Theological Seminary at Alice, near Port Hare University, comprising Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and other Christian denominations, soon took a leading role in the exercise to give Christianity an African face, to restore Africans to their history and cultural institutions, and to uphold their human rights and dignity. African drums, tunes and dances were used in worship, to give expression to the African soul. The students at the Black university campuses also found a platform to express their views on theology, culture, and politics, and joined the UCM in large numbers. A move to push the White-dominated churches to respond to African needs and aspirations, and to pay attention to secular matters of an economic and political nature affecting Blacks as an oppressed group, got underway. The established churches came under fierce attack for conniving with the forces of White domination, oppression and exploitation. Leading theologians in the Black community, such as Manas Buthelezi and Desmond



Tutu, rose to preach a theology of liberation. They denounced the separation of politics from religion, which the European-dominated churches wished to foster in the minds of their members, as a ploy to perpetuate White dominance. Within the UCM, Blacks led by Justice Moloto, Stanley Ntwasa and others who wanted to play a leading role in the affairs of the movement, became increasingly dissatisfied with White leadership and dominance within the movement. At a conference held in 1969 at the Roma campus of the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, in Lesotho, delegates to the conference agreed to split the movement into a Black and White section. NUSAS, the major student organization with an even smaller percentage of Black members, was not long in moving in the same direction as the UCM. The political, theological, cultural and literary tenets of Black Consciousness evolved between 1967 and 1972, formulated by a succession of conferences involving student and community leaders. The writings of Steve Biko provide the most lucid exposition of Black Consciousness.

The authorities at the Black universities, with the exception of the University of Natal's Black Section, refused their students permission to affiliate to NUSAS, which came to have an overwhelming majority of white students from the English-speaking universities. In February 1970 there were about 27,000 White students affiliated to NUSAS compared to 3,000 Blacks.<sup>39</sup> These White students in NUSAS and the UCM championed the cause of Blacks and were seen by some Blacks as important spokesmen for that cause. Such a situation was felt to be unsatisfactory by more radical Blacks who desired to see an end to all forms of White trusteeship.

NUSAS had failed to meet the deepest political and cultural aspirations of these students, who began to search for a new home. For instance, in April 1964 NUSAS president, Jonty Driver, called for NUSAS to support the liberation movements which had gone underground since 1960. Reports of his speech appeared in the press and a conservative backlash ensued from the White community. Students from White campuses, in large numbers, threatened to disaffiliate from NUSAS. At the July 1964 annual conference of NUSAS, Jonty Driver was sharply attacked for his proposal. At the same conference it was also revealed that several prominent NUSAS leaders were members of the African Resistance Movement, an organization which had adopted the tactics of sabotage employed by the banned underground organizations. The revelation produced ripples of shock from the majority of White students in NUSAS.

After 1964, the new NUSAS leadership steered the organization back to the middle of the road, confining themselves to verbal attacks against the government, within the framework of the law.

As a result of government action in suppressing extra-parliamentary opposition, an increasing number of African intellectuals had begun to entertain the notion of using government-created institutions such as the Bantu Authorities or Bantustans, the Coloured and Indian Representative Councils and the Urban Bantu Councils to subvert the government's repressive policies. Chief Gatsna Buthelezi of KwaZulu emerged as the most prominent Black leader who decided to work within the framework of the government's policy of segregation in this way. He had previously been a member of the ANC's Youth League and had been expelled as a student from Fort Hare for his radical left-wing views. The 'Coloured' writers Adam Small and Don Mattera lent their support for a while to these apartheid institutions. They were soon disillusioned when they discovered that such bodies were dummy institutions and that it was probably futile to try and beat the government at its own game, in which they fixed the rules and constantly modified them in their own favour. Militant Black students regarded such institutions, by the very fact that they were tied to the government, as inadequate vehicles for the expression of Black aspirations.

Besides setting up segregated institutions for Blacks, the government embarked on a new policy of dialogue to win friends in independent Africa and gain acceptance for its segregated institutions. When J.B. Vorster became Prime Minister in 1966, after the assassination of Dr H.F. Verwoerd, one of his priorities was to patch up relations between Whites in South Africa and the outside world, relations which had become strained since the Sharpeville crisis and had led to South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961. He announced that in international affairs South Africa, wanting lasting friendship with all, would not interfere in the affairs of others and wished only to be left in peace to work out her own solution. Speaking near Oudtshoorn in the Cape in March 1967, he said that his duty was to lead South Africa towards greater interaction with the outside world, but 'we don't want to be accepted only if we have first reformed'.<sup>40</sup> His policy would be geared towards selling South Africa's policies as they stood. He would

strive to persuade the world to accept separate development and the Bantustans. Following up his predecessor's meeting in 1966 with the Prime Minister of Lesotho, Chief Leabua Jonathan, Vorster invited Jonathan to pay an official visit to South Africa. In January 1967 Jonathan was flown to Cape Town as an official state guest. He held discussions with Vorster and other Ministers and was entertained at an official luncheon. South Africa promised to look into the possibility of granting economic and technical assistance to Lesotho, in return for guarantees of political stability and vigilance against the dangers of international communism. Shortly after Jonathan's visit, a delegation of Ministers from Botswana arrived in South Africa to discuss matters of common concern with their South African counterparts. A significant breakthrough to the north was marked by the visit in March 1967 of three Ministers from Malawi to negotiate a bilateral preferential trade pact. Malawi subsequently opened an embassy in Pretoria and in 1972 President Banda of Malawi visited South Africa as a guest of the government. In 1970 further headway was made with approaches to Madagascar, the Ivory Coast and Senegal.

Militant Black students saw South Africa's policy of winning over Black states with poor economies through large handouts in the form of foreign aid as a ploy for misleading the world into believing that South Africa was moving away from racial discrimination. The propaganda exercise was aimed at convincing the world that, as each of South Africa's projected Bantustans gained independence, they would be treated like Lesotho, Botswana, Malawi or any other independent state. However, Black Consciousness analysis was that 'the actual dialogue', the title of one of Serote's poems from this period, should have been taking place between Blacks and Whites living within South Africa. Only such dialogue could determine South Africa's sincerity and bring about meaningful change. The views expressed by Serote in his poem find amplification in the work of Mafika Gwala and other Black Consciousness poets; while Sepamla's 'Night Falls', from the April/May issue of Staffrider, continues to urge Whites to negotiate with Blacks before it is too late. Reconciliation, without deception, is a theme which runs through the poems of Sepamla and Mafika. However, all the poets of this period are united in their rejection of government-created institutions.

In 1967-1968 a great deal of soul-searching was taking place among

Black students within NUSAS and the UCM. Some of these students, who were prominent from the beginning, were: Steve Bantu Biko, Vuyelwa Mashalaba and Aubrey Mokoape, who were all students at the medical school of the University of Natal's Black Section; Barney Nyameko Pityana from Fort Hare; Harry Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu, Hendrick Musi, Petrus Machaka and Manana Kgwane, who were students at Turfloop; J. Goolam, a medical student in Natal, and Strini Moodely from the University of Durban-Westville, both of whom were Indians; and Henry Isaacs from the 'Coloured' University of the Western Cape. Their initial purpose was to create a Black united front to frustrate government efforts to separate them along ethnic lines, an objective first set out by the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) founded in 1943.

The July 1967 conference of NUSAS at Rhodes University was the occasion which set Biko and his colleagues firmly on the Black Consciousness path. The university authorities at Rhodes prohibited mixed accommodation and provided separate eating facilities for the White and Black delegates at the conference. Blacks were accommodated at a church building in Grahamstown's African township; Black students at the conference were embittered by the superficial integration for which the English-speaking universities claimed to be fighting. They expressed strong misgivings about the sincerity of White liberals, who had set themselves up as spokesmen for Blacks but who easily gave in when Blacks were treated the way they had been treated at Rhodes. The Black students in NUSAS saw White liberalism as ineffective, bold at the verbal level but impotent to effect meaningful change. They questioned the aptitude of White liberals to define Black grievances and aspirations. They pointed out that White liberals stood to gain more than their Black allies from modifications to the system of apartheid than from its complete dismantlement, which is what Blacks wished to see.

In July 1968 NUSAS and the UCM held their annual conferences within a few miles of each other near Johannesburg. The conferences were held in White areas, where the Black delegates were required by law to leave within seventy-two hours. The Black delegates from both conferences withdrew to confer among themselves about what to do when the seventy-two hours expired. The meeting afforded the Black delegates an opportunity to compare notes and to express their disillusionment with the

multiracial bodies to which they belonged. They called for a further meeting of representatives from all the Black universities and colleges to be held in December 1968 to discuss issues which affected their interests as Black people.

The meeting was held at Biko's old high school at Marianhill in Natal. A resolution to form an organisation which was to be known as the South African Students Organization (SASO) was adopted. The conference examined the question of whether the interests of Black students were being served by multiracial student organizations such as NUSAS and the UCM. The general consensus was that these organizations did not meet the needs of Black students satisfactorily, in the educational sphere, in coping with the problems of the Black students on Black campuses, and in the expression and realization of the political aspirations of the Black community. Black students complained of being numerically swamped in NUSAS to the extent that White liberal views prevailed on every issue. The conference proposed that Blacks should break away from NUSAS and form their own organization, in which they could spell out their own problems as Blacks, in their own terms, and prescribe their own carefully considered solutions. They agreed to hold the inaugural conference of SASO in July 1969 at Turfloop.

The most pressing issue at the Turfloop conference was the relationship of SASO to NUSAS. A debate ensued between students who advocated a complete break and those who favoured the retention of certain links with NUSAS. This divergence of opinion arose from the fact that, as students at most Black campuses had been forbidden by their administrations from belonging to NUSAS, many of them tended to romanticize NUSAS and to aspire to become its members. The students who favoured continued affiliation to NUSAS felt that, by condemning NUSAS and disassociating themselves from it, they would be joining their university administrations and the government in denouncing NUSAS. They criticized what they saw as the racial character of SASO, which they accused of playing into the hands of apartheid. The first constitution of SASO, adopted at the July 1969 Turfloop conference, stated the case for multiracial cooperation cautiously while advocating Black solidarity.

The Turfloop conference decided to drop the term 'Non-White', which was used in all official government communications. They viewed the expression in Fanonian terms and saw it as a negation of their being. They were being described as 'non-something', a description which implied

that something else was the standard and they were not that standard. 'They felt that a positive view of life, which is commensurate with the build-up of one's dignity and confidence, should be contained in a description which you accept, and they sought to replace the term Non-White with the term Black,' Steve Biko, first President of SASO, explained in May 1976 at the trial of nine Black Consciousness leaders.<sup>41</sup> In Black Consciousness poetry, 'Non-white' came to be used in a derogatory sense, to refer to Blacks who aspired to White values or were deemed to be serving the White power structure. Mafika Gwala became the foremost literary exponent of this view.

As a consequence of their redefinition of themselves, adherents of Black Consciousness sought to transform expressions such as 'Black is Beautiful' into more than mere slogans. Biko's following elaboration on the significance of 'Black is Beautiful', during the trial of the SASO Nine, is reminiscent of the poetry of Senghor, Okara and p'Bitek:

When you say, 'Black is Beautiful' what you are saying (to the Black person) is: Man you are okay as you are; begin to look upon yourself as a human being. Now, in African life ... the way women prepare themselves for viewing by society ... the way they dress, the way they make up ... tends to be a negation of their true state and in a sense a running away from their colour. They use (skin) lightening creams, they use straightening devices for their hair .... They sort of believed that their natural state, which is a Black state, is not synonymous with beauty. And beauty can only be approximated by them if the skin is made as light as possible and the lips are made as red as possible and their nails are made as pink as possible .... 'Black is Beautiful' challenges exactly that belief which makes someone negate himself.<sup>42</sup>

These notions on Black pride influenced the poetry of Serote, Gwala, Sepamla and others. Black Consciousness taught Blacks the need to assert themselves in order to overcome their fears and complexes. By using Fanonesque tools of psychoanalysis, as outlined in The Wretched of the Earth and in Black Skin, White Masks, advocates of Black Consciousness arrived at the conclusion that Blacks had developed a state of alienation from themselves. They had developed self-hatred, through identifying everything good with Whites and looking upon their indigenous culture as inferior. Black Consciousness poetry sought to inject the right tone of defiance to counteract all those assumptions which looked down upon Black culture and debased them as Black people.

In a subsequent conference at the medical college of Wentworth in Natal in July 1970, SASO rejected multiracialism outright, in the context of South Africa. They expressed dissatisfaction with their status as



junior partners in multiracial organizations hatched in South Africa. 'Blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing,' Biko, who had been elected SASO President in July 1969, wrote in a policy statement issued in February 1970 to introduce SAO. 'They want to do things for themselves and by themselves.'<sup>43</sup> The July 1970 conference at Wentworth endorsed Biko's views. The conference then elected Barney Nyameko Pityana to replace Biko as President. Biko was elected Chairman of SASO Publications, in which capacity he interacted with the leading Black Consciousness poets of the period, notably Gwala, Ndebele and Serote. Biko's column, 'I Write What I Like', in which he signed himself 'Frank Talk', first appeared in the SASO Newsletter of August 1970. His articles from his column in the SASO Newsletter give a precise formulation of Black Consciousness literature and theatre.

Biko's first article, 'Black Souls in White Skins?', a title borrowed and adapted from Fanon, attacked White liberals. He described them as 'the people who say they have black souls wrapped up in white skins'. He rejected patronage from those whites who wanted to decide who the good Blacks were, to determine what was good for them, and to act on behalf of Blacks. He argued that 'integration' in White dominated organizations led to 'Whites doing all the talking and the Blacks the listening'.<sup>44</sup> Such superficial integration served to reinforce the Black people's sense of inadequacy and dependence. He questioned the likelihood of Whites within such organizations being totally committed to the destruction of the White power structure. He compared the practice in such bodies to a situation in which the slaves had surrendered the leadership, in their struggle to eliminate the slave-owners, to the children of their slave masters who had declared themselves on the side of the slaves. He argued, in the manner of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in Black Power, that meaningful integration would only come about once the Whites had been stripped of their paternalistic tendency and the Blacks of their arsenal of inferiority complexes, a notion that is also expressed in Serote's 'The Actual Dialogue'. Biko advocated a grass-roots build up of Black Consciousness, to counteract what Chinua Achebe in 1965 had described as 'the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement'.<sup>45</sup> He refuted the notion that Whites

had been born more intelligent than Blacks. He questioned their qualification to set the pace, as Gwala does in 'Paper Curtains', and determine the direction of Black advancement. Quoting from Aime Césaire, he wrote in a later article that: 'No race possesses the monopoly of beauty, intelligence, force, and there is a room for all of us at the rendezvous of victory.'<sup>46</sup> In 'Black Souls in White Masks?' he expressed his suspicions about White liberal politics and said that the intention of most Whites who professed liberal views in matters of race relations was to maintain the status quo: 'They vacillate between the two worlds, verbalising all the complaints of the Blacks beautifully while skilfully extracting what suits them from the exclusive pool of White privilege. But ask them for a moment to give a concrete meaningful programme that they intend adopting, then you will see on whose side they really are.' He held out that the danger with White liberals was that they gave Blacks the impression that they were doing something to transform South African society, when their actions were calculated to ease the hostility of Blacks and enable Whites to retain their political, economic and cultural dominance. They identified with the Black people's struggle for what they could salvage for themselves or in order to assuage their consciences. Once they had eased their guilt-ridden consciences, through engaging in token integration and ritualistic protests, they withdrew into their racial cocoons. Superficial integration at parties, their favourite pastime, defined the limits of their actions, he explained in the same article: 'As a testimony to their claim of complete identification with blacks, they call a few "intelligent and articulate" blacks to "come around for tea at home", where all present can ask each other the same old hackneyed questions, "now can we bring about change in South Africa?"'<sup>47</sup> This passage is the springboard for Serote's poem, 'They Do It'. Taking the cue from Biko, Black Consciousness poets depicted White liberals as a nuisance and as people who confused issues by diverting attention from essential to peripheral matters. As a result of the stake such Whites had in society and their determination not to upset the applecart through radical action, they were identified with the oppressor, as a resolution adopted at one of the SASO conferences again made clear.

The resolution adopted by the General Students' Council of SASO in July 1969 stated that 'The White man must be made aware that one is either part of the solution or part of the problem; that in this context because of the privileges accorded to them by legislation and because



of their continual maintenance of an oppressive regime Whites had defined themselves as part of the problem (solution 45.3). The new emphasis in SASO was on self-reliance. They wanted to take their destiny into their own hands. Another section of the resolution, whose wording was derived from Hamilton and Carmichael, expressed the view that integration or multiracialism could only be meaningful if it was based on a partnership between equals: 'Before the Black people should join the open society they should first close their ranks to form themselves into a solid group, to oppose the definite racism that is meted out by the White society, to work out their new direction clearly and bargain from a position of strength' (Resolution 45c).<sup>48</sup> Black Consciousness in South Africa was finding parallels with Black Power as originally conceived by Malcolm X and his followers.

Black Consciousness was equally critical of Blacks who embraced White values and aspired to White privilege. Biko wrote: 'They have been made to feel inferior for so long that for them it is comforting to drink tea, wine or beer with Whites who seem to treat them as equals. This served to boost up their own ego to the extent of making them feel slightly superior to those blacks who do not get similar treatment from Whites.' These are the feelings some Blacks derive from attending such multiracial parties as Lewis Nkosi describes in Home and Exile and in Rhythm of Violence. Mafika Gwala called such Blacks 'Black Status Seekers', in his poem by that title. Instead of addressing themselves to the Black communities, educating their people about their collective predicament and trying to work out joint solutions with them, they dissipated their energy in fruitless appeals to the White establishment. Biko accused such Blacks of being an impediment to the Black people in their struggle for emancipation. They had absorbed the gradualist approach of their White liberal mentors and failed to see that such an approach was a favourite trick used by White liberals to retain White privilege. They used methods and prescribed solutions learnt from their White benefactors to the problems of the Black community, Biko continued in the same article, without noticing 'the superior-inferior white-black stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil (and a poor one at that)'.<sup>49</sup> In line with Biko's analysis, Sepamla demonstrates in 'Stop the Lie' the hypocrisy of Whites who uphold the view that Blacks should only be absorbed gradually into the democratic machinery and the intricacies of government, if

they are not to wreck the ship of state, which is another way of saying make concessions only to a select few and co-opt them as allies against other Blacks.

Black Consciousness was also striving to wean Blacks from the White dominant culture, which had created false values for many Blacks. Some of these values, to which many Blacks aspired uncritically, were a deterrent to their self-realization. Black Consciousness sought to counteract the further erosion of African culture by the imposition, for instance, of Western individualism in place of the communal outlook of traditional societies. 'A country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African, must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style,' Biko wrote.<sup>50</sup> He elaborated in another article: 'The oneness of community for instance is at the heart of our culture ... These are characteristics we must not allow ourselves to lose. Their value can only be appreciated by those of us who have not as yet been made slaves to technology and the machine.'<sup>51</sup> Black Consciousness poets began to seek a Black influence in their style and to project Black values and aspirations. In his unpublished memoirs, Molefe Pheto explains what the quest for Black influence entailed: 'Gone were the days when our productions aped White people. Gone were White-written plays and poems ... the emphasis had become Black pride and nationhood through the arts, drawing from our cultural background, a decided turn to our cultural origins.'<sup>52</sup> Studies were undertaken on subjects ranging from poetics, aesthetics and culture to politics, economics and theology. These studies culminated in publications such as Creativity and Development, a collection of papers delivered at the SASO Conference Symposium in July 1972, Black Viewpoint, Essays on Black Theology, Black Review, and others. Marika Gwala and Njabulo Ndebele, who were among the leading poets of the period, were contributors to most of these publications.

Black Consciousness defended itself against accusations that it had fallen into the racist trap by counteracting white racism with Black racism. Biko accused critics such as Donald Woods of the East London Daily Dispatch and Alan Paton, author and Chairman of the Liberal Party until it was banned in 1968, of trying to stifle Black self-determination. 'When blacks announce that the time has come for them to do things for themselves and all by themselves all white liberals shout blue murder,' he said in a statement echoed by Gwala in his poem,

'Black Pincers'. Biko said that it was the White liberals, not the Blacks, who had set up a racial trap. They wanted to create, as inoffensively as they could, a situation in which their values and interests would dominate forever. Biko argued that, as the oppressed and disadvantaged in South Africa, Blacks could not conceivably be accused of practising racial segregation. He added, in the same article, that Blacks did not have the power to subjugate others, if racism is defined as 'discrimination by a group against another for the purpose of subjugation or maintaining subjugation'.<sup>53</sup>

Biko's definition of racism illustrates his indebtedness to Hamilton's and Carmichael's Black Power, a seminal work in the evolution of Black Consciousness, alongside such other writings as The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Malcolm X Speaks, Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, and Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin White Masks. Hamilton and Carmichael define racism as 'not merely exclusion on the basis of race but exclusion for the purpose of subjugating or maintaining subjugation'.<sup>54</sup> Other influences on the political philosophy of Black Consciousness can be summarized as follows: Pan-Africanism and the African political leaders who espoused Pan-Africanism, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Sekou Toure, Amilcar Cabral, and Kenneth Kaunda; revolutionaries from other parts of the Third World, people such as Mao Tse Tung, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Freire; Afro-American writers of the Harlem renaissance and others such as Richard Wright (who is credited with coining the phrase 'Black Power'), Ralph Ellison, Eugene O'Neill, Le Roi Jones (Imamu Baraka), and James Baldwin; the poets of the Negritude movement, notably Aime Césaire and Leopold Senghor, and other radical writers from other parts of Africa. Black Consciousness also had its South African antecedents and, in its views on solidarity among the disadvantaged and oppressed, whether of African, Asian or mixed origin, had arrived back at the position first advanced in 1943 by the NEUM, as expressed in Tabata's The Awakening of a People; Black Consciousness also reiterated the cultural nationalism that had first been propounded in 1944 by the ANC Youth League, under the leadership of Anton Mzwakhe Lembede; Black Consciousness was politically closer to the African nationalism of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, founder President of the PAC in 1959, though its interpretation of this nationalism was broader than that advanced by the PAC and incorporated all the disenfranchised in South Africa, than to the

multiracialism of the ANC as expressed in the Freedom Charter, a policy document for power sharing in South Africa adopted in 1956 during a conference in Kliptown, near Johannesburg, attended by representatives of all the opponents of apartheid, Black and White. The common trends running through Black Consciousness and the literature it inspired were Black assertion and self-determination, non-collaboration with the government, a rejection of White patronage, and the confinement of White revolutionaries to the task of politicizing their fellow Whites.

From his discussion of White liberals, Biko turned in his second article in the SASO Newsletter of September 1970 to another major concern in Black Consciousness, the psychological emancipation of Blacks. Black Consciousness urged Blacks to look more critically at some of the assumptions by which they lived. This dimension of introspection and the capacity for self-criticism injected by Black Consciousness are the characteristics which distinguished the new literature, written under the momentum of Black Consciousness, from the literature of the purely protest tradition, which had hovered dangerously close to identifying everything evil with the White supporters of government policy and had turned a blind eye to the socio-political ills emanating from the Black people themselves. All the major poets of the Black Consciousness era, notably Mtshali, Serote, Gwala and Sepamla, castigated the Black community whenever they saw the need to do so. They examined the Black community critically, pointing out those social maladies which are self-inflicted. The political guidelines for their criticism of society derived from Black Consciousness.

Biko's article, 'We Blacks', in the September 1970 issue of the SASO Newsletter did not dwell much on the manifestations of material deprivation among Blacks. There was already an abundance of protest literature on the subject - political, sociological, economic, and imaginative. He attributed Black subservience towards Whites in South Africa, not to the genetic inferiority of such Blacks but to their psychological enslavement. The inferior systems of Bantu, Coloured and Indian education had been designed to produce compliant Blacks and had contributed to their dehumanization and emasculation, he said. 'The type of Black man we have today has lost his manhood,' he wrote. 'Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the White power structure and accepts what he regards as the "inevitable position".'<sup>55</sup>

For Biko, as for the Black Consciousness poets, one of the most lamentable by-products of Black frustration was the Black people's misdirected and fratricidal violence. They often vented their anger in the wrong direction, on their fellow Blacks in the townships. Elaborating on his views, which had inspired such poems as 'My Brothers in the Street' and 'What's in this Black Shit' by Serote, Biko told the court at the Palace of Justice in Pretoria in May 1976 that: 'When you are in a township it is dangerous to cross often from one street to the next, ... rape and murder are very, very common aspects of our life in the townships .... You see an old man being assaulted by a number of young men for apparently no reason whatsoever except that of course it is the end of the month and possibly he might have some money around him.'<sup>56</sup> The situations described by Biko are also encountered in the poetry of Gwala, Mtshali and others.

Repression after Sharpeville, Biko also observed, had contributed towards generating this feeling of impotence and the sense of inadequacy among Blacks, and produced a spineless breed of people who had become masters at dissimulation. In private, in the toilets and segregated buses, they condemned Whites; but in the presence of such Whites they brightened in sheepish obedience and spoke in praise of the government. 'All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity,' Biko said. His views on how Blacks felt intimidated after Sharpeville are reflected in the poems of Serote and Sepamla. In addition, Biko taught that Black people must see themselves for what they really were, for their hope for emancipation from their mental slavery, as a prelude to their political liberation, ultimately rested on their ability to diagnose their psychological problems correctly. Explaining the role of Black Consciousness in the liberation of Black people, he stated, in the same article, that, 'The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth.'<sup>51</sup>

Biko noted that Black South Africans probably felt the need to rehabilitate their much maligned past even more acutely than Africans elsewhere on the continent. Black Consciousness stood for reclaiming

the African past and stripping it of every insult from Whites who were bent upon discrediting Blacks on all accounts. Biko proposed that research into history by Blacks was essential to correct the negative image which biased White historians had inculcated in the minds of many Blacks. In the process of re-interpreting their history, Blacks also needed to retrieve positive values from their traditional culture and not be persuaded to abandon all the good in their culture. Taking up the challenge, several Black Consciousness writers tried to reach back to the African past for their inspiration. In their work, they invoked heroic battles and figures of the past, Shaka, Moshoeshoe and others who had been great nation-builders and who epitomized African resistance to subjugation. The writers who had been thus inspired to deploy history for literary purposes had similar objectives to those of Achebe, who once said: 'I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.'<sup>58</sup> Their purpose was also similar to Ngugi's, who wished in his work to 'restore the African character to his history'.<sup>59</sup> But unlike Achebe, the Black Consciousness writers were less concerned with the past as history. They were more like Ngugi in that they wished to retrieve the African past in order to forge an accessible myth which would assist them to come to terms with their present predicament. As Plaatje and Abrahams had done in their historical novels, writers of the Black Consciousness era returned to historical themes more as a way of understanding their present than from any academic concern with the problems of African historiography as such. Their task as myth-makers brought them closer to the tradition in Arman than in Achebe.

In religion, Biko argued that Black Theology had to strive to fuse traditional with Western concepts of worship in a meaningful syncretic way. Blacks needed to oppose the misapplication of religion for the purpose of keeping them in perpetual subjugation by discouraging them from retaliating against Whites. He first made his call for a more positive role of Christianity in a paper, 'Some African Cultural Concepts', at a conference organized by the Interdenominational African Ministers' Association of South Africa (IDAMASA) and the Association for the Cultural and Educational Development for the African People (ASSECA) at the Ecumenical Lay Training Centre in Edenvale, near Pietermaritzburg,

in 1971; and subsequently in another paper, 'The Church as Seen by a Young Layman', during a second conference held at the same venue in May 1972. Serote and Mtshali, in particular, both reflect Biko's criticism of the church as an instrument of oppression.

In the June 1971 issue of the SASC Newsletter, Biko turned to the problem of the Black leaders who operated within the framework of apartheid. In his article, 'Fragmentation of the Black Resistance', he noted that the conversion of former ANC and PAC activists to Bantustan politics had boosted the credibility and the respectability of such apartheid institutions and had misled their followers to do likewise. He singled out Chief Buthelezi, once 'regarded as the bastion of resistance to the institution of a territorial authority in Zululand', for special attack and accused him of having swayed many people's minds in favour of accepting Bantustans and the sectional politics they represented. Even if Buthelezi was resisting government pressure to opt for independence for kwaZulu, the government could afford to wait. What was important to them was that another Bantu Authority had been created. In time, a pliable leader would be found to lead kwaZulu to independence. For the time being, South Africa only needed to convince her opponents that she was sincere in her policy of decolonization by creating a 'Homeland' for each of her nine Black nations, where every African could exercise his rights of nationality. Biko argued that what Buthelezi regarded as his strategy for working within the system to attack it from inside, far from beating the government at its own game, had been foreseen by the architects of apartheid, who had cause to be grateful even for such bellicose noises as Buthelezi was making. What sounded like radical demands, which would never be met anyhow, from Buthelezi and the other Bantustan leaders had the uncanny effect of advancing the cause of the government in the face of growing international criticism. 'After the kind of noises made by Buthelezi, the ('Coloured') Labour Party and of late Matanzima who can argue that black opinion is being stifled in South Africa?' Biko asked. All government-created institutions for Blacks worked to the advantage of the White minority racist regime. They silenced critics of apartheid internationally and, in due course, they would also condition Blacks to make their 'well-considered resistance to fit within the system both in terms of the means and the goals'.<sup>60</sup> To Blacks, the acceptance of Bantustans or working within the system, which amounted to the same thing, represented

capitulation and selling off their birthright. As Biko said in court in May 1976: 'What we want is a total accommodation of our interests in the total country not in some portion of it.'<sup>61</sup> Black Consciousness wanted to reflect Black perspectives and aspirations as they emanated from the Black community and not as fostered by the White power structure.

The diffusion of Black Consciousness beyond the university generation took the form of the establishment of an adult, umbrella wing, which was called the Black People's Convention (BPC). The BPC served to accommodate the post-university generation of SASO members and drew in other Black community leaders. The BPC was also formed as a national political movement, in place of the banned ANC and PAC, to organize resistance against apartheid on a national scale. A series of conferences and meetings, attended by representatives of several organizations which had a national outlook, preceded the launching of the BPC. The Black organizations which were involved from the beginning were the IDAMASA, whose Transvaal and later national President, Fr Joshua Mbizo Mzamane, had been a supporter of SASC from its conception; ASSECA, led by M.T. Moerane, then editor of the World, and Dr William Nkomo, both founding members of the ANC Youth League; the Salesmen and Allied Workers' Union, led by Drake Koka, who was instrumental in the launching of an umbrella Black Allied Workers' Union in 1972; the African Independent Churches' Association, represented by the Rev. Mayatula, who became the first President of the BPC; and the Young Women's Christian Association, led by Mrs Ellen Khuzwayo and Mrs Winifred Kgwere.

The first conference held in Bloemfontein on 24 April 1971 elected a committee 'to prepare for the assembly of yet a bigger number of people's organizations'. A two-day conference, attended by more than a hundred representatives of welfare, educational, cultural, religious and student organizations, met in Pietermaritzburg in August 1971. The conference set out the guidelines for the operation of the organization. The conference resolved to ask every organization formed by Africans to join the envisaged 'national confederate organization'; that each of these constituent organizations should work 'in close co-operation with other Black groups towards the realisation of the aspirations and goals of the oppressed in South Africa'; that the proposed umbrella organization should work outside the framework of



government-created institutions such as Bantustans; and that the organization should devote itself 'to representing African political opinion and to promoting community development programmes'.<sup>62</sup> The conference of December 1971 held in Soweto endorsed the decision to form a national political organization under the banner of Black Consciousness. The BPC was formally launched during a conference of 8-10 July 1972 in Pietermaritzburg.

Under the auspices of the BPC, although operating as a separate wing of professional experts, the Black Community Programmes (BCP) were set up to carry out specific community development projects, in a spirit of self-reliance. The projects undertaken by the BCP were: the erection of creches and clinics; the establishment of adult literacy and preventive medicine programmes; leadership courses and youth programmes; and home industries, which were economic projects set up mainly in the impoverished rural areas. The underlying belief in BCP was that Blacks needed to diagnose their own problems and to participate in administering remedies to these problems. Central to carrying out these projects was 'conscientization', defined by Biko as 'a process whereby individuals or groups within a given social and political situation are made aware of their situation'.<sup>63</sup> Conscientization entailed a total deployment of the mental and material resources at the command of Blacks.

The spread of Black Consciousness to high schools was facilitated by young teachers such as Abraham Onkgopotse Tiro, who had recently graduated from the Black universities, where SASO had gained a firm foothold. Tiro, who died in February 1974 in Botswana in a parcel-bomb explosion, had taught at the Morris Isaacson High School, which was at the forefront of the Black revolt in 1976. He had been expelled from Turfloop for his attack on Bantu education in his graduation address at the university on 29 April 1972. Mzwandile Maqina's unpublished play, Give Us This Day, which came to Soweto in 1975 from Port Elizabeth, was based on Tiro's life. The White authorities who controlled all the public halls in Soweto would not allow the play, which attacked Bantu education and township administrators, to be shown in these halls. Consequently, it was staged in churches, to packed audiences, sometimes running to two or three shows a day, by popular demand. Give Us This Day was responsible to a large degree for raising the political awareness which resulted in the Soweto uprising, precipitated by student

demonstrations against Bantu education. Inspired by the example of SASO, students in Soweto formed the South African Students' Movement (SASM - high schools), with branches in almost all the high schools. A federation of youth groups called the National Youth Organization was formed in Natal, Transvaal and the Cape Province. These organizations subscribed to Black Consciousness and were behind the revolt of the youth which began in Soweto on 16 June 1976.

The Trial of the SASO Nine, from February 1975 until sentence was passed in December 1976, gave the ideas of Black Consciousness even wider coverage. The SASO Nine, who were given sentences ranging from five to ten years on charges under the Terrorism Act, were Sathisivan Cooper, Muntu Myeza, Mosiuoa Gerald Lekota, Nchaupe Aubrey Mokoape, Nkwenkwe Nkomo, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Kaborane Sedibe, Strinivasa Moodley and Zithulele Cindi. The accused used the trial to restate their views. The trial provided a dramatic stage setting onto which Biko was flung as a witness for the defence. His restriction orders, confining him since March 1973 to King Williamstown, had been relaxed to allow him to travel to Pretoria for the trial. The crowded courtroom listened for five days to the testimony of Biko, who used the occasion to explain Black Consciousness policy on such matters as White supremacy, Bantustans, Bantu education, and the Black people's struggle for liberation. Blacks all over South Africa pored over newspapers such as the World and the township editions of the Rand Daily Mail and the Star, all of which reported Biko's testimony at great length. Gessler Nkondo, who was then a lecturer in English at Turfloop, was called by the court to give an exposition of Black Consciousness poetry. 'Thus instead of contributing to the suppression of Black Consciousness ideology, the trial, by giving the accused a continuous platform through the press, merely disseminated that ideology even more widely, and held up to youth once again a model of "rebel" courage,' Gail Gernart says.<sup>64</sup>

By 1976 Black Consciousness had managed to permeate many aspects of the lives of Black youth. Its literary legacy was a release of Black creative potential in poetry and the theatre, which became important vehicles for disseminating Black Consciousness. Poetry readings in private houses, during student gatherings and on other social, political and religious occasions became common in the Black townships from 1967 onwards. The dramatization of poetry and the performance of music and plays composed and written by Blacks, for Blacks, by mushrooming township

cultural groups such as Mdali, Minloti and Dashiki, became a significant factor after 1967 in spreading Black Consciousness. These groups are the forerunners of the cultural groups which sprang up after Soweto and gave rise to the new writers' movement. Serote, who had been a founder member of Mdali and Minloti, together with MoIefe Pheto and others, participated fully in these cultural programmes and their poetry reflected the political attitudes and the preoccupations of Black Consciousness. Sepamla, who largely remained his own man and was in two minds about giving his unconditional support to Black Consciousness organizations, was nonetheless affected by the new radical spirit brought about by Black Consciousness, as was Mtsnali, and their poems reflect this fact.

#### AFRICAN VALUES, FORMS AND TECHNIQUES

Having no firm poetic tradition of their own in English in which they could root their poetry, Black Consciousness poets resorted to the forms and techniques, which the majority of them had absorbed quite unconsciously, of oral poetry. Otherwise, they relied on transliteration to reproduce the idiom and other speech habits of Africans. Occasionally, as in Sepamla and Ndebele, they delved into folklore for their imagery. In their work, the reader is frequently struck by their unrelenting effort to reach back to their traditional cultural background in order to try and develop more effective poetic techniques of conveying African values and their personalities as Africans. Their work also demonstrates their constant striving to create a truly proletarian literature, addressed, in the main, to the Black community and speaking to them, in their own language, of their hopes and fears, their dreams and frustrations, wrestling with their problems in a constructive rather than in an escapist fashion.

Praise-poems (variously known as izibongo in Nguni, lithoko in SeSotho and mabôkô in SeTswana) are the most important and the most developed literary form among the Southern Bantu. Such poems reflect the social, economic, cultural and political organization of a people, their historical background and the countryside where the people live. In the poems, references to the flora and the fauna of the region abound, to the geographic features of the area such as its rivers, mountains, ridges and forests. These geomorphic features together with the flora

and fauna of the region provide most of the images employed in the poems. Schapera summarizes the subject-matter of praise-poems in the following way:

They are composed not only about chiefs, headmen, famous warriors, and other prominent tribesmen, but about ordinary commoners also, including women; there are, in addition, praise-poems of tribes and subdivisions of tribes (such as wards and lineages), of domestic animals (notably cattle), of wild animals (including birds and insects), of trees and crops, of rivers, hills, and other scenic features, and of such inanimate objects as divining bones. In modern times some have even been composed about schools, railway trains, and bicycles.

Anything can be the subject of a praise-poem, including oneself. The form is highly adaptable, so that Black Consciousness poets have employed the techniques of praise-poetry to pay tribute to martyrs and leaders of the African liberation struggle and to air their views on such subjects as life in the African townships and in some of South Africa's major cities. G.P. Lestrade, as quoted in Schapera, summarizes the characteristics of praise-poems as follows:

They are a type of composition intermediate between the pure, mainly narrative, epic, and the pure, mainly apostrophic, ode, being a combination of exclamatory narration and laudatory apostrophizing. In form they consist of a succession of what may be called stanzas of an irregular number of lines, each line containing a varying number of words, with, however, a more regular number of stresses, the whole being in ... balanced metrical form .... They narrate, in high-pitched adulatory style, deeds for which the subject has acquired fame, enumerating, in hyperbolic apostrophe, those qualities for which he is renowned; and they include a recital of those laudatory epithets applied to him either as a member of a group or as an individual, and known as his praise-names .... Persons of but modest rank in Bantu society usually compose their own praise-poem, and the praise-poems of their cattle, while those of higher status have theirs composed by professional bards, the praise-poets or reciters, the only type of professional literary artist known to tribal Bantu life.

The praise-poems can be likened to eulogies, odes and epics, though eulogy is a more accurate description since the primary purpose of the poems is to present their subject in as favourable a light as possible. However, they can also be compared to odes in that they present a single subject for our admiration; they are also like epics in that they record historical events. Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, for instance, is a eulogy and an ode to Shaka as well as an epic that gives an account of the king's actions and the events of his reign.

A common feature of praise-poems is their abundant use of similies and metaphors. As Schapera points out:

In almost every one of all but the shortest poems the chief is identified with some such animal as the lion, elephant, rhinoceros or buffalo, and is spoken of as pouncing upon his enemies, trampling upon them, or goring them; he may be likened to a snake or bird of prey, to a thorn tree impeding invaders, to the lightning striking people or nuts, to a rock crushing those on whom it falls, to a shield protecting the tribe, or to a cow yielding nourishment for his subjects; he is 'as tall as a mill', 'as shapely as the full moon', 'as straight as a sandalwood tree', or 'like a cloud overshadowing the people'.<sup>65</sup>

Elaborating on imagery in praise-poems, Trevor Cope points out that references to cattle abound in praise-poems and signify the importance Africans attach to cattle in traditional society:

Wealth is counted in terms of cattle, which constitute the basis of the economy. They have legal value in marriage, for it is only the transfer of cattle according to the lobola custom that legalizes a marriage and legitimizes its issue. This transfer seals the marriage almost sacramentally. They have ritual value in religion, for it is only the sacrifice of cattle to the accompaniment of the recital of praises that propitiates the ancestral spirits.<sup>66</sup>

Cattle, like land, are the life of the people. Their wasteful slaughter or wilful neglect are tantamount to courting disaster, a sure invitation to national catastrophe, as happened when Nongqause (Nongqawuse) persuaded the Xhosa to slaughter all their cattle and await divine deliverance from European oppression. The Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele) word for cow is inkomo (plural, izinkomo, iinkomo). Rubusana's Zemk' iinkomo Magwalandini (1906 - Away Go the Cattle You Cowards), a collection of proverbs and poems, is a title that exhorts Africans to resist European occupation, the appropriation of their land and cattle, and the ultimate disintegration of traditional society under European pressure. Similarly, the titles of Serote's Yakhal' inkomo and Gwala's Jol' iinkomo express awareness of the importance of cattle in African society, in creating social stability and political cohesion. Both writers draw the attention of their African readers to the fate of their cattle, to the dispossession of the Black community under apartheid. The cattle symbol in both titles is drawn from tradition; the communal ethic evoked in their poems also comes from tradition. Another common characteristic noted by both Schapera and Cope, which, however, is used less frequently in English than in poetry written in the African languages, is the kind of verbal repetition and word play commonly encountered in

Shakespeare, as in certain lines from the sonnets, such as 'love is not love/ Which alters when it alteration finds'. In Shaka's praises, as quoted in Cope, we find the following lines:

UTeku lwabafazi bakwaNomgabhi,  
Betekula behlez' emlovini  
Beth' uShaka kakubusa kakuba nkosi,  
Kant' unyakan' uShaka ezakunethezoka.

The joke of the women of Nomgabhi,  
Joking as they sat in a sheltered spot  
Saying that Shaka would not rule, he would not become chief,<sup>67</sup>  
Whereas it was the year in which Shaka was about to prosper.

Word play is evident in the first two lines; while the third shows the kind of parallelisms (defined in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as 'correspondence, in sense or construction, of successive clauses or passages') frequently employed in praise-poems. In their Zulu poems, Njabulo Ndebele and Nkathazo ka Mnyayiza use such devices fairly considerably.

The Southern Bantu distinguish between the prose of myths, legends, folktales and fables on the one hand and the poetry of songs and praises on the other. Poetry has no distinctive formal diction, as such, but uses everyday language in a special way to produce a heightened emotional effect. Such an emotional effect is produced by the use of imagery reinforced by repetition in various guises, such as employing parallelisms (repeated statements of identical construction, with different words expressing the same idea), chiasmus or cross-parallelisms (wherein the second half of one line corresponds to the first half of the next), linking (whereby a word or idea occurring in the second half of a line is repeated in the first half of the succeeding line), assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds), and alliteration (the repetition of consonants).<sup>68</sup> Rhyme is not employed in traditional versification but the poetry can be distinguished from everyday speech by its rhythm, without which it would be impossible to chant the praises. The breath-bar regulates the length of each foot and provides the poem with its even rhythm. 'A breath-bar,' Ngubane explains, 'is the period of exhalation into which the poet crowds a given number of syllables. A breath-bar might be a single sound extended over the length of the exhalation; it can also be a cluster of syllables or words. Most of the time, it is a sentence.'<sup>69</sup> Black Consciousness poets employed all such devices in a bid to create a distinctive African prosody in their verse written in English.

In Oral Literature in Africa, Ruth Finnegan observes that the praise-poems of the Southern Bantu are mainly built up of a series of praise-names and verses, which Schapera also alludes to. The simplest form of praise-poetry is the collection of the praises of a common man. The singular form of 'izibongo' or 'mabôkô' is 'isibongo' or 'sebôkô' respectively, which means one's clan name or patronymic, usually derived from the personal name of the founder of the clan. Custom requires that when people meet they should salute each other by reciting the patronymic which is employed to address members of each clan. Personal names among the Southern Bantu are essentially praise-names. Mtimkulu (He who is as firm and strong as a huge tree), Mzamane (One who is relentless in his efforts), Mehlomakulu (Wide-eyed, alert) were personal names of the founders of these clans and also their praise-names. As with the izibongo in general, patronymics and the brief recitations attached to them are not always laudatory. Thus the Mzamanes, who are also called BaThwa, to acknowledge their descent from the San ('Bushmen'), have the following brief poem appended to their clan names: 'Mpundwana zinhle, zinga zingongiwa' (He of the tiny pretty buttocks, which are worthy of a resounding kiss). The diminutive form, 'mpundwana', employs typical understatement to disguise the fact that the BaThwa have prominent buttocks; the effect is unflattering but comical. Though the remarks made by the praiser may be factual, the humour and the subtlety in their rendition are necessary safeguards against the likelihood of giving too much offence to one's listeners. Particular attention is thus paid to the manipulation of language in a way calculated to produce some desired effect. Talking specifically about the Zulu tradition, but the same is true of other Bantu traditions, Cope says: 'The Zulu praise-poems cannot be described as simple, however, nor as lacking in linguistic artificiality. Praise composition is consciously an art; there is a conscious striving after literary effect and a conscious effort to attain a richer, a more evocative, and a more memorable use of language.'<sup>70</sup>

The recitation of poetry is very much a part of life among the Southern Bantu. Poetry is recited for relaxation, after people have been working in their fields. Like the muezzin, an imbongi (seroki or mmoki) will rise early in the morning and repair to his chief's compound, and there start a recitation which may last for several hours. A visitor announces his arrival by chanting the praises of his

host, by way of greeting and as an expression of respect and affection for his host. In everyday conversation, allusions to chiefs and warriors are accompanied by the recitation of brief excerpts from their praises. At any time, an imbongi is liable to burst into a recital, moved by something said or happening. Schapera observes that among the BaTswana, 'Whenever there is a mass meeting of tribesmen, for example for the discussion of public affairs, it is still very common for someone to stand up in the crowd, before the actual business begins or after it has ended, and to recite praise-poems ...'<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Damane and Saunders note that among the Basotho, 'Lithoko were most commonly chanted at lipitso (assemblies) usually before business was conducted, but sometimes afterwards as well.'<sup>72</sup> Nor is it uncommon for a gathering to be interrupted by an imbongi who has been moved by the proceedings to declaim straight from the heart. No state ceremony, religious or social function can take place without professional bards chanting praises, while at the same time they improvise on current affairs and comment with considerable licence on the deeds and the character of the personalities involved. This tradition of public declamation has been carried over by Black Consciousness poets, who recite poetry on all public occasions. As in traditional society, the poems recited on such occasions may be old or new ones specially composed for the occasion. Some people who may not be very good at original composition may memorize and recite poems composed by others more gifted than themselves. In this way, the composition comes to be adopted by and identified with the community from which it has sprung.

Praises also play an important part in the social life of the Southern Bantu as a means of expressing approval for behaviour that is praiseworthy or conducive to the well-being of the community and disapproval at anti-social conduct. For instance, among the Zulu, children are given praise-names by their parents and coevals also give one another praises. In modern society, praises continue to be given to people in their various walks of life. Throughout Southern Africa, every football player sooner or later acquires a praise-name descriptive of his most striking attributes as a footballer. Such praises are often, but not always, flattering. They are an expression of public opinion. Eileen Krige, as quoted by Cope, notes that, 'Not only do they act as an incentive to and reward for socially approved actions, but their recital is a reminder to all present what qualities and conduct are



considered praiseworthy.' Through the tradition of giving one another praises, certain poetic traits, such as the capacity to use language figuratively, are implanted early in one's youth. These poetic traits invariably rub on to children, whether growing up in the cities or in rural areas. Although professional bards are found in the king's court, literary composition is not a specialist activity. Everyone composes praises, and the practice and competition in composing praises sharpen one's poetic propensity. A remarkable feature of Black Consciousness poets was the fact that they were never deterred by their lack of formal training from trying their hand in writing poetry; they never allowed their low level of academic attainment or their proletarian background to become a handicap to their development as poets. They had learned from traditional society that, as Cope puts it, 'Anyone can tell tales ... anyone can shout out praises to encourage a man engaged in a fight.' They composed their work to serve a purpose, just as praise-poems in traditional society have a function, which Cope, elaborating upon Krige's remarks, describes as follows:

The function of praise-poems ... is to bring about conformity to the approved modes of behaviour. In addition to displaying the good conduct expected of the common man, a chief is expected to be generous .... He is expected to protect the interests of the tribe and to govern it in accordance with the advice of his counsellors. The praiser expresses the opinion of the people and so presses conformity to the approved pattern upon the chief.<sup>73</sup>

The praise-poems of a chief have the primary function of presenting the chief as an admirable person, consequently praise abounds while condemnation is kept at a minimum. However, the imbongi will mention weaknesses in the chief which his subjects wish him to control. No chief wants his faults held up to public scrutiny all the time, so that he will try to regulate his behaviour accordingly. Black Consciousness poets discovered that praise-poetry could lend itself to subtle protest, of the type found in Mtshali, Serote and Sepamla, against the establishment.

Praise-poems also record historical events, a function Black Consciousness poets took upon themselves to preserve for posterity memories of such momentous events as Sharpeville and Soweto. The poems abound in allusions to people, places and events which may be obscure to readers unfamiliar with the unfolding of events within the Black community in South Africa. Such obscurity presents as much a problem of interpretation in Black Consciousness poetry as in praise-poetry.

Praise-poems can also be invocatory and inspirational: 'The unifying function of praise-poems is extended to the religious sphere when it is desired to unite not only the living representatives in the world of ancestral spirits. It is at times of insecurity that this contact with the ancestral world is necessary.'<sup>74</sup> For the same purpose, in their political poems, Black Consciousness poets call upon their past heroes, from Shaka to Biko. There is a belief inherited from tradition underlying such invocation, the belief that ancestors protect the interests of the nation and watch over its welfare. The practice among the new poets of invoking their ancestors in their struggle for liberation is an example of myth-making and of their efforts to retrieve tradition.

The traditional literature of the Southern Bantu is purely oral and written literature among them began with the recording of folklore. Early school readers drew from this repertoire of myths, legends, stories and songs, and fragments of royal praises, so that even children growing up in the cities, such as most poets of the Black Consciousness era, collect a fairly large store of these from their school readers. Black Consciousness poets employed such traits of traditional oral literature as they acquired in their early years at school. They returned to the traditional model of the praise-poem, with a completely different content. They also delved into folklore, stories gleaned from school readers or learnt from parents and rhymes and songs which often accompany children's games. In traditional society, children learn to narrate folktales and fables (called izinganekwane in Zulu, intsoni in Xhosa, and litšomo in Sesotho). From adults they acquire 'a complex system of remembered clichés from which full performances can be fashioned'. Such core-clichés, Harold Scheub continues, provide a 'wide repertory of images and choices for the improvisational creation of a narrative or narrative-clusters'. The folktales have certain poetic qualities in the form of easily remembered songs or chants around which the narrative is structured. Such fireside tales, usually told by women, are not only told to amuse the children, as Cope says, but they also invariably contain some disguised didactic elements. Scheub is more to the point when he says:

The artist is not a preacher; she does not openly moralize. This is not to say, however, that her performances are not moral and even didactic, but the educational functions are subtly realized and are not evident to the alien. The performer

develops her narrative by objectifying the images, and it is in the construction of the image before an audience that ideas and values are communicated. She is a consummate actress, performing, exploiting the poetic qualities of the language, blending the verbal elements of her production with such nonverbal materials as vocal dramatics, body movements and gestures, utilizing the imaginations and bodies and voices of the members of the audience to externalize image-sets which are remarkable in their internal complexity .... The members of the audience learn, not through an analytical examination of ideas, but through a total emotional and psychological involvement in the performance.

Black Consciousness poets combined the functions of the story-teller and the praise-singer. Many, such as Tladi, Ndlovu and Madingoane, committed their poems to memory so that they could chant them to an audience, to the accompaniment of drums and other musical instruments, emulating a traditional recital. In the poems composed by the best writers of the Black Consciousness period, aesthetic considerations play a role as major as the didactic contemporary political purpose of the poems. However, the message is seldom preached but subtly hinted, in the manner of the ntsomi, in which, according to Scheub again, 'One cannot separate image from idea, they are the same. Objectification of image means the expression of an idea.'<sup>75</sup>

In traditional society, the composition of poems, stories, and songs is a communal activity, as Cope points out:

Traditional literature differs from modern literature not only in that it is oral but also in that it is essentially the product of communal activity, whereas a work of modern literature is the result of individual effort and bears the stamp of its author. There is no individuality of style about a folktale or a folk-song, and all examples of folk-literature follow the style established by the culture of the community.

Black Consciousness cultural groups, such as TECON and others, tried to emulate the communal style of composition which informs traditional literature, so that the poems they dramatized were the product of group composition. Some members of the group would invariably emerge as more talented than others in the art of composition. But, even so, what they articulated was the collective consciousness of the whole group, just as an acknowledged praise-poet in traditional society was merely, as Cope describes him, 'a specialist in collecting and in committing to memory and particularly in reciting the praises, rather than in composing them'.<sup>76</sup> In drama and theatre, there were more efforts made during the Black Consciousness era than at any other

time in the history of modern South African literature to collaborate with others in compositions such as Sizwe Banzi is Dead, Phiri, Survival, Shades of Change, and Marumo. Sometimes such collaboration would involve White playwrights and producers such as Athol Fugard, Barney Simon and Robert Mqandweni, who were more highly skilled in the technical aspects of drama, though left-wing groups such as MDALI and Minloti consistently opposed collaboration with Whites, for the same reasons that Black Consciousness refused to work on a common political platform with White liberals. However, from radicals and moderates alike joint productions were launched in communal fashion.

In these various ways, Black Consciousness tried to narrow the gap between traditional oral and modern literature, to employ the techniques of oral composition, for instance its communal ethic, to reflect contemporary reality. They were more disposed to step into Mazisi Kunene's sandals rather than into Brutus's shoes. Kunene's work demonstrated the possibilities for creativity, among Africans, which lay in dipping into tradition. However, though following in Kunene's footsteps, Black Consciousness writers have still to explore and exploit to the full such avenues as Kunene has opened. Kunene was closer to traditional culture, having relatives from both the Zulu and Swazi royal houses, than any of the predominantly urbanized writers of the cultural renaissance. The new poets are faced with an almost insurmountable problem in trying to retrieve a culture that has been wilfully distorted by missionaries and succeeding White governments alike. However, through painstaking and relentless effort, they are creating a culture of resistance by combining elements of the old with the new. The results can be observed in Serote and Sepamla, who have published more volumes of poems than any of the other poets of the Black Consciousness era.

CHAPTER TWO: MONGANE WALLY SEROTE

CRITICAL RESPONSES, LITERARY INFLUENCES, AND SEROTE'S PREDECESSORS

Serote is the leading poet to have emerged from South Africa since Dollar Brand inaugurated the Black literary revival with the publication in 1967 of his poems, 'Africa, Music and Show Business', in Volume 2 Number 3 of the Classic. Since his work was first published in 1969, Serote has been the most prolific and one of the most accomplished poets in South Africa; but he has been neglected by most literary critics. Glowing tributes such as 'His is the first sustained voice in our English poetry for at least twenty years', a statement made by Lionel Abrahams about Mtshali, have not been paid to him, except by a few critics such as Arthur Ravenscroft and Lewis Nkosi.<sup>1</sup> Lionel Abrahams's statement is truer of Serote than of those poets who have been received in such terms and whose voices have been less sustained than Serote's. In 'Contemporary Poetry from Black South Africa', Ravenscroft predicts that, among his generation of poets, Serote's voice is most likely to survive its social and political milieu: 'Certainly, the poetry of Serote is likely to "survive", for its angry intensities of thought and feeling are finely set forth with a vital poetic craftsmanship ... even at his most bitter and angry Serote's imagination is fired not only by present indignities but by a remarkable sense of historical cause and process.'<sup>2</sup>

Nkosi is among the latest critics to add his voice to the continuing exercise to assess Black South African poetry coming from South Africa rather than written in exile. In his assessment of Serote's work, he notes the uncertainty of Serote's technique in his first volume of poems, Yakhal' inkomo, but sees the promise of 'an unusually fertile imagination for producing the freshest image'. Nkosi continues: 'In Tsetlo, in the tart richness of language which seems to be coined out of the untidy leavings of human existence itself ... we are able to get a glint of the lyrical powers which Serote has yet to exploit to the full.'<sup>3</sup> Nkosi's discussion ends with Serote's long poem, No Baby Must Weep, which Nkosi considers a failure, without, however, advancing any reasons.

In fervently composing No Baby Must Weep, Serote sought to generalize reminiscences by selecting elements typical of any African childhood in the townships, hence the poem's seeming obviousness. At the same time, he allowed his genuine perceptions to penetrate into the poem and took great pains not to lose control of the poem or the viewpoint of the child narrator. The sincerity of purpose and the intensity of feeling with

which his childhood reminiscences are conveyed and the honesty and authenticity of his evocation of the deprived environment and the social milieu in which his childhood was spent, the flesh of poetry and the spectre of translucent prose, are the epithets that characterize with sufficient accuracy the art of Serote. These are all his earliest memories, the ones nearest to the original source. From the accumulating scenes of his childhood in the book, we gradually obtain the image of an exceptionally sensitive boy, living in extremely unfavourable surroundings. He is able to imbue with much lyricism the poetic descriptions even of the most sordid objects among which his childhood was spent, objects which give to every township the appearance of a huge junkyard. Given the book's redeeming qualities, unmentioned in Nkosi, No Baby Must Weep deserves to be treated more sympathetically.

Nkosi does not mention Behold Mama, Flowers. However, his overall assessment of Serote's work is favourable: 'The best of his verse reminds us of the lyrical purity of an Alexander Blok; under the lurid light of his poetic imagination the most insignificant details of the human landscape are greatly illumined and can gleam like a new pigment of paint. An "imagist" before he had ever heard of such a movement, his lines can achieve the irresistible authority of someone who knows what language can do for him.'<sup>4</sup> Nkosi's intention in his book is to provide a panoramic view of African poetry from different parts of the continent rather than a detailed discussion of any individual author. However, what we miss in Nkosi is an adequate demonstration of Serote's craftsmanship.

In 'New Black Poetry in South Africa', Nadine Gordimer writes: 'Mongane Wally Serote uses the jazz beat but with a vocabulary and imagery less derivative and obviously localized - generalized definitions of blackness, or anything else, are not for him. He puts a craftsmanlike agony to making-by-naming (Gerald Moore's and Ulli Beier's definition of the particular quality of African poetry) in a vocabulary and grammar genuinely shaped by black urban life in South Africa.'<sup>5</sup> Her remarks provide a useful starting point for examining the characteristics of Serote's poetry.

There are two factors Nadine Gordimer omits in her assessment. The first is the tradition of Black Consciousness within which many of Serote's poems are written. During a panel on Contemporary South African Poetry at a conference in Austin, Texas, on 20-22 March 1975, Serote

described the influence of Black Consciousness on his writing and explained how he and a number of new Black poets had taken up writing:

When I started writing, it was as if there had never been writers before in my country. By the time I learned to write, many people - Zeke, Kgositsile, Mazisi Kunene, Dennis Brutus - had left the country and were living in exile. We could not read what they had written, so it was as if we were starting from the beginning. From around 1969-1974 a whole new group of people started writing; the newspapers described us as 'a new wave of poetry', whatever that means. At the head of this group was James Matthews, who set the standards of how we were going to deal with the things around us. There was also a group of students, the South African Student Organization - SASO - which was very influential in determining what people were going to write about. At that time many people were responding to literary criticism in the newspapers; their writing was being influenced by the standards created by white newspapers. Then SASO, BPC, BCP, and other black organizations came out with their own magazines, through which we could publish; they gave us a platform from which we could speak directly to the black community.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of Serote's own amplification, an analysis of his influences and an evaluation of his work are incomplete without an examination of the impact of Black Consciousness on his development as a writer.

Secondly, Serote and his colleagues used traditional oral motifs, which may sound new, fresh and original to readers who are not intimately acquainted with a particular writer's indigenous African language and culture. In The Voice, Gabriel Okara uses expressions such as 'He has no chest' or 'He has no shadow' to describe someone without integrity or dignity.<sup>7</sup> Okara sometimes writes in Ijaw and translates into English. Similarly, Okot p'Bitek wrote his verse initially in Acoli and then translated it into English. Many other African writers do the same. In 'The Language of African Literature', Mpanahlele explains that many African writers in English are always 'inventing' in this way, by turning to their African speech idioms: 'The African writer ... listens to the speech of his people, to the ring of dialogue in his home language and struggles to find an approximation of the English equivalent.'<sup>8</sup> In the case of Black South African literature, critics who speak no African language observe unEnglish forms of expression in the work of these writers and attribute such expressions to lack of familiarity with English in the Black writers concerned. The judgement that African writers cannot write in proper English is often based on a misunderstanding of the creative process among African writers such as Serote. The evidence of the texts shows, however, that in the work of Serote there is little use of the 'jazz beat' and that he employs Tsotsi Taal or the

'blues' idiom sparingly, unlike Sepamla, who has popularised both idioms through his work. Serote relies more on transliteration from indigenous African languages and not so much on the vocabulary and grammar, as Nadine Gordimer asserts, of the townships. He propagates African values and uses African modes of literary expression.

A year after Renoster Books, managed by Lionel Abrahams, published Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, with a foreword by Nadine Gordimer, they issued Serote's first collection, Yakhal' inkomo. This was less enthusiastically received than Mtshali's work. Reviews were muted. Lionel Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer and other reviewers agreed that Serote was a more accomplished and intense poet than Mtshali but avoided glowing tributes. Nor were Serote's problems limited to neglect by critics. He reports a lack of cordiality with his second publisher, Ad Donker, whom he blames for sometimes attempting to water down the content of his work by rejecting his more militant poems. He alleges that in 1979 they turned down a manuscript of his Soweto poems on the grounds that their publication would 'harm his reputation as a poet'.<sup>9</sup> Some of the poems, in which he adopts a militant stance akin to Kgositsile's, accuse Whites of genocide during the 1976 student upheavals. Serote also points out that prior to that Ad Donker had returned his poem, 'No More Strangers', which is about the student uprising. The publisher wrote to say that he regretted that he would be unable to include it in the collection of Serote's poems, Behold Mama, Flowers. He told Serote that his poem had arrived too late for inclusion and that its inclusion would make the book too long: 'We cannot include the poem No More Strangers, which you gave me in Botswana. The book is getting too long, and I feel you should use it in another volume. I hope you accept this.'<sup>10</sup> Serote subsequently published the poem in Barry Feinberg's revised and enlarged edition of Poets to the People.

'No More Strangers', which had already appeared in the PELCULEF Newsletter of October 1977, occupies two pages. Each of the shorter poems in Part 2 of Behold Mama, Flowers, in which 'No More Strangers' should have appeared, is two pages long on average. The volume runs into eighty-seven pages. Serote questions his publisher's argument that an additional two pages would have made any significant difference to the length of the book or the publisher's cost limits. 'No More Strangers' had appeared in the same issue of the PELCULEF Newsletter as 'Notes for a Fighter', which is less overtly political, in Behold



Mama, Flowers. The subject of 'No More Strangers' and Serote's blunt approach would probably have led to the book being banned, which understandably would have been disastrous for the publisher. Sipho Sepamla's collection of poems, The Soweto I Love, based on the same subject of the 1976 student revolt had already been banned. While appearing not to object to the content of 'No More Strangers', the publisher seems to Serote to have searched for an excuse which would sound inoffensive for turning down his poems on issues considered highly contentious. While Serote may have misconstrued Ad Donker's motives, who, after all, issued most of the poems previously turned down in a selected edition of Serote's poems in 1982, Serote's experiences with White editors, publishers and critics tended to give greater credence to his suspicions of White liberals, their institutions and intentions. These suspicions are conveyed in some of his poems in which he deals with race relations in South Africa.

In his rejection of White liberal patronage, Serote is closer to the tradition of African nationalism in Mphanlele and Matthews than to the liberalism conveyed in the writings of Lewis Nkosi, Arthur Maimane, and Peter Abranams. In his uncompromising rejection of the institutions of apartheid, Serote resembles writers of the Sharpeville era, notably Kgotsile; in his preoccupation with the retrieval of tradition, he veers towards Mazisi Kunene. He is also an assimilationist, in the manner of Mphanlele. He adheres to urban life while, at the same time, trying to assert the communal outlook of traditional society. However, this assertion is made in a spirit of African nationalism and not from any romantic attachment to an idyllic past. His awareness of the plight of African women in society parallels Mphanlele's and, to a limited degree, Abranams's. He often employs most of the stock figures and situations found in the work of his predecessors such as Can Themba and Casey Motsisi, from shebeens to scenes of senseless violence in the streets, but with a far more critical eye, neither allowing himself to wallow in self-pity nor to become cynical. His work attempts to reverse the stereotypes of South African literature and life. His poems are devoid of the escapism and resignation found in the work of some of his predecessors. They convey a more heightened impatience with and an abhorrence of the socio-political situation in South Africa. However, his impatience with and condemnation of those Africans who connive in their own oppression, either through their defeatism or by giving in to

the brutalizing forces unleashed by the system, are toned down by an impassioned and coaxing appeal for change in their attitude towards others who are victims of the same oppressive situation as themselves. He is not dismissive of such people and their anti-social behaviour; he is never contemptuous of their attitude. They can be 'conscientized'; they can be reformed and engaged in the struggle against apartheid. Serote's impatience with, his abhorrence and condemnation of certain anti-social tendencies within the Black community are counterbalanced by a more positive outlook on life. He is constantly engaged in exploring ways of transforming society to the advantage of the oppressed. His work has gradually acquired a tougher resonance, sounding a revolutionary call to the people, repeatedly and with increasing ardour. He is sprung from the people and is one with them. He is proletarian, as much in his outlook as in his background and upbringing.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND: SEROTE'S GROWTH AND FORMATION

Mongane Wally Serote was born in Sopniatown in 1944. He went to live soon thereafter in Alexandra, another Black township in Johannesburg, where he grew up. He does not remember much about life in Sophiatown: 'I know very little about that township. My parents moved out of it to Alexandra when I was still a small boy. Vaguely, I seem to remember that it was built like Alexandra, that is, there were lots of shacks which were packed in one yard and spread throughout Sophiatown. Sopniatown, like most old townships in South Africa, was erased, I think around 1956 or so, by the Group Areas Act. That is, police dogs, batons, guns and bulldozers were used to force people out of it. The people left Sophiatown at gunpoint.'<sup>11</sup>

The Sopniatown renaissance made no direct impact on his development as a writer. He was a victim of Bantu education and the Sharpeville crisis. 'By the time I reached high school, the country had gone through an intense political action, which exploded in Sharpeville,' he says. 'Like many children in South Africa, I struggled through high school. Bantu education is bad, it is not a system of education which prepares children for becoming educated adults; first, it is an education system systematised to set traps and cheat and then produce frustrated semi-literate adults. Secondly, schooling is made impossible for the majority of the people. Everything is made, deliberately so, very difficult for any black child to get an education. That there are doctors and

lawyers, and teachers, priests, etc. who come out of this education is nothing else but dedication and extreme hard work on the part of the people; you can't put the people down.' His educational background failed to provide him with a tradition of Black South African writers in English whom he could take after. In South African schools under Bantu Education these writers were not studied and the children of school-going age after 1960, such as Serote then was, were hardly aware of the existence of African literature written in English.

Although Serote did not grow up in the intellectual atmosphere of Sophiatown, life in Alexandra provided him with a stimulus of another kind: 'The story of Alexandra, that is, the story which made and still makes the young who come out of there, begins for me when I began to suspect that Alexandra was not meant for people to live in. I do not come from a poor family. I cannot say, though, that I come from a rich family. But my parents did make a home for us, their children, which enabled me to see that other people were worse off than us. Most people in Alexandra are very poor indeed. That and also the fact that Alexandra is one of those townships in South Africa which has a long history of political battle.' For instance, in 1943/44 a bus strike, which is described by Alan Paton in Cry, the Beloved Country, occurred in Alexandra over a proposed rise in fares, which the people felt they could not afford. Another Alexandra bus boycott, which is the subject of a short story, 'Azikwelwa', by James Matthews, took place between 1956 and 1958, when Serote was already in his teens. The boycotts in Alexandra raised the political awareness of the residents of Alexandra and threw up many national leaders of the African liberation struggle. The Alexandra People's Transport Action Committee, formed in 1957 to direct the strike, included Alfred Nzo, now Secretary General of the ANC, and Josias Madzunya, widely tipped to become the first President of the PAC when it was formed.

Political militancy in Alexandra had already manifested itself in the Defiance Campaign of 1952/53 against racial segregation and during the Bantu education boycott of 1956, when the township's residents, under the leadership of the ANC, set up their own schools. The militancy in Serote's poems is an outcome of this tradition of militant politics in Alexandra. Recalling his upbringing in the township, he says: 'By the time I went through primary education, Alexandra had fought through the bus boycott, the potato boycott, cigarette boycott ... and what that means is that tanks or rather saracens, guns, and at times mounted police

invaded Alexandra. There was the boycott against Bantu education, which affected our schooling and made us come face to face with the police, their ranks (sic) and guns and all.'

The people of Alexandra, like the residents of Sophiatown, enjoyed freehold land tenure rights. Alexandra was a worse slum than Sophiatown, even though Sophiatown was demolished and Alexandra preserved. Its survival was due to the militancy of its residents, which has continued unabated. Serote's concern with slum conditions, crime and violence is an outcome of his observations and experiences in Alexandra. His grandfather belonged to the Alexandra Residents Committee, which was fighting for the provision of decent toilets, streets, water taps and dustbins. 'My grandfather, by belonging to something called the Alexandra Residents committee or something like that, dropped cues for us the children about that township,' he says. 'I remember that most times my grandfather was with other old men and women, talking about how to fight. They stayed for hours at my grandfather's house, talking and then going out to fight. Later, when my grandfather died, my grandmother took over and started fighting together with the other old people.' Besides the tradition of militant politics, Alexandra also had a reputation for crime second to none. In the 1950s Alexandra produced the notorious Msomi gang and their rival, the Spoilers. The rivalry between these gangs gave rise to the West Side Story setting of King Kong. Despite the gangsters and the squalor, Alexandra has made some notable contributions not only in the political sphere but also to the cultural life of Blacks in South Africa. The Dark City Sisters and saxophonist, Zakes Nkosi, are only a few of the names from Alexandra which became household names in Black entertainment throughout eastern, central and southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. Serote's poems demonstrate how the people's cultural vibrancy and their political fervour are dissipated in the senseless fratricide of Alexandra.

Until 1980 the intention of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development had been to destroy the slums of Alexandra in order to build hostels for single Africans recruited from the reserves or Bantustans to work in the city. As the residents of Sophiatown had done in 1955, without success, the residents of Alexandra campaigned so vigorously to save their township that in 1980 the government capitulated and agreed to preserve the township. The complex emotions which link people to a place like Alexandra, despite its violence and

squalor, are the subject of Serote's Alexandra poems. The township dominates his writing and he keeps approaching the subject from different angles: 'When I read some of my early books, I realise that I put much emphasis on the effects of oppression and suffering of people. In a sense, Alexandra gave me no choice. But I realise now that, in fact, the fact that people live in Alexandra, for so long, that people have survived the odds of the racist Government, terrible odds, there must be something else; and that is, people have been creative fighters.'

After his primary school education in Alexandra, his parents sent him to boarding school at the Sacred Heart High School in Leribe, Lesotho, where he spent a year and a half in 1962/63. His poetry does not address itself to this period in his life. He never liked Lesotho, feeling misplaced there as a child accustomed to township life. However, his briefer stay in Lesotho brought him into contact with the traditional way of life of the BaSotho. He describes his stay in Lesotho and what he learned there in his novel, To Every Birth its Blood: 'I had been to Lesotho, and throughout the year that I was there I was a stranger, a stranger forever. I did not know if I could take that any more .... In Lesotho, with its emphasis on communities, gentleness, there was a circular movement: where the beginning is humility and the search is a desire to be humble, in the process of making a life. It taught me the value of human life.' Explaining the reason for his return from Lesotho, he writes, in the same novel: 'When Lesotho was emerging as one of the independent states, all South African citizens were to carry travelling documents issued by the South African government to enable them to travel into Lesotho. Fearing that by applying for the travelling document, I was exposing myself to the government as an undesirable - because, by studying in Lesotho, I was making a statement about South African education - my parents decided to terminate my stay there.'<sup>12</sup>

He returned to Johannesburg in 1963 and attended the Morris Isaacson high school in Soweto, then left school altogether after Form IV, gaining the rest of his education outside school. Somehow he managed to keep afloat. 'I ducked going into industry,' he says. 'I do not know how I did it, but ended up putting hours and hours behind the typewriter. You must remember that I was trying to learn English while writing.' He read such Afro-American writers as James Baldwin and Le Roi Jones. His main interest was journalism, at which he worked until his departure

from South Africa in 1974. He was detained under the Terrorism Act in June 1969 and released nine months later without being charged. Unlike other African poets who have undergone a similar ordeal, notably Soyinka and Brutus, Serote has not dealt with his prison experiences in his poetry, wishing to avoid further trouble with the police while he continued to live in South Africa. A play, Shades of Change, written in collaboration, after he had left South Africa, deals with the prison experiences of political detainees. While writing from South Africa he confined himself to the themes of daily life in the townships: poverty, starvation, crime, violence, birth, death, and the Black people's struggle for survival.

His earliest attempt to become a writer was made when he went to high school: 'I started writing, by trying my hand very seriously, on a thriller, which was confiscated by a Catholic priest from me in Lesotho, who said I was wasting my school time.' He started writing poetry when he was in Form III. He read the Classic and was inspired by the work it carried, so that he began to contribute to it towards the close of the 1960s. At the beginning of the 1970s, 'it became fashionable, and financially nice to publish blacks,' he says. 'That is when I started looking for a publisher.' He describes the problems he encountered in producing his first collection, thus:

My first book Yakhal' inkomo, which is really a selection from many many poems or even words collected together purporting to be poems, was a real struggle to eventually put between two covers as it appears now. There was the queen's language. It was a problem. There was the idea that I was writing poetry, which is what? I struggled through. Then there is the grievous fact: I am a South African, a black, that is oppressed, repressed, exploited. All doors shut. The room you are in is pitch dark. Some people died before they could go through the door which leads to prison, poverty, and madness. And those who go through the door, it is not because they are more intelligent than those who died, it is only because they learn from the dead, and climb on them to open the door.

In 1970-72 he came under the influence of Black Consciousness and adopted the Black Consciousness doctrine of the psychological emancipation of the Black people as a prerequisite to their political liberation. His poems which followed his conversion to Black Consciousness advocate counteracting White force with Black force if necessary. They no longer advocate dialogue with Whites. They are also characterized by Serote's sure and skilful use of traditional oral forms and his

clearer intentions about what he hopes to accomplish in his writing as well as a clearer idea about who he is writing for. Until his departure from South Africa, he was in the Publications Unit of SASO. He was a founder member in 1972 of Mdali (Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute), which was 'in the forefront of Black Consciousness in the arts' and 'for the first time, positively used the term "Black Arts" in South Africa'. Mdali sponsored annual festivals of Black arts in order to arouse Blacks with work that was Black-oriented. Molefe Pheto, quoted above, who was the founder Chairman, further explains that Mdali 'decried apartheid in the arts, demanded that we Blacks determine our course, recommended a disassociation with White artists and impresarios as long as the colour bar lasted, and ... spoke out on the exploitation of the black artists by the White gallery owners'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1974 Serote left South Africa to study at Columbia University in New York, where he received an M.A. degree in Fine Arts in 1976. He studied African, Afro-American and Caribbean literature as part of his course work. At the end of 1976 he settled in Botswana, where he was granted political asylum, following the outbreak of the 1976 Black revolt in South Africa.

He has been engaged in a wide range of cultural activities. He has written several short stories, some of which have appeared in magazines and anthologies.<sup>14</sup> His ventures into theatre have been through workshop productions in collaboration with other artists. In 1971 he collaborated with Barney Simon, who had taken over as editor of Classic after Nat Nakasa had left South Africa, Stanley Motjuwadi, and Oswald Mtshali; and the musicians, Mackay Davashe, Sophie Thoko Mgcina, and Cyril Magubane, a jazz guitarist. Hoping to score a success similar to King Kong, they produced Phiri: Money Makes Madness, 'a musical comedy of Soweto, based on a free adaptation of Jonson's Volpone'.<sup>15</sup> It was first performed in January 1972 at the University of the Witwatersrand by the Phoenix Players. Although featuring some of the best Black South African actors and musicians, including Abigail Kubeka who had been Makeba's understudy in King Kong, Phiri folded within a few weeks as a result of petty rivalries and lack of discipline among some members of the cast who regularly missed rehearsals.

For a brief period from 1976 to 1977, after he came to settle in Botswana, Serote became co-director of the Black Spirit Movement, a wing of the Writers' Workshop of the University of Botswana and

Swaziland, based in Gaborone in Botswana and giving dramatic performances of poetry with drums and music. In June 1977 he founded the Pelandaba Cultural Effort (PELCULEF) with fellow exiled poets, Mandlenkosi Langa and Lefifi Tladi, and a group of BaTswana and several South African students, who had fled South Africa after the student uprising of June 1976. Pelandaba was the name given to the house in Gaborone where Serote, Langa and other exiles lived. Their first programme, 'An Anthem for Liberation', featured song, dance and movement based on a dramatization of 'Notes for a Fighter', 'No More Strangers', and excerpts from 'Look Mama, Flowers' (later published as 'Behold Mama, Flowers'), written by Serote; 'A City in South Africa' and 'The Final Clenching' by Mandlenkosi Langa; and 'Our Spears are Immersed in Blood' by Lefifi Tladi. Their next effort under PELCULEF in 1978 was Shades of Change, a play based, in part, on the death of political prisoners such as the Black Consciousness leaders, Mapetla Mohapi and Steve Biko, in South African prisons, and, in part, on The Island, devised by Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona and John Kani. Shades of Change, jointly written by Langa, Serote and the two actors, Kush Modau and Tim Williams, also has elements of La Guma's novel, In the Fog of the Season's End, whose prologue describes how political prisoners in South Africa are tortured to break their spirit. Some of the play's insights derive from Serote's prison experiences.

In November 1977 PELCULEF merged with DASHIKI, 'midwife of the Black Consciousness message for a long time' in South Africa, comprising Lefifi Tladi, Oupa Mokou, and other poets, artists and musicians, to form a united cultural front which was called TUKA CULTURAL UNIT. The first joint DASHIKI/PELCULEF programme was a recording of poetry and music at the studios of Radio Botswana on 9 January 1978. This was followed by an art exhibition at the National Museum in Gaborone in February 1978. The group also held a series of music and poetry recitals. Political differences soon developed among its members and the group broke up. A brief history of the TUKA CULTURAL UNIT is given in 'The Last Word: An Exhortation', a report on cultural activities among South African exiles in Botswana published in the first issue of the PELCULEF Newsletter.

PELCULEF was transformed to MEDU Art Ensemble, after the collapse of TUKA, and in 1979, designated International Year of the Child by the United Nations, began with a play devised by Serote, Langa and other members, entitled Take a Look at the Child. The purpose of the play was



to highlight 'the conflicts, tribulations and plights that face a child of colour in a racially oppressive situation of which South Africa is the most glaring example'.<sup>16</sup> Although focussing on South Africa, the play's setting shifts from country to country to show what a universal problem child abuse has become. In an article from the first issue of the MEDU Newsletter in March 1979, Thelie Moema, who was involved in the project, elaborated on the idea behind Take a Look at the Child by quoting figures supplied by the UNICEF International Year of the Child Report in November/December 1978: 'It should haunt the whole community, then, that the world's army of working children under 15 years of age is 52 million .... Child labour is widespread in South East Asia (29 million), followed by Africa (11 million), East Asia (9 million), Latin America (3 million), and about one million in more developed market economy regions.'<sup>17</sup> Serote's poems written between 1976 and 1979 reflect his preoccupation with child abuse. The brutal treatment of school children during the June 1976 uprising had shocked him into a realization of the widespread and serious nature of the problem. In 1979 the Theatre Unit of MEDU staged Marumo (the title means 'spears'), a play 'which celebrates the centenary of the victory of Isandlwana [when the Zulu forces repelled the British invaders] and is based on the struggle of South Africans to liberate themselves from imperialist forces.'<sup>18</sup> The plays produced under the auspices of MEDU and his post-1976 poems show a change in Serote's political beliefs. He no longer believed that the freedom of Black people in South Africa could be brought about through peaceful dialogue between Blacks and Whites. He now fully subscribed to the view that Blacks would have to seize power from Whites through armed struggle. The event which brought about this change of direction in his political beliefs and in his writings was the uprising of 1976, in which the police and the army killed, wounded and arrested many Blacks engaged in peaceful demonstrations. Biko's death in detention on 17 September 1977, under conditions which suggested that he had been murdered by the police, also contributed to Serote's change of heart.

Serote has been gradually turning away from poetry to the theatre and to writing prose. 'I am now done with poetry,' he wrote in a letter of 3 August 1980. His first novel, To Every Birth its Blood, was published in 1981. It is set mainly in Alexandra and deals with the squalor, the violence, deprivation, loss of loved ones and other themes from his Alexandra poems. It also encompasses the course of the 1976 upheavals

in Alexandra, when the students there followed the lead of the students in Soweto. The novel is semi-autobiographical and is written with considerable poetic intensity. Serote has been trying to find a publisher for his collection of short stories.

#### AFRICAN VALUES, FORMS AND THEMES

In many of his poems Serote conveys traditional values and customs, and employs traditional oral modes of poetic expression. In these poems the traditional does not occur as an aspect of a largely bygone culture, standing in contradistinction to and now being largely superseded by Western culture. The cultural conflict that is depicted by writers from east and west Africa is absent from Black South African literature in English. The traditional in the work of Black writers from South Africa appears as a living tradition, which the African growing up in the city has taken in as completely as he has absorbed Western culture. We see the same cultural syncretism, to which Serote's poems testify, manifested in Black South African music and theatre, which have fused traditional African with western culture. Mphanlele describes how these traditional and Western elements blend in the culture of the townships, in the daily lives of the people: 'I have seen the survival, in the most urbanized ghettos of South Africa, of the toughest of traditional traits: the sense of community, the rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death, the theatre that surrounds life in general.'<sup>19</sup> Township culture, as portrayed in Mphanlele, Serote and other Black South African writers, is an amalgam of various cultural strains from Africa and the West, occasionally from the Orient too (as in Dollar Brand or Abdullah Ibrahim), in a way which defies any facile attempt to keep the various cultural components separate. Serote's poems also merge Western influences with traditional elements, a process which is the outcome of having been brought up within both traditions.

Some of his poems such as 'City Johannesburg', 'Alexandra', and 'Olaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity' are written in the form of traditional praise-poems or izibongo (maboko or lithoko). He is no mere protest or mere lyrical poet, and we misunderstand him if we read him as such. He is restoring the tradition of his land, so that the inadequacy in existing criticism lies in its neglect of African values and poetic techniques in Serote's work and in the work of his contemporaries.

Serote's themes are both personal and general in their application. 'The themes chosen by the new black poets are committed in the main to the individual struggle for physical and spiritual survival under oppression,' Gordimer writes.<sup>20</sup> However, the plight of the individual in their poetry, whether in Serote, Langa, Gwala or Mtshali, highlights the general predicament.

One of the major preoccupations in Serote, a striking attribute of his poems, is his treatment of women in society. He explores their role and examines their position in society more fully than any other South African poet. In Serote, we see for the first time in South African poetry how women are reduced to servility, to the status of the most wretched of the earth, as in *Okot p'Bitek*, despite the invaluable service they render to society.

Many other African writers show the crucial role played by women in sustaining life, ensuring social stability, and sometimes in effecting social change. Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Hamidou Kane, and Okot p'Bitek are the leading African writers whose work contradicts the stereotype of the docile women in African societies found in the work of Haggard, Cary, Ruark and other White writers on Africa. In *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, Rider Haggard portrays all Africans as savages, unless they are taken into the service of the White man and a close eye kept on them. His African women are either docile, helpless women or evil creatures, repellent witches like Gagool. In *Mister Johnson*, Joyce Cary does better but only fractionally. Johnson is a Black person who has been wrecked by the Whites and Rudbeck is a White man who has been brutalized by the system. While circumstances have transformed Johnson into a buffoon, his wife, Bamu, a woman supposedly living according to traditional social and moral codes, is little more than a moron who is helpless to extricate herself from the mess Johnson is making of their lives. She has no will of her own and stands in sharp contrast to Ngugi's women characters, Muthoni and Nyambura, in *The River Between*, who defy their parents when they discover that their parents are alienating them from African tradition. Robert Ruark invests his African characters, including women, with qualities of depravity, shown in their brutality to white children, women, and their pets during the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya. *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi corrects Ruark's distorted picture by showing how the atrocities perpetrated by the colonial settlers like Robson against the Africans exceed by far any

offence the Africans can be accused of and how the brutality of the colonial settlers elicits the most desperate reaction from the oppressed. Very few heroines emerge from the work of White writers on Africa. But neither can Blacks portray heroes who are White, and this is as true of Ngugi as it is of Cusmane. However, by contrast, the women in the work of many African writers have decisive roles. Cusmane in God's Bits of Wood and Ngugi in Petals of Blood show the decisive role played by women in the struggle by Africans for better living conditions; and Kane in Ambiguous Adventure, through the character of Samba Diallo's aunt, the royal lady, shows the important part women can play in effecting social change. These writers show that women have the greatest revolutionary potential in Africa. The women, who are oppressed as women in a male-dominated society and as members of a subject race, have little to lose and the most to gain from a new socio-political and economic order. These concepts can be usefully applied to the South African field, to an examination of the role Serote ascribes to African women in society.

In her article on 'The Roles of African Women: Past, Present and Future', Audrey Wipper raises the question of the 'forgotten factor' or the 'invisible women', whose political institutions were destroyed by the colonial regimes. She argues that British colonial officers, steeped in Victorian values about women's roles, failed to see these institutions so that, while they made some effort to understand and preserve the indigenous political system as far as it concerned the men and to incorporate it into native administration, they rode roughshod over the women's institutions. Southern African history has a tradition of women warriors and astute political leaders. MaNthatsi was an able woman who acted as regent for her son, Sekonyela, and her amazonian exploits became legendary. She led the Batlokwa during one of the most turbulent periods in African history when her people were fighting the wars of survival, called liqaqane (diraqane) or m'ecane wars, against the Zulu and other African ethnic groups between 1820 and 1840. In Emperor Shaka the Great, Kunene demonstrates how Mnkabayi (sometimes written Mnkabayi), Shaka's great aunt, who was held in awe and veneration by the Zulu, was the real power behind Shaka's throne. In Ushaba, Jordan Ngubane writes: 'It was to a woman, Mnkabayi ka Jama, that the Zulu nation turned in the turbulence of the early days of the revolution which Shaka led; Mnkabayi served, not only as regent; she became commander of our armed forces.'<sup>21</sup> In Lesotho's recent history, Queen

Mantsebo, as regent in place of King Moshoeshoe II, opened negotiations with the British government for Lesotho's independence. Between 1913 and 1963, as Edward Roux shows in Time Longer than Rope, the strikes against passes which were led by women such as Lillian Ngoyi yielded better results than many abortive campaigns spearheaded by men. That is the legacy of women's role in society Serote inherited and which he propagates. His poems preserve the tradition of militancy among African women. Their institutions and their role are shown as crucial in ensuring social stability and continuity.

In assessing Serote's depiction of women, Nadine Gordimer says: 'He can see the elements of an almost untainted black identity in the old people [who are predominantly female] and the children who are recurring lyrical motifs in his work.'<sup>22</sup> Whether it is the grandmother figure of 'This Old Woman' or the mother figure in 'Mother and Child' or the shebeen queen in 'The Beerhall Queen' or the woman-child in 'Maria', in all these poems the female figure personifies a central paradox in Serote's poetry - the paradox of the supposedly weak or the underdogs, who turn out to be the strongest members of society. This is an extension of the view Serote propagates in 'The Actual Dialogue', where he shows the moral superiority of the oppressed over their oppressors. Serote's poems demonstrate that women, though regarded as the weaker sex, are the stronger sex. He represents African women as downtrodden and degraded yet long-suffering and dignified.

Serote's poems from Yakhal' inkomo, Tsetlo, and Black Voices Shout are also concerned with what may eventually happen if the Whites maintain their intransigence. He struggles to control his rising rage and hatred, in the manner of Don Mattera. However, even as he is doing so, it seems as if deep in his heart Serote realizes that his patience and goodwill are not inexhaustible. In these poems, written before 1974, his gravitation towards militancy occasionally breaks through his carefully cultivated restraint and composure. These poems, particularly in Black Voices Shout, are closer in spirit to the more vigorous protest tradition of the Zulu and Xhosa poets as represented by S.E.n. Mqhayi, B.W. Vilakazi, and A.C. Jordan.

'Listen to Me' and 'Wnat's in this Black Shit' are Serote's most aggressive poems written before 1974. They resemble Garston Bart-Williams's 'Voices from the Basement' or Kgositse's 'For Afro-America' in that all three poets denounce White capitalist society and predict revolution,

led by the people of the ghettos. All three poets invoke the poetic licence traditionally reserved for the imbongi or griot. However, Serote's idiom is less derivative than either Bart-Williams's or Kgositile's, both of whom rely heavily on the statement-and-response format of the blues, the jazz beat, and Afro-American colloquialisms and expletives. These influences are marginal in Serote, barely marked even in his American poems written between 1975 and 1976. He has undoubtedly assimilated some of the traits of Afro-American poetry, its rhetoric and jazz beat, but has not been influenced by these to the same extent as Bart-Williams and Kgositile, or even James Matthews and Mafika Gwala.

The youthful zest and bellicose mood of 'Listen to Me' and 'What's in this Black Snit' epitomize the defiant spirit of Black Consciousness. Both poems and a few others written in similar vein illustrate how the restraint Serote and the Black youth of South Africa have been trying to cultivate all their lives breaks down as a result of their frustration and their gruesome treatment by Whites at pass offices and other institutions of oppression and exploitation. They show how apartheid has created an atmosphere of hostility and rebelliousness among the youth of Black Consciousness persuasion. The poems also point to the direction of confrontational politics in which Serote and the Black youth in South Africa were moving, a process which culminated in the student unrest of June 1976 and in Serote's decision to join forces with the liberation movement in exile, fighting to bring down the apartheid regime by force if necessary.

Serote's language is simple and unpretentious. The repetition of key phrases and grammatical construction in his poems, a common feature of izibongo, is used for emphasis and also as a vehicle for his passionate appeal to his readers. However, such repetition can be monotonous, especially in his long poems. His language is close to the everyday speech of Africans and enables him to reach a wide audience. His language seldom sinks to clichés, political catch-words or banal pronouncements. His poems are not a mere cerebral exercise but functional in purpose. He operates at different levels, which lends depth and intensity to his poems: he is the reformer, sufferer, and participant. Despite his identification with the plight of those he writes about, he handles his themes with detachment. His expressions are deadpan and, far from sacrificing the emotional intensity of his

poems, they effectively bring out the callousness and insensitivity of people who inflict pain and suffering on others. His analysis of the problems which beset the Black community is more comprehensive and penetrating than that of most of the poets who emerged in South Africa during the revival period. His poetry is more profound and intense, more reflective and consistent, than that of his contemporaries.

He made his debut in Volume 3 Number 2 of the Classic, published in 1969, with a short poem 'Cat and Bird', a political fable about a desperate cat and a pathetic bird, symbols of the oppressor and the oppressed respectively, which was subsequently published in his second collection, Tsetlo. His poems in Yakhal' inkomo (1972), his first published collection, were written between 1969 and 1971, and those in James Matthews's anthology, Black Voices Shout (1974), from 1972 to 1973. Most of the poems in Tsetlo (1974) belong to the period 1972-1973, but they also include previously uncollected poems written after 1969. No Baby Must Weep (1975) was his last and most ambitious work written before he left South Africa in 1974. It is an autobiographical poem, written in epic form and interspersed with township scenes and philosophical sections. After returning from America in 1976 and settling in Botswana, he published his fourth collection, Behold Mama, Flowers (1978), consisting of poems written in England and America in 1975 and in Botswana in 1976. His Selected Poems from his published collections and previously uncollected poems, including poems written in Botswana between 1977 and 1980, appeared in 1982. He was awarded the Ingrid Jonker prize for poetry in English in 1975.

His poems from his first two collections deal with the cultural renaissance. There are also others which deal with relations between Blacks and Whites. Another group consists of poems about places, such as the Alexandra poems and No Baby Must Weep. There are also poems about the Black youth in South Africa and about women. Others revolve around socio-political issues: death, violence, crime, and destitution. The poems in Behold Mama, Flowers contrast his African and American experiences. His poems written after 1976 deal with Soweto and its aftermath. His work reassesses his experiences and redefines his position in relation to the cultural, social, political, and economic situation in South Africa. The Soweto poems call for revolution. In an interview published in the Johannesburg Rand Daily Mail of 25 September 1972, he says: 'I hope I meditate and atone with my poetry.' He says his all-consuming passion is to be an honest and good writer, and adds:

'Everything about the life of where I come from is my subject. I come from an oppressed and toiling people, that is, I come from among fighters against oppression and for a happy life and peace. I hope that says something about my writing.'<sup>23</sup>

YAKHAL' INKOMO\*

'O'fay-Watcher Looks Back' (original title 'O'fay Mind Looks Back') was first published in Volume 3 Number 4 of the Classic in 1971 and provides a summary of what Serote hoped to achieve in his poems and a statement of his preoccupations. 'O'fay-Watcher', an Afro-American expression used by advocates of Black Power in the 1960s, describes someone who has set himself up as the watchdog of his community, a role Serote hoped to fulfil through his poetry. In South African terms, he is a tsotsi-figure, but one who has become more politicized than his fellow tsotsis.

'O'fay-Watcher Looks Back' is Serote's manifesto as a writer. He undertakes to examine Black experience in all its facets: 'I want to look at what happened' (p.47). Trying to understand the Black experience is for him like tracing his roots. In addition, it is an attempt to get to the root causes of the social maladies which afflict the Black community, as the recurrence of this botanical image in his poems indicates. He wants to dig in his roots so that his growth can be 'as silent as the roots of plants [that] pierce the soil', 'as silent as plants [that] show colour: green', 'as silent as the life of a plant that makes you see it', and 'as silent as plants bloom and the eye tells you something has happened' (p.47). These plant images, cleverly woven into and interspersed throughout the poem, depict the kind of healthy growth Serote envisages for the Black community. He wants Blacks to grow close to nature, nurtured by their own traditions, their own roots. He wants Blacks to analyse their predicament accurately so that they can grapple realistically with their problems. They must establish the facts first and not romanticize their lives or seek escapist solutions; they must be made fully aware of the gravity of the situation; they must realize that above their houses 'there is always either smoke or

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\* Yakhal' inkomo, Johannesburg: Renoster Books, 1971.  
All page references are given after quotations in the text.



dust/ as there are always flies above a dead dog' (p.47). They must wake up to the reality of their own situation. As the mirror of his society, he pledges to look these unpleasant and revolting truths 'straight in the face', to use an expression from Kgositsile.<sup>24</sup> The images of smoke clusters from coal stoves, dust from unpaved township streets, and rotting fly-ridden dogs are an unflattering description of township squalor. The senseless violence of the townships, 'where knives creep in and out of people/ As day and night into time', is a common feature of Serote's township poems (p.47). He also wants to examine why among Blacks jails have become 'necessary homes for people/ Like death comes out of disease' (p.47). He wants to diagnose all these social diseases: the cultural alienation, the squalor, and the high incidence of crime and death by violence in the townships. He hopes that his poems will create an awareness of these problems among Blacks so that they can stamp them out. He investigates his squalid environment, reassesses his sordid experiences, and redefines his position in relation to the economic and socio-political situation in South Africa.

'Ofay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase', first published in Yakhal' inkomo, is his longest poem in the collection and is more reflective than the rest of his poems from this period, most of which are characterized by lack of resolution and uncertainty in the handling of poetic techniques. It is a precursor of his epic poems and is written from an autobiographical perspective, showing phases in his life and crucial areas of his experiences. It is written in the manner of Dollar Brand's 'Africa, Music, and Show Business'. This introspective poem takes the form of a series of reflections but each phase is a complete entity, and all fourteen movements are held together by the poet-narrator's growing awareness and sense of differentiation.

The poem depicts man's soul as being in a constant state of tumult. The poet-narrator says that he has never known absolute peace in his life, only an occasional lull. 'The quietness is now and then struck', he says (p.48). His peace is frequently interrupted by the grave problems confronting every Black person in South Africa. He traces his unhappy state of mind to his childhood and further back to 'childhood corridors', an expression which suggests a prenatal stage where everything started to go wrong (p.48). His grey and miserable childhood was never alleviated even by bright expressions on the faces

of adults. He always found their expressions 'as black as unpainted walls' (p.48). He could find no protection or sustenance from them. Things started going wrong early in his life, he says: 'In the beginning things started to walk with one foot/ The other foot having been chopped off by time' (p.48). These lines describe his tragic start to life and the suffering that are the common lot of every Black person in South Africa. For the Black child in South Africa, 'the face of the sun is grim' (p.48). He links his origin and the gloomy environment in which he grew up to hell. 'I come from down there,' he says (p.48). In Phase IV, he continues his description of his under-privileged childhood. The children in the townships have no toys. They play with mud and sometimes with their own minds and bodies. 'Their minds are laboratories and their bodies apparatus,' he says (p.48). The extraordinarily high rate of premarital pregnancies such as he describes in 'Maria' are attributable, at least in part, to this phenomenon whereby the children experiment freely with sex. There is a breakdown of moral and social order in the Black community.

The analogy of hell in Phases IV and V is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's poems. Serote's hell is like a descent into the world of Owen's 'Strange Meeting' and other poems. In Serote's world, as in Owen's, people live side by side with death. At times, 'death just lies there, and you lick it like cats their kittens' (p.49). His despondency becomes so great that he often regrets why he was ever born. At such moments, he sees himself in the guise of a Christ-like figure who must forgive his parents 'because they know what they did' (p.49). The bitter irony and the inversion of Christ's saying throws into sharp relief the difference between people who thrive under apartheid and those such as Serote who are the victims of the evil machinations of others. For the downtrodden, there is neither hope for relief nor salvation through the cross; there is only more suffering, wilfully imposed by others, who know what they are doing. The lives of his brother and sister, as described in Phases VII and VIII respectively, are not better than his own. His brother is 'like a tree holding its leaves' (p.49). His sister is like a seed, that is, a seed-bed for children. These botanical images emphasize how their status as human beings has been reduced to that of plants.

In such an environment, it is easy to develop misanthropic views. In Phase X, Serote alleges that:

People are like flowers;  
Far, they attract you.  
Bring them into the house  
In a vase, flowers die. (p.50)

The thought of death reminds him of the excessive violence and frequent deaths in the townships. These indelible and harrowing experiences he reflects upon are described in Phases XI and XII. A child on its mother's back is killed by a stray bullet. Another child is knocked down by a car while playing in the streets, as there are no playgrounds in the townships. Phase XIII returns to the subject of 'The Actual Dialogue': He says that White people must learn to listen and Blacks to speak up. He complains that White people are burning the world and using Black people for fuel. He wants to foster Black awareness as a means of counteracting White Consciousness. 'Black people are Black people', who must never forget who they are, where they came from, and where they are heading to (p.51). In Phase XIV, which is the last phase, he coaxes himself out of his despondency. The morbidity and despair which characterize the preceding phases of the poem change suddenly. In spite of all the demoralizing experiences he has described, he finds time to celebrate life, when he says: 'Manchild throbs-phases/ Alleluya !' (p.51). Despite all the adversity, the pulse of the township continues to beat strongly. His conclusion is an assertion of his indomitable will in the face of all the life-denying aspects of his environment. The ending of the poem is his testimony to the irrepressible nature of man's hopes and aspirations and to his unyielding spirit in the face of oppression.

The poem is difficult to fathom at the beginning but yields its meaning more readily as one proceeds. The technique whereby Serote is obscure at the beginning illustrates his growth from childhood and the development of his consciousness. As his self-awareness and self-knowledge develop, his statements assume mathematical precision. Some of his statements are tautologous ('Black people are black people') and convey his discovery of the simple truths of life. From his underprivileged environment, he develops clearer perceptions about himself and his environment. Serote's poem illustrates one striking irony in apartheid. In trying to enforce segregation as a means of suppressing Black advancement, the system has created a climate which gave rise to the development of Black Consciousness. 'O'fay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase' ends on a note of jubilation as a result of the self-discovery and self-

knowledge attained by the poet-narrator, after his excruciating ordeals as a black person. The poem strikes the same note of jubilation and celebration at his rebirth as in 'Hell, Well, Heaven'.

'Hell, Well, Heaven' is Serote's definitive statement in the 'Who am I, Where did I come from, Where am I going?' idiom. It sets the tone to his Black Consciousness poems. It describes and celebrates the cultural renaissance of the 1960s. The poem uses the blues form, which consists of statement and refrain. Its predominant tone is assertive and triumphal. His rebirth is accompanied by pain, which resembles labour pains, and some uncertainty about the future. In the midst of the pain and uncertainty, Serote celebrates his rebirth. His emphasis in the refrain ('I do not know where I have been') brings out the paralysis which afflicted African politics and culture after Sharpeville (pp.16-17). It also reiterates Serote's point made at Austin, Texas, about how most of the new poets of the 1960s started writing from ignorance of what Black South African writers before them had written. The blues form is appropriate in expressing the sadness Blacks experienced after Sharpeville.

Despite economic and political barriers, represented in the poem by stone walls, and the people's fear of random victimization by the Security Police, and the despair which had begun to assail many Blacks after Sharpeville - despite all these obstacles, Serote envisages the Black people's cultural reawakening and progression as being irrepressible, 'like a tide of water', 'a storm over the veld', or 'the lightning-thunder over the mountains' (pp.16-17). Like the weather, the struggle of the Black people for their emancipation cannot be arrested, nor the final outcome of the struggle. Kgosisile conveys the same sentiments when he says: 'We emerge to prove Truth cannot be enslaved/ In chains or imprisoned in an island inferno.'<sup>25</sup> Kgosisile's 'island inferno' is Robben Island, where the political prisoners arrested after 1960 were sent. Through subtler means, Serote shows that the human spirit cannot be arrested. The weather images in Serote evoke various emotions. These images of nature show that the oppression of Blacks is not only cruel but constitutes a denial of their natural state. The violence inherent in his symbols of thunder and lightning suggests impending disaster, if Whites persist in frustrating Black initiative and aspirations.

'Hell, Well, Heaven' pays homage to the cultural pace-setters of

the 1960s: the musicians, Mankunku Ngozi and Sophie Thoko Mgcina. In his introduction to Yakhal' inkomo, Serote writes: 'Yakhal' inkomo - the cry of cattle at the slaughter house .... I once saw Mankunku Ngozi blowing his saxophone. Yakhal' inkomo. His face was inflated like a balloon, it was wet with sweat, his eyes huge and red. He grew tall, shrank, coiled into himself, uncoiled and the cry came out of his horn. That is the meaning of Yakhal' inkomo' (p.iii). Mankunku Ngozi's emergence marked the resurgence of self-expression, which had been suppressed since Sharpeville. In the same vein, 'Hell, Well, Heaven' mentions the progress in sculpture, during the same period, which owed its impetus to Dumile Feni, whose work Serote again celebrates in 'Mama and Child' in Tsetlo. In his introduction to Yaknal' inkomo, Serote adds:

Dumile, the sculptor, told me that once in the country he saw a cow being killed. In the kraal cattle were looking on. They were crying for their like, dying at the hands of human beings. Yakhal' inkomo. Dumile held the left side of his chest and said that is where the cry of the cattle hit him ... Yakhal' inkomo. The cattle raged and fought, they became a terror to themselves; the twisted poles of the kraal rattled and shook. The cattle saw blood flow into the ground (p.iii).

Like the sound of the cattle, Serote's poems express his solidarity with his people in their struggle against oppression. His self-affirmation in his poems of the cultural renaissance reveals his new-found self-confidence. He learns that repression cannot stifle his culture, which he variously compares to a sea-tide, a storm, thunder and lightning. His poems of the cultural renaissance define his position and his identity during the era of the Black people's cultural renaissance in the 1960s. They portray the resilience of a culture which has survived conquest and apartheid by continually building a new base in the oppressive setting of South Africa.

Serote occasionally looks over the shoulder at those readers in the dominant culture the writers of the protest tradition used to address. But unlike the writers of the purely protest tradition before him, his poems which are addressed to Whites are not so much an appeal to them for sympathy as an assurance he wished to give them from a position of cultural equality. The bulk of his poems about whites are also written for the Black community, to expose the evil machinations of Whites.

'The Actual Dialogue', which introduces Yaknal' inkomo, is a short

poem addressed to the White community. It was written against the background of South Africa's policy of dialogue with independent African states and the world community. In it he suggests that it is wrong for South Africa to try and silence world criticism against apartheid by buying off neighbouring African states with poor economies. Dialogue with independent African states will not solve the problem between Blacks and Whites living in South Africa.

The conversational tone in 'The Actual Dialogue' is intended to allay White fears. His friendly tone is not intended to create a false sense of security among Whites in South Africa nor is it a noax such as Whites use to deceive the world that South Africa is moving away from segregation. He summons all his diplomatic skill to try and make Whites act in a reasonable manner to solve the problem of race relations in South Africa. He uses repetition to reassure Whites that his intentions are sincere and honourable. The kind of repetition he uses is characteristic of the language employed by people pleading with their superiors. When the drummer boy in The Trials of Brother Jero by Wole Soyinka pleads with an angry woman who has impounded his drums with which he has been taunting her, he expresses his plea to her to return his drums in repetitive terms: 'I beg you give me my drums. I take God's name beg you, I was not abusing your father ... For God's sake I beg you ... I was not abusing your father. I was only drumming ... I swear to God I was only drumming.'<sup>26</sup> But the drummer boy has no real respect for the woman, as his previous insulting behaviour towards her shows. The attitude of Serote's persona in 'The Actual Dialogue' towards his 'Baas' is similar. His plea to the 'Baas', whom he has no real respect for, gains its effect through heady flattery. He uses deferential language which hides his true feelings. 'Baas' is not used in any fawning sense but it is used as a means of making sure that he does not frighten the Whites from negotiating with Blacks into believing that Blacks mean to wreak vengeance upon White society. However, Serote's real intention and technique are geared towards undermining the system on its own terms. He uses faulty English, sometimes called Fanakalo (like 'It's awright Baas', p.1), to avoid raising White suspicions that he is a cheeky, educated native. He wants to bridge the communication gap between Blacks and Whites in South Africa. He envisages a future protective role for Blacks. He projects a future in which he cares for Whites. He is careful not to allow his good English to spoil his attempts

to reach Whites. At the same time, he is determined to teach the Whites that in the long run Blacks have the upper hand in South Africa. Since the Whites are unwilling to meet Blacks on equal terms, Blacks are prepared to overlook their insulting behaviour in the interests of a peaceful solution to South Africa's race problems. In time Whites may learn that the actual dialogue has to be a matter of give-and-take. Blacks are prepared to make the first gesture of goodwill, not out of weakness but from a position of strength. The Black is the soul of the White person. However, Serote is worried that the White people's refusal to accept the proffered olive branch and all their other provocative actions may ultimately lead Blacks to take drastic action. The apartheid regime has suppressed Black political organizations operating openly so successfully that they have been driven underground. Under such repressive conditions, Blacks are increasingly led to feel that the only option left for them is war, which Serote at this stage still hoped could be avoided.

In 'The Actual Dialogue', Serote sees fear as determining White relations with and their attitude towards Blacks: the fear of losing their privileges to Blacks, the fear of Black vengeance, and the fear of miscegenation. He sees fear as a serious obstacle to real and meaningful dialogue between Blacks and Whites. The problem is how to purge White society of its fear. His formula for escaping out of the impasse is to show magnanimity as a means of coaxing Whites to negotiate with Blacks, who, although appearing in the guise of underdogs, have the upper hand. This idea is expressed metaphorically by identifying Blacks with the night. Like the night, Blacks represent mystery. They can cause Whites endless nightmares. But Whites can only experience the nightmares if they persistently look at things with eyes blinded by fear. The night is simply another facet of nature, which is harmless in itself. Serote appeals to Whites to stop working themselves up when there is no cause for alarm. 'We will always meet' implies that the White and Black people's destiny in South African cannot be separated, as Richard Rive's 'Where the Rainbow Ends' also shows (p.1). Serote's attitude is more conciliatory than Rive's. 'Blame your heart/ When you fear me' infers that the White man has been unaccommodative and nursed a grudge in his heart against Blacks (p.1). Black and White people complement one another. To this end, Serote notes that there are deficiencies among Blacks in the technological and other spheres. Blacks and Whites could both learn each from the other. Whites could

impart their technological knowledge to Blacks in return for the Black people's goodwill, which is all they have to offer given the fact that Whites have deliberately kept them backward. Above all, Whites could share their political power with Blacks in a more meaningful manner than through dummy institutions such as Bantustans. 'I will blame my mind/ When I fear you' implies, like Phase XIII of 'Clay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase', that the Black man is also to blame for not speaking out and standing up for his rights (p.1).

The notion that the Black people's hearts are as 'vast as the sea' derives from Negritude (p.1). Serote picked up the notion from Biko, who had seized on the idea from his reading of Césaire. In the manner of Negritude poetry, Serote suggests that Blacks could pick up technology from whites and in turn restore to the white community the humanistic qualities their materialistic civilization lacks. However, this claim to a monopoly of warmth, goodness and virtue is not to prove that Blacks are superior to Whites but to show that the only way Blacks and Whites can live harmoniously together and thrive is in partnership, in the spirit of the ANC's Freedom Charter.<sup>36</sup> They may be as different from each other as the sea is from the earth, but they are inextricably linked. No amount of mystification by the government about Blacks having to carve themselves a separate destiny from their white compatriots can refute that fact. Serote teaches that Blacks and Whites in South Africa are destined to sink or swim together. In such a case, the real dialogue cannot be between the Whites in South Africa and the leaders of the neighbouring African states. The actual dialogue should be taking place between Blacks and Whites within the country.

'They Do It' deals with Whites from a Black Consciousness perspective. Unlike 'The Actual Dialogue', it is not addressed primarily to Whites. It is a rejection of white liberal patronage. It examines the life-style and political attitudes, what may be described as tea-party politics, of white liberals which have led to their rejection by radical Blacks. It is a scathing attack on the hypocrisy and offensive condescension of white liberals towards their Black associates.

The opening lines of the poem describe the affluence of white South Africans, who have 'everything. Earthly' (p.14). Their ways, which are said to be 'woven wide,/ Only small 'cause they're the same', describe their freedom, opportunity, wealth and privilege (p.14). The emphasis on 'earthly' to qualify their affluence and the paradox



suggested by the contrast between 'wide' and 'small' bring out the limitations in their lives. Such wealth and affluence as they possess become a social trap. There are limited ways for them to enjoy what they have and share it with other people. As a result, they hold the same round of parties every day and participate in the kind of study groups which betray their trifling approach to human relationships. 'There's a party,' Serote writes. 'There's a study group/ Or some such thing' (p.14). His low opinion of such parties and discussion groups comes out in the phrase, 'Or some such thing.' He is not impressed with their hospitality either. They offer you tea with cheese cake, coffee or milo, 'or whatever you want' (p.14). He is not interested in what they have to offer. They become so importunate in their profession of hospitality that they create resentment among their guests and leave them suffering from social indigestion. The affair has become a ritual to them, a development implied in the lines: 'What is important is/ They meet' (p.14). The monotony in this type of existence is conveyed through the repetition of phrases like 'the same people' and words like 'monotony' (p.14). The tokenism and the hypocrisy which they indulge in in their relationship with Blacks galls Serote very much. To Serote, the most grievous aspect is that at these gatherings they occasionally invite a few token Blacks as curiosities for their little, private amusement. The contrived situations fail to bring about meaningful social interaction and the parties sour on all the people concerned, rather like the excursion to the Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India. Serote compares the forced smiles of his White hosts on such occasions to shedding 'crocodile tears' (p.14). They display more insincerity still when they pretend to lament Black oppression. Their actions are always calculated to produce an advantageous response. 'They Do it' is a rejection of the patronage, condescension and hypocrisy inherent in the attitudes of White liberals towards their Black acquaintances.

'Hippie or Happy' looks at the hippie-cult of the 1960s which flourished in Johannesburg's White suburbs such as Hillbrow. In the poem, the white hippie 'whose hair like rain falls from ... heaven' is a symbol of rebel courage, independence of thought and action, and non-conformity (p.2). The hippies, who can mingle freely with Blacks, present a more acceptable face of interracial co-operation and peaceful coexistence than the self-seeking liberals. In place of the cold

calculating attitude, the patronage, opportunism and hypocrisy of liberals, the hippies are warm, spontaneous, honest and sincere in their dealings with others, and independent. They are free of the herd instinct that hinders most Whites from cultivating healthy personal relationships with Blacks. Their unkempt hair points to their rebelliousness; they smoke pot and loiter about; though educationally highly qualified to take up well-paying jobs, they are contemptuous of modern man's materialism. The hippies, 'whose arms are guns', hold a better hope for revolutionary change in South Africa than the liberal establishment (p.2). 'Hippie or Happy', like 'The Actual Dialogue', conveys Serote's quest for ways of cultivating better understanding among people of all races in South Africa. The poem also reveals Serote's ambivalent relationship with Whites at this stage in his career, before Black Consciousness took a firm hold on him.

Serote's poems about places constitute another set of poems in Yakhal' inkomo. Two examples of such poems are 'City Johannesburg' and 'Alexandra'. In his novel, To Every Birth its Blood, he describes Alexandra in relation to Johannesburg in the following terms:

Alexandra is one of the oldest townships in South Africa. It is closely related to Johannesburg. From the centre of the Golden City to the centre of the Dark City is a mere nine miles. Where one starts the other ends, and where one ends, the other begins. The difference between the two is like day and night. Everything that says anything about the progress of man, the distance which man has made in terms of technology, efficiency and comfort: the Golden City says it well; The Dark City, by contrast, is dirty and deathly. The Golden City belongs to the white people of South Africa and the Dark City to the Black people. The Saturdays and Sundays of Alexandra roar, groan and rumble, like a troubled stomach. The same days in Johannesburg are as silent as the stomach of a dead person.<sup>27</sup>

'City Johannesburg', which first appeared in Contrast (No. 27) in 1970, is written in the form of a traditional praise-poem, although the idiom is not sustained throughout as in 'Cfaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity'. The most significant characteristics of izibongo to note in 'City Johannesburg' are the salutation with which the poem opens and the poetic licence invoked to criticize the establishment. The opening line echoes the salutation in a praise-poem addressed to a respected personage: 'This way I salute you' (p.4). When a chief makes a public appearance, it is customary for the people to shout their greetings in this manner. They address him by his various praise-names the way

Serote repeats: 'Johannesburg ... Jo'burg City'. 'Jo'burg City' is employed in the poem as a term of endearment or patronymic, which is employed in izibongo in place of one's real name to show respect and affection. The personification of places or objects such as Serote employs in the poem is common in izibongo. After the opening salutation, Serote complains in a roundabout way, employing the kind of circumlocution that is used to state one's case before the chief. He makes an equation between his blood pulse, his life, and his pass:

My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket  
Or into my inner jacket pocket  
For my pass, my life. (p.4)

Through alliteration, 'pulse' is associated with 'pass' and the latter is in turn equated to 'life'. To the Black person in South Africa, a pass confers the right to live, as Motjuwadi demonstrates in his poem, 'Taken for a Ride', in which he refers to his pass as his everything. Serote deplores the pass system, which is the bane of every African in South Africa.

'City Johannesburg' reveals a striking irony of life in South Africa. Despite the fact that Johannesburg is the wealthiest city in Africa, Black people in Johannesburg starve. Figures published by the Markinov African Syndicate for the first quarter of 1976 show that 43% of families in Soweto were living below the Poverty Datum Line.<sup>28</sup> In Serote's poem, the victim's stomach groans with hunger. Besides emanating from a hungry stomach, the victim's groans express the Black people's deep seated resentment of the system. The collocation of 'groans', 'roar' and other related terms conveys the Black people's mounting anger. 'Like a starved snake', the hand of the persona in the poem reaches out for his pocket to protect his money, which is too little to satisfy his needs (p.4). The image of the starving snake depicts desperation and the imminent violence to which the victim is likely to resort in order to satisfy his basic needs. This violence manifests itself in the high incidence of muggings, armed robberies, and other crimes of violence in Johannesburg.<sup>29</sup> Serote suggests that violence by Blacks against their own kind may ultimately cease and be transformed into armed insurrection against the state. In this regard, Serote's message in the poem resembles Alan Paton's in Cry, the Beloved Country. In Paton's novel, Absalom Kumalo and his two accomplices, driven by destitution, break into Arthur Jarvis's house, where Absalom inadvertently kills Arthur Jarvis. Paton warns the Whites in South Africa through the words

of the African priest, Msimangu, that the patience of Black people is running out. 'I have one great fear in my heart,' Msimangu says, 'that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating.'<sup>30</sup> That is also the message of Serote's early poems to the White community.

In Serote's early poems, the option of violence against the state is always lurking in the background and assumes importance in his later poems. As in 'The Actual Dialogue', his tone in 'City Johannesburg' is still solicitous and conciliatory. 'My stomach also devours coppers and papers/ Don't you know?' he says in appealing for a fair share of the city's wealth (p.4). In addition, the poem describes the sacrifices demanded of the victim by the city he serves, while his own environment in the segregated townships remains insalubrious, neglected and deprived. The dongas and ravines, caused by soil erosion, bear witness to the state of neglect of the areas in which Blacks live, in their 'comic' matchbox houses (p.4). Each house is a semi-detached concrete box just one storey high, and the state of the roads and the lack of environmental maintenance testify to the government's neglect. The 'ever-whirling dust' causes chest diseases among township dwellers (p.4). Serote's description of the victim's house as his death is an allusion to these unsanitary conditions and to the widespread violence. In the line: 'I travel on your black and white and roboted roads', Serote draws a parallel between the city's white-lined tarmac roads, its traffic lights, and the people. 'Black and white' describes the population, which is likened to the city's traffic lights, and the roads. The comparison brings out the strict regimentation of life under apartheid and implies that both Blacks and Whites in Johannesburg are capable of being callous and insensitive to the suffering of others. Johannesburg is also compared to iron, to underline the point made about the insensitivity of its people. The 'thick iron breath' which the city innales in the morning and exhales in the evening is a metaphor which describes the trains, buses and taxis which transport thousands of Black workers daily from the townships to the city and back (p.4). In 'The Dube Train', Can Themba depicts the deathly atmosphere in the overcrowded trains used by Blacks to travel to the city. These commuters are the Black workers who sustain the city's Whites, like breath sustains life. They are the exploited members of society. The signs of wealth and affluence from which these Blacks are excluded are represented by the city's neon lights. The

Lights are beautiful and attractive and naturally invite admiration. The love-hate relationship which the deprived victim of the poem develops towards his environment, a relationship which is described as his love that is at the same time his death, becomes a key concept in the Alexandra poems. Despite the detestable aspects of life in Johannesburg, the victim in the poem sees himself as a person who is rooted to the soil and whose feeble roots sustain Johannesburg:

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness,  
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,  
And everything about you says it,  
That that is all you need of me. (p.4)

The blood ties he feels towards Johannesburg are suggested by the physiological imagery of the poem. The contrast between 'your might' and 'my feebleness' defines the exploitative relationship between the city's Whites and the township's Blacks. In this sense, Johannesburg is similar to a heartless man who mercilessly and unscrupulously exploits a woman who is passionately in love with him, and leaves her heartbroken. The concept of soil erosion, which is brought in at the end of the poem, applies to the erosion of the souls of Black people, not just in Johannesburg but in the country as a whole.

In 'Alexandra' attention shifts from the city to the Black township which dominates Serote's writings. The poem describes Serote's mixed feelings about Alexandra. The township, like the city in 'City Johannesburg', is personified and presented in the guise of an unloving, uncaring mother. The mother image refers to his origin. Although Serote is dissatisfied with life in Alexandra and wishes he could escape to another place, he still feels tied to Alexandra by a strong filial bond. 'We have only one mother, none can replace,' he says (p.22). The mother-child bond also conveys his sense of civic consciousness. The love-hate relationship which characterizes his attitude towards Johannesburg is manifested more clearly in 'Alexandra'. Fate has linked him to Alexandra, like a child who has no say over whether he wants to be born or not or over who he wants his parents to be: 'Just as we have no choice to be born,/ We can't choose mothers' (p.22). There is more than this kind of fatalistic resignation in the poem. It also shows his commitment to his society, to purging and uplifting his community, to transforming it. 'Alexandra' is Serote's way of identifying himself with the problems of the township. 'Do you love me Alexandra, or what are you doing to me?' is a passionate appeal for reform and for Alexandra to treat him in a better way. His

disgruntlement arises from the life-denying aspects of a Black person's existence in the township, such as its abject poverty, violence, cruelty, crime, alcoholism, insecurity, and sense of vacuity. Life in the townships offers limited opportunities for self-fulfilment. From her sociological study of the quality of life in one of Johannesburg's Black townships, Marianne Brindley observes that in the township it is difficult for one to live down one's frustrations or to 'achieve a measure of human fulfilment', because the township is a 'deprived environment featuring bad housing, sporadic violence and ubiquitous poverty'.<sup>31</sup> Serote acknowledges all these problems but exhorts his people to strive to transcend them. In focussing on the negative aspects of slum life, he wants to draw attention to these various problems so that Blacks may address themselves to them.

Serote traces his roots to Alexandra: 'And Alexandra,/ My beginning was knotted to you' (p.22). His umbilical cord is buried in Alexandra. Even though his actual birthplace was Sopniatown, his identification with Alexandra is complete: 'You throb in my inside silences/ You are silent in my heart-beat that's loud to me' (p.22). Serote and Alexandra are one.

The dust, a recurring motif in Serote's poems, represents everything that contaminates Black lives in the townships. Yet because Alexandra is his mother, he continues to appeal to her whenever he is thirsty. The notion of a mother who is unable to satisfy the needs of her offspring expresses the pathos of parenthood among the majority of South Africa's Blacks. Serote does not mention the economic factors responsible directly but, as in Mtshali's poems, they are implied in a manner which makes their discovery by the reader feel as if he is uncovering a festering sore. Dust and dongas, frequently mentioned in Serote's poems, conjure pictures of a wasteland. The excessive violence, on which the children are nourished from a tender age, seems to ooze from the very breasts of mothers. The sadism of the people who have been brutalized by the system is conveyed through the reiteration of 'cruel', 'frighten', 'nasty' and other related words. As in 'Ofay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase', hell conveys the torment which the poet feels. He views all the uncongenial aspects of life in Alexandra as drawbacks to progress. 'I feel I have sunk to such meekness,' he complains, 'I lie flat while others walk on me to far places' (p.22). The lines refer to the fact that Black anger and violence are directed against other Blacks, as some of Mtshali's poems and Biko's writings show. Such misdirection

of anger and violence renders Blacks unable to counteract their oppression and deprivation effectively. While the majority of Blacks 'lie flat', unable to rouse themselves to action, the Whites and those Blacks who prey on their own kind 'walk all over them'. They leave their victims in a pathetic state, cringing for favours. The use of colloquialisms identifies the situations described in the poem as commonplace in the townships. The ultimate irony brought out in the poem is that Alexandra, which gave life to Serote, threatens to take away the same life from him. In spite of these setbacks, the malevolence and the squalor, Serote feels drawn to what are, after all, his roots:

When all the worlds became funny to me,  
I silently waded back to you  
And amid the rubble I lay,  
Simple and black. (p.23)

From his symbolic use of the female figure in such poems as 'Alexandra', Serote proceeds to pay direct tribute to Black womanness. 'This Old Woman' is a typical poem which conveys his attitude towards women. Other similar poems about Black women in Yaknal' inkomo are 'Beerhall Queen', 'Mother and Child', and 'The Three Mothers'.

'This Old woman' shows an old African woman's resilience and forbearance. The language of the poem is close to the actual language spoken by African grandparents. It echoes certain expressions from the indigenous languages such as 'Ngoan'a ngoanaka' (child of my child, that is, grandchild) and 'Bana ba kajeno' (children nowadays). The old woman is bent double with toil and age, yet she still stalks the streets like an old huntress. Her old and worn out jersey indicates her poverty. The use to which her old jersey is put shows the services a grandmother renders in traditional African communities in bringing up her grandchildren. When everybody has gone to work, she remains at home to look after the young ones. Serote's poem shows that, with the erosion of customs in the cities, the grandmother's services are abused, as when the children are left in her charge while the parents enjoy themselves elsewhere. Nowadays the grandmother is charged with the additional responsibility of looking after the 'children of boys and girls', who are the product of the high rate of premarital pregnancies in the townships (p.3). Despite such abuse of her services, she remains steadfast to tradition. Her patience and endurance in coping with her numerous charges elicit

the poet's sympathy and admiration. He describes her admirable qualities as a kind of beauty that has become foreign to him, brought up, as he has been, outside the ethical codes of traditional society, with its strong emphasis on the communal way of life. The old woman represents an alien way of life to him which he compares to 'untouched natural scenery' observed from a passing car (p.3). Serote romanticizes tradition when he compares it to uncontaminated nature. However, the point of the poem is that he feels as removed from this virgin scenery as the car driver in the poem. The car symbolizes those elements of Western technological civilization which estrange man from nature. The poet-narrator has become so estranged from the way of life represented by the old woman that when she talks to him he feels 'the bitter winter cold', that is, she can no longer communicate or impart to him the warmth of the old ways (p.3). For him, the past has become absolutely frozen.

The closing lines of this poem, through the analogy of drivers of different cars at a traffic light, arrested side by side by the red traffic light, strangers to one another and lacking the means or aptitude to communicate with each other, depict the alienation of modern people from their traditional values and from their fellow human beings. The link between urbanized Africans and their traditional roots, the contact between the poet and the old woman, has become tenuous. Yet for as long as the old lady lives she continues to embody the traditional past, which is like her old jersey in that it defies time and refuses to succumb to the onslaught of the new ways. She remains a visible link with tradition. Serote strains hard to embrace the past, to re-establish links with tradition. A great deal of the new poetry after 1967 attempted to do the same, particularly the poetry of Njabulo Ndebele and such other poems as Gwala's 'The Children of Nonti'. Serote extols tradition, in the manner of Black Consciousness. His poem is an expression of his rediscovery and an assertion of his traditional heritage. This process is part of the cultural regeneration which set in after Sharpeville. His poem is like a spiritual pilgrimage to a land that is fast disappearing. It is an attempt to retrieve the fading African past.

'The Three Mothers' projects an image of the stoic suffering of African women. The paradoxical contrast in the poem between 'uncurling' and 'tangles', to describe the manner in which Black South African



children grow up, depicts the accumulation of problems as one grows up. To the mothers, the growth of their sons spells increased suffering. Their children are soon grabbed away from them, by the police or through premature death at the hands of the tsotsis or township thugs, 'like the cross did Jesus from Maria' (p.20). The South African situation deprives mothers of the joy of seeing their children growing up unmolested into manhood. The face of Elizabeth, the first mother mentioned in the poem, is clouded with sadness and misery. Her unhappiness is caused by the fact that, while she entertains hopes of a successful future for her children, she knows in her heart that such hopes may never be realized. The next mother, Hilda, urges her children to strive on and discourages them from wallowing in self-pity, despite her intuition which tells her that there are no bright prospects for her children in South Africa. Serote's women represent the positive principle in life. In Hilda, we see the role of the mother as a constant source of encouragement to her offspring. Although Alina, the third mother in the poem, remains silent and inactive, her silence and inaction convey her depression mingled with her concern for her children's future. All three parents demonstrate the agony of parenthood, which is described as the 'love [which] can wound' (p.20).

'Beerhall Queen' depicts the shebeen queen's persistent struggle. Her appearance - an empty tin firmly tucked under her armpit, her confident gait and the look of preoccupation in her eyes - conveys her grit and firm resolve. On her way from the beerhall, the tin of 'bubbling ... bitter beer' on her head, her steps are even more regal. The alliteration conjures up a picture of the rich, appetizing froth from the beer. She now has it in her power to dispense warmth and happiness to the people who come to drink at her house, 'away from this troublous world' (p.25). Serote's depiction of shebeens as places of warmth and happiness contradicts the official image of shebeens as dens of iniquity, which were deemed illegal until 1980, when the Minister of Co-operation and Development relented and legalized them, after persistent pressure from Black people.

'The Auntie Otherside' is a short poem which presents another stoic female figure, who takes all her problems in her stride. 'Fertile like the mushroom' describes her growing number of children, now going for nine (p.32). 'The piece of earth close to the wall/ At the backyard' receives urine whenever the backyard toilet is occupied, and there also men often take their women, as in Mphanlele's short story, 'In Corner B'

(p.32). The aunt is a fertile field for men's carelessly sown seeds, a mere receptacle for their excess sperms. Serote's imagery, which conjures unpleasant backyard township smells of excrement, conveys his disapproval of the sexual exploitation of women. He sympathizes with the aunt from next door and admires her capacity for endurance, and her ability to provide oranges for her family. In 'Mother and Child' we see yet another image of the agony and the ecstasy of motherhood (p.28). In all the poems, the emphasis is on the inimitable qualities of women and their central role in sustaining society.

Serote continues his role as a watchdog of the Black community in his poems about youth. 'My Brothers in the Streets' and 'Burning Cigarette' are examples of his poems written about youth.

'My Brothers in the Streets' is a passionate appeal for an end to the senseless violence and fratricide which plague Blacks in the townships. The tsotsis, who are identified by their 'heart-tearing footsteps', approach their victims stealthily like 'thin shadows' (p.19). The expressions used indicate the inhumanity of the tsotsis. Serote also likens their approach to a sudden cold chill, to reveal their callousness and the terror they spread. Their characters are unpredictable and intemperate. Their identification with the fearsome night brings out their treachery. 'Heart-tearing' describes both the process of murdering another as well as the misery and suffering which result. Township youths are delinquents who 'holiday in jails' and 'rest in hospitals' (p.19). In 'The Detribalised', Mtshali expresses the same concepts. But whereas Mtshali is inclined to treat the matter lightly and to shrug it off as a hopeless situation, the gravity with which Serote deals with the problem shows that he does not consider it to be a joking matter. It is in the very nature of the tragic predicament that confronts Blacks, trapped as they are in a vicious system which unleashes the blind fury of young Blacks against their own kind; it is a measure of the frustrating and brutalizing effects of the system. Serote does not think that the matter can be overlooked and dismissed as simply another manifestation of the moral depravity of Blacks. He urges the Black community to try and counteract all the factors which give rise to their unfortunate situation. In the language of Black Consciousness, Black youth must be 'conscientized' to a full realization of their tragic predicament and an acceptance of their responsibilities, a task which

Serote's poem is designed to achieve.

In the manner of Biko's writings, Serote notes with grave concern how the same youth, who react with a sense of outrage that can be fatal to their victims whenever they imagine that they have been offended by their fellow Blacks, cringe and whine piteously before the Whites. They never respond with the same sense of outrage to insults to their dignity and humanity from their oppressors. Instead, they 'smile at insults' and 'fear the Whites' (p.19). They behave like 'horde-waters that sweep over black pastures' (p.19). They deprive other Blacks of all those things which sustain life. They are brave youth, indeed, who calmly duck bullets fired at them when they are engaged in crime. Serote's sarcasm shows that their bravery is misplaced. They can 'grab bread from black mothers' but they cannot demand their rights from Whites, to whom they go begging for charity (p.19). Serote scorns such charity and teaches the need for self-reliance. So that Blacks can utilize all their energy and resources in the struggle against oppression, he discourages them from holding life so cheaply that they 'spill blood as easy as saying "voetsek"' (p.19). 'Voetsek' is a common South African insult and its use in the poem indicates the degree to which Serote's subjects have been vulgarized. The suffering caused by these young Blacks affects Black women most, so that his final message in the poem reads: 'Listen,/ It's black women who are crying' (p.19). He repeats this message in 'Motivated to Death', 'What's Wrong with People', and other related poems.

'Burning Cigarette' reads like an extended metaphor. Cigarettes are for use only and, once lit, their end is predetermined, in the same way in which the fate of the little Black boy in the poem is fixed. In Serote, fate emphasizes the strict regimentation of the lives of Blacks and their short life expectancy due to environmental, political and other factors. The fire that reduces the cigarette to ashes, the fire that consumes Black youth, is apartheid and its derivative evils. The hopes and aspirations of Black children stand little chance of being realized. The boy in the poem is caught in a hopeless situation and rendered impotent, as we can judge from the manner in which he merely 'looks at his smoke hopes' (p.12). Apartheid creates a tragic sense of discrepancy between expectation and fulfilment; the system emasculates, leaving the boy 'docile', 'harmless', and 'smothered' (p.12). The poem is a simple analysis of the manner in which apartheid

operates against Black youth, the way in which the system burns them up. As in 'My Brothers in the Streets', Serote's intention is to make Black youth aware of all the forces that are at work against them, in order to enable them to counteract such iniquitous forces more effectively.

Closely related to Serote's poems about the Black youth are his poems about death. Death is a recurring subject in Serote even more than in Mtshali. There are two major factors responsible for the high death rate in the townships: the South African government's brutalizing policies and, flowing from the first, the knife-happy township thugs. Serote's acceptance as a Black person of some of the blame for the high incidence of death in the townships is a consequence of the spirit of constructive self-criticism and self-examination introduced by Black Consciousness. In 'Fear - An Important Determinant in South African Politics', Biko sounds the keynote against which Serote looks at the situation. Biko argues that it is almost a miracle for a Black person in the townships to live through to adulthood.<sup>32</sup> Destitution and deprivation drive Blacks to kill one another.

In 'What's Wrong with People', the persona in the poem is an eye-witness to someone's death in the streets. The poem is short, like the life expectancy of Blacks. The staccato movement, due to the monosyllabic words employed, conveys tension and the staggering motion of the dying man: 'I saw a man/ Come. Walk. Limp' (p.9). The poem contrasts 'man' with 'branch' to bring out the heartlessness of those who kill another human being 'like a branch being sawn' (p.9). They kill indiscriminately like a wild wind which does not care in which direction it is blowing. The dying man's mute appeal, which goes unheeded, is reflected in his flickering eyes. The final shame in this episode is reserved for the spectators, the persona in the poem among them, who make no attempt to come to the rescue of the dying man. There are compelling reasons for the people's inaction. They are motivated not so much by indifference to the plight of others as by the fear of being victimized by the hooligans responsible for the murder. However, what is equally true is that the people lack the group sentiment which might have enabled them to tackle the problem jointly. They lack solidarity. For Serote and advocates of Black Consciousness, part of the solution to the problem in situations of this nature lies collectively

with the Black people. Otherwise, for all their protestations to the contrary, their apathy must be construed as connivance in their own oppression. They cannot be exonerated from at least a share of the blame.

'Motivated to Death', on the other hand, apports the greater part of the blame for the Black man's condition upon apartheid. The poet-narrator says of his dead brother: 'The RSA [Republic of South Africa] condemned him/ not Alex - where he died, where his killers exist' (p.40). Degeneracy among those Blacks immediately or directly responsible for the man's death is conveyed through Serote's use of 'exist' rather than 'live' to describe their decadent mode of life. The poem distinguishes between the immediate and the ultimate causes. As in Mtshali's 'Nightfall in Soweto', those immediately responsible are themselves victims of the vicious socio-political system which has reduced them to beasts of prey. The system has dehumanized them by discriminating against them on the basis of their colour. Ironically, death comes as a release to the dying man. 'Thanks, he's beyond this now', the poet notes (p.40). His remark underlines the bitter irony that for black people in South Africa relief is often found outside the establishment or the mainstream of life. This sad state of affairs comes across strongly in Mandlenkosi Langa's 'Mother's Ode to a Stillborn Child', in which a mother expresses her gratitude for begetting a stillborn child in a society which would have caused her child pain and suffering. This is the same agony of parenthood which Serote conveys in his poems about women such as 'The Three Mothers'. In 'Motivated to Death', we discover that the assaulted man had neither a job nor a place to stay because he had no pass. Here Serote illustrates the sense in which a man's pass is his life, a proposition he makes in 'City Johannesburg'. The destitute man gravitates to wherever he can find friends to offer him beer and shelter. He meets his death in a muddy donga, that area which is Serote's wasteland. Throughout his life the man has been exposed to the elements, 'his blankets, the dewy green grass' (p.40). All his life he has been vulnerable and without shelter. Even in death he lies 'alone in the donga' (p.40). The closing lines of the poem are marked by bitter irony:

Me I want to believe  
That they that kill by knife  
Shall so die.

Even in Alex ? (p.40)

Although these words are directed at those township thugs who have knifed the man to death, they apply with equal force to the representatives of the system which treated the man callously and made him easy prey for others more brutalized than himself. The cruelty of the system drives Serote to contemplate alternative methods of counteracting it.

The poems which show Serote's reaction to oppression are transitional in terms of his evolving political attitudes. They mark his disillusionment and growing uncertainty about the feasibility of a peaceful resolution of South Africa's race problems. They stand in sharp contrast to poems such as 'The Actual Dialogue' which advocate peaceful negotiation between Blacks and Whites. Although they point in the direction of military confrontation, they still fall short of an unqualified support for armed struggle. 'Waking Up. The Sun. The Body', 'That's Not My Wish', and 'The Growing' take stock of White intransigence. In these poems, Serote meditates about what such inflexibility might lead to. In 'What's in this Black Shit', he contemplates firmer action against oppressive conditions.

'What's in this Black Shit' starts by painting images of putrefaction, vomit and excreta. The technique of evoking nausea and disgust resembles Ayi Kwei Armah's technique in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. As in Armah's novel, the emotional intensity of Serote's poem, its abrasive tone and unflattering imagery express strong disapproval of apartheid, which Serote compares to 'the steaming little rot/ In the toilet bucket' (p.8). The system is humiliating and disgusting and is further compared to compelling a person to swallow back his vomit, after forcing that person to savour it for a while in his mouth. The detestable and inhuman manifestations of the system which are examined in the poem are the squalor, the violence, the discrepancy in the standard of living between Blacks and Whites, and the harassment of Blacks under the pass laws. In addition, he berates Blacks for their timidity, a situation which is also examined by Biko in 'We Blacks' (an essay which is the springboard for Serote's poem). A father vents his rage and frustration on his daughter by beating her for spilling sugar which he says he has worked 'so hard for' (p.8). The poem describes Serote's attitude and that of many young blacks to apartheid. Its invective is a measure of his anger and rebelliousness. The alliteration, as in the line 'A thing my father wouldn't dare do', expresses his grim resolve (p.8). He warns

that young Blacks are no longer prepared to turn the other cheek. He warns against confrontation between militant Black youth and the White establishment, so that there is an element of prophecy in the poem which was fulfilled during the Soweto uprising of June 1976.

In 'Waking Up. The Sun. The Body' the big question is: When is the anger of the Black people going to explode into a vast conflagration similar to or worse than what happened in June 1976, when school children set government buildings on fire, or in Sasolburg in 1980, when guerrilla insurgents burnt down the huge oil-from-coal plant? Serote is nearing the end of his tether when he asks:

For what do you do when, again and again,  
Things around and in you beg you with a painful embrace to hate,  
And you respond with a rage and you know  
That you can never hate. (p.27)

In the face of White intransigence, it is not true that the poet can never hate. He admits as much in 'That's not my Wish' when he says:

To talk for myself,  
I hate to hate,  
But how often has it been  
I could not hate enough. (p.19)

The significance of Serote's words in 'Waking Up. The Sun. The Body' lies in the fact that at this stage in his life he was striving to suppress his rage, after he had been imprisoned for nine months in 1969 under the Terrorism Act and released without any charges being brought against him. Such humiliating experiences create bitterness and resentment. The problem of his growing frustration, anger and hatred and his efforts to keep his emotions in check comes up again in 'The Growing'. He addresses himself to the crucial question of how long Blacks can keep retreating from Whites, who are forever crowding them with increasing impunity and brutality. The poem illustrates how at this stage Serote was prepared to defer his decision on whether to counteract violence from the apartheid regime with violence, until he could be certain that all the channels for peaceful negotiation with the racist regime had been explored exhaustively. The violence in Serote's early poems, always simmering beneath the seemingly placid surface, does not boil over from the beginning. What Adrian Roscoe in Uhuru's Fire says about La Guma is equally true of Serote:

One can see that the violent solution ... is drifted towards, not preached at from the outset. From pointing out human and economic injustice to ... suggesting that the victims of oppression ought to band together, there emerges, tiredly and

hesitantly, the idea of violence as the only course of action that holds out hope, the only course of action the regime will respect. This development is presented so objectively that the author seems almost to have no part of it. It appears as a tired inevitability. And who, examining events in Southern Africa, would deny its force? <sup>33</sup>

Such a development in Serote, from pacifism to militancy, becomes clearer in his other collections.

#### TSETLO AND BLACK VOICES SHOUT \*

Serote's poems from his second collection, Tsetlo, and in James Matthews's anthology, Black Voices Shout, pursue most of the themes introduced in Yakhal' inkomo: there are poems of introspection, poems about Alexandra, poems about Black youth and Black women, and poems of resistance. The government's threat to destroy Alexandra and resettle its residents elsewhere is a new concern to emerge in Tsetlo. His mood in Tsetlo and in Black Voices Shout is more aggressive than in Yakhal' inkomo, so that in his poems addressed to Whites he drops his tone of conciliation which is found in such poems as 'The Actual Dialogue' from his first collection. His new, uncompromising stance marks his growing disillusionment with the establishment. His faith in a negotiated settlement to South Africa's problems has diminished to such an extent that he considers violent confrontation to be inevitable between Blacks and Whites in the prevailing political climate of South Africa.

The title of his second collection derives from the name of a tiny bird called 'tsetlo' in Sepedi, Serote's indigenous African language. In the dedication page, he explains the significance of the title. The bird possesses 'a mysterious, weird sweet whistle which it plays while it flies from branch to branch in the bush luring people to follow it ... It may lead you to sweet honey, to a very

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\* Tsetlo, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1974.

Black Voices Shout, edited by James Matthews, Athlone (Cape): Blac Publishing House, 1974.

All page references to Tsetlo (abbreviated as T) and Black Voices Shout (abbreviated as BVS) are given after quotations in the text.



dangerous snake or to something very unusual' (T, p.5). Serote's poems are written to lure Blacks to deeper self-examination and greater self-awareness. He has chosen an indigenous emblem for his title to indicate his purpose of reaffirming his identity, dignity, and culture. The cry of the bird is nature's own clarion to rouse Blacks from their resignation, especially after Sharpeville.

Tsetlo opens with a short poem, 'Prelude', in which Serote describes his poetry as an outburst: 'When i take a pen / my soul bursts to deface the paper' (T, p.9). His poems are more controlled than his statement suggests. There is considerably less of the fulmination which characterizes James Matthews's poems. 'Prelude' unveils Serote's inner being. He examines his soul, which has been wounded by apartheid. He enters into the innermost recesses of his heart and mind like a surgeon or a psychiatrist. Various clinical terms used in the poem suggest these surgical interpretations. 'Pus' and 'germ' describe his deep wounds inflicted by his sadistic environment, which violates love and undermines his humanity. He unbare his aggrieved heart and says that when he writes 'his crimson heart oozes into the ink' (T, p.9). His attitude contrasts with Sepamla's, who prefers not to bleed on paper when he writes. Serote wants to shock his readers into a realization of the injustices perpetrated against his people. 'Bursts... deface... deform' are words used to show his readiness to act violently if necessary to attain freedom from the stranglehold of apartheid (T, p.9). As in Yakhal' inkomo, his violence is still inert but its immanent outburst has become a more distinct probability, as manifested in Tsetlo. The need for self-expression and self-assertion is conveyed in the line: 'My mother, when i dance your eyes won't keep pace' (T, p.9). He would like to dazzle his mother with his nimble, swift movements. Dance, like music, can be therapeutic, when it becomes a means of releasing pent-up emotion. In the poem, dance is creative rather than escapist. Through a process which is akin to exorcism, dance enables him to come to terms with himself. Besides restoring his equanimity, dance becomes a creative process

by which his distinctive identity is established. His true self is reflected as much in his eyes as in his dancing, so that those who would like to know him as he really is need only look into his eyes where, he says, 'the story of my day is told' (T, p.9). His poems are psychoanalytical in intention and make it possible for him to look deep into his soul and that of his people.

The Alexandra poems in Tsetlo were written after a few houses in the township had been demolished to make room for the erection of barracks for single migrant workers from the Bantustans. 'Another Alexandra', 'Amen Alexandra', 'Death Survey', and several other poems from Tsetlo continue the saga of Alexandra.

In 'Another Alexandra', as the demolition squads embark on their job, 'the skies and god's mystery look on' while 'the blood flows / the tears dry' (T, p.59). The sky's indifference to human suffering is reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's treatment of nature, which looks on unconcerned while the human drama is enacted in some predetermined fashion. The heavy, uncompromising hand of fate, represented by callous officials, descends upon the residents of Alexandra. However, in spite of death and destruction, life continues in Alexandra. 'Dry' is contrasted with 'flows' to suggest continuity. The people's spirits may be dangerously close to being broken, but life goes on.

A further interesting feature of this poem is Serote's characteristic juxtaposition of traditional and urban elements. In the line 'the slaughter sheep hangs from a tree red like the setting sun', the symbol of the setting sun conveys the gloom which envelops the residents of Alexandra (T, p.59). The slaughtering of sheep for sacrifice, to appease the ancestors and seek their protection against impending misfortune, shows how tradition has mingled with the new ways. The custom is widely practised even in the cities. Serote likens the people of Alexandra to sacrificial sheep. In Mine Boy, Peter Abrahams describes the

oppressed and exploited as 'sheep that talk'.<sup>34</sup> In Serote, the blank expressions of 'the men on the stoep staring straight into space... / not even noticing women passing' are reminiscent of the expressions of the miners in Abrahams. Their relish for life has been diminished, judging from the manner in which the passing women evoke no response from them.

'Another Alexandra' contrasts the world-weary adults with their care-free children, who have not yet been weighed down by the burdens of life: 'It is only children who still laugh and play and jump / as they play on the rabble heap' (T, p.59). The emphasis on 'play' suggests the discrepancy between the world the children recreate for themselves and the real world. The 'rabble heap' which serves for the children's playground brings the sordid squalor in the real world into sharp relief. The children are as deprived as Mtshali's boy on a swing and, as in Mtshali, the grim reality of life is destined to catch up with them. There are indications to show how short-lived the children's state of innocence is likely to be. The little girl of the poem, 'licking her lips' in sensuous enjoyment, has already tasted 'adult experiences' which have left her 'innocence... shattered' (T,p.59). As with Maria in Black Voices Shout, the girl in 'Another Alexandra' already has a child. The ease with which she is seduced is comparable to Maria's swift decline from innocence. She was tricked into having sex 'while she was playing with rag-dolls / and longed to be held by the hand and told stories' (T, p.59). The stories referred to are traditional tales, through which moral instruction is imparted and traditional values transmitted in African society. The lack of such guidance in the child's upbringing reflects the moral laxity in the townships. The little girl has not had the benefit of moral instruction. Her fall was too sudden to allow for the customary, gradual transmission of such values. The ruins of Alexandra assume a greater significance and point to the physical, social, and moral breakdown in the community. The poem also shows that life and death in Alexandra have become such close companions that 'women have come to know.../

that graves are not only below the earth' (T, p.59). Death is such a common occurrence that worms have become 'well informed, wearing mocking smiles everytime they hear us sing hymns' (T, p.59). These subtly poignant lines convey Serote's biting irony directed against Whites and their sinister intentions towards Blacks. They are like the worms for whom human suffering has become a source of perverse delight. The grotesque image of worms, besides applying to the Whites in power, also applies to those Blacks who kill others in Alexandra.

Like life and death, pleasure and pain also exist side by side in Alexandra. Serote has come to know these different facets of life in Alexandra in an intensely personal way. He has witnessed the vices of township people and shared their harrowing experiences: 'concubines conspiring in secrets with husbands', 'murder declared while we sat on a broken sofa / drinking', a man weeping 'like a woman giving birth / while he pleaded for his life' (T, p.60). The broken sofa, like the broken down piano in T.S. Eliot's 'Preludes', indicates the social and moral decay of the community. The central figure in the poem makes a futile attempt to obliterate his misery and the sordid reality of his squalid environment by drinking excessively. He has become so disoriented in life that his heart shakes 'like a tornado-uprooted tree' and 'bleeds like a licking (sic) tin' (T,p.60). The tornado is a metaphor used to describe the violent and destructive forces ranged against him and his community. Although most of these malevolent forces derive from the White power structure, Serote does not exonerate himself and his community from a share of the blame. Blacks must be held partly responsible for their condition, even in a place like Alexandra. Serote compares the Blackman's problem to Lady Macbeth's. The Blackman has become so implicated in the evil around him that he can no longer wash the bloodstains off his hands. The damned spot refuses to wash off as a measure of his implication in the evil around him: 'The blood is messy on my lap where I wring my hands

absent-mindedly' (T, p.60). Blacks are collectively responsible for their worsening condition. This concept of collective guilt conveyed in the poem derives from Black Consciousness, which teaches that Blacks who are socially and politically uncommitted are conniving in their own oppression.

The removal of Alexandra is the last point brought out in 'Another Alexandra'. Pain accumulates in the hearts and minds of the people as the streets of Alexandra disappear and its houses tumble down. The pain felt by the people at their loss distorts their features, leaving their facial expressions 'twisted like a woman's riddled with bloody pain' (T, p.60). But even as the houses come tumbling down, Serote notes with regret that Blacks take no action. He laments their paralysing apathy and exhorts them to take action against the evil system. The closing lines of the poem explain why he thinks Blacks continue to be oppressed and exploited:

For your legs are chained apart  
and your dirty petticoat is soaked in blood  
blood from your ravaged wound. (T, p.60)

Blacks are enslaved as one people but show no solidarity among themselves. They exercise no discretion in the conduct of their affairs and are prone to display their blood-soaked petticoats in public. As a nation, they are bleeding themselves to death. Serote laments all these trends which divide the oppressed, who should be acting in unity against their foes.

In 'Amen Alexandra', the people of Alexandra experience excruciating pain at the township's demolition, despite the misery and the suffering they have always lived with. Other familiar themes associated with the Alexandra poems recur in the poem. Serote alludes to his roots, which the demolition of Alexandra threatens to dig out. His feet, which were once firmly rooted 'like the earth', have become as unfirm as the township's crumbling structures (T, p.14). He bemoans all the suffering Blacks are exposed to and their drudgery as servants of White people, their backs 'soaking chilly winds and rains' (T, p.14). He mourns the

loss of their sole place of refuge, flimsy as such protection Alexandra could afford has always been. Yet, he recalls (some nostalgia beginning to set in), 'we stood beneath your wings' (T, p.14). To its residents, Alexandra has the sanctity of a shrine from which its people learnt 'the sacred secrets of silence' (T, p.14). Serote equates its destruction to an act of desecration. The elegiac tone in the poem brings out the gravity and the pathos of the situation.

In 'Death Survey', by juxtaposing certain situations which at first seem unrelated, he equates government attempts to destroy Alexandra to attempted murder. He presents his experiences in the form of a nightmare. In his dream, his friend comes running to him, pursued by a gang of knife-wielding thugs, like vicious dogs 'barking and chasing a cow from a dustbin' (T, p.47). Scared out of his wits, he flees along with his friend, ducking bricks and other missiles hurled at them. The scene is a familiar one in the townships. The ruins of Alexandra reflect the ravaged souls of its residents. The loose bricks being hurled at the retreating figure of the narrator and his friend come from the destroyed houses. These bricks are like the lives of the people which are being hurled damagingly all over in some mad power game of the oppressor. The poet-narrator feels like a person who is on the brink of destruction, as if some gaping donga is waiting to swallow him and muffle his screams. The donga assumes the frightful qualities of a vampire and represents the evil system that lays waste people's lives.

In their flight from their assailants, the narrator and his friend encounter a group of Zulu tribesmen, 'holding some meeting with the old leg of the past' (T, p.47). Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, their Bantustan leader, is presiding over the meeting. Serote expresses his opposition to Bantustan politics through his description of the tribalism which the policy is trying to foster as 'old' and belonging to the 'past'. The 'Homeland' policy is an attempt to reverse the clock and rake up ghosts of the lifagane or mfecane wars, the internecine wars of the nineteenth century

between South Africa's indigenous people which made their conquest by the White colonial invaders easier than it might have been if the indigenes had been united. Bantustans are similarly divisive. They revive tribal animosity in place of promoting a broad South Africanism. Serote rejects collaboration with the oppressor through participating in government created institutions such as Bantustans. 'Why did Gatsha come?', he asks rhetorically, thereby implying his disapproval of divisive tribal politics which Chief Buthelezi represents (T, p.47). The divisions among Blacks created by Bantustan politics are aggravated by the traditional rivalry between town and country. Serote describes the case of a township lad who is attacked by the Zulu tribesmen for no reason other than that he is of the city. The reason behind razing Alexandra to the ground, with its multi-ethnic composition, in order to build quarters for migrant workers, is to bring in men and women from the tribal reserves who owe their allegiance to one or the other of these chiefs Serote denounces. The tribesmen are brought to the cities to neutralize the growing economic and political power of urban Africans.

Confronted with the band of marauding Zulu tribesmen, the narrator takes to his heels to seek refuge at the home of another friend called Frank. He finds that bulldozers have already been there ahead of him and destroyed Frank's place. The painful feeling of arriving at a once familiar haunt to find that it has been destroyed is reminiscent of the feeling of emptiness expressed by Can Temba in 'Requiem for Sophiatown'; it is the same dreadful vacuousness that assails Frank Joad in Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, when he returns home after a few years' absence only to find that his old home has been demolished. 'Even screams don't come in a dream like this,' Serote says (T, p.48). The cruelty behind this act of wanton destruction comes through most strongly in the following lines:

this bloody bulldozer had done a good job and its teeth  
dripped blood;  
bricks-pillars-hunks-of-concrete-zincs-broken-steps-

doors-broken-glasses-crooked-window -panes-broken-  
flower-pots-planks-twisted-shoes  
lay all over the show  
like a complete story. (T, p.48)

The ravished lives of the people are like fragments from the scene of a demolition. The fragmentary quality of their lives is brought out through the list of hyphernated words. The image of bulldozers applies to the agents of White authority in South Africa. The Black people are exposed and placed in a vulnerable position by being deprived of shelter by the system. In the closing lines of the poem, the narrator says that he held his heart in his 'right hand / like a jacket' (T, p.48). His salvation as a Black person in an uncompromisingly oppressive society, Serote suggests, lies in raising his hand and striking a blow for freedom, in armed insurrection against the apartheid regime.

'Mama and Child' returns to the theme of women in Africa, a theme Serote develops to the fullest in No Baby Must Weep. Like the persona of 'This Old Woman' in Yakhal' inkomo, the old woman in 'Mama and Child' stalks the road with her load, her child strapped to her back. Bringing up her child in her deprived environment is burdensome. 'Tough... hard... rock' are words associated with the woman to describe the stolid figure she cuts and the hardships she has to bear (T, p.15). Weather elements and natural phenomena are used symbolically in the poem. The heavy rains, the blast, and the hot sun represent life's hardships. The mother's bare feet indicate her vulnerability. But she defies adversity in a manner which elicits Serote's admiration, who describes her resilience as a miracle. Serote's poem brings to mind Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue. Although Mphahlele's setting is Marabastad in the 1930s and Serote's is Alexandra in the early 1970s, the situations both writers evoke are similar. The women in Serote's poems have much in common with Mphahlele's mother, his grandmother, and Aunt Dora in Down Second Avenue. They combine toughness with gentleness. The tradition of such heroines in Black South African literature in English goes back to Plaatje and Abrahams.



But the social origin of this literary stereotype is to be found in tradition. Serote transposes Nguni and Sotho female roles to his urban setting. The Indian vendor in 'Mama and Child', shouting her 'tomatoes and onions for sale / with indian cracked english', is reminiscent of the Asian shopkeepers in Down Second Avenue and in Peter Abrahams's autobiography, Tell Freedom (T, p.15).

Serote's depiction of African women in Tsetlo is never romanticized but balanced. In 'Murderer, His Mother and Life' he relives a visit to a shebeen. The shebeen queen in Part II of the poem cuts a sinister figure. She is a fat, cold-eyed person, 'seated on an armchair / a throne of death' (T, p.44). She is different from the woman in African custom who brews beer, a traditional female industry. She illustrates how custom has been eroded by the new culture of the cities. Numerous deaths occur after people have been drinking at their place. Her assistant is a Gagool-like figure: 'buttockless, eyeless, sexless' (T,p.45). The assistant has a 'small hairless head' and 'wound-filled twigs' for legs (T, p.45). The contrast between the shebeen queen of 'Beerhall Queen' in Yakhal' inkomo, who exudes warmth and hospitality, and her cold, inhospitable counterpart in 'Murderer, His Mother and Life' shows Serote's honest determination to explore Black experience in all its facets, without romanticism or escapism.

'Maria' in Black Voices Shout uses the shebeen setting of 'Beerhall Queen' and 'Murderer, His Mother and Life'. Whereas 'Beerhall Queen' portrays shebeens as happy places (in the tradition of Casey Motsisi), 'Maria' depicts the negative effects of shebeens, especially upon children brought up in that kind of environment. The more mature woman of 'Beerhall Queen' is a symbol of grit and grim resolve, but Maria is only a woman-child. In spite of the fact that Maria is only a child, she is already past her prime: 'She has been' (BVS, p.48). Her diminished zest for life is reflected in her dull expressionless eyes, once aglow with vivacity. The flame in her eyes has been extinguished. Her sordid experiences have left her worldly-wise beyond her years and 'as slippery as a fish' (BVS, p.48).

The fish image describes her sunken state and her elusive character.

The poem traces Maria's swift and imminent decline. From her beginnings, her fate is already sealed. Serote exposes the limited opportunities for self-fulfilment for a girl in Maria's position. She was born to a shebeen queen who has no husband and is herself the mother of an illegitimate son, Mandla. The quick transition from a discussion of Maria's birth to that of Mandla shows how early in her life she fell pregnant. Her life is a repetition of the cycle of her mother's life. Maria behaves in a precise repetition of the model she knows best. Her chances of obtaining a decent education are frustrated by the exigencies of her exacting domestic life. She is required to help her mother sell beer to strange men late into the night. She is seduced by the same drunken, sex-starved, corrupt men she sells alcohol to at her home: 'They groped for her thighs / and nearly tore her breasts off' (BVS, p.48). Her passage from innocence to experience is swift. Her terse situation and harrowing experiences are described in equally fleeting terms:

first she used to smile  
then giggled  
but after mandla  
grim (BVS, p.48)

Her gravitation towards the bottom is rapid. In a short time she develops a caustic tongue, 'a fuckyou type of tongue'; she becomes violent and is soon nursing an ugly scar 'across her face' and 'one stab wound on her chest' (BVS, p.48). She falls in love with a murderer. The end of the poem suggests that it is only a matter of time before she becomes a murderer, too:

bitchneverphela  
alas  
god knows  
where maria is bound (BVS, p.48)

'Bitchneverphela' (bitchneverdies) is a common township expression used to describe a woman who has sunk low, morally and materially, but who continues to defy her fate. Serote's use of colloquialisms does not detract from the gravity of the situation evoked but reflects what William

Pretorius in a review of No Baby Must Weep describes as 'the spiritual limitations of the inhabitants and the lack of quality of the social milieu'.<sup>35</sup> It is more accurate to talk of 'moral' rather than 'spiritual' limitations, because even a woman who has become as morally depraved as Maria still commands some spiritual and physical reserves, which are implied by the phrase 'bitchneverphela'. Serote's use of colloquialisms is atmospheric and emphasizes the fact that the events he describes are everyday occurrences in the lives of township Blacks. Although a mere woman-child, Maria's resilience is no less remarkable than the old woman's in 'This Old Woman'.

Serote's tribute to African women reaches its zenith in 'Ofaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity', which appears in Black Voices Shout. This poem opens on a note of applause for Black women: 'My hands clap'; and his gestures manifest veneration: 'I bend, / I bow by head' (BVS, p.66). As in the opening line of 'City Johannesburg', his mode of address, which he sustains to the end this time, is in the manner of izibongo or lithoko: 'Woman whose bosom swells with bubbling love / Agee' (BVS, p.66). 'Agee' is a word of greeting in Sepedi. Serote has sympathy for the suffering of African women, the nation's mothers, who are forever reduced to tears as a result of one tragedy after the other. He associates Black women with the earth and the rivers, the sun, and the plants like wheat and mealies (maize/corn) which provide the staple food for most Africans. The women generate and sustain life. As in 'This Old Woman' and 'Beerhall Queen', Serote depicts the women as the source of warmth and happiness in the community. He alludes metaphorically to their stoic suffering and patient endurance when he says that their breasts 'have hung on / Like eternity rocks in the belly of the earth' (BVS, p.66). 'Eternity' implies invincibility; 'rocks' refers to their hardiness. Although his thinking is still to crystallize more clearly on this matter, Serote pins his hope for the successful outcome of the Black people's struggle for emancipation mainly upon women, as in Ousmane and, to a lesser extent, in Ngugi. The women's copious tears are 'like a drop of water on a thirsty tongue' (BVS, p.66). The

expression points to their role as redeemers and as Africa's liberators.

Towards the end of 'Ofaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity', Serote strikes a note of celebration: 'You who dances to drums / Who dances to horns' (BVS, p.67). The instruments are traditional. Serote dispenses with the jazz beat and the blues idiom of 'Hell, Well, Heaven' and employs the breath-bar instead. The rhythm, the dance, and the instruments are in tune with the traditional form of the poem. Serote's technique attunes the reader's mind to those virtues which are traditionally associated with women: sympathy, understanding, patience, and endurance. His tone is as laudatory as Senghor's in 'Black Woman'. Senghor employs the rhythm of the tom-tom in much the same way as Serote uses the drum-beat.

Although in 'This Old Woman' Serote laments being cut off from his people's traditions, it is clear from the concepts expressed in 'Ofaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity' and the traditional stylistic features employed that he has not been cut off completely from his African roots. There is no contradiction between Serote's claim in 'Alexandra' that his roots are in the city and the claim that he still retains elements of his people's tradition. But seen together, 'Alexandra', 'This Old Woman', and 'Ofaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity' express his complex, composite character which resembles that of most urban Africans. In The African Image, Mphahlele testifies that the urban African of a few generations' standing still carries his traditional roots, which have been transplanted to the city. By dipping into traditional oral forms in 'Ofaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity', Serote demonstrates that oral tradition is not and need not be residual; that it can be instrumental in raising cultural and political consciousness. In Black South African literature of English expression the type of writing which reaches out to African tradition and employs traditional stylistic features is rare. It faded out with Plaatje. Mphahlele's lone efforts to revive traditional stylistic elements were not followed by his contemporaries. Mphahlele was himself ambivalent about traditional African culture.

Black South Africans are inclined to turn their backs on tradition, which they identify with the government's policy of arresting African progress by confining Africans to the tribal reserves. Tradition is often mistakenly equated with backwardness. But Serote, Mtshali, Gwala, Ndebele, and the new poets after 1967 evoked tradition unapologetically, in a conscious effort to counteract their psychological and cultural enslavement. Through the persona of the 'Ofaywatcher', Serote guards jealously against further inroads into his traditional heritage by those aspects of Western culture which are inimical to the best interests of his people. 'Ofaywatcher-Blackwoman-Eternity', like Gwala's 'The Children of Nonti' or Mtshali's 'Sounds of a Cowhide Drum', was Serote's attempt to retrieve traditional African prosody.

Turning from women to youth, in 'Murderer, His Mother and Life' Serote presents us with the figure of a tsotsi stereotype, the shebeen queen's son. His eyes are red like a marijuana or dagga smoking skellum's (hooligan's). He never looks at anything straight but at an angle. 'He almost looked at us,' Serote writes in describing the tsotsi's shifty eyes, which reflect his devious character (T, p.45). His appearance, like his mother's, is spine chilling to their customers and victims.

The concept of fate is strong in Serote's descriptions of township youth. The shebeen queen's son in 'Murderer, His Mother and Life' has much in common with his counterpart in 'A Sleeping Black Boy'. In both poems, the boys, wearing oversize clothes, are destined to meet their death prematurely. The tsotsi's swift transition from innocence to experience and the implacable hand of fate hovering over him are described as follows:

this thing is not a boy  
is a child  
with blood soaked hands...  
bound to die;  
his blood sipped by the earth of a street. (T, p.46)

He lives in the syndrome, typical of American gangster movies which have probably moulded his own life, of 'live

fast, die young'. He is a man-beast, steeped in blood like a scavenging animal. The sum total of his knowledge is the law of the jungle: eat or be eaten. In the quoted extract, the pun on 'bound' implies, not only his likely premature death but also, his inability to transcend his environment which is like a cage to him.

Serote portrays another picture of degenerate, trapped township youth in 'A Sleeping Black Boy', a poem in the tradition of 'My Black Brothers in the Streets' and 'Burning Cigarette' from his first collection. In 'A Sleeping Black Boy', Serote again reveals his concern for the plight of Black youth in the townships. The boy is like the rest of the people in Alexandra who are trapped in their environment. He is 'pinned down', 'stuck', and 'glued' to his deprived environment as inextricably as the shebeen queen's son in 'Murderer, His Mother and Life'. His lot is not destined to improve in any significant way. His oversize jacket has probably been passed down to him, an indication of extreme want. He has to struggle to keep himself warm and does so outwardly by using his jacket, which also serves as his blanket, and inwardly by sniffing glue. He has an unpleasant smell as a result of not washing regularly. Symbolically, his smell indicates his outcast status. He is the township's Huckleberry Finn. Like the boy in Dugmore Boetie's Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost, he has no shelter and sleeps out in the open, where the hostile forces ranged against him far outweigh the small mercies which are occasionally shown to him. In such an environment, his untimely death is a foregone conclusion.

Serote's poems about youth in Tsetlo, as in Yakhal' inkomo, convey the hopelessness of life among the township's youth. The young often feel that they can never transcend their misery and destitution. In his semi-autobiographical novel, To Every Birth its Blood, Serote shows us how in his youth he often felt similarly worthless, dejected, and trapped. Under such frustrating conditions, township children easily turn wild and become a danger to themselves and a menace to their community. Serote's poems personalize material deprivation and other problems created by apartheid. We see the plight of Blacks in flesh-and-blood

terms, as it affects individuals. His choice of young victims to illustrate the iniquities of apartheid brings out the extreme mercilessness of the system.

Apartheid inevitably generates a feeling of vengeance among the oppressed. In 'Vengeance', Mazisi Kunene poses the following question to his oppressor: 'How would it be if I came in the night / And planted the spear in your side?'<sup>36</sup> The temptation to give the oppressor a dose of his own medicine is always great. 'A Poem on Black and White' by Serote is written from a similar feeling of rejection and injury inflicted on his people. The thought of vengeance grips his mind and he thinks that if he can pour petrol on the face of a White child 'and give flames the taste of his flesh / it won't be a new thing' (T, p.11). When he says that 'it won't be a new thing', he does not mean that he has poured petrol before on a White child's face. He means that he will not be seeing a person burn for the first time. He has seen this gruesome spectacle in the townships countless times before, just as the young Mphahlele in Down Second Avenue watches helplessly as his father burns his mother with hot stew. Serote has also seen sadistic Whites 'pouring petrol on a black child's face / setting it alight and shooting him in a pretoria street' (T, p.11). His message in the poem is that, if Whites persist on treating Blacks brutally, he will not flinch from carrying out the unpleasant task of avenging himself upon them. The irony of the situation is that he has picked up these cruel methods he is thinking of resorting to from his persecutors. Whereas in 'Vengeance' Kunene is still talking to his White tormentors, trying to make them see sense, Serote's poem is made more ominous by the fact that he is talking more to himself, as the next step before launching an attack on his oppressors, having despaired of ever convincing them to desist from tormenting him.

Serote's poem reflects an outraged mind which has undergone some excruciating ordeal. He has reached the

threshold of his tolerance and feels excluded from society and from all the benefits which the Whites have appropriated for themselves: 'pretoria has never been my home... / and jo'burg city has never seen me, has never heard me' (T, p.11). This is a step away from the pleading tone of 'City Johannesburg' and 'The Actual Dialogue'. He now recognizes the need to fight for his rights, although he has not yet reached the stage in this poem where he outrightly endorses the guerrilla struggle. He has been alienated to the extent that he does not feel he has a stake in the society anymore. He has nothing to lose but his chains. His state of mind is expressive of his frightful desperation, rejection, and isolation. 'But who has not been witness to my smile?' he asks (T, p.11). His smile and the proverbial smiles of Black people mask hearts that are seething with murderous intent. Whites have abused their goodwill to the extent that Blacks are giving serious consideration to the prospect of embarking on arson to redress their grievances.

'A Poem on Black and White' is contemplative and is written in the tradition of such poems from Yakhal' inkomo as 'The Growing' and 'Waking Up. The Sun. The Body'. In these poems, Serote wrestles with the overpowering urge to yield to his violent impulse in order to avenge himself and his people. Whereas in Yakhal' inkomo his vengeful intentions are couched in metaphorical terms, the poems from Tsetlo and Black Voices Shout spell out his thoughts in all their gruesome details. He has drifted closer, albeit reluctantly, towards supporting armed struggle against apartheid. 'A Wish to Eye God' and 'Listen to Me' reflect this drift and express his growing urge to resort to violence in even stronger terms.

'A Wish to Eye God' looks at the future, at the gruelling times ahead, following a revolution. The perspiring sun symbolizes the oppressor and the moon represents the Black community. Metaphorically speaking, the situation has become so hot for the sun that it perspires. On the other hand, the moon coolly shakes 'its sweat like a dog removing flies' (T, p.41). The moon's behaviour represents the action of the underdog in ridding



itself of harassment and oppression. Serote hopes that revolution will result in a total transformation of South African society, a transformation which will obviate the need for him to write about people 'dying in the street and bleeding through the ears and eyes / and babies suffocating in suitcases in muddy dongas' (T, p.41). Such cruelty and abuse is engendered by apartheid. To be meaningful, revolution must restore the basic human rights and the dignity of the people and lead to qualitative changes in their lives.

Serote tries to recollect himself in the face of excessive provocation from the apartheid regime: 'Lord, I am just polite... / I am calm' (T, p.41). But in the end his efforts prove fruitless. Dejection and despondency seize him and lead him to ponder over the significance of religion to his community. All the evil perpetrated against the Black community gives the lie to everything he has ever heard about God's benevolence and omnipotence. Viewed against his people's suffering, these notions about God strike him as palpable lies. 'I won't live for you', he says, rejecting God, who has let him down (T, p.41). In another poem, 'Personal Lament + Talk', a strong desire assails him to bang at God's door and 'even fart the hell's fire to hell / and leave the devil getting cold on the sand' (T, p.52). He contemplates desecrating all those institutions held sacred by a society that discriminates against him. His drift towards violence becomes even more manifest in 'Listen to Me'.

'Listen to Me' addresses God in a defiant, irreverent mood: 'I'll pull out my hand and grab your hair / God' (BVS, p.54). In his pre-1974 poems, Serote rarely threatens to use his hands the way he does in 'Listen to Me'. 'God' refers as much to the Christian God as to the White rulers. Serote's threat is a threat to desecrate all those things Whites venerate: riches, privilege, and power. It is a threat to bring down the White establishment. God must be driven 'to commit suicide' and, wherever there are church buildings to be found, green traffic lights must be installed to make Blacks walk past (BVS, p.54). The

substitution of traffic lights, called 'robots' in South Africa, for God indicates that Serote considers Him to be as ineffective as a robot that has broken down. Serote is disillusioned with the established churches for conniving with the oppressors and condoning their actions. He complains that Blacks have been misled by Whites who encouraged them to abandon their religion, customs, and traditions, and follow those of the Whiteman. Many other African writers have voiced the same complaint, writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Mongo Beti, and Camara Laye. Whites displayed impudence and deception in telling Africans to abandon their old ways. Serote calls such Whites 'self-styled-gods' for the manner in which they lord it over Black people (BVS, p.54). The god who is worshipped in their churches was created in their own image to serve their interests. This phenomenon is equivalent to deifying themselves and their values. The 'fucking' lie' in their religion was to teach Blacks that 'survival of the fittest was... a human principle' (BVS, p.54). Serote turns his back on their teachings and regrets the neglect of his ancestral soul in the White Churches, in much the same way as Biko does in 'The Church as seen by a Young Layman'. Above all, Serote denounces the oppressive and exploitative order in South Africa. Further, he warns that one day Whites in South Africa will be made to atone for their sins of oppression and exploitation. He advises every White person to listen to his true gospel of reconciliation before it is too late, a message which is also found in his other poems such as 'The Actual Dialogue' and 'OfayWatcher, Throbs-Phase'. In 'Listen to Me', his tone is considerably more imperious. But the poem occasionally sinks into incoherence, as when he says: 'Go black boy, uproot what you know and seek what's new. / Then turn to your makers God' (BVS, p.54). 'Then turn to you makers God' flows structurally from the preceding utterance but it is difficult to establish the logical or grammatical link. The poem also suffers because at times, as Mphahlele once wrote of Mtshali, Serote resorts to 'custom-made images

and tries to let rhetoric do the feeling for him.'<sup>37</sup> But such a slip is rarely found in any of the other poems by Serote, who is one of the most intense and profound poets of the revival period.

NO BABY MUST WEEP\*

No Baby Must Weep is a lengthy experimental poem. Its significance in the development of modern Black South African literature lies in the fact that it was the second sustained effort at composing a serious long poem in English since the publication of H.I.E. Dhlomo's Valley of a Thousand Hill in 1941.

The poet-narrator describes a pilgrimage to the early haunts of his childhood, in the fashion of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. But the two worlds are poles apart. Where Wordsworth's world is virgin territory, away from the hurly-burly of city life, Serote's setting is the slums of Alexandra. In the process of describing his pilgrimage, he tells us how children grow up in the Black townships of South Africa. He employs the stream-of-consciousness technique and an autobiographical perspective. The poem is built on a contrast between innocence and experience. There is a mystical dimension to it, whereby the persona descends into the underworld to become a typical hero of the underworld. The poem also contains elements of prophecy.

The themes of childhood, initiation into adulthood, the process of growing up, and the quest for self-knowledge and fulfilment provide the framework for Serote's poem. In Mind Your Colour, Vernie February notes that these are 'oft-recurring themes in what is sometimes referred to as third world literature'.<sup>38</sup> They have also been the favourite themes of English novelists from Defoe to Lawrence. But whereas most writers treat these themes in prose-fiction, biography, or autobiography, Serote handles them in poetry as fully as any novelist. The themes of

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\*No Baby Must Weep, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975.

All page references are given after quotations in the text.

No Baby Must Weep are also the recurring themes in his novel, To Every Birth its Blood, which he began at about the same time No Baby Must Weep was published in 1975. February supplies the sociological facts necessary to grasp the distinctive quality of growing up in the Black slum areas of South Africa.

From birth, the non-white child in a plural society is already on the threshold of adulthood... He is confronted with life in the raw at a very tender age... Such a child is also spontaneous in his criticism of his world and his society. He is not yet burdened with experience, an overdose of knowledge and prejudices, although little sorrow is already sitting and weeping in his sleep. The child observes things from within his small micro-cosmos and can be very accurate.<sup>39</sup>

Serote transmutes these sociological facts and renders them in the flesh. He is careful not to impose his world or vision on the child, so that no harmful effect is produced on the credibility of the child's vision.

The child-narrator begins his reminiscences with his parents. He describes his mother's concern, her warmth, and her love for him. He depicts his father as slightly comical but distant, a picture which emerges again in his novel. He is critical of his father's resignation to his oppressed condition. But the harsh tone which is found in 'What's in this Black Shit' is absent from his judgement this time. In this poem and in the novel, his father complains frequently about the prime minister, the law, and the ruling National Party but remains scared of Whites. He exemplifies the emasculated, servile parent described in Biko's essays. As the boy hero of the poem grows older, he realizes how different his political outlook is from his father's. He begins to feel that he and his father have come to the parting of ways. Although he remains fond of his father, they begin to view matters as from opposite sides: 'he took me to church and i walked out of the door / i dreamt he took me to school and i never learnt' (p.12). Their estrangement from each other saddens the son but he realizes that he must learn to stand on his own feet.

His reminiscences of his childhood experiences are the liveliest and most vivid sections of the poem. His real education begins when he starts going against the

instructions of his parents, who have forbidden him to roam the streets of Alexandra. Driven by an irrepressible adventurous boyish spirit, he dodges his mother to join other children from whom he picks up his knowledge about life.

The description of his first sexual experience in a 'wrecked automobile' reminds one of the township's squalor, as do the other run-down township structures described in the poem (p.8). The scene shifts to the shop veranda where the young congregate, as Mphahlele shows in Down Second Avenue. Serote explains the significance of these boyhood gatherings in street corners and shop verandas in the following terms: 'The street corner, the shop verandahs, the brazier and all those places where we spent hours and hours as boys really taught us sharp, cutting humour. We did laugh in those days, we stayed alive, perhaps, the corners and the braziers contributed to that.'<sup>40</sup> The shop veranda is the place for spinning tall yarns, indulging in lewd laughter, and learning about life. 'Eddy said vusi's mother's breasts were so long,' one of the stories go. 'It was nice at that veranda' (p.9). He remembers other childhood friends, particularly the worldly-wise Tlogi, whom the boy adores but who is resented by the boy's parents as a bad influence on their son. Tlogi imparts to the boy the kind of basic knowledge every township child needs to survive. One example is when he advises the boy to pour soil on a wound sustained by the boy in a football game. 'And it healed,' the boy recalls gratefully. Tlogi's teachings are practical and survival oriented. They leave a lasting impression on the boy and strike a responsive chord, as the following example shows:

why did they say it is a sin to sleep with a woman  
before you marry  
because i saw nothing wrong when Bra-Moss did with  
sis-dinah and  
sis-maureen  
they all liked it  
and tlogi said Bra-Moss was a real man  
and i thought so but the priest and the church and  
the benches  
and the incense and the smell of the perfume of women  
in church  
frightened me.

The church, the state schools, and the law courts represent the voice of 'Urizen'. The boy finds such institutions life-denying, as do most Blacks in South Africa.

Some sections of the poem read like Mtshali's 'The Detribalised' in that they deal with the formative influences in the lives of most township youth, such as working as a garden boy in the rich White suburbs or being a caddie at the golf course. Such experiences have become a form of initiation and children who do not participate suffer estrangement. The boy complains that his parents used to prevent him from joining in the escapades of his age mates, thereby making him the laughing stock of others. These various episodes from the poet-narrator's childhood illustrate the discrepancy between what parents often desire for their children and what their children turn out to be. Among Blacks in South Africa, the problem is aggravated by oppression and extreme want. As a result, there is often a gulf between expectation and fulfilment.

A brief visit to the countryside teaches the boy that conditions all over South Africa are fundamentally the same for the oppressed and disadvantaged. In the train in which he is travelling, he is assailed by 'the smell of rotting poverty... / decayed breath, breath burnt, rotting breath' (p.14). He learns that there is no escape from the rotten stench of life into which he has been cast. The train smells take his mind back to the township's little silly houses 'where the men's voices buzz / hanging on the mirage of alcohol' (p.14).

As his train travels through the Karroo region of the Cape, he is struck by the pathetic condition of a Black herdbooy he sees looking after sheep. The description of the herdbooy, 'a majestic sight on a throne of stone holding a stick / crowned like that by the heavy heel of the Karroo', uses ironic contrast between images of royalty and affluence, on the one hand, and the bizarre and commonplace, on the other hand (p.15). The images indicate the herdbooy's low position in the socio-economic stratum of South Africa, worse even than the lot of township youth. He has become a victim of fate and his innocence has been turned against him by an inhuman world. In reminding us that 'the boy.../'

has a mother', the poet is making an appeal for a recognition of the boy's downtrodden humanity (p.15). The section of the poem which deals with the herdboys offers a rare example when Serote shows concern for the plight of the peasants.

After his thousand mile journey to the Cape coast he returns to the uncongenial, sordid environment of Alexandra a sadder but wiser man who has learnt that 'there is no such thing as a thousand miles', that is, conditions for Blacks are the same everywhere (p.15). After his excursion to the Cape, he describes his attachment to Alexandra in terms which are reminiscent of his Alexandra poems from his earlier collections. He admits that 'Alexandra is full of shit' and deplores its wanton destruction, violence and squalor. But every wreckage in the township holds dear memories for him and conjures a sense of identification akin to a feeling of blood ties. 'This car / with doors torn and its body folded,' he says in describing his attachment to Alexandra, 'has stains of my blood on its seat and floors and bonnet' (p.16).

He proceeds to a description of his response and that of his people to apartheid. The poem indicates that Blacks harbour deep hatred for the racially oppressive atmosphere of South Africa. Domestic servants hate their White employers, even as they seem to exhibit fondness and servility. Serote subtly hints at impending insurrection from this class of people by stating that 'hatred rushes in like a domestic servant summoned by her master' (p.18). The narrator-poet himself shows no docility. For instance, when he buys a coke and is given a bottle of schweppes instead, he refuses to accept it and walks away in annoyance from the spiteful White shopkeeper. In this mood, not even the music of Nina Simone, his favourite Afro-American blues singer, is capable of soothing him. Apartheid leaves a permanent scar on him, as it does on the domestic workers. He warns the White community that 'men and weapons... / discover each other soon' and that 'such things don't think much about who's coated what colour' (p.20). He suggests that time may be running out for Whites in South

Africa, a point which becomes more explicit in his Soweto poems. He regards time as the great harbinger of change and expresses the hope that some day it may be possible for people of all races in South Africa to share drinks and court any women of their choice.

Much of the poem is occupied with his vision of change. In highly symbolic and prophetic language, he describes the transformation that must take place: 'i heard something tearing somewhere / and the mountains moved a little like bored old men' (p.21). 'Tearing' suggests the force that will be necessary to change South African society. Mountains symbolize obstacles to the attainment of freedom by Black people, so that forces of volcanic proportions might be necessary to remove such obstacles. He points out that the rivers, the earth, the sun, the trees, the sky, and all things in nature move. Nothing is static or immutable; change is inevitable. His predominant images suggest movement and change. In such a situation, Whites in South Africa must adapt or perish. Looking optimistically into the future, he concludes: 'After this day, the moment that comes must be brand new' (p.20).

Serote is appalled by the atrocities which people commit against their fellow human beings, without raising much of an outcry from the rest of humanity. He accuses people who hurt others and those who fail to react to these outrages of insensitivity. They are 'outsmarted by cats in gentleness' and 'shamed by tigers in agility' (p.25). They have become 'gods of destruction', lacking in compassion and unmoved even by 'the sight of machine-gunned children' (p.25). Serote's prophetic words point to events in Soweto and other African townships in 1976, a year after the publication of No Baby Must Weep. He sounds the same prophetic note elsewhere in the poem when he warns that 'the children are as impatient as a droplet of water on fire' (p.28). The prophecy is remarkable for a poem written as early as 1974.

Turning specifically to the White community, he describes Whites as insensitive creatures 'who have forgotten how to kiss / or smile' (p.25). He paints a vivid picture of



emotional distance cultivated by prosperous Whites to keep them apart from the poor and the destitute. Such people may be wealthy in material things, but they are heartless and spritually bankrupt: 'Their hearts are just red pumps / bloodied with their sins' (p.26). His statement is an amplification of the accusations he levels against prosperous Whites in 'They Do It' from Yakhal' inkomo.

He complains that he is tired of protesting against callousness, when nobody listens anymore. His disillusionment is illustrated in the following lines in which he refers to people in inanimate terms, as 'these things' who sleep through a nightmare 'with open eyes / ears shut to everything except the alarm clock' (p.27). His dejection increases at the thought that many Blacks have become frustrated, helpless people who are weighed down with life's problems 'like a loaded washing-line' (p.28). Others have fallen victim to the system, killed in the act of restoring hope and dignity to their people through their unrelenting opposition to apartheid. He reminds his readers of Tiro, the Black Consciousness leader killed in February 1974 in a letter bomb blast in Botswana. Such tragedies have become so frequent that 'mothers... don't weep no more' (p.31).

The occurrences he describes cut deeply into his soul. When his momentary disillusionment leaves him, he realizes the enormous responsibility he carries. As a grown up man, he can no longer flee to his mother for solace all the time. His destiny is in his own hands. With grim resolve, he states: 'i see that i am the one who has to build this world out of dust... / tame the snakes and make a path' (p.32). He must not remain silent like his father but must counteract the forces that oppress him. He owes it to past and future generations to stand up and fight. His resolution marks his dedication to the liberation struggle.

Having cast aside his feeling of inadequacy, his disgust mounts as before at the gaudy display of opulence in the middle of abject poverty. 'f you can eat while my eyes fall into pits with hunger,' he says, disassociating himself from people who flaunt their prosperity, 'if you can laugh while my eyes are big darts of tears, !/ don't call

yourself my brother' (p.37). He invokes divine wrath upon the culprits and states that they shall not triumph over him: 'i am the man you will never defeat' (p.37). He reiterates a point made earlier in the poem that they shall be haunted forever by their uneasy consciences. He dramatizes the fear under which his adversaries shall live by saying that 'when the trees rattle you shall hear my last footsteps' (p.37). In their guilt-ridden minds, the most innocent sounds assume the sinister significance of approaching hostile forces. In their role as oppressors, they may emerge victorious from isolated skirmishes but they will never win the war. In the end, they shall prostrate themselves before the oppressed and beg for forgiveness. The images employed of icy coldness, darkness, and aridity depict the bleak future for which the oppressor is heading.

By comparison with his oppressor, he regards himself as happy and care-free. He may have little food or leisure time, but he can eat the little he has with relish and indulge his passions whenever the opportunity presents itself. He is free from the anxiety which afflicts the oppressor and has no potential insurrection to worry about, so that he can eat, laugh, and make love with free abandon: 'My fingers can make life / though i be so wound-riddled weary' (p.38). His regal movements suggest that he is the underdog who shall triumph in the end: 'i stride the earth with the rhythm of my wounds... / fuelled by the fury of love and hate' (p.38). He shall turn his love and hatred to good account and employ it like fuel to wrest power from his oppressor. He is wealthier than his oppressor in the resources of the soul. A similar message of moral superiority among the oppressed runs through 'The Actual Dialogue' in Yakhal' inkomo. In both cases, the Black disadvantaged are, in some ironic sense, masters of the situation. They are the souls of their White oppressors who in persecuting Blacks persecute themselves.

The mother-figure is a recurring motif in the poem. She is his constant source of inspiration and the raison d'etre for his fierce social commitment. He invokes her

spirit on all occasions and is largely motivated by his concern for her welfare. He has abiding memories of her years of drudgery. The mother, an earth-figure, represents the stability of love in the bitterness of his life. Her love cushions and sustains him, so that future turmoil holds little threat for him. He can bear it with his mother's equanimity, who has let him into the secret of her 'rhythmic gait which bore insults' (p.41). She is a reassuring figure in any crisis situation who soothes and gives him strength. On another level, she symbolizes fertility, productivity, and creativity. She is associated with the soil, the seeds, and fruit. She guards life, making sure life continues from one era to another. She is the heroine of continuance.

Serote weaves together images of growth and motion to suggest progress towards freedom. The river meanders towards and empties itself into the sea. He is that river, flowing towards fulfilment's lake and then evaporating to become one with the air. In his progress, he can neither be pinned down nor contained. At every stage of his development, he yearns to grow further still. He is like 'the little child amazed by the height of the adults' (p.43). When that child becomes an adult, he is still not satisfied and remains 'wonder-struck by the distance of the sky / and the stars' (p.43). He yearns for release and describes himself as the thirst that can only be quenched by freedom.

Hatred and frustration crop up repeatedly and he is caught in a constant struggle against them. He walks the streets of Alexandra gripped by a feeling of futility. In frustration, he renounces Alexandra: 'these bloody streets can vanish to hell / i don't care' (p.45). His frustration and renunciation are ominous signs of his desperation which is setting in. He feels that his efforts to effect reconciliation and reform have been futile. He warns repeatedly against looming disaster and paints gruesome scenes of the suffering which he hopes can be averted. 'I could hear the footsteps of tears coming to me,' he says, expressing his vision of impending disaster, 'where babies die like flies / where men fall walking their minds torn

beyond sobriety' (p.44).

A picture of the frustrating conditions which lead him to desperation emerges from the poem. 'Dirty, dusty, muddy, bloody' are some of the words used to describe Alexandra, whose streets, he says, 'weave in and out of my mind to nowhere' (p.45). The latter metaphor shows that life is a dead end for many Blacks who aspire to transcend their miserable lot. Life in the townships is static and moribund. For generations conditions have remained the same. The children are caught in a trap, reduced to nothingness, and cannot make anything out of their lives. They and the dust of the streets are one. He apportioned the blame for this state of affairs on apartheid and states with passion that 'these streets stink like apartheid' (p.46).

In the deprived environment of the townships, only vice, crime, and callousness thrive. 'Only whores know how to breathe in the dust,' he says, 'and only the murderers live long / and the cops shoot first and think after' (p.46). Even the custodians of law and order are guilty of brutality. Symbolically, dark shadows and thick clouds hover above the people whose prospects in life are bleak. In their desperation, grandmothers pray all night and the fact that they are still able to pray is interpreted as a hopeful sign rather than an expression of resignation. 'Maybe their red hearts have hope,' he suggests, 'the last secret of the wretched' (p.47). But it is a desperate hope. More positive action is needed to which the poet pledges himself, when he says: 'i am the wound of this earth / which will turn the river red' (p.47). The emancipation of Black people will come through selfless, dedicated revolutionaries who are prepared to lay down their lives for others.

He is a patriot who identifies himself with the earth, dust, trees, grass, and rocks. His commitment is strong enough to sustain him through a protracted struggle, so that he does not believe that he shall remain subdued forever in his own motherland: 'i cannot be tamed on this my beloved earth... / i have a long thirst for freedom' (p.48). Sometimes his mood changes, like the river which 'curls and turns and folds and bends and breaks' (p.51).

Hopefulness and despondency alternate, compelling him to admit that he has been 'ravaged by conflicts like wood torn by ants' (p.49). Self-pity and world-weariness occasionally take possession of him, when he feels like a person 'drowning, suffocating, crushed and smashed' (p.50). His dejection gives way to love and hatred, which are forms of more positive energy. He has lived with and has been sustained alternately by love and hatred: 'I know them like the fish know the sea' (p.51). Despite his emotional vacillation, his optimistic vision lingers in the recurring symbol of the river which continues to flow inexorably towards the sea. The sea becomes a symbol of freedom and boundlessness. The sea is also the vast container of all man's aspirations and frustrations, his hopes and fears, and holds hope for his fulfilment. 'The strands of the poem are collected in the sea, which contains both life and destruction,' as William Pretorius observes, 'and represents a release into mystical awareness that transcends sordid reality.'<sup>41</sup>

No Baby Must Weep deals exhaustively with growing up in the ghetto, with the poet-narrator's alienation, and with his quest for freedom and fulfilment. Serote employs three major symbols to develop his themes: his mother, the river, and the sea. He describes the mystical experiences which convey his vision of the future in which the oppressed will emerge victorious. The most successful sections of his poem are those which deal with his childhood. His evocation of township scenes is vivid. In the metaphysical sections, he fails to sustain our interest to the end. The repetition used in places to emphasize emotional intensity tends to dissipate tautness through monotony and blunts the mental agony he wishes to convey. There is a lack of a systematic treatment of the main themes, which are interwoven in a way that suggests that at times the poet is rambling without adequate control over his subject-matter. However, Serote succeeds in leaving a lingering impression of hope mingled with despair, sorrow, confusion, and estrangement. No Baby Must Weep is no mean achievement. As Mandlenkosi Langa wrote in his review of the book: 'To retain a single theme - a coherent thought structure - for such a length... is

itself no mean feat. The marathon poem, if you want, is written in simple and lyrical language that makes it even more appealing, evocative and memorable.'<sup>42</sup>

BEHOLD MAMA, FLOWERS\*

No Baby Must Weep was followed by an equally long poem, 'Behold Mama, Flowers' written in 1975 'on the road' during the course of Serote's travels to New Orleans and Washington D.C. (p.11). The poem was completed in New York.

The recurrence of the 'road' in the poem signifies Serote's widening intellectual and political horizon. As in No Baby Must Weep, his fountain of enlightenment is life's experiences rather than formal learning. The 'road' denotes a spiritual pilgrimage and a quest for fulfilment. It also represents the path to freedom which Serote, following in the footsteps of Kgositsile, wishes to map out for Blacks everywhere. In the poem, he gives freer rein than in his previous work to his desire to evoke scenes of violence which will be necessary, when all else has failed, to bring about freedom for Black people. The predominant emotions he communicates alternately are fear, sadness, loneliness, estrangement, frustration, hope, resolution, and triumph.

The poem employs the camera technique, so that Serote's imagination flows freely, back and forth, between America and South Africa. He reflects on racism, capitalism, and imperialism in the context of America, South Africa and other parts of the world. The Whites emerge as the dominant race who hold the world in their 'white palms' (p.29). He experiences deep anguish, which is accentuated by his realization of the fact that the world is basically unsympathetic to its 'lost children' like himself (p.11).

In the American scenes, he relives his estrangement in that country. The impressions of his stay in and his

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\*Behold Mama, Flowers, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1978.  
All page references are given after quotations in the text.

attitude towards America are given in an interview with Jaki Seroke in which Serote says:

Because of the political role the United States is playing in the world, I became aware that my decision to go to America was extremely wrong. As a result I took it upon myself not to stay for long. I worked very hard to complete my studies within the given period of two and a half years. As soon as that was finished I packed by bags and I left. I do not regret that decision. I feel that it is one of the healthiest decisions I've ever made in my life. 43

'Behold Mama, Flowers' is partly about Serote's growing awareness of the politically repressive role America is playing in the world.

His political education begins with his observations. He resembles La Guma, Ousmane, and Ngugi in that his politics 'seem as if they have grown out of a shocked response, an instinctive response, to human suffering and not from either library or lecture hall. The human condition is sense, examined and understood; then a politics is embraced to cure seen ills.'<sup>44</sup> He recognizes the same suffering in the eyes of Black people in America and South Africa and sees that the majority of Blacks in these countries wear wan smiles. Their hearts are filled with memories of the oppression and suffering which Serote is convinced they will never allow themselves to forget. He focusses on their suffering and oppression in the hope that he may be able to exhort the people to continue with their struggle to remove the source of their unhappiness. The people must resolve to triumph over their persecutors, 'to live forever' while their adversaries 'wither like unwatered flowers' (p.11). In the end, they shall be able 'to reach out for the sky and the stars' (p.12). His sad memories stick to him like a tick 'when it kills me / having drunk my blood' (p.11). His oppressors appear as brutal and as formidable as the tick. He needs to steel himself against their onslaught and then to devise means to counteract their oppression and exploitation.

In his travels through some of America's large cities, he reflects on the significance of the tall, brightly illuminated structures he sees. He recalls sadly that some unfortunate, poor labourers worked themselves to death to

construct these imposing buildings; others were driven to insanity by construction companies indifferent to their heart-rending screams. He reminds us that these various structures were all watered with the blood, sweat, and tears of the workers. His thoughts leap on to slavery, which produced America's vast wealth. He writes of the numerous slaves, en route from Africa to America, killed and buried at sea, still in their chains. He links slavery in America to labour exploitation in South Africa's gold mines, where multitudes of Black mine workers die frequently when the mines collapse over them:

how can i forget  
that even the skies winked and blinked as the soil fell  
on men digging gold beneath the earth? (p.12)

The blinking and winking stars indicate the widespread indifference to suffering and the connivance of many in the exploitation of others. The poem illustrates the adverse effects of capitalism more effectively than any political treatise on the subject by exposing the toll in human life which the system exacts. Serote pledges himself to fight the evil system in all its manifestations in order to break 'the chains of the rand with its frozen face' and 'the chains of the dollar with its frozen eagle in flight' (p.12). Paul Kruger's face on the rand and the eagle, America's national symbol, are symbols of insensitivity. South Africa and America are cast in the role of the evil giant, called izimu or lelimo in Nguni and Sotho folklore. Capitalism appears as the izimu or lelimo, insensitive to all the suffering engendered and sucking the blood of its victims to the last drop. The lives of Black people are steeped in so much blood, Serote says, that 'our love songs... / are twined in those brutal deaths' (p.37). The recurrence of blood points to the blood money which goes to enrich a few people at the expense of multitudes of others. Capitalists are blood suckers, like the ticks mentioned earlier and the cannibals in folktales. Blood also shows the senseless carnage which came about as a result of White conquest. At the end of the poem, Serote refers to Shaka's and Dingane's defeats, which started the era of dispossession and exploitation in South Africa in the nineteenth century. He recalls the elimination of vast numbers of his people by



colonialists for attempting to resist White conquest and for alleged slackness at work.

The poem shifts to Serote's contemplation of the various options left for Black people in their struggle for freedom. He points out that, given the oppressor's feigned deafness to appeals, the probability of armed uprising against the oppressor cannot be discounted. He believes that the oppressed shall have the last laugh:

our laughter like the thunder which no one can look in  
the face  
will blow eyes out  
for our laughter shall burst out of steel. (p.13)

Steel and thunder indicate the guns and bullets to which the oppressed are likely to resort. The most likely outcome is a pitched battle to the bitter end. The oppressed are at a stage where they will make a last ditch stand, since they have virtually nothing to lose besides their miserable lives. Serote's sentiments find an echo in an open letter written on 6 May 1976, a month before violence erupted in Soweto, to the Prime Minister of South Africa by Desmond Mpilo Tutu, who was the Anglican Dean of Johannesburg: 'I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably. A people can take only so much and no more... A people made desperate by despair, injustice and oppression will use desperate means.'<sup>45</sup>

Despair and sorrow afflict the poet-narrator, who laments the fact that he brings misery and little joy and companionship to all those he professes to love. He is steeped in his own misery and his sorrow rubs on to the others who are made to pay for everything he does. He leaves 'droplets of pus' on the bosoms of the women he makes love to (p.14). The metaphor describes his aggrieved soul. His grief is tied to the fact that, when he went to America, he left behind his wife, his child, his relatives, and all his friends. He was concerned over their welfare and the additional hardships his absence was causing them. At this stage, he had already made up his mind not to return to South Africa. 'How can i forget,' he asks, referring to his

uncertain future, 'that i have never known where to go / on the road of the days to come?' (p.14).

He identifies with the plight of Afro-Americans in a way which resembles Kgositsile's and addresses them as his brothers. He stays up all night listening to their songs of agony, unable to sleep peacefully, tossing and turning 'like a sausage in bubbling cooking oil' (p.14). He seeks solace in music and enjoys jazz and blues, as the frequent mention in his writings of such musicians as John Coltrane, Nina Simone, and others testifies. Black people in America, he says, remind him of 'journeys that were never intended' (p.14). Tossed all over, as a result of the 'insatiable greed' and cruelty of others, their lives, like his, have not followed any clearly conceived, predetermined path (p.42). Their forbears were simply shipped as slaves to America. His own trip to America came about through a combination of fortuitous circumstances. When he had dropped out of school ten years earlier, he had not bargained for the fact that one day he would be able to pursue his education in America. He had tried unsuccessfully to study by correspondence and had then dropped his plans to acquire a formal education. He became like the slaves shipped from Africa to America in that he embarked on a journey that he had never intended to take. He is not happy with the fact that he has become a slave to circumstances. His poem represents his attempts to chart the direction of his own life and he recommends a similar process of self-determination for every Black person in similar circumstances.

He envisages liberation, a future break with the past, at the point of a gun if necessary. 'The sun has to / rise, pulling walls down,' he says (p.15). The rising sun is a symbol of the bright future which must follow the destruction of the existing order. Before a new dispensation is ushered in, Black people need to 'break the walls of oppression' so that they can 'cross the rivers', 'climb the mountains', and 'sail like birds in the sky' (p.27). Great floods are required to purge the earth of all its loathsome flotsam. In the process, enormous pain will have to be borne and human relationships will suffer. But after the

purge, the ordeal will appear like the pains of parturition; the painful experiences of the past will be turned to advantage by the oppressed, who will emerge from their suffering stronger, happier, and wiser. Despite his cheerless depiction of the present, Serote's vision of the future is essentially optimistic.

Serote paints a grim picture of a sadistic world which keeps 'peeling off the little brittle petals my smiles put on my wounds' (p.16). He refers to a number of cases to demonstrate cruelty, injustice, and oppression. First, he describes the murder of one of his friends in cold blood, 'his heart pouring blood out like an angry fountain' (p.16). Next, he describes the predicament of a wife who has children and whose husband has been sentenced to a life term in prison. In South Africa, this form of sentence is most commonly passed against prisoners convicted of political offences. Those who speak up against injustice and oppression are ruthlessly suppressed and left with their 'tongues hanging out / dry and thirsty' (p.17). He mentions the South African government's intolerance of all forms of extra-parliamentary opposition, more specifically, the clamp down on African opposition after Sharpeville. He also recalls torture in prison, under solitary confinement, to which he was once subjected. His list of the Black people's grievances in South Africa includes evictions and the demolition of their homes by government agents. All these are the common experiences of Blacks in South Africa which they can never forget.

As always in Serote, women bear the brunt of the suffering. Their prayers are choked in tears and, as in his early poems, their inability to pray shows their helplessness. In the midst of all this suffering, he feels world-weary and asks: 'Does it matter where we die?' (p.19). He laments the fact that life has become cheap, with human beings reduced to sacrificial bulls and cars treasured more than people. He would like to see an end to all such inhumanity which stifles love, life, and laughter: 'I want to walk with ease, laugh and kiss with a / giggle in my heart' (pp.19-20).

His warning to the oppressor echoes the words of Eldridge Cleaver in Soul on Ice: 'We shall have our manhood.

We shall have it or the earth will be levelled by our attempts to gain it.'<sup>46</sup> Serote returns repeatedly to his warning and shows that Whites refuse to heed all the omens which indicate impending disaster. These portentous signs are represented by the roar of the sea and the raging fire and are reflected in the crimson horizon. His frightening symbolism of rats reeling under the impact of a plague is contrived with the ingenuity of a Camus. 'Everything that you see now,' he warns 'speaks about children who never listened when they were told' (p.21).

He returns to the grievances of Blacks and links South Africa with America and other parts of the world. He invokes the names of various martyrs of the Black people's struggle for freedom: Albert Luthuli, President of the ANC until his death in 1967, who was banished to his home town of Stanger where he began to suffer from failing eyesight and hearing and was killed in rainy weather trying to cross a railway line near his home; and Mangaliso Sobukwe, President General of the PAC until his death in 1978, who was sentenced to three years in 1960 and held by special decree for two further three-year terms until released in 1969 suffering from terminal cancer and banished to Kimberly. Serote draws American parallels of persecuted Black civil rights leaders: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Jonathan Jackson, and others. Eduardo Mondlane and Amilcar Cabral are also mentioned to give his poem a Pan-African dimension. By drawing parallels between America, South Africa, and other parts of the world where Blacks live under White domination, Serote brings together all the oppressed Blacks in a common revolutionary purpose, an ideal also espoused by Kgositsile. The cross, symbol of persecution and martyrdom, links all the oppressed of African descent in a holy bond. He weaves, not just a Pan-Africanist but, a Black political consciousness into his poem, in the manner of Kgositsile. Serote describes every major achievement in the modern world as being soaked in the blood of people of African descent.

He sees Black people as being their own enemies in several respects. They lack unity and resolution. They are

full of treachery and suffer from excess passivity. They betray one another's fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters; render one another orphans; and are generally threatening to destroy their own nation. They behave like a divided family. In an attempt to remedy their social maladies, Serote warns the people concerned that their treachery and cowardice might follow them to their graves. He suggests that they might even die violently in the hands of those they had set out to betray.

Serote employs dramatic monologue similar to Senghor's in 'Black Woman':

Africa  
i have had no choice but to walk between your thighs  
clad in your blood  
pus  
sweat. (pp.28-29)

But unlike Senghor, in Serote there is little adulation for the oppressed. Treachery and passivity create self-inflicted pain and suffering among them. Serote exposes more than the passivity we find in Senghor's otherwise blameless characters; he exposes their other vices such as their cowardice, greed, and lust for power. He identifies these as serious social evils to which Blacks must address themselves, without fear or romanticization, if they are to attain their freedom from White domination.

Returning to his American experiences, he reveals his homesickness when he writes: 'I know of pain i know of loneliness' and expresses his desire to return home: 'Ah my sister i want to come back / from looking at you from a distance' (p.30). After going through an initial period of cultural shock and alienation, he turns his back on escapist solutions and renounces self-indulgence. He must stop soaking himself in whisky, burning himself with 'the flames of whiskey' (p.31). He also describes his shock at such practices as making babies in test tubes, something he considers unnatural, and is appalled by homosexuality, which he finds widespread in American society. 'I will tell my grandfather a joke,' he says, 'that some of my brothers did kiss with tongue and all / another man and they put the night together' (p.31). He is vulnerable and feels outraged

at the decadence he discovers. His reaction is at once a measure of his sensitivity as well as his naivety. He needs someone to soothe him and craves comfort, companionship, and protection. 'Hold me again and drown me again, i'm weary,' he says, appealing to his sister and caressing her image in his mind. 'Pace this earth again like you used to do / a tiger whose gait tastes its agility' (pp.32-33).

The poem graphically depicts his insecurity and alienated life experiences. The sense of vacuity and insubstantiality to which his life has been reduced is captured in the recurrence of 'shadows', 'wind' and other words which reflect emptiness. He cuts the pitiful figure of a creature that has lost its hole and can only hide in the shadows. His life is as worthless, unproductive, and barren as the sand, which is also used as a symbol of Africa's political bankruptcy and impotence, as in the following lines:

ah, africa, it does matter that you take a look  
and begin to believe that the sahara owns you  
that you own nothing. (p.34)

It is important for Africans to look critically at themselves, take proper stock of their institutions, and act positively. He points out that times have changed from the days of slavery when Blacks trembled in fear and failed to counteract the slave trade. Today they cannot be expected to connive in their own enslavement; they cannot be expected to stand aside and watch their children destroyed. His message to Blacks is that they must rid themselves of their docility and slave mentality. They must not disregard the voices of their militant civil rights leaders. They must heed the defiant message from their musicians like John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Nina Simone, Miriam Makeba, and Letta Mbulu. Serote lists some of the most militant and assertive musicians from America and South Africa who are exemplary and an inspiration to their oppressed people.

Occasionally, he goes through a phase of dejection, as when he says: 'I get weary, sisters, i fear to faint' (p.38). In that mood, he appeals for solidarity from all those who suffer oppression like himself, an appeal contained in his frequent repetition of the phrase 'hold my hand'. He reminds

the oppressed that they cannot simply wish their troubles away. 'We can never be able to turn away,' he says. 'But as we have been able to laugh with tears running down our faces / we can still sing and finish the road' (p.38). Their salvation lies in fighting their common foes as a united force, in showing their solidarity in action and not just in paying lip service to the 'struggle'.

Serote distrusts political rhetoric from whichever quarters. 'Was it not the radio that told us of progress / democracy and change,' he asks with suspicion (p.41). He has learnt from bitter experience that these words are empty slogans uttered by dishonest politicians. In reality, such insincere politicians propose no changes in the position of the underprivileged. As far as he is concerned, there is as much chance of meaningful change taking place through the efforts of such politicians as there is of cotton wool mysteriously changing colour: 'Change may be the day when cotton wool turns red' (p.41). The time for such miracles came and went with Jesus Christ, he says by way of showing that he has as much faith in the professed good intentions of people who hold public office as he has in miracles. The history of Blacks abounds with the names of revolutionaries who were frustrated in their efforts to bring about meaningful change. 'The list, my brother, will grow and grow like death,' he predicts (p.41). Whether in Africa or America, for Blacks the frustrating conditions are fundamentally similar. Afro-Americans may enjoy relative social mobility but Serote entertains no illusions about the tenacity of racism and capitalism in America, where the majority of the Black underprivileged are kept firmly in their place. Serote is not nearly as impressed as Mphahlele with the good fortune of Afro-Americans. 'That the American Negro is miles ahead of the South African Negro is a measure of the relative abundance of opportunity he has enjoyed, such as his South African counterpart could never have,' Mphahlele argues. 'The black American can count his blessings.'<sup>47</sup> Serote's position is closer to Kgositsile's and the radical Afro-Americans of Black Power persuasion such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Angela

Davis, and Eldridge Cleaver.

Serote's metaphorical journey up the hill, from the depths of the sea, across vast expanses of sand, represents a march towards fulfilment. It is a journey that has been attempted countless times before. The trip may have eluded his forebears and broken their backs, but he will follow in their blood spattered footsteps. His inspiration derives from his grandfather, whose 'blood and tears and sweat... / made the grass on the hill green' (p.48). He has as great a stake as any White person in the wealth and prosperity generated through the labour of his forebears. 'I am going to mount that hill,' he says, resolutely asserting his determination to fight for his freedom, dignity, and prosperity. 'I will come there and unload my suitcases' (p.46). The extended metaphor Serote employs to describe his journey echoes the words of popular Negro Spirituals such as 'Down by the River Side' and South African freedom songs such as 'Unzima lomthwalo' (The burden of oppression is heavy).

Serote recreates his spiritual journey confidently and lyrically to underscore the triumphant note on which he predicts the Black struggle is going to culminate, when the stars start popping like 'bursting balloons' and the moon comes tumbling down (p.46). Serote has carried over such apocalyptic images of the overthrow of the oppressive order from No Baby Must Weep, as he has done with the symbols of the sea and the river which he employs in both poems. His message is conveyed with remarkable single-mindedness and consistency. We are even reminded of earlier themes from Yakhal' inkomo and Tsetlo, such as the theme of his unresolved conflict between love and hatred, a conflict which conveys the growing agitation of the oppressed. 'Behold Mama, Flowers' expresses this growing desperation through the images of a 'desperate rat', an 'angry snake', and a cornered tiger (p.47). He reminds his people of their strength which lies in numbers and exhorts them to continue struggling in unity. He reassures them that in their struggle they are as unstoppable as a river and are destined to sweep away every obstacle from their path. As



in his previous poems, his vision is essentially optimistic, despite the enormous hardships that he predicts his people will encounter. Both the painful process and the happy outcome of their struggle are conveyed in the symbols of childbirth and daybreak. His people have a fierce determination to wrench their freedom by force, if necessary, or wreak havoc upon society. 'The hour / is here,' he says aggressively. 'If we can't have a home nobody must have a home' (p.57). The last line of the poem is another triumphant symbolic depiction, as with the symbols of childbirth and daybreak, of victory represented in the image of blooming flowers: 'Behold the flowers, they begin to bloom' (p.61).

The gravity of the subject warrants the protracted discussion devoted to it in the poem. But in the process, Serote dissipates the tension he so skilfully builds in the early pages. He resorts to padding long after the point has been made emphatically. Stripped of excessive repetition, his poem could come down well to not much more than half its present length. The repetition in Serote derives from traditional narrative techniques, as in the intsomi or tsomo (folktale). However, such repetition needs to be skilfully handled if it is not to sink to monotony, and Serote comes dangerously close to being monotonous. Where the traditional storyteller will resort to song, dance, mime, mimicry, and other dramatic devices, Serote has no access to similar devices and he creates no substitutes. The most commendable aspect of the poem is his attempt to link racism with capitalism and imperialism in America, South Africa, and elsewhere. Without being pedantic, he demonstrates by means of drawing parallels the interconnections between events at different times in history and in different parts of the world. The episodes described serve to illuminate one another. He displays a remarkable historical and political imagination. With all its shortcomings, 'Behold Mama, Flowers' is his most ambitious undertaking to date as a poet and a worthy tribute to the resilience of the disadvantaged and oppressed.

Serote's long poems have revived the tradition, absent

since H.I.E. Dhlomo's Valley of a Thousand Hills, of lengthy poems by Blacks from South Africa writing in English. Among the post-Soweto poets his successor has been Ingoapele Madingoane, who has already published a 32-page poem, 'Black Trial', and excerpts from another long one, 'Behold My Son', which was published in Volume 2 Number 4, November/December 1979, in Staffrider.

Serote's remaining poems from Behold Mama Flowers show his empathy for suffering people in various situations, ranging from imprisonment to exile. The poems embrace artists, writers, academics, musicians, freedom fighters, and close acquaintances in distress. A common characteristic among the people to whom these poems are dedicated is their unflagging spirit in the face of adversity. Serote recalls many sombre moments, but he leaves little room for self-pity, defeatism, or pessimism. The outstanding quality of these poems is the indomitable spirit conveyed. Human weakness is acknowledged and transcended, an example of the spirit required to succeed against the oppressive South African regime.

'Eyes in Motion', which opens this section, was written in New York in 1975 and pursues the subject of Serote's secret suffering in isolation, a theme dealt with in 'Behold Mama, Flowers'. From his spiritual exile, he says, 'silence takes over and the shadows move and move' (p.65). In his lonely world in which silence prevails, he follows events with his eyes only without participating. People appear like insubstantial shadows and cannot offer him solace or companionship. He is very much the outsider here and there is no point of contact. Amidst all the bustle of activity in New York he feels left out, nursing his loneliness like a wound that requires constant attention.

'Poem: On Distances', which continues to examine his alienation, is dedicated to Thami Mnyele, the artist who designed all the covers of Serote's collections and is a member of MEDU Art Ensemble. In this poem, Serote again expresses his feeling of isolation, rejection, and spiritual

torment. 'Can't a man rest once in his life?' he asks, appealing for some measure of freedom and peace of mind (p.66). He refuses to indulge himself any further in activities that can be construed as escapist. Through sexual symbolism, he reiterates a point made in 'Behold Mama, Flowers' concerning the way he feels as though he had some contagious disease. 'I leave clots of blood from my wounds / on the breasts of these women,' he says (p.66). The sense of contamination which he feels is a measure of his alienation from his fellow human beings. He has tried to seek solace from sex but the experience turned sour on him, an example which shows that escapism is not a satisfactory solution to his problems. He views his vulnerability and persecution as being worse than a bird's and wants a way to ward off the persecution, so that he can assuage his soul and realize himself:

i keep paving love away as if it were smoke coming into  
my eyes  
i keeping dart my eyes  
seeking a tree that i can settle on  
but even birds, they do stretch their legs and rest  
their wings.  
(p.66)

There is a faulty construction in the line 'I keeping dart my eyes', which should read as 'I keep darting my eyes'. As it stands, it is neither a bilingual nor a deliberate distortion for dramatic effect. Despite such minor slips, the poem is a powerful expression of mental agony.

'For those of us who make music', written in New York in 1975, expresses other dimensions of the problem of mental agony. The poem is dedicated to Jonas Mosa Gwangwa, the jazz trombonist from Soweto who left South Africa with King Kong in 1961 and settled in America. Serote notes that, despite his moderate success in America, the musician is plagued by a sense of insecurity. Anguish, arising out of this basic insecurity, is the keynote sounded in the poem. Images of vulnerability and torment stand out. 'And destined for the mad hoofs' is a metaphor that forbodes calamity (p.67). Anguish deriving from torture is conveyed through a simile which likens the victim's suffering to that of a worm roasting in the hot earth. Despite manifestations of

hopelessness in the situation, the poem characteristically ends on a triumphant, if slightly morbid, note for the musician: 'You ride the hour like death rides life' (p.67). Gwangwa, who survived a car accident in Angola in 1980, settled in Botswana in 1977 and became a member of the music unit of MEDU.

'Notes for a Fighter', written in London in July 1975 and first published in the PELCULEF Newsletter in October 1977, is a similar dedication to the Gwangwa poem and was written for the artist Dumile Feni. The esteem in which Serote holds Dumile Feni is again made evident in the short story, 'When Rebecca Fell', which is a descriptive encounter with the artist, as well as in such poems as 'Hell, Well Heaven'. Other similar tributes in Behold Mama, Flowers to various personalities are: 'Modes of Introits from Familiar Sights', written in New York in 1975 and dedicated to his brothers, Thibi, who lives in exile in Botswana, and Thabo; 'Matshidiso: Past Footsteps', written in Denver, Colorado, in June 1975 for his sister; 'Child of the Song', also written from New York in 1975 for James Matthews; and 'Shadows in Motion', written in Berkley in 1975 for Ezekiel Mphahlele, who was living in exile in America at the time.

Besides the poems dedicated to various individuals, the rest of the poems in Behold Mama, Flowers are written for the mass of struggling, suffering humanity. 'When Lights Go Out' and 'Heat and Sweat', both written in 1975 in New York, are conceived in this collective fashion.

'When Lights Go Out' is dedicated to political prisoners in South Africa, after the manner of Dennis Brutus's prison poems. As Brutus and La Guma often do, Serote suggests that his freedom is meaningless and incomplete while his fellow Blacks remain in captivity in South Africa. Putting himself in the position of the prisoners, he postulates several questions which indicate that his heart is with the prisoners: 'how does it feel to be you / to be watching and waiting' (p.69). Two factors emerge which illustrate how imprisonment weighs heavily on the minds of the prisoners. In the first instance, time seems to drag on endlessly when one is in prison. In Letters to Martha, Brutus describes imprisonment as being 'embalmed in time' or living in 'the greyness of

isolated time'.<sup>48</sup> Both Brutus and Serote emphasize the tyranny of time on the minds of the prisoners. The second significant factor is the realization by the prisoners that little has been accomplished and their fears that they may have sacrificed their lives in vain. Memories of the life they once led plague them and, as despondency sets in, their hopes for emancipation diminish. The optimism of every political prisoner is eroded. 'You alone know,' Serote writes about the demoralizing effect of prison upon each person, 'that once there were hopes / that once the footsteps of the people sounded on the horizon' (p.69). Everything appears to have come to a standstill and a deathly silence reigns. Under the circumstances, the prisoners need to steel themselves against the psychological onslaught of imprisonment. They need to redeem their hopes, to remind themselves that their sacrifices and the martyrdom of all the other freedom fighters have not been futile.

Characteristically in Serote, we are repeatedly shown how in the end the positive attributes of the people triumph over life-denying forces. 'So one day hope begins to walk again,' Serote says in explaining the subsequent redemption of the prisoners from their apathy and hopelessness, 'it whispers about the twisted corpses that we saw / sprawled across the streets' (p.70). The corpses sprawled in the streets are the bodies of Black people killed in trying to protest against apartheid, as in Sharpeville. Against such brutality from the state, Serote asserts that 'it is when there is no hope, that hope begins to walk again', a statement which testifies to the indomitable nature of the human spirit (p.70). His message for freedom fighters and the political prisoners is that, in order to avoid being broken down completely by the system, they must never allow their spirits to flag permanently. As a former political detainee, he knows the importance in prison of steeling oneself against intimidation and endeavouring to keep one's morale relatively high. The humanity of the prisoners and their sanity rest on their success in warding off all demoralizing influences. 'When Lights Go Out' is Serote's first published poem to tackle prison conditions directly

and to relate prison conditions to the countrywide situation, in the manner of Brutus and La Guma.

On the other hand, 'Heat and Sweat' is addressed to every despondent person, in and out of prison. It is written 'for sisters and brothers who may be weary' (p.71). Serote appeals for reserves of moral strength from the oppressed and exhorts them, not to suffer patiently but, to resort to spoil tactics, if all else fails, so that 'if we don't get there / nobody must' (p.72). In A Wreath for Udomo, Peter Abrahams spells out more explicitly the type of destructive tactics the oppressed are often compelled to adopt, when he writes: 'It is the traditional function of the most noble and most heroic sons and daughters of an invaded and occupied people that they should harass the enemy, blow up his bridges and trains, cut his communications, put sand into his machines. It is only the psychologically enslaved or the traitors who behave otherwise. We must be negative and destructive until we are free!'<sup>49</sup> Serote recommends such tactics, where peaceful means of persuasion have failed. He has become convinced that negotiation and persuasion have failed in South Africa. In 'Heat and Sweat', words like 'hold' and 'glue' emphasize the tenacity with which the oppressed need to cling to their objective to be free; while the motion, heat, and sweat depicted in the poem signify the tremendous exertion required to carry on with the struggle. He also exhorts his people, particularly the young, to learn the old songs of their people, songs which are endowed with the power to soothe, guide, and inspire. These old songs possess 'the prowess of our mother's back / and the eloquence of our grandmother's foresight' (p.71). The musical metaphor refers to time-honoured African traditions, such as the people's communal outlook and their strong family ties, which have enabled them from time immemorial to withstand adversity by sharing all their burdens. Tradition can be a unifying factor and the success of the liberation struggle rests on the people's firm resolve and their solidarity in action.

'Song of Experience' makes a fitting ending to a discussion of Behold Mama, Flowers, as it was written later

than the other poems in the collection. It was written at the beginning of 1976 in Francistown, Botswana, near the Limpopo river, which features prominently in the poem, and demonstrates Serote's change of heart in the light of his bitter experiences. As indicated by his call to arms, he has lost faith in the likelihood of a peaceful settlement to South Africa's race problem. His mind is made up and his long-dragging conflict has been resolved, so that he no longer vacillates between love and hatred, peace and war.

'Song of Experience' is dedicated to the Black Consciousness leaders: Barney Pityana, Aubrey Mokoape, Strinivasa Moodley, and Sathasivan Cooper. At the time the poem was written, Pityana, who was to flee to exile in 1978, was serving a five-year banning order, restricting him to the magisterial district of Port Elizabeth. The other three were facing charges, in the case against the SASO Nine, under the Terrorism and the Suppression of Communism Acts. The fate of all these founding leaders of Black Consciousness demonstrated to Serote that the policy of open politics and the peaceful tactics adopted by SASO and the BPC had failed to produce all the desired effects. The state was not going to brook any opposition which threatened to upset the status quo but remained as adamant as ever, determined to pursue its racist policies. In such a hostile political climate, Serote turned away from advocating peaceful transition to majority rule. As he points out in the poem, the experiences of Sharpeville, the Congo, Angola, and wherever White settlers had been firmly entrenched had borne out the fact that they could only be dislodged by force.

Part I of 'Song of Experience' links oppression in the present to the early history of White colonialism. Serote describes the pioneer White colonialists as having been callous in their dealings with the indigenous people and denounces the Whites for spreading 'a merciless civilization... / which knew nothing about generosity' (p.75). Turning to the present, he views Black Consciousness as an important development in plugging the political gap created by bannings, mass arrests, and exile after Sharpeville. He reminds us that the founders of Black Consciousness 'came

and found a blank space' (p.75). But they were impotent to effect change in South Africa, where traditionally Black people's demands are met with gun shots. 'Do you see how in the light of South Africa's day,' he asks, cautioning against brutal response from the government, 'when a speech tries to come out / only blood keeps dripping through the lips?' (p.76).

Part 2, which is subtitled 'The Agony', describes subdued Blacks in the early phase of their conquest and the spate of repressive legislation enacted by succeeding White administrators to keep Blacks in check. The hoe and the bible, which are both mentioned in the poem, represent joint state and church enterprise in the subjugation of Blacks. After reminding his people of their long history of suffering, he equates their agony to the pains of giving birth. The prominence of the symbolism of childbirth in Serote bears witness to his optimism about the success of the struggle for liberation.

In the third section, subtitled 'We Choose the Weapons', Serote opts for the bullet by declaring that 'the water of the river limpopo swallows in choking fashion / the song of the bullet' (p.77). The Limpopo valley, on South Africa's northern border with Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique is ideal territory for guerrillas infiltrating into South Africa. Serote predicts an upsurge of guerrilla warfare, bloodshed, and death in the area. 'The moon that stares at these waters is now bloodshot,' he says. 'Here on these banks death is alive' (p.77). Death appears in the guise of a deranged man at loggerheads with joy and peace. Serote depicts the ensuing battle as a life and death struggle: 'Either we live or die' (p.78). He finds it remarkable that before he never fully accepted the inevitability of resorting to force to liberate Blacks. 'How could we have existed so long?' he asks incredulously, referring to the suffering Blacks have had to bear and to their reluctance to take up arms against their oppressors (p.78). He demonstrates that their drift towards violence has not been of their own making, a point which finds amplification in Anthony Sampson, who writes: 'Only the impact of the white man has forced



Africans to regard themselves as a single race, and to develop an African nationalism and self-consciousness as a reaction and protection against White domination.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, White intransigence and brutality have driven the Black freedom fighters to contemplate taking up arms against the apartheid state. Once taken, the choice is as regrettable as it is irrevocable and ushers in what Serote describes as 'the day we never intended to see' (p.78). In this new phase of the struggle, Serote believes that Blacks will dictate the pace and choose the weapons.

The poems in Part 2 of Behold Mama, Flowers are more successful than his long poem in Part I. The shorter poems are more tightly organized and less inclined to rambling and repetition. Most of the shorter poems are tributes to people Serote admires, who are caught in difficult situations which call upon their ingenuity and reserves of moral strength. He admires their ability to function undeterred by past or present setbacks. Anguish leaves tell-tale scars on their souls but never results in their complete spiritual collapse. They confront every challenge in life heroically, with admirable resilience. Serote holds them up as living examples of the positive spirit Black freedom fighters require to triumph.

The poems in this collection constantly allude to the womb, to trees, and plants, as symbols of fecundity and creativity. The symbols are chosen from elements which generate or sustain life. The liberation struggle itself is presented as a creative activity for the restoration of human life and dignity. The ever-flowing river appears in a number of the poems to suggest irreversibility and invincibility, as do the footsteps of the oppressed people approaching from a great distance and drawing nearer.

Serote does not cherish his life while countless Blacks remain under White domination. He did not find life pleasant in America, instead America made his alienation worse, as he explained in his interview with Seroke:

I am from an oppressed community where we are told that our culture is backward. The only way out of barbarism, we are told, is to interact with 'civilised' communities. We are inescapably hammered to believe in this. I had this inclination when I left for the United States. Perhaps I should add here that I had read a lot

about America and was extremely suspicious of influence from the Western world. For the six years that I have been away from home my most valuable period has been since I came to Botswana. I feel that my stay in the USA was a total waste of time. I was not dedicated there at all. On the side-line I studied the art of film-making but realised that one could easily make pornographic films which had nothing to do with the life of people where I come from. 5!

Serote discovered that, in order to find himself, first he had to reject White definitions of himself and then relate to his own people and finally immerse himself in their struggle for liberation. Not since Senghor's New York poems do we find equally graphic poems of alienation by an African writing from New York. As in Senghor, Serote's poems discredit Western civilization and equate its values to exploitative practices of every description. Serote's analysis of White civilization as being built on the exploitation of Black people derives from Black Power leaders such as Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Cleaver whose writings Serote had read. Serote's major achievement in Behold Mama, Flowers lies in his success in exposing modern man's spiritual bankruptcy, his decadence, and his disregard for healthy human values and relationships.

#### THE SOWETO POEMS

The uprising in Soweto and its aftermath provided the most significant series of events after Serote returned from America to settle in Botswana. The events of 1976/77 in South Africa were in many respects a repetition of Sharpeville. Demonstrations against injustice and oppression were met with brutal suppression, culminating in many Black Consciousness organisations being declared unlawful in October 1977. The other major event which shaped Serote's Soweto poems was the death of Steve Biko in police detention on 12 September 1977. These events gave rise to the new diaspora, when large numbers of school children and their supporters, escaping from possible detention, fled to the independent neighbouring states of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland and swelled the ranks of exiles already resident

in those countries. Underground resistance in South Africa intensified, as it had done following attempts to suppress Black opposition after Sharpeville.

The Soweto poems are a response to events in South Africa and reflect the political pulse of Blacks, especially the victims of Soweto. Serote is the poet turned historical witness. 'We keep the record here,' he says in one of his Soweto poems, 'and give the report straight.'<sup>52</sup> In an address to the Writers' Workshop at the University College of Botswana in January 1978, he elaborated on what he perceived as his new role by stating that, 'Our reality is that we live in the age of the written word, and we know its advantages, like for instance, keeping records.'<sup>53</sup>

In responding to events in South Africa in his Soweto poems, Serote was reacting and creating in the same breath. He saw himself as combining the roles of the political activist and the creative writer. He subscribed fully to Kgosisile's notion that 'the artist is committed to certain values way before sitting in front of a typewriter, humming a tune, picking up a brush and paint, or whatever', so that what the artist produces 'either affirms, proposes or opposes certain values'.<sup>54</sup> In the three-day Writers Workshop, which Serote conducted with the assistance of Mandlenkosi Langa, at the University in Botswana in January 1978, his dual role as a revolutionary and a creative artist came across strongly. He expressed the view that, 'A writer is a God. He makes people in his image. He creates reasons for deaths, or if you like, writers create reasons for life.'<sup>55</sup> Having asserted the primacy of the imagination in the creative process, he also upheld Kgosisile's notion that every writer has an ideological base. The conclusion from Serote's workshop was that 'a writer in Africa is committed... There is no middle way.'<sup>56</sup> He described his new commitment not as being to protest in the old vein against injustice and oppression but, more specifically, as rooting his writings in and joining hands with the forces of liberation waging a guerrilla struggle against racism and exploitation:

I want to suggest that, and I will talk only about a place I am beginning to understand more and more, Southern Africa, children who are being born now, and who were born not too long ago, like 1944 or 57, are

going to deal with a state of war here. Do we ask them, using either poems or novels... or plays or whatever, to teach them how to protest about war, or do we join in the flow of the process which is determined to create a state of mind which is willing to deal, as realistically as possible, with a racial and exploitation war?' 57

Prior to Soweto, 'consciousness' was the key word and the poems attempted to raise social and political awareness, after the fashion of Black Consciousness. The Soweto poems are characterized by an end to ambiguity and by open defiance, reflected on the political front in the increase of political demonstrations and guerrilla insurgency. The Soweto poems evince a diminished predilection for oblique social comment and a marked preference for overt political pronouncements. The titles of the poems from this period either express open defiance or convey his optimistic vision. His confidence as an established poet is reflected in his tendency to go for lengthy poems, though none of them is as long as No Baby Must Weep and 'Behold Mama, Flowers'. His most important poems of this period, 1977-1980, are 'No More Strangers', 'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day', 'Time has run out', 'There Will be a better time', and 'Notes'.\*

'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day' reads like Serote's rededication to the liberation struggle. The poem enunciates his new politico-poetical manifesto and explains the rationale behind it, the political circumstances which make his political and poetical creed eminently reasonable and unavoidable for any serious person caught in his circumstances. The poem was written in September 1978 at Kanye, Botswana, where his wife was teaching at the

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\*'No More Strangers' (hereafter NMS), in Poets to the People, edited by Barry Feinberg, London: Heinemann, 1980, pp.168-170.

'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day' (hereafter BDND), MEDU Newsletter, I, no.1 (March 1979), 14-17.

'Time has run out' MS (hereafter THRO).

'There will be a better time' (hereafter BT), MEDU Newsletter, 1, no.3 (September 1979), 10-15.

'Notes', MEDU Newsletter, 2, no.2 (September 1980), 5-7.

Seepapitso secondary school and where they were resident at the time with their son. It was first published in March 1979 in the first issue of the MEDU Newsletter, which replaced the PELCULEF Newsletter. As an exposition of his beliefs by which he was to write, it deserves to be discussed first, even though written and appearing after 'No More Strangers'.

'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day' takes stock of the current state of affairs in South Africa, defines his political attitude, and sketches his future line of action. His conviction in the course he was to follow, culturally and politically, runs deep. He dedicates himself to a war which to him bears all the characteristics of a holy  Jihad, 'demanding the full fury of our wrath' (BDND, p.16). Paradoxically, beyond the wrath and the fury, the bloodshed and the destruction, he envisages a new day on which reconstruction on solid foundations will follow. First, his society must be purged of all its past impurities, in Fanonesque fashion.

His point of departure in the poem is the Soweto uprising and the emptiness left in the hearts of parents who lost their children. He states that, as other children are born, they will demand to know what happened. He wants the record of his people's struggle for freedom kept straight: 'isandlwana. bulhoek. sharpeville. are milestones of which the latest is soweto' (BDND, p.14). He employs a historical perspective that places Soweto on the long road to freedom. He urges his people to bide their time and exercise great caution in 'choosing their weapons' (BDND, p.15). He reverts to prose and, in terms which are easy to understand, asks his people: 'how much do you know about yourself and where you are and where you are going to: blood river. cato manor. or another type of soweto?' (BDND, p.14). The question is posed as a warning against the type of disasters to be avoided in future. The places mentioned are all associated with disaster where the losses incurred by Blacks against Whites were excessively high. The latest blaze that was Soweto, he further points out, has also been reduced to ashes by the fire that 'swept all

that was', so that 'some saw the smoke and some saw the smotherings' and others 'left their footprints on the cold cold ashes' (BDND, p.15). The contrasting metaphors of blazing fire and cold ashes describe the pattern of Black insurrection and the manner in which it has been quelled on each occasion. He likens the collective experience of suffering among Blacks to a gathering storm. The most recent of these experiences, like the Soweto massacres, are still burning brightly in the memories of Black people, like 'a fresh hot coal from the fire' (BDND, p.15). Despite every setback, in the end every measure ever adopted by those engaged in the struggle will count towards advancing 'the breezing dawn of the new day', which will bring freedom to all the oppressed.

Serote feels betrayed by people such as White liberals and other opportunists who pay lip-service to the struggle. 'We are here,' he says, 'betrayed by everything but ourselves' (BDND, p.15). This is the standpoint advocated by Black Consciousness in declaring that Black people are on their own and must regard themselves and act as such. His previous hope for a negotiated settlement has died. As a result, he has become convinced that Blacks have no alternative but to resort to confrontation and non-collaboration. The only way out for them is to state categorically: 'we cannot work and be exploited / we refuse too to be oppressed' (BDND, p.16). He rejects the kind of diplomatic approach he used to adopt in stating his case. 'We are fighting now,' he says in declaring open warfare against the forces of oppression and exploitation (BDND, p.16).

In his struggles, he is sustained by a belief that 'nothing stays forever, even our oppression or our oppressor' (BDND, p.16). He proclaims confidently that Blacks are ready to take on the might of the South African regime. 'All this time of having nothing' has prepared them (BDND, p.16). That is another way of stating that they have nothing to lose but their chains. Serote feels like a child who has been looked after and taught well and is now ready to take his fate into his own hands and to rid himself of his oppressors. His renewed challenge is directed as much

against apartheid as against Western capitalism and imperialism. 'africa needs south africa,' he states, reverting to prose, his device for making plain statements of facts, 'not america. or europe. because these two have no manners, know nothing about being guests' (BDND, p.16). Against the South African regime in particular and their beneficiaries in general, Black or White, he sounds some pointed warnings, in terms which are reminiscent of the biblical evocation of judgement day:

and day by day one by one we will come  
and the new paths will be started  
and the old will turn to chaos  
the house of law will turn mute  
the house of reigns will turn limp  
and their security will turn blind (BDND, p.17)

By these signs his enemies shall come to know that 'something terrible for them' is around the corner and little children 'somewhere in the mist of death will know / the breezing dawn of the new day' is at hand (BDND, p.17). Accordingly, the people shall 'put brick on brick / and build, a new country' (BDND, p.17). The poem ends on an eschatological note, with the usual visionary elements which complete Serote's gospel of liberation.

'No More Strangers' was the first of Serote's Soweto poems to be published and the earliest known among those discussed in this study. Written in Gaborone in 1977, it first appeared in the PELCULEF Newsletter in October 1977 and subsequently in Barry Feinberg's revised and enlarged edition of Poets to the People in 1980. It was first dramatized at the Gaborone Town Hall on 16 June 1977, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Soweto uprising, by three young South Africans exiled after Soweto: Pat Ledwaba; Thabo Sekano; and Chippo Moagi, who later became a poet under Serote's influence. Under the auspices of the Pelandaba Cultural Effort, the poem was incorporated in 'An Anthem for Liberation', the programme of poetry recital with song, dance, and movement. The programme was reinforced by the inclusion of several girls, among them, Anastasia Kgosidintsi and Beryl Phala, both Batswana girls from the Gaborone Secondary School who stayed with the programme to

the end, and Juanita Ngakane, a young exile from South Africa studying at the Northside Primary School in Gaborone. Ujebe Glenn Masokoane, who later withdrew, Mandlenkosi Langa, and Lefifi Tladi also contributed to the programme with their poems.<sup>58</sup>

'No More Strangers' is written from the perspective of the students and their parents from South Africa's Black residential areas who lived through the horrors of the student-led revolt of 1976/77. Serote recreates the atrocities perpetrated against the young, draws lessons from such experiences and others in the more distant past, and looks forward to a more harmonious future.

The poem recalls the shooting of school children in the Black townships, 'when their little bodies rolled on the streets / rolled as if stones gone mad rolling from the mountains' (NMS, p.169). He holds up these memories of defenceless children charging against the enemy, while everybody else stood by watching, as an indictment against the adults who were passive spectators of the genocide. In contrast to the brave display of the children, the elderly people in the townships cut a pathetic figure of self-pity and in their helplessness resorted to escapist solutions such as taking to 'whiskey, dagga and religions' (NMS, p.168). The poem recalls the lamentable internecine clashes among township residents, while the police wreaked havoc upon the children. These clashes occurred between the students and the migrant labourers who lived in the hostels and were allegedly set upon the children by the police. Serote explains such divisions, deliberately sown within the ranks of the oppressed, in terms of the divide-and-rule tactics employed by the government, 'merciless emissaries who speak foreign tongues / who turned us against each other' (NMS, p.168). The poem evokes the fear, despair, and horror which engulfed the townships, affecting the children and their parents. Serote concludes by saying that, although hostilities may be said to have been terminated and calm restored after Soweto, there are still institutionalized assaults being mounted against Blacks, for example, through



their continued exploitation in White factories. He exposes the deception in the government's attempts to project an image of normality and placidity.

Serote teaches that Blacks must learn to recognize the fact that 'oppressors are guilty forever' (NMS, p.169). The most piquant lesson, though, from the Soweto revolt is that Blacks themselves must be prepared to wrest power from their oppressors, without relying too much on external assistance. Persuasion against a government that is basically intractable has repeatedly failed to yield results. The poem ends by portraying a grim but optimistic picture of the liberation wars ahead:

it will be the trees, the mountains  
it will be the silence of the karroo and its heat  
it will be the song of our rivers  
moving, us one with them  
moving  
the night giving us sanctuaries  
the day witness but silent  
it will be us  
steel-taut to fetch freedom  
and -  
we will tell freedom  
we are no more strangers now (NMS, pp.169-170)

Nature's full complicity in this struggle indicates the righteousness of the Black cause. As in Elizabethan drama, nature is outraged by acts of usurpation such as Whites embark upon in stripping Blacks of their land and political rights. Restoration, though lying in the hands of human agents, is also sanctioned, not so much by the divine order as by nature itself. What Blacks are striving for is, after all, man's natural condition. Blacks are vindicated in taking whatever steps are necessary to restore their natural rights. Morality is on their side, as indicated by the assistance they receive from nature in their guerrilla struggle.

The guerrilla strategy advocated in the poem is expressed in the notion of sanctuary provided by the night and the suspension of hostilities by day. Guerrilla terrain is suggested by the trees, the Karroo bushes, and the mountains; while 'steel-taut' suggests guns. Soweto has eliminated all fear from the oppressed and taught them that they can take on the enemy. Serote suggests that with better

organization Blacks could be assured of victory. They only need to deploy their resources more economically and intelligently and to take advantage of nature so that they can mount a successful guerrilla campaign. 'No More Strangers' set the tone for Serote's writings which followed, so that henceforth he was to insist on drawing lessons from past experiences to determine all future campaigns.

'Time has run out' and 'There will be a better time', both completed in Gaborone in 1979, are complementary poems which introduce a new political dimension into Serote's poetry. In these poems, he explicitly outlines the exact nature of the new dispensation he envisages for Blacks in South Africa, along Marxist - Leninist - Maoist lines. Exile afforded Serote the opportunity to assimilate these socialist influences more fully. Both poems employ the analogy of time and not so much of the flowing river, as in his previous poems, to suggest inevitable change. The decisive action to effect these changes towards a new socialist order has to come principally from Blacks themselves.

'Time has run out' is the longer of the two poems and deals with a variety of themes, both historical and contemporary. Some sections read like a throw-back to the early world of his Alexandra poems. Excerpts from his 14-page typescript of this poem first appeared in the November/December 1979 issue of Staffrider and were reproduced in 1981 in Reconstruction, an anthology of prose and poetry by Black South African authors, edited by Mothobi Mutloatse.

In contrast to the bright future symbolized by dawn in 'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day', 'Time has run out' begins on a note of gloom, suggested by the night which has been a witness to the most hideous deeds perpetrated by the oppressor against the oppressed. Like the bushes, the trees, and the mountains of the previous poems discussed, the night provides the ideal setting for the freedom fighters and has been the traditional ally from olden times of Africans engaged in the wars of resistance against the White invaders. The dark night is associated with Black people to suggest,

as in 'No More Strangers', that conditions have become more favourable for a Black victory, with nature on their side. As surely as night precedes dawn so will it one day usher in a new day for the Black oppressed:

it will see us one day  
when we make our distances  
avenging the debris of our memories  
and in the track of our footsteps will be milestones of  
a new dawn,  
the creating of our land in our hands  
the sun and the moon dancing  
the stars singing. (THRO, p.9)

The anticipated restoration is celebrated through dance and song. The predicted harmony is conveyed through the presentation of day and night as complementary rather than as standing in contradistinction to each other. After night will come day time, 'when new men and women are born', and there shall be work and ample reward for all in the new era, 'when people work and eat' (THRO, p.8). In the present, the night continues to be a witness to many tragedies, Serote reiterates through his dominant symbol of the night.

Past and present struggles are depicted through another recurring Serote metaphor, as part of a long and difficult march towards freedom;

we did make distances  
whose milestones are, as we all know  
broken droplets of blood which are now splashed  
and are scattered on the streets  
on fences  
and on walls of houses we live in -  
on ceilings  
on floors and desks  
even on floors of land-rovers (THRO, p.1)

These lurid scenes describe the persecution of Black people in general and the ghastly murder of Black political detainees in particular, the most notable of which was Steve Biko's death. Serote's poem describes in detail Biko's persecution at the back of a police van and his death from brain concussion sustained when he was beaten by the Security Police. Serote's description of Biko's death is a powerful indictment of the system which condones the methods of torture that are employed by the Security Police in interrogating political detainees. He also condemns, in

stronger terms than in 'A Wish to Eye God', the hypocrisy of Whites who profess to be Christians yet commit such cruel acts. In 'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day', the facts about Biko's death which the state did its best to try and cover up are laid bare in their stark nakedness, like Biko's naked body in the police cell. The effectiveness of Serote's description lies in the minute details evoked ('and then he was naked / and then he was chained on the leg... '), in its touching simplicity, and in his avoidance of emotive language or purely sensational details (THRO, p.2). Without straining for effect, the gruesome details rendered tell their own horrific story. Another significant factor in Serote's handling of Biko's death is that, while he makes Biko's death the focal point, he also makes it clear that Biko's death is only one among numerous others of its kind under South Africa's White minority racist regime. He reminds his readers that, apart from Biko's funeral in Kingwilliamstown, there have been other funerals of equally intelligent Black children 'whose fresh and young blood was spilled in the streets / by fire-power of oppression' (THRO, p.3). He is careful not to propagate any personality cult. At the same time, he wants to show how memories of Biko's death have lingered in people's minds in a manner which could not have been anticipated by those who were responsible for his death. Biko's executioners could not have possibly foreseen that 'the people would claim his battered remains' and that 'he would not be counted among the countless many / who were stolen by these men' (THRO, p.2). In this section of the poem, Serote's objective is to explain the making of the Biko legend and its symbolic significance. Biko lives in the hearts and minds of his people as an inspirational force. The obituary by Serote is like Biko's canonization eulogy.

The link of Biko's death to numerous other deaths of its kind enables Serote to retrace the tragic history of Black people to Soweto, Sharpeville and, further back, to Blood River in 1838 when the Zulu under Dingane were demolished by Piet Retief's Voortrekker squad. In another

section of the poem, Serote refers to the repulsion of the Portuguese along the African coast in the sixteenth century by the indigenous people fighting with spears, bows and arrows. This kind of historical perspective, which Black Consciousness has been accused of lacking, has become increasingly firm in Serote, as when he says:

we did make distances  
from blood river  
to sharpeville to soweto  
we know now  
that oppression has been unmasked and will act true to  
our expectations  
(THRO, pp.4-5)

His poem scans the Black people's history of dispossession and exploitation by Europeans.

The history of European expansion into southern Africa and the resistance offered by the indigenous people provides examples of defeat and triumph. Serote acknowledges that he has learnt as much from the unsuccessful campaigns of the past as he has from the more recent triumphant experiences of Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe. The most enduring lesson from such campaigns has been the fact that suicidal mismatches, whereby Blacks armed only with stones or wielding spears hurled themselves against Whites armed with guns and cannons, must not be allowed to occur again. 'You cannot kill children like cattle and then hope that guns are a monopoly,' he says, warning Whites and urging Blacks to take up arms (THRO, p.3). He advocates methods of full scale guerrilla warfare, similar to those adopted by other southern African states in their fight for independence. He does not completely dismiss the numerous disastrous campaigns of the past waged by his people. He recommends the heroism displayed by his ancestors against the White invaders, 'when great warriors fell... / being proclaimed by love of freedom', but rejects the quixotic madness and the suicidal foolhardiness of taking on men armed with guns with bare hands (THRO, p.7). At least, they did not sit down quietly when robbed of their manhood, as A.C. Jordan puts it. Serote invokes the memory and commends the bravery and sacrifice of those early Black resisters, whom he regards as martyrs of the Black liberation struggle. His heroes include: Makana, the first African

political prisoner on Robben Island in the nineteenth century, who died while trying to escape; Duma Nokwe and Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, who died in 1979 and 1978 respectively and who were in the vanguard of African resistance during the Sharpeville era; Mapetla Mohapi, the Black Consciousness leader killed like Biko in police custody on 15 July 1976; and Hector Peterson, the first child to be killed by the police on 16 June 1976 upon the outbreak of the Soweto upheavals. 'Their blood yields strength to us,' Serote says (THRO, p.7).

In the past, Serote pinned his hopes on a negotiated settlement and viewed the declaration of a full scale war against Whites as being slightly premature. Some of his early poems show him as struggling to suppress his urge to surrender himself to his destructive impulse and hatred and to take up arms against the White establishment. Another of his teachings from his pre-Soweto poems was that Blacks should never allow their past suffering to lapse from their memories, but he did not explain convincingly or state categorically to what useful purpose he thought that Blacks needed to keep such memories alive. The retention of such memories is a recurring subject in Behold Mama, Flowers. In 'Time has run out', Serote explores the subject further and admits that it is not enough to retain such memories for their own sake. 'That is not enough,' he argues. 'Memories don't break chains' (THRO, p.5). Whites in South Africa have proved singularly resistant to international pressure and verbal attacks against apartheid, so that in seeking an alternative solution which is likely to produce the desired effect Serote suggests, obliquely at first, that Blacks should resort to arms. His suggestion comes out from the question: 'My people tell me / what does, what breaks chains?' (THRO, p.5). A few lines later, after presenting the necessity to take up arms as a self-evident conclusion, he makes his proposal more directly: 'Can someone teach us.... how to fight?' (THRO, p.5). His persuasive tone and his subtle build up to an otherwise emotive subject, through suggestion and implication, remove the sting from the proposal and take away the shock which people would normally

feel when asked to take up arms. The military solution at the end of his discourse is presented as an inescapable conclusion and as the only sensible and realistic option left for Blacks.

Serote's conflict between love and hatred, violence and non-violence, dialogue and confrontation, ambiguity and commitment, a conflict which had plagued him from the beginning of his career as a poet, was finally resolved in 'Time has run out'. Such a conflict has become the classical conflict of South African literature and politics, as in Serote, Sepamla, Mattera, and Adam Small. Serote's conflict found resolution through his participation in the liberation struggle. Just as he shows in 'Time has run out' how day and night are complementary, he also demonstrates how his love for freedom, justice, and life impelled him to hate racism, exploitation, and genocide. Explaining how his resentment of oppression led him to espouse revolution, he writes:

Oppression and Revolution  
are related like pus and blood  
one stinks  
the other is fresh (THRO, p.7)

He no longer considers love and hate as being mutually exclusive, but sees the one as naturally flowing from the other. His love for freedom:

hammers hate as if a red-hot iron  
bends  
and bends  
rings into song of commitment (THRO, p.9)

He harnesses the destructive force of fire to constructive purposes, like a blacksmith in a Camara Laye novel. He needs the fire of love to forge a new era out of the detestable present, an era in which 'everyone will read and write' and 'where man, child and woman are eager to learn / not to oppress' (THRO, p.8). Serote's socialist vision unfolds in more detail in the poem and comes out even more forcefully in 'There will be a better time'.

In 'Time has run out', Serote recants his former political ideology (or lack of it), his previous ambiguity, prevarication, and lack of total commitment. He equates his earlier attitude and that of his people to resignation. 'We

knew among other things about us tales of tragedy / which we coated with the ice-and-sugar of our life, humour,' he says. 'It seemed then that we offered / thousands and millions of silences' (THRO, p.10). By consigning all the foibles and iniquities of apartheid to the realm of the ludicrous and outrightly ridiculous, as many people are inclined to do, Blacks in South Africa gradually came to accommodate themselves to the system. When that happened, they became guilty of conniving in their own oppression and exploitation: 'at the mercy of our silence and sweat... america and europe and oppenheimer plucked the flower.' (THRO, p.11) Their problems as Black people were compounded by what Serote describes as 'the cruel things we did to each other where mad we killed each other' (THRO, p.10). He explains that Blacks need to act in unison and to put their fratricidal violence behind them. This section of the poem is like a throwback to the violent and escapist world of his early poems: shebeens, jazz, rape, murder, hospitalization, and imprisonment. He laments what he describes as the outrages Blacks committed against themselves in their frustration, when 'we did amazing things to say simple things' (THRO, p.13).

Finally, Serote declares that the time for his people to sit back, lick their wounds, and cry over their dead is past. Moreover, brutality from Whites has taught them that the only effective way to retaliate is by using gunfire. Blacks have 'learnt by losing children and dying terrible deaths / how to hold a gun and a grenade' (THRO, p.13). As historical witness, Serote places on record the fact that guerrilla warfare has broken out in earnest in South Africa, a fact hardly ever acknowledged in official communiques. 'Guns and grenades are popping blue flames,' he writes. 'Old relations are being erased and our hands are soaked in blood' (THRO, p.13). Blacks are stamping their will on their destiny and asserting their humanity by declaring, in the simplest terms possible, that 'this is our land / it bears our blood and must bear our will' (THRO, p.13). 'We hold the present by its scruff and demand our future' is the positive attitude advocated and the optimistic vision



projected (THRO, p.12). The picture he paints of Blacks, who have time on their side, contrasts sharply with the position of Whites, who are shown as being engaged in a war they can never win. White interests have become irreconcilable with those of the Black majority. As the Whites pray and rally round their laager for a last ditch stand in defence of stolen lands, Blacks create 'blue flames... knowing a new day must come' (THRO, p.14). The struggle may be long and difficult and riddled with many casualties, some caused by Black traitors, but Blacks can rest assured of a resounding victory in the end.

'There will be a Better Time' was completed in Gaborone in May 1979 and first published in the MEDU Newsletter in September of the same year. The poem is addressed to the school children who rebelled in Soweto and other Black residential areas against the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools. Its tone is conversational. Serote fills in the gap in the education of the children by teaching them about their history and culture of resistance, topics which are never dealt with in their schools under Bantu education. He explains such concepts as revolution, solidarity, sacrifice, and socialism in a language the children will understand and absorb. For the record he restates the casus belli which led to the confrontation between Blacks and Whites in 1976: Bantu Education, specifically Afrikaans language instruction, lack of food and other amenities. He dispenses with high flown, technical text book jargon. For instance, the term socialism does not appear anywhere in the poem. Serote portrays the changes that must come in the lives of the people, in their system of government, and mode of production. He gives a clear rationale and exposition why the children must continue to fight for everything that is rightfully theirs, to attain the socialist objectives envisaged in order to create a better time.

The opening of his poem describes the children's purity, innocence, and vulnerability. 'Little', 'clean', 'fresh' are some of the words used to describe their condition. Serote's tone is reassuring, as in the opening

lines of the poem: 'little one / you are here now, you have arrived' (BT, p.10). After their traumatic experiences, the children need reassurance about their safety. Serote acts the elder brother, a role he had quickly come to fill in the lives of the children arriving in exile in Botswana. Serote adds new contrasting images, 'earth' and 'sky', to his customary repertoire of images such as day and night. Such images express the contrast between the Black people's dim past and grim present, on the one hand, and their bright future, on the other hand. The symbol of the sky as goal and destination conveys the lofty ideals which are the driving force behind the revolution. The clear sky also symbolizes the future as a time when everybody will be able to make a clean break with the past in order to build anew.

Serote's simple, unaffected diction and his imagery are well within the range of the high school children who constituted the majority of the demonstrators and the victims of state brutality in the uprising. He describes revolution as a time-consuming process which is as long as the time it takes to traverse the distance between earth and sky. He explains about the dedication, sacrifice, and hard work required to achieve the revolution, in terms which working-class children such as the many who formed the vanguard of the uprising would understand easily:

this revolution  
is in the minds  
of men and women who know lots about freedom  
who work everyday, sometimes at night, at times day  
and night  
(BT, p.10)

Many of the children's parents work in this manner, in the depths of the earth as miners, in White firms as messengers, or in other menial tasks such as Serote describes in the poem. 'They carry the world on their backs', like an African mother carrying her offspring (BT, p.10). Serote's poem employs such local and traditional images which would make sense to his Black audience.

As in classical socialist dogma, Serote links the revolution to the working class, although he expresses his own views on the subject and rarely yields to the temptation to substitute political clichés and jargon for

his own feelings. He describes the future socialist order as a world in which all the children will be able to eat and go to school, a world in which 'all the children are a pride of their mothers and fathers' and 'the state is very proud of its children' (BT, p.10). The parent-child bond is designed to appeal to the children who have been unceremoniously separated from their parents. Education, state brutality, and food are actual grievances about which the children feel strongly. The examples used in the poem derive from the children's circumstances. In trying to mobilize the children, Serote lays emphasis on their educational, recreational, and other requirements. They are deprived children who need reassurance that in future knowledge shall be made 'the wealth of all human beings', so that children can get time to play, 'learn / work and live long' (BT, p.11). Further, in the welfare state Serote envisages, science and technology will be harnessed for the benefit of everybody, to create comfort, leisure, security, and prosperity for the old and the young alike. Serote's explanation of the technological benefits and the health and educational reforms contemplated is supplied in the language of African peasants, whom Serote regards as being among the first people who should benefit from any reforms or technological innovations. Technology is 'for all of us / to take rivers to places where there is no rain', Serote says, so that 'people can grow vegetables to eat / and look after their cattle and sheep and goats' (BT, p.11).

The poem also discusses the means necessary to achieve the socialist objectives outlined. Serote explains that the benefits described can only be brought about through a revolution carried out by self-less, dedicated people like the children's forebears who tried to withstand White encroachment. He urges the children to emulate the example of their brave ancestors and explains the solidarity necessary to bring about the revolution. The unity in action which he advocates is conveyed metaphorically through singing or drilling together. The heroes of the past 'talked with one voice as if they were singing / they

walked the same way as if they were drilling' (BT, p.11). Drilling is an army practice, so that by using such subtle means Serote hints at the military action required to secure the gains described. In another section of the same poem he advocates sabotage, so that 'no-one will have plenty when we have nothing' (BT, p.14). In addition, he says that, in order that Black people may speak with a common voice and engage in consented action, they must first remove all 'backward thoughts' from their minds (BT, p.11). For instance, narrow ethnic loyalties must yield to broader nationalist sentiments; avaricious practices and capitalist aspirations must give way to altruistic ideals of scientific socialism. However, Serote never uses such terms, confining himself at all times to the actual language used by ordinary people. His message that society must be purged of its retrogressive practices, 'like we do with dirty clothes'<sup>59</sup>, runs through his poem, as does his call for common action against apartheid (BT, p.12). He calls on Blacks to register a mass 'No' against 'those who ride on others', those who exploit and oppress others (BT, p.12). He does not mince his words either in his denunciation of Blacks who stand in the way of progress. He propounds the Machiavellian view that dissenters who threaten the revolution must be liquidated, as the end fully justifies the means. He has faith in the ultimate triumph of his people over the forces of oppression. The objectives of the vast majority of the people, pursued with relentlessness, must be realized to create a better time. He says about the strong will of his people and his belief in their invincibility:

if the we is the most of us  
and the most of us is the will  
the will to say no!  
when the most of us will create a better time  
there will be a better time (BT, p.12)

Serote attempts to jerk the young from their despondency by telling them about their heroic past, which they may have heard very little about from their formal and distorted system of education. 'We have a history,' he asserts. 'This is a big land as big as the sky,' he adds, echoing the sentiments of the Freedom Charter, the ANC's blueprint for a multiracial South Africa. 'All of us can

have enough from this land' (BT, p.14). Reducing the argument to its most elementary terms, he says:

we use the past we learnt like that  
we say grandpa and pa and ma come from here  
we are born here, so we are here  
here is our land (BT, p.12)

His argument implies that Blacks have a right to land and other benefits which accrue from citizenship. Their task is to assert their rights in the land of their birth, like their ancestors who died fighting for their land. To die like them, with honour, is preferable to living in ignominy. Their ancestors died like martyrs and are remembered with pride by their descendants today. Their ideals inspire succeeding generations, even though their European conquerors thought to scare their descendants for all time from ever raising their voices in demand of their rights in the land of their birth. These invaders did not know that 'one no from our warriors / made many nos among us' (BT, p.13). Serote stirs the heroic spirit of the past among the youth and advocates mass resistance, as of old. The song of the past echoes in the present. 'The song is here now / from voices of many warriors,' he says and appeals to the youth to pick up the strains of the old song of resistance and sing with one voice: 'No more of the bad times' (BT, p.13). The poem ends by reiterating the Nietzschean principle that people exert their historical will to create a better time, through self-assertion. Exile, imprisonment, and even the death of some of the people engaged in the liberation struggle can have no power to subdue people permanently for as long as they continue to make a mass stand. When people take their destiny into their own hands, 'there will be a better time made by us' (BT, p.15).<sup>60</sup>

Serote's 'glorification of the heroic past', as Vernie February observes in his discussion of a similar trend in Afrikaans literature written by Whites, 'is a necessary adjunct to powerful myth formation' among the oppressed.<sup>61</sup> As in Negritude poetry, Serote's Soweto poems succeed in forging an accessible myth to boost the morale of Black people engaged in the struggle for liberation. 'There will

be a better time' is not a political tract, though strongly political. Serote has little use for jargon, slogans, or time-worn images. He writes with deep conviction on a subject which he has come to espouse as the most important in the lives of Black people in South Africa. His poem is written for the young, to motivate them and to explain to them certain concepts often made unnecessarily difficult in learned political treatises. He demystifies such concepts by using simple language and localised or traditional images and examples. Throughout the poem he manages to sustain a child-like viewpoint.

'Notes' is the last of Serote's poems discussed. It first appeared in September 1980 in Volume 2 Number 2 of the MEDUNewsletter and provides some kind of epilogue to Serote's Soweto poems. He reviews the past, in which Blacks have been plagued by dejection and hopelessness, and looks at the present, with the guerrilla struggle already steaming ahead at full throttle. He projects the future as a period of great promise and reconstruction. 'Notes' also provides a slightly different emphasis on the development of his political credo. His new conviction is that, although history, on which he dwells at some length in the previous poems discussed, may have provided Black people with their raison d'etre for staking their claim upon South Africa, only guerrilla warfare provides the means for Blacks to wrest power from Whites and reclaim their historical rights.

'Notes' employs several major symbols, some of them old and others new, to portray the bleak conditions of life among the oppressed, their struggle, and their imminent victory. The past is associated with the dark night, 'moonless and starless' (Notes, p,6). The image is common in Serote and goes back to his earliest poems, like 'The Actual Dialogue' from Yakhal' inkomo. 'The snare of spider webs' is a new symbol which depicts a trap, intimidation, and enslavement under apartheid (Notes, p.5). Drought is another new symbol and depicts destitution and hopelessness. But neither of these new symbols are sustained throughout the poem. Serote's characteristic method is to explore his symbols further in succeeding poems. As in his previous

poems, approaching footsteps symbolize the struggle and the coming of freedom, the song represents common action, and the new day is the approaching era of independence and reconstruction.

Serote traces political developments to the past, when the decision to launch a full scale guerrilla war was taken, when 'a secret was hatched / a secret which now changes our gait and sight' (Notes, p.5). Freedom is in sight and the people's gait testifies to their new-found confidence in themselves. The success of some of their military operations has restored their hope and faith. Serote corrects any erroneous impressions which the titles of his two previous poems discussed may have created in the minds of his readers. 'Time has run out' and 'There will be a better time', with their emphasis on change as an inevitable process, could easily be construed to mean that Blacks are predestined to attain their freedom, irrespective of the effort which they themselves put into their struggle. To advance the deterministic view too strongly that history is on their side may reinforce such impressions and lead to resignation. Serote teaches that 'a day is not made by time only... / it is made by us' and warns against the belief that matters will right themselves somehow (Notes, p.5). His emphasis is on action from the ranks of the oppressed to bring about the contemplated changes and not on the inevitability of change, as such.

Besides the examples of Biko and the Soweto uprising, Serote cites the Goch Street shootings in Johannesburg on 13 June 1977 to illustrate the kind of action required in the new phase of the struggle. In Goch Street, an exchange of gunfire between guerrillas and Whites resulted in the death of two Whites. One of the guerrilla insurgents involved, Solomon Mahlangu, whom Serote mentions in the poem, was sentenced to death for the offence. His bravery elicits admiration from the poet, who believes that the Afrikaner establishment has been shaken to its foundations by such incidents. The fear which is described by Alan Paton in Cry, the Beloved Country, the fear under which White South Africa is said to live, has increased to a

nightmarish pitch and the Whites are caught in the nightmare. Their discomfiture and insecurity derive from the intensification of the guerrilla war in which even police stations are sometimes attacked. Whites find themselves confronted with the same kind of snares they used to lay all along the path of Black people.

In contrast to the tension that exists among Whites, Blacks, who have become accustomed to the night, no longer stumble in the familiar terrain of the night but operate without hindrances, recognizing one another in the dark and, by implication, being able to spot the enemy. However, the enemy is not in a position to see them. Serote refers to the attacks by Black youths on the saracens, called hippos, which patrolled the streets of Soweto during the uprising: 'We learnt to trip the hippo in the night' (Notes, p.5). Blacks have absorbed the silence, secretiveness, and fearsome nature of the night from which the uninitiated are excluded.

Towards the close of his poem, Serote turns to the future, through his customary image of daybreak. When daylight unfolds, the victorious bands of guerrillas will greet the new day with a great outburst of song, 'a song / in love with freedom', and the lives of 'the millions who starved' will be transformed (Notes, p.6-7). Their success in battle will bring a new lease on life to the Black disadvantaged and spur them on to undertake reconstruction. They will start creating 'an eternal day' in which they can live freely and 'work and build the country' (Notes, p.7). In the poem, the past is shown as giving rise to the present and the future; the future will be what the people want to make of it. The 'crushing and smashing' of oppressive and exploitative structures must give rise to socialist reconstruction (Notes, p.7). Serote forecasts a period of purgation by fire, followed by an era of reconstruction from the ashes of the old. The end of the poem completes the ritualistic cycle.

Serote's Soweto poems are pre-occupied with the struggle for liberation. He propagates and actively promotes 'a culture of resistance', a phrase he uses in 'Time has run



out' (THRO, p.4). He engages culture in the pursuit of his political objectives. Mandlenkosi Langa describes Serote's role and the task his poems fulfil in the liberation struggle as follows: 'It is often said that the role of an artist in an oppressed place is to sensitize the oppressed to their oppressive surroundings, sharpen their consciousness and shape the mode of their response.'<sup>62</sup> Serote has merged culture with politics and fused his poetic vision with his political vocation, in the service of the liberation struggle.

His Soweto poems are closely tied to political events as they unfold in South Africa, so that in the poems he often employs what February describes as 'the ready-made situation which is dramatically always at hand' in societies plagued by racial conflict.<sup>63</sup> The pattern of life in South Africa is unvarying for the oppressed, so that the sameness of the material available to the politically committed artist in such a situation reflects the stagnation of life in such a society. Serote's Soweto poems tend to be repetitive, thematically and stylistically, and he re-employs the same old symbols and rarely throws in fresh insights into the problem. Where such new insights occur, they usually point in the direction of his political development. His recognition of the fact that since Soweto he has been largely repeating himself may have prompted him to remark, in a letter of 3 August 1980, after the appearance of 'Notes', that he thought he was through with poetry.

Some of the characteristics of his Soweto poems are the inevitable result of integrating his poetic vision with his political commitment. If these faults would seem to have diminished his stature as a lyric poet, his deep commitment has enhanced his reputation as a revolutionary poet. He evokes situations which are familiar to the Black community in South Africa for whom he is writing and which serve to establish a common bond with his people. His Soweto poems are less personal and more significant as statements of the collective revolutionary consciousness of the Black community in South Africa. He has moved away from purely social comment, spiced with side remarks and a few sneak

lines of some political import, to unambiguous political commitment. He has learnt to write forcefully, with sincerity, forthrightness, singleness of purpose, and directness and, as Langa observes, 'without recourse to gimmicks'.<sup>64</sup> 'Writers cannot be tricksters,' Serote says, emphasizing the need for both artistic and political integrity. 'You battle with your creation until it is real.'<sup>65</sup> The reality of the situation, as Serote describes it in the Soweto poems, is that open warfare has broken out between Blacks and Whites in South Africa. Serote takes cognizance of this fact; the poems are intended to mobilize support and build up morale among Blacks. The poems develop from expressing Serote's conviction in the inevitability of change to a recognition of the primacy of self-actuation in bringing about change. He is a visionary poet with a strong urge to communicate his vision in terms which make sense to the Black people he is writing for. To those who share his vision, Serote is the guerrilla poet-cum-prophet come to life. He encourages political consciousness among Blacks, defines and propagates revolutionary changes, and impels Blacks to revolutionary action.

Serote's development has followed four phases, which slightly overlap. The first two stages in his development are charted in his first two collections, Yakhal' inkomo and Tsetlo, and in No Baby Must Weep. The first phase was connected with the cultural revival in the late 1960s. His poems of this period focus on his self-discovery and on the reawakening of the Black community. They also contain elements of the old protest tradition, which are manifested in his poems addressed to the White community, but in general his personal and social concerns over-ride his political pre-occupations. His second phase was contemporaneous with the spread of Black Consciousness in the early 1970s. In this phase, his social, personal, and psychological concerns become as important as his political pre-occupations. The poems repudiate White liberal patronage, assert Black self-determination, and explore Black experience in all its other facets. His self-awareness develops into consciousness of his community and its needs. Identification and conscientization are the key concepts in his poems from this period and his introspection takes the form of meditation over White intransigence and its consequences. He seeks ways to avert escalating conflict and an agonizing dichotomy between love and hate takes hold of him, as his quest for a formula for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in South Africa approaches a point of frustration. Moderation wrestles with militancy but his inner conflict veers more towards embracing militancy and non-collaboration over moderation and negotiation. The new formula for resolving his dichotomy is restated as his love for freedom which fuels his hatred for oppression. His contributions in Black Voices Shout manifest his drift towards Black Power, in which political themes are clearly in the ascendance over predominantly social concerns. The Black Power phase is demonstrated in his poems written from America in Behold Mama, Flowers. The poems have a Pan-Africanist dimension and they also embrace Blacks living under White domination in places such as America. His Soweto poems coincide with his socialist phase, following his exile in Botswana. The Soweto poems are concerned with

the revolution's socialist objectives, its conduct, and its outcome. Serote's poems written between 1969 and 1980 show a shift in emphasis from the personal or psychological, to the descriptive and analytic, and finally to the prescriptive. All the strands are collected in the Soweto poems, in which he finds fulfilment in his commitment to the revolution. His poems are prophetic and penetrating in their depiction of the politics and psychology involved in the accelerating confrontation between Blacks and Whites in South Africa.

CHAPTER THREE

SIPHO SYDNEY SEPAMLA

CRITICAL RESPONSES, LITERARY INFLUENCES, AND  
SEPAMLA'S PREDECESSORS

Despite Sepamla's stature as a poet, his output has received scanty attention in the available studies. In her introductory study of the poets of the post-Sharpeville revival, Nadine Gordimer does not mention Sepamla. When her article, 'New Black Poetry in South Africa', appeared in 1973, however, he was known only for a single contribution, 'To Whom it May Concern', which gave the South African edition of Royston's anthology its title. His work was later to appear regularly in magazines and periodicals in South Africa. Subsequently, Sepamla made great strides, as a poet with a growing international reputation and also as a short story writer, a novelist, and an editor. Four years after Nadine Gordimer's article, however, Arthur Ravenscroft in 'Contemporary Poetry from Black South Africa' still dealt with the same poem, though he did mention Sepamla's first collection, Hurry up to it. This work had appeared in 1975, followed by a second volume, The Blues is you in me, in 1976. In her forthcoming book on Black South African literature in English, based on her doctoral thesis submitted in 1971 at the University of Cape Town, Ursula Barnett confines herself to discussing Sepamla's work as an editor and pays no attention to his poems, even though he now has three collections to his credit, only one of which is banned in South Africa.

Sepamla's first two collections were received with little enthusiasm outside the Black community of South Africa. Richard Rive proclaimed him 'the last of the major poets' of the revival period whose work, though neither 'as strident as Mtshali's nor as bitter as Serote's', was nonetheless more sophisticated in its use of satire as 'a weapon with which to hit hard at the system which tries to reduce him to a reference number'.<sup>1</sup> Although a handful of non-Black critics such as Douglas Livingstone who paid

serious attention to these collections were as favourably impressed as Rive, it was only after the appearance of The Soweto I Love in 1977 that Sepamla received the wide critical acclaim he deserved. Index on Censorship and African Literature Today reviewed The Soweto I Love, which was based on the events which erupted in Soweto in June 1976 and had been banned in South Africa upon its publication. The collection was translated into Dutch and German. Since then his reception and reputation abroad, based on The Soweto I Love, have been favourable and growing.

In Index on Censorship, Christopher Hope wrote: 'Sepamla must be ranked along with Oswald Mtshali and Wally Mongane Serote among what I might call the poets of the new cities.' In his brief assessment, Hope singled out Sepamla from the ranks of what he described as the 'assertive, angry and confused' Black poets in South Africa, not only as a poet of considerable merit but also, as unique among his contemporaries, and observed that 'what sets Sepamla apart from the others... has been a certain wariness of political rhetoric, a most un-South African subtlety'. The same claims can be made for a number of other Black South African poets of the same era such as Njabulo Ndebele and Mandlenkosi Langa. But that does not diminish the validity of Hope's observation about Sepamla's admirable qualities as a poet. Hope further described Sepamla's work as evincing 'a nervy urban sensibility, perfectly suited to finding chinks in the regime's fibrous armour and thrusting in his spear'. He saw Sepamla's poetry as some kind of double-edged sword which is aimed at bringing out not only 'the pains of the blacks under apartheid, but articulates, too, the white nightmare of dispossession, often imagined, always expected, forever abjured'.<sup>2</sup> He admired Sepamla's characteristic humour, by which the poet exposes the absurdities of apartheid, and his effective use of what Douglas Livingstone has described as 'the deadpan, factual, throw-away line'.<sup>3</sup>

In a review in African Literature Today, Vernie February contends that Sepamla owes his rising popularity abroad to his collection after the Soweto massacres and attributes the interest shown in Sepamla to the 'cult value of Soweto', 'an oft-found word in the Western press ever since the "slaying

of the innocents" in June 1976 in South Africa'. Although February confines his discussion to The Soweto I Love, his remarks about Sepamla's simplicity apply to Sepamla's other collections. 'Upon first reading his poetry, one tends to think of it as simple and naive,' February says in the same review. 'A second and more thorough scrutiny teaches that the simplicity is singularly deceptive and hides a deeper, more profound meaning.'<sup>4</sup> He draws our attention to Sepamla's success in cultivating an ironic comic stance. In The Soweto I Love, Sepamla is less inclined towards parody as he is in his earlier collections. This lack of humour is due to the more sombre nature of the subject. In his review of Sepamla's novel, A Ride on the Whirlwind, which deals with the same subject as The Soweto I Love, Roy Isacowitz observed that, 'In a book which takes itself so seriously (and which deals with a subject of undoubted seriousness and importance) parody hardly seems likely.'<sup>5</sup> However, Sepamla's biting satire remains in evidence in his Soweto poems. February notes Sepamla's peculiar idiom, which derives from the speech patterns of township folk: 'Although oral in tone, at times his poetry draws its strength from the urban proletariat environment which spawned him, the poet.'<sup>6</sup> In his assessment of Sepamla's experiments with language, Richard Rive remarked:

His descriptions of the locations are not as vivid and angry as Serote's, and his depiction of life there not as incisive as Mtshali's, but he uses the patois, the linguistic conglomerate of location speech to create an almost tangible atmosphere. The language becomes so localised that it is unintelligible to almost all English-speaking South Africans outside Soweto. These poems of his, such as 'Come Duze Baby' and 'Dear Lovely', might very well be the first symptom of a new and vibrant South African English.<sup>7</sup>

However, Sepamla is intelligible to African readers throughout the Witwatersrand and as far afield as KwaMashu in Durban, New Brighton in Port Elizabeth, and Langa in Cape Town. Despite their guarded praise, these recent articles and reviews suggest the strong and favourable impression made by Sepamla's poems, particularly The Soweto I Love, at home and abroad.

Sepamla's Soweto collection attracted a hostile review from Cherry Wilhelm, a lecturer at the Rand Afrikaans University. In the least enthusiastic of his reviews she wrote:

The fact that professed political allegiances do not make poetry is, however, amply borne out by Sepamla's new collection. The self-regarding title: The Soweto I Love, the dedication to the dead in South Africa, cannot conceal the slackness and emptiness of the poems, rushed out, one feels, to answer an instant need in the market-place, written carelessly and prolifically. It is astonishing that such a collection, written, one would have thought, with intense feeling behind it, never touches the reader with a spirit of authenticity... The satire is broad and crude, the suffering is chronicled without impact, poems gather no momentum. There is not a single poem that rises above the slack emotions and clichés of poor journalism. The collection is closer to an insult to the dead than a tribute to their memory.<sup>8</sup>

She does not substantiate her attack with any specific references to the poems themselves. She produces no evidence to demonstrate her astonishing observations and sweeping generalizations. Moreover, her views are not shared by Blacks who do not regard Sepamla's tribute as an insult to their dead. For instance, February's comment on the dignified manner in which Sepamla deals with his subject was that, 'The poet's anger is contained with poise and does not spill over into bitterness, a vituperation.'<sup>9</sup> Cherry Wilhelm is clearly not speaking for Blacks in making what must be considered political rather than purely literary judgements.

There is no in-depth study of Sepamla's work, not even from Rive, one of the ablest Black literary critics still resident in South Africa. Writing Black, Rive's most recent work, devotes a brief chapter to the 'Soweto' writers. The book is autobiographical and Rive merely gives his impressions of his first meeting with Sepamla. One of the most experienced Black journalists and columnists still resident in South Africa, Doc Bikitsha, has written a fairly detailed article-cum-review, which Sepamla dismisses as 'a friendly chat' and which is inclined to biography.<sup>10</sup> As revealed in his interview with Stephen Gray, Sepamla feels aggrieved by the fact that no Blacks in South Africa have reviewed his work seriously and systematically. 'It seems I'm in a position which I cannot change at the moment, having to deal with Whites as my critics,' Sepamla says. 'I think the fact that there are no experienced Black writers leaves me with very little choice but to work with



white critics, white editors.' His tone suggests dissatisfaction, not only with being published by Whites who have had a monopoly on publishing in South Africa but also, with receiving definitive critical acclaim from them, favourable as most of this acclaim has been in his case. He implies that he has had serious disagreements with White reviewers, publishers, and editors, although we are not told the exact nature of these differences of opinion. The only revelation he makes in his interview is that he has 'come to believe from experience that there is a difference between a black editor and a white editor', a difference which he attributes to the fact that in South Africa Black and White experiences rarely coincide. 'I think that most white writers and critics and editors don't have the sort of feelings which oppress me as I sit in a township room, writing, fearing this or that might happen,' he explains. In their different worlds, the interests and perceptions of Blacks and Whites in South Africa are very often in direct conflict. Given their different backgrounds and conflicting interests, their outlooks are seldom identical. This divergence of views which applies to life in general extends to literature. Sepamla regards White critics as being prejudiced and ill-equipped to evaluate Black writing objectively or, at least, in terms which do not undermine the interests of Black people in South Africa. Their vision is blurred by such limitations and their criticism projects their values and superimposes their worldview over that of Blacks. Despite the difficulties White critics experience in coming to terms satisfactorily with Black writing, Sepamla still upholds, in his characteristic open-mindedness, that Black writers can pick up something of lasting value from some well-disposed White critics, just as Whites can learn a great deal from Blacks. 'One has to accept that there's a lot we can learn one from the other,' he argues in the same interview with Gray. 'I can learn as much from Whites as they can learn from me.'<sup>11</sup> His criticism of White critics, editors, and publishers is corrective rather than dismissive, by pointing out their shortcomings. In literary criticism, as in other spheres of life, he appeals for mutual goodwill,

tolerance, and understanding between Blacks and Whites.

From the foregoing we can surmise that his reception by White critics has been rendered lukewarm by what he perceives to be their cynicism towards Black writing, their paternalism, condescension, and overbearingness. These various attitudes are often displayed by White reviewers of Black South African literature who write regularly for newspapers and periodicals with a predominantly White readership and who appear to want to put their special stamp on everything written by Blacks. Sepamla objects to the protégé mentality displayed by such White critics.

In his search for a deeper cause for the malaise affecting Black writing, Sepamla laments the impoverishment of South African literature which has been brought about by censorship, imprisonment, and exile. Like Serote before his travels to America, he feels cut off from the mainspring of Black South African literature in English as represented by the censored work of his predecessors: 'I feel this distance from those people. I think it's unfortunate that we are compelled to begin from the beginning. This means the groping that is taking place is harder and more painful, and I think it's unfortunate.' He regrets the lack of a vigorous and sustained English literary tradition among Blacks in South Africa from which succeeding generations of aspiring writers can pick up the strands. As an editor, he regrets that a great deal of the material he receives from aspiring Black writers is of poor quality and attributes this to the fact that 'a lot of people that write are inexperienced; a lot of people that write lack contact with other people, lack an exchange of ideas, lack technical know-how. And it's because they're operating from a vacuum, virtually. This is why their work is still without direction. In some instances you find that the work is without depth.' The disadvantage to the budding Black writer of the position outlined by Sepamla is that 'there is no encouragement, there isn't a person who himself has gone through it all and can advise him'.<sup>12</sup>

As a comparatively older person, Sepamla was less cut off from his predecessors than Serote, who is twelve years younger, and many other writers who emerged in the late

1960s and in the 1970s. Sepamla had known a number of the writers of the Drum generation and the Sophiatown renaissance personally. He had been a student at Orlando High School when Mphahlele still taught there. 'I read Man Must Live by Ezekiel Mphahlele in 1948 as a prescribed book at Orlando High School,' he says. His only complaint on this score is that he was never sufficiently and systematically exposed to these writers for their work to take firm root in him or to Black American authors, whose pre-occupations are similar to those of the Black South African writers. At school he had read the classical English authors and, although in a technical sense he had benefitted as a potential writer from reading the English masters, he had found that he could not fully identify with them. They did not reflect his soul as an African or his predicament in a White-dominated world. Their values and pre-occupations were not intrinsic to his African cultural heritage, as a result he had craved for something that was closer to his heart:

I was brought up on Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence, Keats and other English greats. True enough they opened my eyes, they gave me inspiration. In short, I received a rich sustenance from these men. But for my body to have remained healthy, for my eyes to have kept me on the right course I would have liked to have been fed on Mphahlele, La Guma, Themba, Nkosi. I would have liked to have laid my hands on the 'unrewarding rage' of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones (Imamu Baraka) and other Afro-American writers. These men I would have liked tenfold because they have all sucked from the teats of my mother.<sup>13</sup>

When he started as a writer, he tried to imitate, stylistically and thematically, the English writers he had read at school. 'We looked at D.H. Lawrence, Shakespeare, but trying to write like those guys was not easy,' he says. 'There was a hell of a distance for a man to cover to get to that point, so it was very difficult to write.'<sup>14</sup> When such English writers proved unsatisfactory as models, he resolved to be true to himself and to follow his creative impulse.

Although Sepamla had grown up with some of the Drum writers, when he took up writing seriously he did not choose prose, as they had done, but opted for poetry. He derived his inspiration from the crop of writers who had started to flower in the late 1960s and was motivated by

them to write poetry. Explaining why he and many other writers of the revival period decided to write poetry, he says:

I think we have to go back a couple of years when there were guys like Oswald Mtshali and Wally Serote [both of whom were studying in America at the time]. Those fellows were a great inspiration, because a lot of the people that are writing today saw them, talked to them. They know their experiences and they got to know how they translated their experiences into poetry. And I think the writing that is happening today is an extension of what those guys started around here.<sup>15</sup>

While Sepamla acknowledges his indebtedness to the poets who inaugurated the revival period, he also explains how he developed in a different direction from the rest of them.

'I was influenced by the fact that in the field was already Mtshali, Serote too,' he says. 'I had to say things my way, different from theirs. I had a little more formal education than they, and that exposed me to more ideas perhaps, I don't know. Anyway my poetry is my own thing.'<sup>16</sup> Sepamla explored many social and political aspects of life among Blacks in South Africa which were new to literature. His influences ranged from the classical English authors, the Drum generation and writers of the Sophiatown renaissance, Black American writers, to the poets who ushered in the revival period in South Africa.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND: SEPAMLA'S GROWTH AND FORMATION

Sipho Sydney Sepamla was born in Krugersdorp in 1932.<sup>17</sup> He started writing seriously at the age of thirty-five. Doc Bikitsha, a journalist with the Rand Daily Mail, who grew up with Sepamla at Madubulaville in Randfontein, describes him as an intellectual type who came from a respectable household and, even as a child, appeared destined to distinguish himself educationally and to extricate himself from the deprived environment of the township. 'One needed no prophetic instinct or Nostradamus insight into what young Sydney Sipho Sepamla would most likely be or blossom into when he grew older,' Bikitsha writes. 'The very family and environment he was born into and grew up under shaped his life.' Describing his introspective nature, artistic temperament, and sharp

powers of observation, qualities which set him apart from other township children, Bikitsha adds: 'Shy and reserved by nature but sharpening his powers of observation as he grew up. Above all the artistic streak in him was sharpened by the individual himself.'<sup>18</sup>

Although Sepamla came from a relatively prosperous and educated family, there was nothing ostentatious about his background. His parents came from a working class background and wanted a sounder education for their son than they had had. His father was a teacher turned miner. He had come to Krugersdorp from Sterkspruit, near Herschel, in the Cape Province. His mother, formerly Miss Poswayo, came from Vrededorp in Johannesburg. She was employed as a domestic worker, there being few jobs open to African women outside domestic employment. Both his parents were Xhosa-speaking and literate, with a good command of English. Sepamla's mixture of Xhosa and English in poems such as 'Statement: The Dodger' is representative of how his family and other literate Blacks speak. His parents sent him away from Luipaardsvlei mine in Krugersdorp, where they lived and where he had started school, to go and stay with relatives in Madubulaville township, where he grew up in a family of teachers and received a good education.

Madubulaville did much to shape Sepamla. 'His home at Padi Street in the old township was well-constructed and fenced,' Bikitsha writes. 'It was many times that I passed him behind the fence up to some chore in the yard or reading.' Bikitsha makes the kind of contrast between Sepamla and other township kids as Mark Twain makes between dutiful Sid and scampish Tom Sawyer, Hucleberry Finn, and their friends. As a result of the work Sepamla's family put into it, their house in Madubulaville looked less squalid than the average house in the township. His upbringing was strict and he was taught early in life to work hard and behave responsibly. He was seldom allowed to gallivant in the streets with other township urchins of his age who lacked proper parental care. He has never tried smoking or drinking and Bikitsha finds this surprising, as slum children are inclined to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol,

and drugs at some stage in their lives. 'How Sipho escaped the grape and weed only the devil knows,' Bikitsha says. Sepamla's interest in literature was nurtured early in his life and sustained through his association and contact with some of the leading literary figures of the time. 'He read voraciously and associated with literary figures from the onset,' Bikitsha reports and relates an incident when Sepamla helped members of a local student association in Madubulaville to obtain books for a library they were trying to build.<sup>19</sup> Sepamla had made friends with a White family, the Goldblatts, including John, now a freelance photographer working for the British Sunday Times. Through the Goldblatts, he managed to obtain books for the township's library project.

In Madubulaville, Sepamla lived with his blind uncle. 'Whenever I met him, which was often as primary scholars, he was leading by hand a blind relative,' Bikitsha recalls.<sup>20</sup> This blind relative was his paternal uncle, Isaiah, whose wife was called Ma-Daniel. Sepamla's first novel, The Root is One, is dedicated to both of them. His uncle, Isaiah, used to ask Sepamla to read him newspapers and, as Sue Douglas reports, Sepamla's 'interest in writing was fired by a daily digestion of the entire contents of The Star newspaper when a blind uncle asked him to read everything from cover to cover.'<sup>21</sup> As Sepamla's English improved, his interest in books grew. He read everything he could lay his hands on until his reading began to surpass that of his age mates in the township. He often discovered exciting authors whom he recommended to his friends. 'I remember very well his love of Ethel Manning's works and my reading her book Bread and Roses at his instigation,' Bikitsha writes.<sup>22</sup>

Outside his sedate family background and the world of his books, the environment of South Africa's segregated ghettos inevitably began to intrude upon Sepamla's consciousness. Like many urbanized Black youth in South Africa, American movies and jazz fired Sepamla's imagination. This is how he describes the era of his teens in the 1940s:

This was the age of the Juke-box, Louis Jordan being the hit-maker. The music of the time was boiling hot with a heavy rhythm. The jitterbug, illustrated in such movies as Cabin in the Sky and Stormy Weather was very

popular.... It seemed like an act of God to identify with all things by black Americans. The very fact that these brothers came from Africa and were baptised as slaves was equated to the massive oppression experienced by local Africans.... Couple this with the powerful exploitation of the advertising media and the indelible link becomes apparent. For instance, we had musicians imitate such people as Charlie Parker - not only did they play like him but they tried to live like him, his drinking habits and all that jazz. Indeed, there was once a time when the local black man was condemned as apish.<sup>23</sup>

Sepamla absorbed some of these influences but more selectively. In his youth, he developed a passionate love for jazz which is manifested in some of his poems such as 'Encore!

The Quintette!'. The slang used in such other poems as 'Talk, Talk, Talk' and 'The Blues is You in Me' derives from the idiom of jazz and American movies. Unlike many township youths, he showed some judiciousness. In his poems, he uses the blues idiom sparingly where other Black South African writers, some of the older ones such as Casey Motsisi among them, employ it without much discrimination.

From Madubulaville, Sepamla went to live with other relatives in Pimville, Johannesburg's oldest surviving ghetto. 'Pimville Station' is based on his experiences as a resident of Pimville. During this time, he started secondary school at Orlando High School in 1948. The following year, he transferred to Tiger Kloof High School, a boarding school in the northern Cape, where he obtained his Junior Certificate, taken after three years of secondary school. He proceeded to Kilnerton High School, from where he matriculated in 1952. He was forced to leave school to take up employment, in order to raise money to enable him to continue at school.

He found a job with a company that made sewing machines. But when he was told one day that he would be required to make tea as part of his job, he walked out in a huff. His account of how he left the job after a year is as follows:

One day the guy who made the tea was off and I was asked to make afternoon tea. I refused. I said, 'I'd rather take my jacket and go.'

They said, 'If you're not going to do certain jobs you're no good for our organisation.'

'Most definitely not,' I replied, and took my jacket and left. I lost that job because I refused to make the tea.

However, he says that by the time he was sacked from his job, he had already raised enough money to see him through school. A sudden and unexpected windfall had come from a small inheritance. 'The Swazi Spa [near Swaziland's first Holiday Inn], the spring itself, belonged to my grandfather's estate, you see,' he explains. 'It was money from that I inherited. He was grossly under-compensated, but that's another story.' Sepamla had also started to write in 1953, when Drum was emerging as the main forum for African writers. 'My first attempt happened when I was around eighteen, nineteen,' he says. 'I started with short stories, lost now from moving around, never published.'<sup>24</sup> He broke it off to concentrate on his studies and a few years passed before he could resume creative writing.

From 1954 until the end of 1956, he was a student at the Pretoria Normal College, studying for a three-year post-matric diploma in teaching, 'which was first year BA and two years training college'.<sup>25</sup> Among his fellow students at the College were Casey Motsisi, Stanley Motjuwadi, and Doc Bikitsha, who all branched into journalism; and Desmond Tutu, who became the first Black Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches.

Sepamla started teaching in 1957 at his old school in Orlando but left after a year to go and teach in Sharpeville. Some of his students and acquaintances were among the people shot in Sharpeville by government troops on 21 March 1960. He visited the area around the police station to examine the terrain where the people had been shot. The Sharpeville massacres stirred his soul and left an indelible impression on him. Fifteen years later, the horrific events were still vivid enough in his mind for him to write 'I Remember Sharpeville', a poem which appears in his second collection. The poem was written on the eve of the Soweto massacres, of which he was also to be a witness.

After five years, he left teaching in the same way in which his father had been compelled to do three decades earlier due to financial circumstances. In 1959 Sepamla had married Miss Marylene Phahle, by whom he has five children. As his family grew, he found it increasingly



difficult to support them on a teacher's salary. Under Bantu Education, African teachers received little pay. Industry paid better and was sucking teachers from the profession. 'I earned R91 as a teacher and I was offered another job at R155,' he explains.<sup>26</sup> As a teacher in government employment, he had also found himself under close surveillance from government officials. The atmosphere was so stifling that he could not express himself freely without taking the risk of incurring the wrath of the Department of Bantu Education if his utterances displeased them. He felt that his social and political activities were being too closely monitored, so he left and in March 1962 moved to Wattville township, near Benoni, where he still lives.

For a brief period in 1962 he worked as a sales promoter in Johannesburg with TV and Eletrical Distributors, a radio company that was trying to break into the African market. He left the company to take up another job as Musical Organiser with the Union of South African Artists at Dorkay House in Johannesburg. Dorkay House was the 'fortress of meaningful cultural and artistic activity in those days'.<sup>27</sup> The Union of South African artists had been responsible for musical productions such as King Kong and Sponono. Sepamla's love for jazz and theatre had drawn him towards Dorkay House. 'Over the next few years I was a talent scout, looking for artists for jazz festivals,' he explains.<sup>28</sup>

One of his major achievements as a talent scout was to bring the Malombo Jazzmen in 1964 from Pretoria to Johannesburg, where they participated in a Jazz festival, modelled after the Newport American annual jazz concerts, at the Orlando Stadium. The trio, consisting of Phillip Tabane on guitar, Abe Cindi on flute, and Julian Bahula on African drums, pushed jazz in a new direction by fusing elements of Pedi and Venda traditional music with American Jazz and produced art which expressed their new African personalities. Malombo music also showed how, despite the suppression which followed Sharpeville, art and culture could continue to thrive in the Black community. The poetry of the 1970s, pioneered by groups such as the Dashiki Poets

and Mihloti and employing a strong African drumbeat, was further testimony of how art and culture could continue to grow. Unlike the poetry of the previous generation which had exhibited stylistic features of mainstream English poetry, the new poetry synthesized Western elements with traditional features, as the music of the Malombo Jazzmen had done and as Dollar Brand was to do in music and poetry. Sepamla did as much as anybody else to promote the cultural renaissance. When the government enforced segregated audiences in the theatres and concert halls, Sepamla resigned from Dorkay House in 1968. The actions of the government had cut down on attendances and affected revenue from such variety concerts as Sepamla had been promoting. Serious music and theatre were hard hit, as popular and escapist productions came on the scene to exploit the less sophisticated audiences who clung on to segregated performances. For the next ten years, Sepamla worked in commerce and industry as a personnel manager.

Union Artists had given Sepamla some artistic scope and latitude, but not enough for full self-expression. He had been unhappy with the menial roles in which Blacks were always cast: 'We were made to "organize" halls, put up posters and distribute handbills and arrange accommodation for artists in out-of-town places instead of involvement as script writers or play directors.'<sup>29</sup> He had been looking for a way in which he could contribute meaningfully to the arts and had been reduced to a glorified messenger boy, only a step removed from making tea for his White employers. However, working in Dorkay House afforded him other opportunities he relished, such as meeting leading musicians, actors, producers, and writers of all races. Nat Nakasa, Dugmore Boetie, Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote, and others whose work appeared regularly in Classic frequented Dorkay House. His job as a talent scout had required him to travel a great deal during which time he resumed writing. 'The first attempt was a play and then I tried some love poems - things near to my heart at the time,' he recalls. 'But none of them were good enough, even though some were published.'<sup>30</sup> In 1962 he wrote a play which was about the involvement of

African students in the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of 1952/53 when he was still a student. 'I tried to capture the spirit of the students, tried to get over what we felt,' he says. 'People discouraged me from pursuing it, "You are qualifying for Robben Island". It was the time of Sharpeville and Robben Island was... uh... used a great deal.'<sup>31</sup> His play has never been published, but it was the precursor of his novel and his poems which deal with the involvement of a new generation of students in the 1976/77 Soweto upheavals. He wrote several amateur theatrical pieces, most of which are now lost. Although he ended as a poet rather than as a playwright, he kept a sustained interest in theatre as the editor of Sketsh, a magazine specializing in Black theatre for which he had previously written reviews. He took over the editorship of Sketsh in 1975, the same year in which he revived Classic and New Classic, from its founding editor, Robert Maclaren Kavanagh, who was leaving South Africa for England. Sepamla also wrote a play, Cry Yesterday's Fall, 'a social play, not too strong (politically)', which was staged in Soweto.<sup>32</sup>

When Sepamla started writing poetry in 1968 he wrote love poems, which he abandoned after six months. He felt 'they didn't come together' and that, at any rate, 'love poems are irrelevant to Blacks of today. I couldn't write like that again. Now I have a role and I must write for the benefit of Black people'.<sup>33</sup> He turned from love themes to socio-political issues which he deemed to be of great importance in the lives of Black people in South Africa. At first, no South African magazine would accept his work for publication, so in 1972 he sent some of his poems to Playboy magazine, which published his most widely known poem, 'To Whom it May Concern', which Royston included in his 1973 anthology. 'My first published piece was "To Whom it May Concern", which appeared along with poems from four other black South African poets, Mtshali, Serote, Joyce Sikhakhane and Stanley Motjuwadi in Playboy Magazine,' he recalls. 'Nadine Gordimer sent them off.'<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, his poems began to appear regularly in South Africa in Izwi, Ophir, Contrast, New Classic, Sketsh, Donga, Bolt, Unisa

English Studies, New Nation, and Staffrider.

'In the early 1970s, I wrote the poems published in The Blues is You in Me and Hurry Up to it,' Sepamla elaborates on his part in establishing the poetic tradition which began in the late 1960s and gathered momentum in the 1970s. 'I remember I gave up working for a while and decided to be creative. I wanted to see if I could live on writing. In '73 I was still at it, the poetry.'<sup>35</sup> Unable to maintain himself and his family as a full time writer, Sepamla went back to work as a personnel officer but also persisted in his chosen career as a writer. When writers' groups began to blossom in South Africa's large cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban in the early 1970s, he became a member of no less than three such groups in the Johannesburg area. Explaining the activities of such groups, which were the forerunners of the writers' movement which swept across the country after Soweto, and the difficult conditions under which they functioned due to the political situation in South Africa, he wrote:

We read our works amongst ourselves and read some of it to small audiences. The whole idea gave stimulation largely because of the comments at the end of the programme. But for some reason each of these groups folded up. Whether it was because they were multiracial or not multiracial enough, I cannot say. Then I tried to organize some people in Soweto. The back peddling was always supported by the fear that one of the group may be an agent of the system.<sup>36</sup>

Alongside his poems, Sepamla has also published several short stories. Some of his short stories have appeared in magazines and periodicals in South Africa; others have been anthologized. He also has two novels to his credit. The Root is One, which he started writing in 1973, appeared in January 1979 and is about the removals of Black people from White proclaimed areas in terms of the Group Areas Act. It focuses on the unsuccessful efforts of the Black community, disunited among themselves and infiltrated by government spies, to resist eviction. Explaining how he conceived of the novel and how it works, Sepamla says:

I titled it The Root is One because it is about a father and son in their own ways of the same root. The father is what you might call a superintendent's lackey and the son is a police informer - much like

what the father is, though most definitely even worse. The novel is based on the removals which are always taking place; you see a bit of Sophiatown in it, a bit of Randfontein, and it concerns what is very strong now in African society, very strong in Soweto - the role of the informer.<sup>37</sup>

His more ambitious, if less successful novel, A Ride on the Whirlwind, which was published in 1981, shows a similar pre-occupation with African informers in the Soweto area. The novel tells the story of a freedom fighter who comes to Soweto to kill a much-hated Black policeman. The guerrilla becomes entangled in the affairs of Soweto and of the students, whose cause he espouses and whose fate he shares. A Ride on the Whirlwind was banned in South Africa soon after its publication.

From September 1981 to January 1982, Sepamla attended the International Writers' Programme in Iowa, where he hoped to complete a new volume of poems. Since 1978 he has been full-time Director of FUBA, the Federated Union of Black Arts, which was established to give professional training to aspiring Black writers, actors, and artists.

#### . POLITICAL AND LITERARY CREED

Sepamla is committed to the remedy of the racial situation in South Africa but is not revolutionary, in intention at least. Over the years he has firmly resisted being drawn into any specific political camp. He endorses Bessie Head's stand expressed in a paper she read at the Writers' Workshop conference, which Sepamla attended, in April 1976 in Gaborone, Botswana. Bessie Head struck a responsive chord in Sepamla, who reissued her paper in New Classic, when she declared: 'I just want people to be people, ... so I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel they falsify truth.'<sup>38</sup>

Sepamla's refusal to be drawn into inflexible political positions manifests itself in his ambivalence towards Black Consciousness, the dominant political philosophy of the late 1960s and 1970s in South Africa. In an address at a Writers' Seminar in Johannesburg in May 1975, he described himself uncharacteristically for his time as an 'African (amongst

Coloureds and Indians)'.<sup>39</sup> His definition went against the current trend in Black Consciousness to view oneself (whether of African, Asian, or mixed descent) as Black. However he has not been hostile to Black Consciousness, which has left its mark on his political outlook as it has on every other Black writer to emerge from South Africa between 1967 and 1980. The Soweto I Love, a few of his earlier poems such as 'Talk, Talk, Talk' from Hurry Up to it, and his articles from this period reflect the influence of Black Consciousness. In 'The Thrust of Black Writing Since the Mid-Sixties', an unpublished article written in 1980, he quoted extensively and approvingly from Steve Biko and spoke of Black Consciousness as a political philosophy which spelt out 'the area of concern for the black writers'; he recognized its proponents as defining 'the milieu within which the writer must operate if he must remain relevant to truth'. Although in this article he claimed to regret his lack of a clear ideological base and attributed the 'lack of depth' in his work to his ideological deficiency, the general drift of his argument demonstrated his continuing ambivalence towards Black Consciousness and his desire to remain uncircumscribed by ideological allegiances.<sup>40</sup> In another article, he had explained his rejection of a fixed ideology as deriving from the fact that, 'Socialism tends to confuse me because it seems to have too many heads and voices. As for Communism which appears to have gripped many Black writers in America, well, the less said of that swear word in South Africa, the better I suppose.'<sup>41</sup> The statement illustrates his refusal of a straitjacket of imported ideas.

'Having insulated myself thus, I want to add here that I owe nobody any apologies because I remain a human being,' he told the conference of May 1976, asserting himself against both Black and White ideologues. To distance himself from the Bantustans, to which the South African government wishes to channel every African, he proclaimed himself a detribalized, urbanized African whose fate is inextricably linked with that of Whites in South Africa. He rejected every law that pigeonholes people and said that he wanted recognition in his own right and lamented the fact

that as a Black person he was regarded as a non-person. As a writer, he wanted his individuality and his humanity acknowledged so that he could be freed from the burden of protest. He complained that protest stunted the development of his talents and negated his human attributes. 'In fact, I sometimes wonder how much growth, in the broader artistic sense we miss as a result of our fixation on protest,' he said. 'We seem incapable of communicating the insights of man and nature because we are forced to remind other people about their undesirable deeds towards us. I long for that day when this will not be my priority.'<sup>42</sup> However, he still saw his work, in its handling of crucial areas and different facets of life among Blacks in South Africa, as an affirmation of his downtrodden humanity and that of his fellow Blacks.

Another key area on which Sepamla falls out with Black Consciousness is on the desirability or otherwise of addressing oneself as a Black writer to White readers. He is critical of the Black Consciousness teaching that Blacks must direct all their literary, political, cultural, and economic efforts exclusively to the upliftment of Black people and ignore the White community. 'I don't agree with the idea of ignoring the White man,' he says, 'what I believe is important today is that every Black writer must be self-conscious. We must not pander to the whims of White tastes. This for me is not something born of Black Consciousness.' He distinguishes between 'Self-Consciousness' and Black Consciousness but his terms are not clearly defined. However, from the context of his address on 'The Black Writer in South Africa Today; Problems and Dilemmas', Black Consciousness implies membership of a politically oriented group such as SASO, BPC, or some other Black Consciousness organisation. On the other hand, Self-Consciousness entails a broader platform and a less rigidly defined base. Self-Consciousness is what every human being owes to himself as an assertion of his individuality, whereas Black Consciousness emphasizes group identity and allegiance. As a writer, he wants to take the broader view, unencumbered by organisational loyalty, and to address himself to a wider audience, as a result he maintains that a Black writer must address himself

to Blacks and Whites. Hopefully, if he does that, he may be able to elicit a positive response from both groups, but not when he does not even try. 'I'm forever hoping that I provide a stimulus for some kind of reaction from an audience,' he explains further in his address. 'I think this is what Black writers can hope for amongst Black audiences. We should be shaking them to deeper self-consciousness.... We should hope that the liberal White is made aware of something by Black writing. Certainly he can be made to look more often over his shoulder when he goes about in the Black world.'<sup>43</sup> Sepamla has gone beyond the purely protest tradition to a point where he recognizes the equal importance of writing for Black people. However, he does not accept the Black Consciousness argument that appealing to sensitive White readers is a futile exercise to such an extent that Black writers must consign every White person to oblivion.

Sepamla's misgivings about Black Consciousness arise simultaneously from his emphasis on the adoption of what he considers to be a pragmatic approach to the problem of race relations in South Africa and his opposition to bandying about slogans which are devoid of substance. 'Now we talk of asserting the Black ethos,' he says. 'These are heavy words. Like other Black writers elsewhere we need to give substance to our claims to manhood or nationhood.' Before the Soweto massacres, he had declared himself opposed to the kind of diatribe that characterizes a great deal of Black poetry directed against the White establishment. He had said in the same speech quoted above that 'we don't need to be more angry' and had emphasized the need for Blacks to carry out those tasks that they could successfully accomplish within the existing constraints, 'with a little more purpose and diversity of action'.<sup>44</sup> He said that he saw no point in giving vent to impotent rage and argued that no useful purpose could be served by indulging in angry tirades of the type common in Black Consciousness poetry. He was critical of the kind of righteous indignation expressed through clenched-fist salutes and shouting Black Power slogans, none of which could accomplish anything. He urged that people's



political ideals should be backed by practical considerations, based on what Black people in South Africa could realistically accomplish in their stand against apartheid. His standpoint against self-corrosive rage was an extension of the debate initiated by Serote and Don Mattera, a debate generated by their conflicting emotions towards South Africa and the White establishment, between love and hate, goodwill and bitterness, accommodation and confrontation.

After Soweto, Sepamla modified his views. He had come to know from bitter experience that Blacks had every reason to remain angry. The Soweto I Love makes much of the fact that he had been an eye-witness of the atrocities perpetrated by the apartheid regime. He acknowledged that after Soweto 'even those people who didn't take stances in these things were roused to do something'.<sup>45</sup> He had been moved to indignation by these cruel events to such an extent that he had left for a while for Swaziland, feeling oppressed by events in South Africa. However, he still advocates an essentially pragmatic approach to South Africa's racial problems rather than an ideological solution.

His emphasis on what he considers to be pragmatism lays him open to charges of opportunism, of sacrificing principles on the altar of expediency, of advocating accommodation within the existing socio-political order. He discourages confrontation and pursues essentially reformist policies which would earn Blacks concessions and guarantee them a place within the established political structure. Seen against the background of Black Consciousness, his attitude, like Mtshali's, suggests that he would welcome cosmetic changes which held special rewards for certain Black people. 'The prize of liberation, freedom and uhuru is so great that a principle cannot be shelved to accommodate paternalistic crumbs from the pockets of insensitive capitalists,' George Wauchope, Secretary-General of the Azanian People's Organisation, has declared in explaining why advocates of Black Consciousness reject White charity.<sup>46</sup> Sepamla does not advocate revolution to topple the apartheid state and establish a majority ruled socialist state. He even confesses to a reluctance to think too deeply

about subjects such as socialism and communism and accepts the weary facts of the South African situation. His tendency to seek accommodation within the system resembles that of White liberal writers from Alan Paton to Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, and Andre Brink. For instance, Russel Vandenbroucke has said of Fugard that, 'Forced to choose between leaving the country, ceasing his theatrical activity altogether, or continuing under government-imposed conditions, Fugard has chosen the last course, declaring in 1968 that "to sit in moral paralysis while the days of my own life, my chance to discover the brotherhood of other men, pass, is so obviously futile and pointless it is not worth talking about".'<sup>47</sup> Sepamla has reached a similar position of compromise and modified any radical political stance he might have felt inclined to adopt, in the light of the grim reality of South Africa.

Although Sepamla's poems have moved in a less radical direction than Serote's, Matthews's, or Gwala's, his political message comes through clearly if slightly more indirectly. His work may lack the intensity of Serote's, but it spans a wider range of social and political issues. He is a more self-conscious craftsman than Matthews, who has openly declared that he cares less for poetic refinement than for the liberation struggle which he writes in support of. Sepamla's utterances are coined with greater circumspection. He has not reached the conclusion, arrived at by most of the Younger Black Consciousness poets, that nothing can be accomplished anymore through 'protest against apartheid in the name of moral renaissance of their society, that nothing can be really changed by a mere appeal to sympathy, common sense, feeling for justice, etc'.<sup>48</sup> But he also realizes that he is caught in the crossfire of irreconcilable interests between Blacks and Whites in South Africa, where he is often compelled to declare himself unambiguously. 'I've always thought that a writer in South Africa, whether he likes it or not, finds that he is involved in what is happening,' he says. However, he also sees himself as being politically less passionate than most of his contemporaries owing to the fact that he is older than them. 'I do of course

feel a little distant from the young guys, because their pace, or perhaps their impatience, is so hard that so far I'm not able to cope with them,' he adds.<sup>49</sup> But, as a comparison with Matthews, who is three years older than him, demonstrates, age has less to do with his ambiguity and moderacy than his own political temperament, which recoils from the kind of confrontation that total commitment would entail in the inflexible system and oppressive political climate of South Africa. Besides, Serote and even Mtshali have become more radical as they have become older. Sepamla's caution or timidity in political matters derives from his anxiety to avoid harassment by the Security Police. 'We want to hold on to our sanity, at least the bit that still forms our consciousness, without inviting those nocturnal visits so common in this country,' he confesses. In the same article, he justifies his moderacy by arguing that he dreads causing any friction through his writings which would catapult the country in the direction of another Sharpeville. 'Many of us went through a traumatic experience which we have found hard to erase from our hearts,' he says, referring to Sharpeville. His understandable prudence is more evident in his pre-Soweto poems, which rely on satire, subtlety, and innuendo 'as alternative strategies' for attacking apartheid. 'South Africa has taught us to talk in metaphors,' he adds. His politics veer more towards liberalism, with its insistence on the moderating voice of reason and its emphasis on individual rights and freedom, than towards the collectivistic ethic of Marxist-Leninism, which is the political direction in which Serote and other radical South African poets have been moving. 'But how careful can one be in this country?' he also asks.<sup>50</sup> His question reveals his dilemma as a writer who wishes to articulate his people's grievances and aspirations but who, at the same time, does not want to speak plainly and strongly lest he should incur the displeasure of the state. He also sees himself as a moderating voice in the face of extremism from Blacks and Whites, particularly the latter who hold the reins of power in South Africa.

#### THEMATIC CONCERNS AND STYLISTIC FEATURES

Sepamla's poems particularly from his pre-Soweto period as represented by his first two collections, Hurry up to it and The Blues is You in Me, exhibit elements of protest, but not in the narrow sense of literature that is addressed primarily to White readers to appeal for change in their racial attitudes. Some of his poems are concerned with holding up a mirror to the Black community through which they might see themselves better. His intention to document key areas in the lives of Blacks extends to his Soweto poems, which he wrote in order 'to record what transpired while he was around'.<sup>51</sup> He is one of the most celebrated satirists to emerge in South Africa during the revival period and satirizes the White establishment as much as he satirizes the Black community. He followed Dollar Brand, Mtshali, and Serote in selecting a wide range of subjects and thematic concerns, thereby pushing Black poetry in new and unexpected directions. He and the others derived their inspiration, not so much from the conflict between Blacks and Whites in South Africa as from penetrating observations of life within the Black communities. They demonstrated the limitations of designating all literature written by Blacks as either mission inspired and 'apprentice', or 'protest', as Janheinz Jahn had done in chapter five, '"Apprentice" and "Protest" Literature', of A History of Neo-African Literature.

The truly underlying themes in the work of Sepamla, Mtshali, Serote, and other Black writers are 'survival' and 'affirmation', which have been the predominant pre-occupations of Black South African writing since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. 'I just manage to survive,' Mtshali told a conference at the University of Texas in March 1975. 'My poetry reflects that type of situation in which we are forced to live.' He added: 'In my writing I'm not trying to elicit sympathy, I'm not indulging in self pity... the reason why I take up a pen and write is to affirm.' The poet and sculptor, Pitika Ntuli, another Black South African participant at the conference, described Black South African poetry as 'poetry of life and death, a poetry of anger, a poetry of hope', in other words, of survival and affirmation.<sup>52</sup> Sepamla's poetry shows

similar strains, so that to view it at all times as protesting or proselytizing is to respond to its appeal in a limited way. Even Sepamla's predecessors, B.W. Vilakazi, A.C. Jordan, Mazisi Kunene, Dennis Brutus, and others who have been described elsewhere in this study as poets of the protest tradition, went beyond protest in the narrow sense. When Brutus says: 'Somehow we survive / and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither', he is asserting a simple statement of fact about how Blacks survive in South Africa in spite of 'severance, deprivation, loss'.<sup>53</sup> Sepamla's poems manifest freedom to let protest, albeit not absent, to take a back seat. He goes beyond protest to depict the idiosyncracies of township people, in such poems as 'Statement: The Dodger', with a vividness which is unsurpassed even by Mtshali.

If up to the Soweto upheavals the majority of Black writers in South Africa had been content to register the Black people's sense of outrage and to draw lines of resistance which enabled them to protect their personalities and integrity, after Soweto they went beyond the simple assertion of their human rights and dignity to propagate outright revolution, after the manner of Serote's Soweto poems. Sepamla does not go that far but his work after Soweto is influenced by the growing militancy within the Black community. In his interview with Stephen Gray, broadcast in June 1977 by the Africa Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation, after the publication of The Soweto I Love, he explained that he had dedicated his collection to the liberation struggle in South Africa and to those Blacks who had lost their lives in the Soweto uprising. He said that in writing his poems, he had reacted spontaneously, after events in Soweto had made him even more sharply aware of the fact that in South Africa, try as he might to cultivate an air of political indifference, he could never completely disengage himself from developments which affected other Blacks. He said that he had turned his back on moderation in order to vent his innermost feelings, free from any self-imposed restraints or external constraints, and to capture the anger and the pathos of those who had

been involved in the Soweto upheavals. However, even when he tackles agonizing topics like Sharpeville and Soweto, he still distances himself from his subject in order to prevent excessive anger stifling his objectivity and his creativity. He allowed some time to lapse before he could write about the outrages perpetrated by the army and the police upon the people of Soweto. 'I had to give myself a little time, so that I don't cry over the page, I don't bleed over the page,' he told Stephen Gray. 'And for that reason I waited until about three months after the last group of people who were detained last year were released from prison, and only then did I think it wise to write, after I'd been aware of what had happened to them.'<sup>54</sup>

Sepamla's poetry is as wide-ranging as Mtshali's and Serote's in its appeal and in the variety of township situations depicted. When he focuses on apartheid, Sepamla scans South Africa's statutes governing Blacks and examines the effects of apartheid legislation on the lives of ordinary people. He shows how it feels to live under the constant shadow of the Urban Natives Act, the Bantu Authorities Act, the Group Areas Act, the Immorality Act, the Population Registration Act, the Bantu Education Act, the Pass Laws, and other apartheid legislation. His poems, such as 'Hats Off in My House' from his first collection and his Soweto poems, show various ways in which Blacks fight against political repression, economic exploitation, land dispossession, and deprivation. His evocation of scenes from township life in some of the poems to be discussed are full of vitality and humour. Whether it is the courtship scene of 'Come Duze Baby' or the neighbourly squabbles of 'Statement: The Dodger', the highly comical yet deadly serious events are described with brilliant precision. His poems are celebrated for their clever twists and telling punchlines, which underline his seriousness beneath his light-hearted presentation.

Sepamla is a humorist and a satirist along the lines described by Vernie February when he observes:

Realism which in everyday life reveals a true humanity is often typified as humour. But humour should never be confused with shallow laughter, mere jocosity. The humorist detects small contradictions in life which evoke laughter. But often these contradictions only

serve to hide a deeper, spiritual contrast between the ideal and the real. The laughter of the true humorist is therefore softened, or toned down, to a smile of sympathy or even empathy at times. The humorist will laugh about the incongruities, the follies of people, as well as the inexplicabilities of their fate with a conciliatory smile. Humour carries with it always a hint of the tragic.<sup>55</sup>

Successful satire relies on cultivating some distance, which should not be mistaken at all times for cynicism or disengagement, between an author and his subject. Despite the difficulties a reader may encounter in identifying the author's voice with certitude, the satiric tone should be distinguished from indifference or insensitivity to the fate of one's subjects or absence of spiritual involvement with them. Part of the role of the humorist and the satirist in apartheid South Africa is to expose the absurdities of the system, without necessarily projecting laughter as some form of sugar-coating on the bitter pill of apartheid to be swallowed and then shrugged off. In Sepamla, one is repeatedly struck by the ridiculous nature of the situations he depicts to show life under apartheid. Beyond his portrayal of conditions under apartheid, he also shows Blacks striving in various ways to come to terms with their environment, not just through accommodation and mild protest but through confrontation and challenge. He responds with imagination and skill to the diverse stimuli in his environment. He has an endearing lightness of touch and is at his creative best when he is relating the common experiences of ordinary township folk in their day to day existence, using their own idiom.

On the question of language, Sepamla admits that he often feels a certain degree of unease whenever he writes in orthodox English or whenever he hears hecklers shouting down actors to revert to indigenous African languages in such productions as Sizwe Banzi is Dead which employ standard English. 'Granted these [hecklers] have been in the minority but they have left me wondering,' he says. 'And then again I have often questioned the English used in some of these productions including my own for that matter.'<sup>56</sup> However, he will not countenance dropping English

altogether for another language. He feels his resolve to continue writing in English is vindicated by several tendencies and developments within the Black community. First, he states that English is the language of social intercourse among Blacks at their weddings, funerals, women's welfare clubs, football meetings, and other public meetings. Secondly, it is the language most widely employed in education, industry, and in the newspapers which have a national circulation among Blacks in South Africa. Thirdly, it is an international language. The language debate in African literature is not new and has been raised by many writers, critics, and academics, including Mphahlele in such articles as 'The Language of African Literature' and 'African Literature - Dialogue of the Two Selves'. Sepamla has been trying to revive the debate among the emerging Black writers in South Africa. His concern over neglecting his African cultural and linguistic heritage was stated in a newsletter issued by FUBA in December 1980 in which he wrote: 'Some of us consider this issue of ethnicity, which in many ways defines our Africanness, needs re-examination,<sup>57</sup> In South Africa, with its large population of urban Blacks of a few generations' standing, anything that smacks of ethnicity, including traditional culture and mother tongue instruction in schools, is not only equated with backwardness but with support for the government's policy of Bantustans, which are designed to keep Blacks divided along ethnic lines and disunited in their opposition to apartheid. Sepamla challenges such negative responses evoked on every occasion by traditional culture among Black South Africans and their lack of discrimination and discernment. These arguments about traditional culture extend to language in literature. Sepamla is neither a purist nor a traditionalist but an eclectic who resorts to several languages, foreign and indigenous, as a means of illustrating how the various cultural components which constitute the composite, complex personality of the modern African are synthesized. He advocates cultural syncretism.

The language used by Sepamla in his work ranges from standard English to African English as spoken by Africans



who are barely literate, what might be called pidgin. At other times he employs Tsotsitaal, slang based on Afrikaans and a conglomerate of other languages as spoken by city-slickers, or a mixture of English and African languages such as Africans use in their daily discourse. His use of these various registers helps him to communicate with all sectors of the Black community. Such linguistic experiments, based on using the actual language spoken in polyglot communities such as we find in the Witwatersrand area, have inspired younger poets from Farouk Asvat to Fhazel Johannesburg and Christopher Van Wyk. These linguistic innovations in poetry, which are also found to a lesser extent in the fiction of Mphahlele and Motsisi, contradict Jean Marquard's criticism in a paper she presented at the University of York in September 1981 that 'contemporary literature in South Africa is entirely conventional' in its use of language.<sup>58</sup>

#### HURRY UP TO IT\*

Sepamla's first collection of poems, Hurry up to it, was first published in 1975. The poems in the collection can be grouped, according to their emphasis, into poems which portray restrictions, oppression, material deprivation, property dispossession, exploitation, paternalism, and exile. Each group of poems treats these themes as the lot of Black people under apartheid. The poems are often assertive in tone and bear testimony to the will of the people to live and their hope for victory which sustains them in adversity. Through satire, Sepamla unveils the absurdities of the South African political situation. His best poems are memorable for their punchlines. They are also humorous, so that he is able to laugh his way out of the cuckoo's nest. Compared to Serote, there are fewer traces of traditional verse forms in Sepamla, who is more of a sidewalk poet in the modern American style. Sepamla is closer

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"Hurry Up to it, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975.

All page references are given after quotations in the text.

to the Drum tradition and the Sophiatown renaissance. He distances himself from tradition and has only begun to reach out to tradition as a result of the impact of Black Consciousness. He has embraced the hybrid culture of the cities and is less keen on retrieving roots than on exploring and coming to terms with the more immediate problems posed by apartheid and the environment of the townships. He is at his creative best satirizing apartheid, describing scenes from township life, and building his own idiom around township speech patterns. He is a poet of ideas, which are expressive of the grim realities under which people live in South Africa. Despite his pre-occupation with the predicament of Blacks, occasionally he throws a backward glance at the White community. He resembles most of the poets of the revival period in the manner in which he writes with little affectation about the simple affections of common people.

Some of his poems such as 'To Whom it May Concern', 'Hurry Up to it', and 'A Pause' deal with the restrictive laws under which Blacks live in South Africa. They are an assertion of the basic human rights which the people are denied.

'To Whom it May Concern', first published in May 1972 in Playboy is the best known of Sepamla's poems to deal with the restrictions imposed on Blacks, particularly through the pass laws, but 'Hurry Up to it' is the better realized poem on the subject. 'Hurry Up to it' first appeared in Izwi Volume 3 Number 15 in April 1971. It is an even subtler denunciation of South Africa's restrictive laws, not directly through tabulating such laws, as in 'To Whom it May Concern', but more insidiously through showing their effect on human relationships. Sepamla fuses statement and narrative in a popular tale of a father giving advice to his son who is on the threshold of matrimony, a scene which is reminiscent of and may owe its inspiration to the scene in Hamlet where Polonius gives advice to his departing son. In most traditional societies, the expression of filial

concern on such important occasions is common practice. In the poem, the father balances, as on a ledger sheet, his natural anxiety to see his grandchildren before he dies and his son's love for the beautiful woman he wishes to marry, on the one hand, against the frustrations his son is likely to encounter as a result of the laws which violate an African's freedom of association and his right to lead a normal family life, on the other hand. The father cautions his son to examine the laws carefully and make certain that 'she's a desirable person'. For in South Africa:

Love is:

Knowing the girl's homeland,  
Knowing her papers are right,  
Knowing she has permission to marry,  
And above all

Love is:

Knowing if you can make children. (p.69)

The father reminds his son that when he is married he will still be compelled 'to buzz thoughts of manhood / In a men's hostel' and that his wife will be driven 'to nurse the ache / Of an ill-used womb / In a women's hostel' (p.69). Africans of different ethnic origins who marry run the risk of being separated from each other and being deported to the Bantustans to which they are decreed to belong. Other laws require a woman to obtain permission from the Influx Control Department in order to live with her husband outside the reserves; she needs government permission to lead a normal family life as a married woman in the White prescribed areas. Even if they both qualify to live in the same area, there may still be the problem of appropriate housing, as the construction of houses for families has virtually been frozen in the urban areas. The government prefers to erect single barracks for men or women, who must arrive in the cities as migrant workers from the Bantustans, where they must return when their labour is no longer needed. Sepamla underscores the lack of concern among Whites for the tragic situation in which Blacks are placed in South Africa, a situation which regulates the family and the sex lives of Blacks and sometimes denies them the right to procreate.

'A Pause' rejects restrictive measures which prevent Blacks from singing and drinking their beer in peace, from enjoying the elemental freedoms, Whites are cast in the role

of killjoys whose curfew and liquor laws prevent Blacks from enjoying themselves:

Let church choirs sing the Messiah  
Musicians blow their horns  
Politicians make their speeches  
But for Christ's sake let us drink our beer  
Not hurried by sirens. (p.61)

Sepamla asserts freedom of speech and the right to dissent. The poem ends on an ominous note by hinting at the strong threat posed by a possible uprising, sparked by the desire among Blacks to overthrow the ruthless regime. 'We won't mind to hear the end / For this thing has taken too long,' Sepamla says. 'We want to bid the whole thing goodbye' (p.61). He speaks with annoyance and a collective voice which spells a popular uprising. The people are ready to throw caution to the wind and hurl themselves headlong against the oppressive state machinery. The theme of resistance, which is hinted at in 'A Pause', is treated more fully in his other poems.

A number of Sepamla's poems explore the various forms oppression takes and its effects on Blacks and Whites in South Africa.

'Feeling Small' decries the arbitrary arrest of Blacks in predawn raids; the poor transport facilities in overcrowded trains and buses; the disrespectful manner in which most Whites treat their servants; the meagre handouts given to Black workers in lieu of pension money, after many years of faithful service; and the squalid conditions under which Blacks live. The poem explains such oppression as deriving from the deep-seated fear of Whites in South Africa, their fear of a possible take-over by the country's Black majority. 'Darkness' explores the problem further and shows how fear and insecurity produce the kind of paranoia which leads Whites to promulgate curfew and other regulations to protect themselves against Blacks, especially at night. This short poem closely resembles Serote's 'The Actual Dialogue' in its identification of Blacks with the night, as in the lines: 'i walk erect in the night / you crouch in retreat' (p.63). Unlike Serote, whose tone in 'The Actual Dialogue' is gently coaxing, Sepamla's tone in 'Darkness' is aggressive and menacing: 'yes sir i have arrived / walk

the night if you dare' (p.63). He employs the antithesis between sets of words such as 'erect' and 'advance' (associated with Blacks) and 'crouch' and 'retreat' (in describing White reactions), to show that Blacks ultimately have the upper hand in their battle with Whites for the control of South Africa. Oppression derives from some irrational fear of the unknown and, instead of creating a sense of security within the White community, it compounds their security problems.

In 'The Applicant', oppression takes the form of constant surveillance by the state against possible insurrection. The persona of the poem simulates an attitude of subservience but his assumed obsequiousness is a device for undermining the state, the institutions which he deplores. His sarcasm betrays his superior intellect as opposed to the panic and inanity of the officials who have been entrusted with the responsibility of upholding apartheid. He indulges their whims for the sake of getting his own way, so that when he is summoned to an interview for an application he has made to the government, the applicant assures his interviewers that his credentials are without blemish: 'I boast a shadow at all times... / And my thinking is coming up fine' (p.26). He also informs his interrogators that he was born in a reserve and is not one of those city-bred, cheeky, educated Africans whom Whites resent. There is a revealing incident in Bloke Modisane's 'The Situation', a short story about White attitudes towards educated, urban Blacks. In the story, a group of Whites in Johannesburg fall upon a well-dressed, educated African for no other reason than that he is expensively dressed and speaks English well. Sepamla's applicant says he is not that type of Blackman and assures the officials that he has been inoculated against yellow-fever and red-pox. Such vaccination is necessary for travel abroad but in the poem the colours, yellow and red, also represent Communist influences from China and Russia, respectively. That is what his interviewer believes people who receive inoculation against yellow-fever and red-pox are being vaccinated against. He does not realize that the applicant is making fun of him. The applicant pokes more

fun at the system for wishing to keep out foreign ideas, while at the same time millions of rands are spent on improving facilities at Jan Smuts airport to promote tourism. The example reveals how the system contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction, for visitors from abroad meet and exchange ideas with Blacks. The repressive measures taken by the government can neither keep liberalizing or revolutionary influences out of the country nor contain revolt by the oppressed Blacks forever. As revealed in the poem, the ultimate irony of apartheid, which is probably going to lead to its undoing in the end, is that it produces a breed of crafty Blacks with the capacity to undermine the system subtly and effectively on its own terms. Sepamla knows the experiences of the applicant, having been denied a passport on several occasions before. 'The Applicant' is, in large measure, an outcome of his own confrontation with White officials and is written in the tradition of Nortje's 'Song for a Passport', which relates similar experiences with White officials in charge of issuing passports.

'The Loneliness Beyond' is more concerned with the psychic effects of oppression than in merely describing its manifestations. It is one of the rare poems in which Sepamla addresses the work specifically to the plight of Black workers as a class. Its counterpart in Sepamla's second collection is 'The Work Song'. In his poems, Black workers rarely appear as a class or individuals, as in Mtshali, but appear submerged under an undifferentiated mass of oppressed Blacks. However, in 'The Loneliness Beyond', they emerge as a distinctive class with well defined features: 'strains of energy... maskless faces... spirits maimed by commands' (p.39). He reveals what is hidden beneath the facade of imperturbability put on by the workers. Watching them alight from overcrowded trains daily after work and disappear in their pondokkies or 'little holes' of houses, he wonders what they might be thinking or feeling (p.39). They must feel their misery acutely and it is conceivable that they might even be hatching secret plots to overthrow the oppressive and exploitative regime. Sepamla employs the

imagery of raindrops which gather force and change into a fierce storm (first, it is 'raindrops pattering', then they become a 'torrent') to suggest deceptive placidity among the oppressed and exploited, the kind of self-containment which disguises a brewing storm in the form of a violent uprising. 'The Loneliness Beyond' is written in the tradition of Mafika Mbuli's 'The Miner' and Mtshali's poems about the workers, but Sepamla is closer to Mbuli than Mtshali in his concern for the psychic rather than the purely material well-being of his protagonists.

Closely related to Sepamla's poems about oppression are his poems about deprivation. The main horror may be ideological and may be found in oppression, differential scales of payment, and petty scorn and major crimes of the Biko type; but it is also true that, in spite of South Africa's wealth, the material lot of the oppressed, especially in the rural areas, has not improved significantly. 'The Great Evasion: South Africa. A Survey' written in 1980 by Simon Jenkins demonstrates that under pressure of resettlement, the Ciskei, for instance, is fast becoming one of the poorest areas of Africa. The government uses South Africa's wealth to tighten oppression. Some of Sepamla's poems draw from the fact that educational and recreational facilities available for Blacks remain poor.

'The Signs of the Time' enumerates some of the changes that have taken place in the form of vast construction projects undertaken in South Africa, projects which testify to the prosperity of South Africa: 'Into the skies have gone / The Carlton Centres and the Strydom Towers' (p.65). In contrast to the improvements made in the White areas, the areas where Blacks live in townships such as Soweto, Thembisa, and KwaMashu 'sprawl over wasteland so much like bullfrogs' (p.65). The description of Black residential areas as 'wasteland' brings out the contrast between White affluence and Black deprivation, even in the showpiece Black townships mentioned in the poem. Sepamla uses the kind of juxtaposition between White affluence and Black deprivation which is employed by Alan Paton in the opening chapter of Cry, the Beloved Country to contrast the lush, verdant fields

of Ixopo with the scorched, eroded veld in Ndotsheni where Blacks live. Sepamla also takes a swipe at the 'newly-meant leaders' in the Bantustans who have all been appointed by the government to carry out its oppressive and exploitative policies (p.65). The parallel between the improvements announced in the townships and in the Bantustans illustrates the superficial nature of such improvements. Their cosmetic nature is brought out in Sepamla's remarks about Black beauty queens who make heady 'spins to Miss World' (p.65). To think of such developments as spelling out improvements in the lot of Blacks is like Lakunle in The Lion and the Jewel, who proclaims that the world should judge African progress by 'the girls who win beauty contests'.<sup>59</sup> All these surface changes proclaimed by the South African government leave the deprived lot of the vast majority of Blacks in South Africa untouched. Such deceitfulness from the South African government leaves Blacks wondering whether 'the world has been truly accommodating', Sepamla adds sadly (p.66).

'The Will' is written against the background of the Bantustan policy and other related laws which deny Blacks home ownership and land tenure rights in White prescribed areas, outside the tribal reserves. Certain concessions have since been introduced; for example, granting ninety-nine year leases on the houses of Blacks who qualify to be in the urban areas as registered workers in White business concerns. Such leases are not automatically transferable to their descendants. In 'The Will', an African father is apportioning his belongings among his children. The burgler-proofing [sic] and the gate... the bicycle and a pair of bracelets... the kitchen scheme and utensils... the bathtub and the two brooms... the bedroom suite... the studio couch... the peachtree... the bible... and the cat' - these constitute the sum total of his worldly possessions (p.23). Yet there are mind-boggling complexities in disposing of these simple items. First, he informs his children that they must realize they cannot have the house, which belongs to the state and which they must vacate upon his death. Even the new concessions described by Simon Jenkins which



have been introduced since the poem was written make it manifestly clear that the house does not belong, 'by right', to the descendants of the person who held the lease on the house (p.23). The second complication for the old man of the poem is over the manner in which he should dispose of his peach tree. He advises his children to uproot it, since 'it might grow in the homeland / so might it be with your stem' (p.23). The intended satire does not come off, but these lines are intended as a mockery of the Bantustan system. The final and unresolvable dilemma is over sharing the family pet. 'The cat spotted black and white / you will have to divide,' the old man tells his sons, 'for that you'll need God's guidance' (p.23). The policy of the South African government is to keep Blacks and Whites apart; but what does one do with spotted cats or people of mixed race? 'The Will' portrays Black poverty and destitution and the absurdity of apartheid, by showing how little most Black parents who spend their lives working for Whites have to leave for their offspring, how little they have to show for their labour.

Like Serote in 'City Johannesburg', Sepamla also demonstrates that South Africa's large cities, where most of the country's wealth is concentrated, have little to offer Blacks. Material deprivation has reduced many of them to beggars, who are found in the heart of wealthy Johannesburg. In 'Oppenheimer Park Revisited', which takes its title from Mtshali's 'Pigeons at Oppenheimer Park', Sepamla notes the large number of beggars around the park: 'Hoboes insulated as usual', their heads 'glistening in the sun' and their hands holding berets like collection dishes (p.43). Sepamla regards the beggar class as a White creation, so that in 'The Beggar' he writes: 'You didn't ask to be the beggar / the gods dropped the idea into your lap' (p.41). Here, as in Blake's 'Songs of Experience', the establishment is held responsible for the conditions of abject poverty under which the majority of the people live, while a privileged few enjoy most of the country's wealth. The underprivileged live by their wits, whereby the healthy among them pretend to be cripples in order to arouse the

sympathy of the wealthy. They 'grab sympathy by the balls' and laugh into their tattered sleeves at their White benefactors, who, however, not realizing that they are being taken in, shake their heads in sympathy, 'wishing God wouldn't do these things' (p.41). Faced with destitution, begging (as in Dugmore Boetie's Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost) becomes necessary and loses the stigma traditionally associated with it. Beggars also have their dignity as human beings. This dignity is asserted in Sepamla's poem, 'The Beggar', which is reminiscent of Bloke Modisane's 'The Dignity of Begging', a satiric story about an African crippled matriculant turned professional beggar so that he can make easy money from gullible Whites. Sepamla and Modisane elevate what is essentially a strategy for survival, a practice which calls for humility, into a proud profession, whereby Blacks get their own back on the establishment responsible for creating the conditions of destitution under which the majority of them live in South Africa.

Besides the issues of hunger and homelessness, Sepamla's poems tackle the problem of poor educational, recreational, and other facilities for Blacks. Except in Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue and in his short story, 'Mrs Plum', the debate such as we find in Ngugi's The River Between and Petals of Blood concerning the desirability and the type of education for Africans has not been treated in Black South African literature of English expression, although it has been a major area of concern in literature written in the indigenous languages since Mofolo. As a teacher who rebelled against the system of education for servitude given to Blacks, Sepamla is concerned about falling educational standards and growing illiteracy among Blacks. 'The Bookshop' features an African who is so self-conscious of his lack of education that he usually walks around with a newspaper, which he cannot read, tucked under one armpit, like educated people do. He is the type who in the train home will probably be holding his newspaper upside down, intending to impress others that he can read, until he notices the pictures. He has a tragic longing for the education he has been denied

and, as a measure of his frustrated aspirations, he has acquired the habit of frequenting a bookshop in the city. His favourite section is the magazine section; his favourite magazines, which carry absorbing pictures that enable him to enjoy poring over the magazines despite his inability to read, are Fortune, Esquire, Time, and the New Yorker. They are priced beyond his means; but he flips through them, taking in as much as his education will allow him to. He is oblivious of the passage of time, nearly missing the train back home. As he is walking hurriedly out of the bookshop to the station, he is followed by an anxious shop detective, who stops and grabs his newspaper to see if he has stolen any books and wrapped them in the newspaper. The dialogue illustrates the suspicions roused in the minds of Whites by Africans: 'Can I see what you have there?' the shop detective asks (p.13). 'Sure! I never had anything to hide!' the African responds (p.13). Failing to spot any stolen property in the possession of the African, the detective apologizes and adds: 'But / One lady inside said you had taken all sorts of things' (p.14). The suspect informs us how he responds to the episode: 'Not the first time! I answers / And I proceeds' (p.14). The poem dramatizes the humiliation Africans who aspire towards learning often have to contend with. White stereotyping consigns all Blacks to the rank of thieves.

An interesting feature of 'The Bookshop' is the language in which the poem is written. The narrative is rendered in broken English as spoken by Blacks who have not progressed beyond elementary school. The fact that they try to speak English testifies to their yearning for more education than they have. The social comedy accentuates the pathos of the situation in which the suspect finds himself in the bookshop. As often occurs in Sepamla, the humour underlines the absurdity of the situation in which the persona of Sepamla's poem finds himself. The language of 'The Bookshop' makes for authenticity, carries great pathos, and illustrates Sepamla's ear for the nuances of the speech habits of ordinary people. His ability to reproduce with accuracy the

various registers used by Africans from different social strata has been one of his major contributions to South African literature.

Moving from the educational sphere to the problem of resettlement, Sepamla's work explores the effects of evictions carried out in accordance with the Group Areas Act, which requires that separate residential areas must be provided for Blacks and Whites. His first novel, The Root is One, set in Sophiatown in the 1950s, is preoccupied with the reactions of the township's residents upon being evicted from their homes to make room for the erection of a new White suburb. In Madubulaville, Pimville, and Benoni old location, all places where Sepamla had lived at different times, families had been uprooted from their homes and resettled further away from White settlements. Sepamla's concern over the plight of the victims of the government's resettlement policies is born out of actual experience.

'The Start of a Removal' deals with the demolition of an African township and shows how the sense of community cultivated by the people whose homes are bulldozed is destroyed in the process. Their eviction constitutes a major disruption in their lives. As a backdrop to the evictions, Sepamla portrays scenes of the usual Monday morning crowds rushing to work; and teachers and children preparing to go to school, 'peeping out of windows to see' if 'so-and-so / their timekeeper / was leaving for the factory or office job' (p.40). There is a certain rhythm and routine to their lives which their removal to a new residential area threatens to break. The poem mentions a local petty trader who is bound to be affected economically by having to set up business in the new area. Sitting at his till and 'waiting for the early customers / to make his insomnia worthwhile', he broods over his business which is likely to take a plunge for the worse (p.40). Sepamla dwells on the violence, the squalor, and other difficulties with which the people have had to contend at the old place. In a romantic sort of way, these problems assume a new significance to the evicted tenants. They will take away certain fond memories of their miserable lives in the old place which has been

their home and to which they had become attached.

The people in 'The Start of a Removal' are reminiscent of the characters in Serote's Alexandra poems from Tsetlo in that they are all victims of resettlement. Sepamla does not focus so much on the plight of the individual as on the destruction of the whole community. He does not draw the connection between the people's eviction from their homes and their broken down lives on the individual level with the same intensity as Serote, but still his description enhances our appreciation of the pain which the departing tenants collectively feel. The insensitivity of the state apparatus is brought out subtly, as in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, by focussing on the bulldozers and the trucks rather than on the people operating them. The evictions are carried out with an indifference to human suffering that is characteristic of the machines. In a manner which is reminiscent of Trevor Huddleston's description of the removal of Sophiatown in Naught for Your Comfort, the people wake up one morning 'to the drone of bulldozers / and the impatience of heavy-duty trucks' (p.40). The system which authorizes the removals and the human agents who carry them out are as heartless as the machines which do the actual demolition job. The occurrence of the removals in the early hours of the morning adds to the callousness of the act. The Group Areas Act as an instrument of dispossession is condemned by showing its ill effects on the lives of ordinary township people who are made its victims. In 'The Start of a Removal', Sepamla returns to the concerns of writers of the Sophiatown renaissance such as Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, and Casey Motsisi over the demolition of their township.

Although 'To Whom it May Concern' alludes to the labour exploitation of Blacks, 'Jam Tin' is Sepamla's subtlest poem on the subject from his first collection. 'Jam Tin' is an allegory with a social, an economic, and a political dimension. Sepamla employs the analogy of a jam tin, valued when full and discarded when empty, to illustrate how human beings use others and dump them when they no longer need anything from them. When the tin is full, it is treated with care, like a delicate pregnant woman. Shopkeepers proudly

display it on their shelves and windows, flooding it in a flash of 'neon-coloured mink coats' (p.11). At this pampered stage in its life, the tin boasts: 'Ladies adore me then... / Turning me about like a dance-partner' (p.11). After it has been bought and opened, it continues to receive men's attentions, some gently solicitous and others reaching out greedily for it. But once empty, it falls out of favour with all its former admirers. Little boys then start kicking 'me about shamelessly... / Till I'm buried at the bottom of a viaduct', the tin complains (p.11). At this stage in its life, the tin laments the loss of its former glamour and proud identity: 'Someone has lost me my identity: / Made in South Africa' (p.11).

The extended sexual metaphor employed in the poem suggests exploitation by unscrupulous men. Their callousness is no different from the insensitivity of the officials in 'The Start of a Removal'. At one level, the jam tin represents a woman whom men take for a ride and then, having satisfied their lust, leave her to her fate, when she is past her prime. The opening of the jam tin is equivalent to breaking a woman's virginity. At another level, the jam tin represents a person with much money who attracts many friends while his fortune lasts, like the prodigal son. All his friends abandon him when he runs out of money. Both interpretations represent a tale of woe that is common in every slum. At both these levels, the poem is about social and economic conditions as they give rise to moral laxity and ultimately to a disregard for the humanity and sensitivity of others.

'Jam Tin' has another dimension, which is political. The fate of the cast-off tin has a bearing upon the lives of Black workers who are discarded, as in Cosmas Desmond's book, The Discarded People, which shows how Black workers are dumped in the tribal reserves by the state when White commerce, industry, mining, and agriculture have sapped them of their strength. This theme of exploitation is also dealt with in films such as Last Graves at Dimbaza (Morena Films, 1974) and Abaphuciwe - The Dispossessed (Gavin Younge/Cold Fire Production, 1980), which examine the policy of

resettling redundant African workers and the brutal reality of life in South Africa's resettlement camps. As political allegory, 'Jam Tin' deals with a subject who has been stripped of his identity. The tin represents Black workers who have been stripped of their citizenship and resettled in the Bantustans. The poem also brings out the anguish of people whose feelings have been trampled on, who are regarded as mere objects, like a tin of jam.

Sepamla's poems which manifest the influence and concerns of Black Consciousness range from his poems about White liberal patronage, Black culture and assertion, to his poems of resistance.

In common with those of Gwala and Serote, some of Sepamla's poems reject White patronage. As in his essay, 'Towards an African Theatre', he views White patronage as a device for perpetuating Black dependence, oppression, and exploitation. He borrows the language and analytical tools of Black Consciousness to convey his personal disillusionment with the White establishment, so that despite his protestations to the contrary the evidence of the texts shows that he has embraced the language of Black Consciousness and some of its precepts.

In 'Nibbling', he focuses on White liberals and expresses resentment for their superior airs, as when they encounter a Black person who has been successful in any field and remark: 'isn't he clever? / isn't he marvellous' (p.16). He criticizes their ways with Blacks by saying, sarcastically, that he admires 'White people / who are perfect flatterers' because they leave him 'with only one thing / Suspicion!' (p.17). He is not taken in by their condescension, hypocrisy, or flattery. He explains the rationale behind the steps taken by organisations such as SASO and BPC to secede from multiracial organisations like NUSAS as being to provide a forum for Blacks to develop their own ideas, without being led astray by the glib talk and empty promises from liberals who profess to care about the plight of Blacks. He says that Blacks have genuine grievances that have given rise to their bitterness, which

cannot be wished away simply by explaining it as racism in reverse:

i hate lies  
one of which tries  
to explain my bitterness  
as anti-whiteness

His words echo Sobukwe's sentiments when he declared in an interview in January 1959, in a statement which became of cardinal importance to Black Consciousness: 'We are not anti-White.... We do not hate the European because he is White! We hate him because he is an oppressor. And it is plain dishonesty to say I hate the sjambok and not the one who wields it.'<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Sepamla's 'Nibbling' rejects charges of anti-Whiteness from White critics of Black Consciousness. He views their accusations as smoke-screens deliberately floated in the air to hide White group attitudes towards Blacks. His projection of Black Consciousness attitudes notwithstanding, Sepamla remains his own man, advocating reconciliation rather than confrontation. Reaction to White attitudes may have produced extremism among certain elements within the Black community, but for his part he detests inhumanity from whichever quarters it comes :

of course i do hate  
some people -  
i am in love  
with mankind (p.17)

'Nibbling' is a companion poem to Gwala's 'Paper Curtains' and Serote's 'They Do It'. This set of poems demonstrates Black Consciousness attitudes towards the White liberal establishment. Whereas the pre-1976 poems of Gwala and Serote convey orthodox teachings in Black Consciousness, Sepamla's poem is an example of how he borrows familiar arguments from Black Consciousness without imitating its doctrines in any slavish manner. The emphasis he lays in the poem on his love for humanity does not derive from orthodox Black Consciousness, which glories in a kind of Black exclusiveness from which Sepamla wishes to break free. He believes in what, in 'Towards an African Theatre', he terms 'humanism', which is best summed up by the words 'ubuntu' or 'botho' in Nguni and Sotho, respectively.

The inward look in Sepamla's poems about aspects of



township life and culture is a legacy of Black Consciousness. A number of his poems touch on various topics: courtship, fashions, music, and other activities in the townships. In most of these poems, Sepamla resorts to township diction, which enables readers who are familiar with the patois to enter more fully into the spirit of the event.

'Come Duze Baby', which first appeared in Contrast Number 33, is written in a language that may be complete jargon to Sepamla's readers outside the African townships:

Moenie dink	Don't think
Ek wala-wala net stof	I'm talking rubbish
Ek wil jou cover	I want to cover you
Ek wil jou smekana	I want to kiss you
Jy ken mos	You know
Die movie-star ding	The movie-star thing (p.22)

My simultaneous translation is a rough approximation of the Tsotsitaal used in the original. The title of the poem derives from a song, 'Baby, Come Duze, Sondela' (Baby, Come Nearer, Nearer). In the poem, the suitor asks a woman he fancies to come near so that he can pour out his heart to her. He is gently solicitous and assures her that he is not one of those men from Johannesburg's White suburb, Hillbrow, who take African women for a ride. He warns her against the dangers of the Immorality Act, if she should go out with White men. Sepamla's poem demonstrates how the prejudices of White people have sunk in among Blacks, many of whom despise Black women who prostitute themselves to Whites. The persona of the poem cares little for Blacks who distance themselves from their people and says so to the woman of his choice, in the language of the people to underscore his point. He tells her further that he is not a 'situation' either, one of those Blacks Bloke Modisane writes about who want to 'situate' themselves socially above their fellow Blacks, despite being caught in the same network of oppression. He concludes with an emphatic, if melodramatic, declaration of his love for her. The imagery is jazzy and Hollywood inspired. However, the metaphors and images employed, even where they refer to foreign products such as the Impala Chevrolet, are localised. Young men ('outies') who drive in Impala Chevrolets are 'Die Mpala-mpala outies' (p.21). The poem contrasts the low life led by the majority of Blacks

with the high life and the symbols of success to which a number of Blacks aspire. At a different level, this poem about courtship is Sepamla's appeal to Black men and women to associate and pull together with their kind. The degree of Black cultural and political awareness displayed by Sepamla's persona in the poem sets him at the polar end of such characters as Soyinka's Lakunle and p'Bitek's Ocol who have sold their souls to the West. The dramatic tone of the poem, aided by the use of patois, locates the events described in their social and cultural milieu and brings the townships to life.

'Dear Lovely' employs a different register, which is easier for English readers to follow: 'My heart cough little bit / Minute I touch you' (p.64). In evocative, sometimes extravagant terms, the suitor in the poem describes how he is affected by a woman he loves. He does not resort to outworn images; he describes his pounding heart as 'coughing', to suggest that only the warmth of her love can restore him to good health. His gentle flattery, conveyed with earnestness, extends to the extravagant promises he makes her, as when he vows to buy her a first-class train carriage 'complete of head-rest / And cushions and all' (p.64).

'Come Duze Baby' and 'Dear Lovely' are about two types commonly found in the townships and identifiable by their language. Their attitude to women usually indicates their degree of assimilation in the townships. 'Come Duze Baby' describes what Mtshali in his poem, 'The Detribalised', calls 'a clever' as distinct from a 'moeqoe' or country-bumpkin who is easily carried away by the glamour of city women.<sup>61</sup> The 'Come Duze Baby' type is the calculating, wordly-wise tsotsi type. By contrast, the persona of 'Dear Lovely' is a migrant worker of the 'Jim-Comes-to-Jo'burg' type, a phrase which describes a common literary tradition in South Africa, a tradition which exploits the plot of an African newly arrived in the city from the tribal reserves. Richard Rive traces the tradition to Plomer: 'Plomer in fact began the two most popular literary traditions in South African writing, the miscegenation story and the Jim-comes-to-Jo'burg novel. Turbott Wolfe represented the first type and

and Ula Masondo the latter.<sup>62</sup> This type, which also occurs in the novels of R.R.R. Dhlomo, Sinxo, Abrahams, Paton, Nyembezi, and others, has become a stereotype in South African literature. Although Sepamla does nothing to reverse the stereotype, the treatment of the African arriving in the city from the tribal reserves in poetry, for the first time, is evidence of the new directions Sepamla opened for Black Consciousness poetry and for literature in South Africa.

Just as 'Encore! The Quintette' (Sepamla's homage to some of the leading musicians of the cultural revival) celebrates the vibrant culture of the townships, a culture which has survived repression and apartheid by building a new base in the townships, 'My Name Is' celebrates the rise of Black Consciousness. Black Consciousness manifests itself through a rejection of colonial and derogatory tags which Blacks had previously accepted: 'Kaffir / Native / Bantu' (p.44). Sepamla rejects other derogatory names given to Blacks by Whites, too arrogant to learn the proper names of Blacks: 'Gone is Kleinbooi / No more Sixpence,' he says. 'John is neither here nor there / Mary lives no more for tea only' (pp.44-45). He substitutes African names which celebrate 'the birth of a new age' ushered in by Black Consciousness. He uses indigenous names with pride: 'Say my name is: / Makhonatsotle', which he translates as 'He who is capable' (p.44). He deliberately employs click names, too, which Whites complain they find difficult to pronounce: 'Xoxo elixhaphisa / Amaxhwili aseRawutini' (Envy of opportunists from Reef areas) (p.45). In this context, Black Consciousness spells Black assertion, with the emergence of a new generation who have confidence in their own capabilities. Black Consciousness spells the rejection of White stereotypes, inferior status, and self-cancellation; a rejection of definitions coined by Whites to describe Blacks. Another poem, 'Mother of Men', similarly rejects White stereotyping as a process which ascribes negative qualities such as 'slyness', 'cruelty', and 'treachery' to Black heroes and nation-builders of the past, Shaka and Moshoeshe. In this poem, Sepamla's views are linked to Negritude and the period of independence in the states to the north of South Africa.

'Africa! Africa! / New voices tell of your rebirth,' he proclaims. 'They tell it not in sorrowful strains... / But they shout it in song and dance' (p.53). Negritude, the Pan-Africanist and Black Consciousness ideals are part of a chain reaction, instilling an ever-growing spirit of resistance among Blacks.

'Talk, Talk, and Talk' manifests other aspects of Black Consciousness in Sepamla's poetry. The poem employs the 'Black is Beautiful' idiom of America, favoured by Black Consciousness poets such as Gwala: 'Shit baby, I want to squawk / To say you don't need painted lips' (p.48). White cosmetics and concepts of beauty represent self-denial, as in Gwala's 'Black Status Seekers'. 'You don't need hair sliding off like that / 'Cause a plaited head can do its own thing,' Sepamla tells African women who straighten their hair to make it look 'pretty', like a White woman's (p.48). Such slave mentality must be discarded, alongside the fear most Blacks have for Whites. They need to fight for their emancipation until the Whites capitulate.

However, in discussing Black Consciousness, Sepamla does not always employ the idiom of Afro-American literature as frequently as Gwala does. Sepamla can convey the same concepts in an idiom shaped by his South African environment. 'A! Bafashi! Bafashini!' (A! Women! Fashions!), which first appeared together with 'Come Duze Baby' in Contrast Number 33, depicts a character similar to the one portrayed in 'Dear Lovely'. The language in both poems is basically the same but, this time, he spices his broken English with Zulu expressions, the latter spoken in a way which enables us to identify the persona of the poem as a migrant worker from the north of the Limpopo river. In fact, Sepamla dedicated this poem to a migrant worker from Malawi with whom he used to work in a firm which sold sewing machines.<sup>63</sup> An important difference in the attitudes of the men depicted in the two poems is that, though equally left gaping by fashionably dressed city women as his counterpart in 'Dear Lovely', the man in 'A! Bafashi! Bafashini!' rejects the new look as an element of self-cancellation. He becomes angry with his Lizzie the day he sees her with her hair

straightened to resemble a White woman's. He tells her: 'You tink de longy hair / Is God's word for longy life' (p.29). He is angry that she should want to transform her God-given features, as though there was anything intrinsically wrong with the texture of African hair. The attitude of the narrator in the poem rescues him from becoming yet another stereotype of uncritical country bumpkins who see in everything in the city the epitome of civilized fashion. Sepamla's language is more natural and more atmospheric than p'Bitek's in the English version of Song of Lawino, in which Lawino voices similar sentiments about her husband, Ocol, as the narrator in Sepamla's poem does about Lizzie. Sepamla has no need to strain for an approximate English register; his character already has his peculiar blend of English in real life.

Sepamla's poems of resistance such as 'Hats Off in My House' convey the revolutionary teachings of Black Consciousness, although he does not himself espouse violence but merely warns against its imminence in South Africa. The constant raids mounted by the police against the homes of Blacks constitute one of the most infuriating aspects of life under apartheid. In Down Second Avenue, Mphahlele recalls the ritualistic liquor raids by the police, every Friday night, in Marabastad, where Mphahlele grew up. Sepamla's two novels, The Root is One and A Ride on the Whirlwind, give several instances of the police raiding the homes of Black people at the most inconvenient times imaginable. In every instance, the police display a gross disregard for the dignity and privacy of Blacks and no respect for the sanctity of Black family life. Such raids have provoked retaliation and sparked off instant riots in the past, as they still continue to do.

'Hats Off in My House', though not as strongly worded, conveys an aggressive spirit akin to Serote's 'What's in this Black Shit'. Sepamla expresses the annoyance most Blacks feel at the disrespectful, inconsiderate methods employed by the police in their dealings with the Black community. The affected Blacks are often spurred to spontaneous acts of defiance to salvage their trampled dignity. 'Hats Off in My House' tells the story of a family

of hopeless drunks, roused to indignation by a police man who walks into their house without taking off his hat. In a moment of spontaneous outburst, the father of the family reacts with unexpected vehemence to the insult: 'Hats off in my house!' (p.31). The police, who lord it over the residents, are not accustomed to such reactions from their victims. The process deflates the law, so that 'the poor little constable' in the poem quickly retraces his footsteps, frightened by the unexpected outburst, 'as if he had forgotten his law' (p.31). This momentary triumph infuses a sense of dignity to members of the household and redeems the family of alcoholics in the eyes of the community. Blacks may be punch-drunk, which is the symbolic significance of excessive alcoholic intake in the poem, but a wild swing from them can still catch the law flat-footed. More-over, as long as South Africa continues to disregard the rights of individuals, the state will have to contend with such sporadic outbursts from the oppressed. The people cannot take it lying down. When they rally back, as they will invariably do, the vehemence of their retaliation is likely to catch the law enforcement agents of the state unawares and send them reeling back, like the constable in the poem.

Sepamla wishes a way could be found to avoid the inevitable confrontation between Blacks and Whites in South Africa. 'The Rainbow's End' conveys his anxiety and expresses his growing impatience in the face of immense provocation from the oppressive state. He prays that providence may teach him 'to forget the deeds of those man / who debased' him and who taught him 'to see people as tribes' (p.52). The lines imply a rejection of the Bantustan policy, with its divisive tactics. He regrets the fact that some Blacks have been absorbed into the system and are willing to be used to suppress their fellow Blacks. He is ashamed to see his 'brothers in high places... / Harassing brother and sister alike' (p.52). His anger is directed against Whites and against the Black demagogues who 'rule' in the Bantustans, in the name of the oppressor. Sepamla suppresses his hatred and his impulse towards violence, in much the same way as Serote and Mattera do in their early poems. In

'Land of Ostriches', he confesses that he loves South Africa too deeply to countenance sparking off a conflagration which may cause destruction on a large scale. However, his growing impatience with White rule comes up repeatedly in such poems as 'Go Slow', which expresses anti-liberal, anti-gradualist sentiments similar to Gwala's in 'Paper Curtains'. He rejects the gradualist approach advocated by people of liberal views, who tell Blacks: 'Go slow, the last cow leaves the kraal also' (p.56). Such glib sayings are only uttered to hold back Blacks and keep them in perpetual servitude.

Against the slowness and the inaction prescribed in 'Go Slow' for Blacks as a solution to their problems, 'The River' demonstrates the irreversible movement of the Black nation towards fulfilment's lake:

Intimate whispers  
the river in between  
sources of a murmuring  
they tell of hope. (p.58)

The symbol of the river, which Sepamla may have borrowed from Ngugi, as suggested by 'the river in between', expresses continuity and hope, which will never dry up, for the eventual emancipation of Blacks.

Sepamla's poems of resistance show that Blacks are not all acquiescent or resigned. They sincerely want to see a peaceful resolution to the racial problem in South Africa. However, the system's intransigence and the arrogance and callousness of its agents create desperation, which will find expression through outbursts of violence. Sepamla warns of a rising tide of Black anger, which spells doom to the White establishment, a tide which will wash away apartheid and drown Black collaborators. As in Serote's poems, Sepamla sees an irreversible flow as being in motion. Both Serote and Sepamla speak in metaphors which elevate their work above the political rhetoric that marks a great deal of Black South African verse in the hands of less accomplished poets.

THE BLUES IS YOU IN ME\*

The Blues is you in me, published in 1976, contains the remainder of Sepamla's poems written before the Soweto uprising. The poems explore the themes introduced in Sepamla's first collection further. They deal with deprivation, exploitation, Black Consciousness, and resistance. Others recreate life in the townships: growing up in the townships, problems of survival, and other social aspects of township life. In The Blues is you in me, Sepamla places more emphasis than in his previous collection on the problem of race relations in South Africa, the quality of life under apartheid, and the prevalent political attitudes among Blacks. A dominant theme in the book is his growing concern over the continuing apathy within the Black community, following mass repression after Sharpeville. This concern occasionally spills over to an examination of his own political role and attitudes, in a situation that calls for increasing political commitment and an end to ambiguity. The poems open up one of the great debates of Black South African literature and politics, the debate between people who espouse negotiation, protest, passive resistance, and a display of human brotherhood and love and those who believe in confrontation, challenge, armed resistance, and giving free vent to their hatred.

'Mnta Kazibani-bani' (literally, So-and-so's Child) comes closest to articulating Sepamla's purpose in writing poetry. The poem is written in Tsotsitaal. It's language points to the main audience Sepamla has in mind: the Black urban proletariat. The language strikes an intimate tone of confidentiality with his audience. He is prompting them to wake up to their collective predicament as Black people. In the language of Black Consciousness, he is trying to 'conscientize' his Black readers, to raise their political awareness. The poem is addressed more specifically to township 'clevers', the city-slickers who regard themselves

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\*The Blues is You in Me, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975.

All page references are given after quotations in the text.



as being worldly-wise, in their own language: 'Hey phela manotja daarso / jy wat se jy dra nie 'n nzungana' (Hey wise guy over there / you who says you don't carry a knife) (p.46). The wise township guy or 'manotja' prides himself on the fact that he does not carry a pass, a boast also made by Mtshali's 'clever' in 'The Detribalised'. Manotja takes pride in defying authority, in being his own man, an attitude Sepamla commends him for. Manotja carries a knife or 'gonie' with him all the time. He is a brave but violent man, and his violence is as misdirected as that of Serote's protagonists in 'My Brothers in the Streets'. Sepamla proposes to hold a 'discusseration' (a corrupted form of 'discussion') with Manotja from Sgodiphola, a rough section of Soweto, and hopes that the exercise may help to restore balance and perspective in Manotja, whose enterprising spirit and fearlessness could be more gainfully employed in fighting the oppressor (p.46). He points out to Manotja what he perceives to be the true predicament of the Black person in South Africa: working long hours for Whites and running endless errands for them, relegation to a hopeless life of impoverishment in the Bantustans, the spectre of long term imprisonment for voicing opposition to apartheid, and the senseless violence from knife-happy township thugs like Manotja. He appeals to Manotja to address himself to these problems, to channel his energy in more constructive directions, for the benefit of his community. As a declaration of his poetic intention, 'Mnta Kazibanibani' explains how in his poems Sepamla, like Serote in 'Ofay-watcher Looks Back' declares he wants to do, hopes to highlight the predicament of Black people in South Africa, to explore their experiences with the intention of correcting any misanthropic tendencies among them, to 'conscientize' his Black audience. The poems in The Blues is You in Me highlight his personal, social, and political concerns.

Sepamla's poems such as 'Early Days (A Memory of Uncle)', 'Statement: The Dodger', 'Zoom-the Kwela Kwela', and 'The

'Peach Tree' deal with various aspects of township life. The earliest inspiration in Sepamla's life was his blind uncle in Madubulaville, Randfontein. 'Early Days (A Memory of Uncle)' is a narrative poem, written from an autobiographical perspective, dedicated to his uncle. In it, Sepamla briefly describes his childhood and gives his early impressions of Madubulaville, when he used to lead his blind uncle to church or to visit friends in the mines. The importance of this poem is largely biographical and shows the deep impression his uncle's stoic ways and earnestness, tinged with a humorous disposition, left on him. Madubulaville is occasionally brought back to life in Sepamla's poems such as 'A Childhood Memory' and 'When I Lost Slum Life', both of them published in The Soweto I Love.

'Statement: The Dodger', first published in the 1975 issue of Sketsh, reveals a more seamy side of township life. The action shifts from the church to the shebeens. The pious atmosphere of 'Early Days' is replaced by the exuberance and sensuousness of Mrs January's shebeen. Sepamla employs the idiom of educated Xhosa-speaking Africans, whose Xhosa is liberally laced with English expressions. The poem has an element of parody, but what is important in it is not so much its subject matter as Sepamla's linguistic experiment, which comes off successfully. The story itself is rendered in the first person narrative and is about a quarrel between two people over a debt. The narrator has been incensed by the behaviour of a man he once lent five shillings to. This indicates how old the debt is, for South Africa switched from British sterling in 1961. The debtor disappears and after an inordinately long time they meet at Mrs January's. Unaware that the man he has been owing is present, the debtor orders a bottle of whisky. The man he owes immediately makes his presence known and demands to be paid. When his debtor tries to make excuses for not repaying him, the infuriated man beats him up. Sepamla's comedy here, as elsewhere, is successful largely as a result of the fact that the humour speaks for itself. The poet-narrator sounds serious. As the author, Sepamla is never there behind the story saying how amusing it all is. This in modern terms

means that the incident or story is written deadpan. The lively narration, demonstrating how Xhosa-speaking Africans graft in English expressions into their speech habits, brings the scene to life in all its comical manifestations. The language is atmospheric and greatly adds to the social comedy. However, the English reader who has no knowledge of Xhosa can still follow the action by extrapolating the English expressions, as in the following account of how the debt was originally incurred:

He comes to me one day...  
He says ndimthi-borrow i-five bob  
Uzandithi-fixup on a Friday  
Xa sithi-meet again on the way (p.28)

Sepamla's controlling interest of New Classic and Sketsh has placed him in a position where he can pioneer such bold linguistic experiments, which many White editors might not have suffered easily. For instance, in responding to Moteane Melamu's story, Bad Times, Sad Times, which employs similar linguistic innovations to Sepamla's poem, Jack Cope as editor of Contrast once wrote, explaining his reasons for rejecting Melamu's story: 'The use of "township language" is very atmospheric and amusing, but here again I think it can be overdone. Most readers when coming across passages in any foreign language simply skim over or else it inhibits them from going on. So this needs careful use.'<sup>64</sup> Cope talks on behalf of an international readership, where Sepamla, Melamu, and others want to reach a wide township audience. Melamu's story was rejected by Cope and published by Sepamla and has since gained greater international currency. Sepamla, Melamu and a few others, notably Mothobi Mutloatse, have given a new impetus to both prose and poetry through their quest for a language that effectively portrays the synthesis between Western and indigenous African culture. Taking a language and making one of your own out of it is a sign of great vitality, which is celebrated in most of Sepamla's township poems. 'It is the pulse of a people,' Sepamla writes in 'The Glint: 12.30', referring to the cultural dynamism of township residents, 'the beat of their life / it is the release of the moment' (p.58).

'Zoom the Kwela-Kwela' illustrates the ingenuity of

township folk. The title derives from the name given by Africans to the police vans which patrol the streets of the townships, sending terror into the hearts of many innocent people. No African is exempt from arbitrary arrest, for a multitude of obscure crimes, ranging from vagrancy to offences under the pass laws. 'Kwela' is a Nguni word which means 'ride'. 'Taken for a ride' by Stanley Motjuwadi in Royston's anthology describes the 'free rides' in the dreaded Kwela-Kwela vans many Africans are often compelled to take. But the artful dodger in 'Zoom the Kwela-Kwela' devises an ingenious scheme, which is described with some admiration and amazement in the poem, for evading the police patrols:

I never know a man when I meet one...  
like that one I saw the other day  
hobble on a pair of crutches  
the length of a Reef road  
lean them on massive pillars  
of a 'native' shop...  
and began to play football  
on sound agile legs  
the very moment after  
the kwela-kwela zoomed by (p.52)

Blacks have become past masters at such dissimulation. Their survival in an otherwise hostile environment calls for such tactics. Survival, the key element in Sepamla's poem, is demonstrated in Bloke Modisane's short story, 'The Dignity of Begging', which also asserts the need and the desire even among the beggar class, to which all Blacks belong at any rate, to lead decent lives, free of constant harassment and humiliation by the state and its agents. Modisane's beggar, a cripple, who feels that he is always unfairly dealt with by the White courts, is forever hatching the most endearingly roguish schemes to stay alive. At the end of the story, he is even contemplating establishing a trade union for beggars. Sepamla's poem is in the true Modisane tradition. A central feature to the action in his poem is the daring and the ingenuity required by Africans to keep on the right side of the law. This same capacity for survival prompts Sepamla in 'Ticking and Licking' to ask, again in sheer admiration and amazement:

But I would like to know  
What makes up our ticking  
After so much licking? (p.37)

'The Peach Tree', on the other hand, demonstrates the resilience of a culture that has survived conquest and continues to defy apartheid by building a new base in the urban setting, where most Africans now find themselves. Peach trees are found in almost every yard in the townships along the Reef. For people who have little time for gardening, for tending their hedges and looking after rose buds, the peach tree is often all they can afford to grow. It assumes a central position in the yard or homestead, taking the place of the village square or council (indaba) tree in traditional society. It is a place where everyone congregates, the playground for the children and the centre for all family social gatherings and business transactions:

canopy of an elated drinking party  
courtyard of the bemused bridal group  
handy housewife's family pride  
stuffing shelves with juicy canned fruit jars (p.55)

Its constitution, which Sepamla describes as 'long-suffering', reflects the hardiness of the people and their culture (p.55). Undeterred by the vicissitudes of life, they have dug in their roots in the new setting of the city, where they continue to thrive somewhat like the tree that manages to produce fruit from one season to the next. The peach tree becomes a visible symbol of their transplanted culture, bearing testimony to the culture which, although fighting for survival against grim odds, is rich in creative potential.

Despite their rich potential, Blacks are kept down through their oppression and exploitation, subjects Sepamla deals with in Hurry Up to it but which come up again in The Blues is you in me, in poems such as 'Sixpence', 'The Work Song', and 'Song of Mother and Child'.

When The Republic of South Africa was proclaimed in 1961, the new currency of rands and cents was introduced. To the ruling oligarchy, South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, introducing her own currency, and generally launching on an independent path represented open defiance of world opinion, which had been increasingly clamouring for change to the system of apartheid, particularly as a result

of the adverse publicity South Africa received after Sharpeville. 'Sixpence!' recalls the switch from British sterling to the new currency and examines the suffering brought about by these new developments upon Africans. The poem indirectly protests against the intensification of political repression, following South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, and the economic hardships suffered by Blacks against which Blacks had been protesting during the Sharpeville crisis. The poet-narrator argues, in simple terms, that by replacing sixpence with five cents, the new monetary system robbed him of an extra day's meal. Before, he says, 'I used to buy mangola for sixpence / And I'd live for six days' (p.13). Mangola is a cheap form of polony. The spiralling cost of living hits Blacks, who earn far less than their White counterparts, hardest. Yet these same economically deprived Blacks work the hardest to generate South Africa's wealth. Sepamla employs the new monetary system to symbolize the political order that creates such misery and suffering. The poem is an indictment of underpayment and of the repressive system in general.

'The Work Song' employs the statement-response scheme of the traditional work song to show the response of the Black workers to economic exploitation. They are fast reaching the end of their tether and their growing resentment and defiance are celebrated in the words of a popular work song:

I've heard the anguish of a chant  
Heard rising in the air  
Like orchestrated screams of a big band  
The harmony of the labourer's voice  
Singing:

abelungu ngoddamn  
abelungu ngoddamn  
basibiza bojim  
basibiza bojim (p.50)

Their anguish is brought out in their screams of protest and their defiant song reflects their growing militancy and solidarity. They sing in perfect harmony, signifying that they have reached some accord about the evil of the system. The words of the song spell doom to the exploitative and oppressive White regime.: abelungu ngoddamn (Whites be

damned). 'A Roadgang's Cry' by Mtshali expresses the same sentiments as Sepamla's poem, using the same song. Both poets reflect the political reawakening of the workers and the upsurge of a spirit of resistance among them.

Besides looking at the attitude of the workers, their living and working conditions, Sepamla spares a thought for their wives and children who fare even worse than their employed menfolk. 'Song of mother and child' conveys the anguish of a mother and her child left behind in their impoverished rural home, singing in remembrance of the man 'whose beard grew grey / in search of gold' (p.60). The man has gone to the gold mines as a migrant worker. Sepamla is exposing the evils of the migrant labour system, which breaks up families, a theme which has been taken up with even more vigour by the younger playwrights, Matsemela Manaka in Egoli (Golden City) and Maishe Maponya in The Hungry Earth. In the mines, the man is reduced to a shadow of his former self, to mere 'ashes of a father / entombed in the abyss of things' (p.60). His wife has become a virtual widow and their child an orphan. They are left mourning the untimely disappearance of the man, who has joined the ranks of 'the living dead' (p.60). They expect him to come back home dead, if he ever does, when the back-breaking work of the mines has taken its toll upon him. But Sepamla's poem also looks ahead to the future, when South Africa's wealth will be used for the betterment of life among all sectors of the population.

Many other writers, from B.W. Vilakazi, Peter Abrahams, to Mafika Mbuli and Mtshali, share Sepamla's concern for the plight of the miners. Sepamla's significant contribution to the subject lies in his demonstration of the adverse effects of the system, not just upon the physical and spiritual well being of the mine recruits but also, upon their families. In common with Serote's poems about women, Sepamla illustrates the fact that it is women and children who suffer most under apartheid by being discriminated against, first, as Black people, next, as women and children.

In poems such as 'The Odyssey', 'The Blues is You in Me', 'The Ash Urns', and 'Goddess of Power', Sepamla deals with the adverse effects of discrimination, oppression, and

exploitation upon race relations and appeals for racial harmony in South Africa.

Arthur Nortje contrasts the beauty of the scenery in South Africa with the ugliness that is its apartheid policy:

Yes, there is beauty: you make  
the understandable mistake.

But the sun doesn't shine for the sun's sake.<sup>65</sup>

'The Odyssey', which first appeared in Ophir Number 23 in 1976, examines the quality of life under apartheid in a similar fashion. Sepamla strips apartheid of its veneer of respectability, promoted by a ballyhoo of favourable publicity, to be able to show what lies beneath the superficial facade. He exposes the discrepancy between appearance and reality and presents South Africa as a land of contradictions, through the use of contrasting images and metaphors. His exposure takes the form of a response to an imaginary leaflet or advertisement issued by a travelling agency or a state agency like the Department of Tourism, to a group of potential tourists from abroad. He describes South Africa as a country 'where shadows linger eternally / Where peace sits ready to walk away' (p.17). The shadows symbolize the suffering and gloom which envelop the majority of South Africa's Black population and the uneasy relationship which exists between Blacks and Whites. The contrast between brightness and dimness illustrates the disparity between South Africa's tourist image as a land of great beauty and sunshine and the unpleasant reality which is its apartheid policy. He exposes the deception contained in tourist brochures. 'Discover the lie of our mountain,' he invites the would-be-tourist, 'the drakensberg and its inns' (p.17). In the pun on 'lie', he satirizes South Africa's propaganda agencies and its segregated institutions. The statement that in South Africa 'we are far from being an ignorant people' is immediately discredited by the revelations contained in the lines which follow:

for ours is a land of many tribal universities  
where many read unbiased tribal newspapers  
for ours is the land of the sabc  
the guardian of modern-day twists (p.18)

The universities, the newspapers, and the radio under the control of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, a



state corporation, all serve to reinforce apartheid by falsifying truth. The 'people are made to live a lie' (p.18). Peace in South Africa is an illusion; the racial situation is highly explosive.

The question of land dispossession is also brought up. 'The Odyssey' contrasts the 'vast empty spaces', where the game reserves are situated to promote tourism, with the barren overpopulated tribal reserves (p.17). The animals are better catered for than Black people. Sepamla points out how the prevailing conditions in South Africa give rise to hatred, fear, distrust, and despair. But he refuses to yield to the negative pull of such emotions and tries to assert the more positive values of hope and love. South Africa may have temporarily 'gone sulky to a vision' of racial harmony, but among many of its people, he proclaims, there is still an abundance of 'love that is there / sitting awake waiting to be used' (p.19). Hope lives side by side with despair, refusing to succumb to the life-denying force of despair. His faith in humanity is displayed in his persistent hope that one day South Africa's racial problems will be resolved peacefully. A naive vision perhaps, one that is commonly held against liberals, that the transition to majority rule in South Africa will come peacefully, but nonetheless one that describes his ideal, his belief in the fellowship of all human beings and explains his own disposition.

'The blues is you in me' is another poem that explores the quality of life under apartheid. Sepamla employs the blues idiom to explore various aspects of life under apartheid. Janheinz Jahn compares and contrasts the blues with the work song, the folk-song, and the Negro spiritual, and observes that: 'In contrast to the Spirituals, the Blues are secular songs. They are not sung in chorus but by an individual singer. The Blues-singer describes first person experiences, but only such as are typical of the community and such as each individual in the community might have.' He continues: 'Like the Spiritual, the Blues consists of statement and response.... A Blues verse, then, is based on the African scheme of statement and response, not the European scheme.' He notes that the Blues-singer differs

from the European song writer or poet, 'and also from the anonymous author of folk-songs, in that he describes typical experiences in the first person.' He makes a distinction between the folk-song and the Blues: 'The folk-song takes itself seriously, the Blues makes fun of and satirizes itself through understatements and exaggerations. The Blues continues the techniques of African praise - and mocking-songs.' Wit and irony characterize the Blues, but 'the wit is always put in as a means only, never as an end in itself taking precedence over the sense. The Blues always has its reference to the social background.'<sup>66</sup> The use of 'blues' as a synonym for 'melancholy' derives from an insufficient understanding of the mood and the intention of the Blues-song. The Blues does not merely express melancholy and resignation, it is also assertive. Lamentation and affirmation co-exist in a Blues-song, but the predominant mood is triumphant. In a foreword to Paul Oliver's Blues this Morning, Richard Wright observed that 'the most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope.'<sup>67</sup>

The blues idiom is eminently suited to Sepamla's purpose in 'The blues is you in me', in which he unburdens himself of the melancholy that assails him and demonstrates how he never loses faith in life, no matter how repressive the South African environment remains. The poem manifests the influence of jazz on him and is similar in style and content to Gwala's 'Gumba, Gumba, Gumba'. Sepamla describes the poem as his anthem and admits the influence jazz has had on him.<sup>68</sup> The poem explores typical problems in the lives of Blacks, in the manner of a Blues-song. He declares his intention to unburden himself and to protest unambiguously: 'I want to say it louder now / I want to holler my thoughts now' (p.70). He complains about underpayment, censorship, the Group Areas Act, Bantu Education, and other measures which withhold Black advancement. He argues that these same measures which serve

to keep Blacks in subjugation constrain White progress and happiness, too. While Whites are inclined to be complacent and to accept the situation which leads to their stagnation, Blacks are striving to change the status quo and counteract their oppression:

we are the blues people all  
the whiteman bemoaning his burden  
the blackman offloading the yoke (p.71)

Whites are depicted as victims of apartheid, too, which has ironically become burdensome to them as well to maintain. The title signifies the inseparable destinies of Blacks and Whites in South Africa. Sepamla conveys the Black people's firm resolve to end their misery, to shed the yoke of oppression.

Several other poems in the collection explore the problem of race relations in South Africa further. In them Sepamla appeals for an improvement in race relations, a central preoccupation in his work. He is the builder of bridges. 'Da Same, Da Same', which first appeared in New Classic Number 2 in 1975, is written in pidgin English, which is well suited to his purpose in the poem. He uses the layman's language to assert the common humanity of all people, irrespective of race or class, in the following terms:

when da nail of say da t'orn tree  
scratch little bit little bit of da skin  
I doesn't care of say black  
I doesn't care of say white  
I doesn't care of say India  
I doesn't care of say clearlink  
I mean for sure da skin  
only one t'ing come for sure  
an' da one t'ing for sure is red blood  
dats for sure da same, da same for avarybudy (p.11)

The truth of his proposition is so self-evident that it does not require an exceptionally learned person to uncover it. Even the least sophisticated or least educated person should be able to realize that Blacks are human beings who must be treated with consideration. Conversely, anyone who fails to appreciate this simple fact must be either inhuman or devoid of common sense. In 'The Ash Urns' the appeal for human fellowship is carried further. Sepamla uses the language of courtship to try and woo even the dyed-in-the-wool racist to accept his vision for a future of cordial

race relations in South Africa:

there is for you and me  
a place  
we can huddle together  
to make this fire burn  
evermore (p.48)

He is the scorned lover, gently coaxing, persistently offering his hand in marriage, and trying to convince the person he loves about their bright future prospects together. He makes a direct appeal similar to Serote's in 'The Actual Dialogue'. In his appeal for an end to racial hostility and the abuse of power, he is at his lyrical best in 'Goddess of Power', in the last stanza, which reads:

O dark drunk goddess of power  
yield these yellow red strings  
squat squeeze spew forth foul failures  
into the new Eden  
for a joyous love-life to sprout  
springing from firm fine roots (p.12)

The poem displays a fine feeling for words which few of Sepamla's contemporary Black poets in South Africa can match. The point made by Douglas Livingstone in his comparison of Sepamla's linguistic and technical accomplishments with Mtshali's and their contemporaries is evident in the poem, namely, 'that Sepamla is the more widely-read... his irony being sharper in terms of reference, or the more informed'.<sup>69</sup> His concern for the future well-being of all South Africans is couched in apocalyptic terms, invoking the goddess of power and asking her to intercede. The language is deeply affective, employing alliteration most effectively to make his appeal against the abuse of power. He is the suppliant, gently solicitous, but nonetheless unrelenting in his opposition to those who are power-drunk.

He embraces Black Consciousness as a means of fighting the abuse of power. Black Consciousness also provides the ideological framework, as in his previous collection, against which Sepamla assesses the prevalent political attitudes among Blacks in the period between Sharpeville and Soweto. He does not have to subscribe to Black Consciousness on every point, for instance to its insistence that social and political contact between Blacks and Whites should be discouraged, to find in it a useful tool of analysis. Also

as historical witness, he has no wish to falsify the socio-political milieu of his poems when Black Consciousness was in the ascendant in the minds of Black people. Despite himself, however, he confesses that Black Consciousness has the attraction of an exceptionally beautiful woman on his soul. He may restrain himself from taking her to bed with him, but he cannot ignore her entrancing beauty altogether. These various sexual connotations are present in varying degrees in his Black Consciousness poems, which also have strong overtones of Negritude poetry, the poetry of the Harlem renaissance, and Black Power poetry in America.

'The Black Girl' is written in the 'Black is beautiful' idiom. He waxes lyrical about the Black girl's 'dimples, ... the olive of her skin,.... her brown eyes,... her tall proud neck,... her plaited head,... her smile,... her soft thigh' (pp.44-45). However, the poem is more than a simple tabulation of her attractive physical attributes. She is the symbol of Africa's great appeal and alluring qualities:

She is the sun  
She is the daughter  
She is Africa (p.45)

Sepamla resorts to Senghor's technique in 'Black Woman' of personifying Africa and presenting her as an attractive woman. But, as Clive Wake points out, 'A poem like "The Black Girl" is an interesting contrast, in its lack of rhetoric, with Senghor's famous (notorious?) "Black Woman".'<sup>70</sup>

Sepamla employs oblique irony to attack the laws which prohibit mixed marriages and sexual relations between Blacks and Whites, by showing the hypocrisy and neuroses created by such laws. The Black beauty proves so irresistible to Whites that she drives them to break their own laws. Sepamla is alluding to the Excelsior scandal of 1973, when prominent White residents of the small town of Excelsior in the Orange Free State were arrested under the Immorality Act for having sexual relations with Black women. Whites have created this pathological state they are caught in and are actually in love with what they profess to hate. Neither the subject matter of Sepamla's poem nor his technique are original. Nonetheless, his poem is a record of the reawakening of a people, their growing collective consciousness and pride in

being Black. It presents their determination to regain belief in themselves and cast aside their complexes. The poems point to the Sharpeville era, when the Black community suffered a serious setback to their self-confidence, self-esteem, and revolutionary zeal.

'I remember Sharpeville', written around 1968, in the same period as his first published poem, 'To Whom it may Concern', recreates the traumatic events of Sharpeville, when Black anger, which they had contained over many years through their remarkable self-restraint, flared up and was only snuffed out by the armed forces. In 'Beyond this Moment', he explains that in the intervening years since Sharpeville, he has tried to forget the shattering experiences of Sharpeville, but the memory of the fallen heroes and his people's unrealized hopes lingers. Consequently, 'I remember Sharpeville' was written to preserve the memory of Sharpeville and conveys, in a way that several accounts of Sharpeville do not, how it felt to be one of those involved. He describes the despair and the defeatism which swept across the Black community and paralysed them, until the rise of Black Consciousness brought about a new militancy. He records how, after the Sharpeville massacres, the spirit of the Black community appeared to sink with the coffins. The Sharpeville massacres were followed by the gnashing of teeth and 'the mournful wail of salt-stained faces / the groan and grouse of aggrieved relations' (p.22). Though the events have remained indelible in the minds of Blacks, he laments the fact that people have taken very little action to avenge these deaths. They remain regrettably cowed by state repression.

'Pigeon-Holes', first published in New Classic Number 1 in 1975, recalls how shattered the people's morale was after Sharpeville: 'the rattle of a gun / shook the very roots of our kinky hair' (p.24). Exile, imprisonment, and banishment also took their toll and crippled the Black community even further. Those who managed to escape the dragnet of state repression withdrew from the public eye to lick their wounds in private, where they continue to 'bridge their feelings / with long days of anguish' (p.24). However, they still nurse secret grudges against the murderous regime, as the poem's

ending indicates:

We try to settle the debt  
Sweat dripping in long queues  
Because all the pigeon-holes remain (p.24)

The title, 'Pigeon-holes', signifies emptiness, frustrated aspirations, and a vacuum that is waiting to be filled. Sepamla portrays the people as broken-spirited, but predicts their recovery from the afflictions of Sharpeville. 'Two Masks' pursues the subject of the political inactivity of most Blacks after Sharpeville and depicts their resignation and lethargy in the following lines: 'time has stilled or tamed / the shrieks of despair' (p.15). Their faces, like masks, betray no feelings. But Sepamla foresees a time when these masks will come off. He warns against that inevitable day of reckoning, when Blacks reveal their true feelings and decide to redress their grievances:

i ponder that day  
these faces will be  
shattered  
trampled  
leaving no trace of a beauty  
i feel by day and by night (p.16)

'This time' conveys Sepamla's concern over certain prevalent attitudes in the Black community since Sharpeville: apathy, cowardice, avarice, and careerism. Opportunism has triumphed over integrity, so that many Blacks have become self-seekers, sinking their teeth in any 'rotten fruit' and drinking 'water from poisoned wells' (p.27). These metaphors convey contamination. Sepamla is writing about the growing number of Black people since Sharpeville who were willing to serve in government created institutions such as Bantustans, in exchange for a few concessions and personal favours. Black Consciousness, whose views Sepamla's poem reflects, was opposed to collaboration of any kind and participation in these apartheid structures. Black Consciousness was also pledged to bringing about the political reawakening of Blacks. In pursuit of this objective, in 'The reluctant goat' Sepamla tries to goad his Black readers out of their lethargy:

you sit there  
like you missed your tablet  
nine months ago  
speak it my friend (p.42)

Goat is a traditional metaphor for stupidity and timidity. The advanced stage of pregnancy referred to in the poem signifies effeminacy and helplessness. He says Blacks sit awaiting deliverance from outside and chides them not to 'squat so / like you wait for Noah's ark' (p.43). These snide remarks are designed to arouse those Blacks who claim to be descended from a long line of illustrious African warriors to shed their fear, disguised as indifference, and take to arms against their oppressors.

In 'The Dilemma', he piles yet another insult upon the politically apathetic, when he mockingly asks:

I wonder I really wonder  
Which people to embrace  
The death-living or the memorable dead (p.56)

He contrasts the people who died in Sharpeville and other martyrs of the liberation struggle with those Africans who have survived them but are too scared even to say boo to a goose. He interprets the prevailing cowardice and lethargy within the Black community as insulting behaviour to the memory of the dead and a betrayal of those ideals of freedom and human dignity for which they sacrificed their lives. His own political disengagement comes under critical scrutiny in 'I tried to say', where he writes:

For days I've pondered...  
whether to sit by the window  
watching shadows turn to night  
or make those little noises  
that affirm our tilted existence (p.35)

The poem reveals how he himself shuns political involvement, except indirectly and in a moderate way. He can only sit, ponder and make little but ineffectual noises. He is painfully aware of the fact that he is no more than a commentator who is, in all other respects, a passive spectator; that, as a poet, his voice is probably ineffective in compelling the establishment to take note. Yet even making useless noises is for him preferable to maintaining a deathly silence, like those people he relegates to the realm of the 'death-living' in 'The dilemma' (p.56). His raised voice, impotent as it may sound, is nonetheless an affirmation of his being.

Beneath the facade of peace and calm among Blacks, Sepamla senses a restless spirit among them against which he



warns the oppressive regime. He compares the mood of Blacks to a gathering storm. Beyond their silence, bred of repression, lurks frustration and bitterness, which may yet culminate in a frightful outburst. He warns against impending violence by demonstrating the dangerous pitch which Black anger has attained and warns the oppressor that it can no longer be contained. At the same time, he tries to rouse the faint-hearted to stand up for their rights and support the liberation struggle.

'Silence: 2', first published in New Classic Number 1 in 1975, is a prophetic poem about the outbreak of violence, which Sepamla could already see was imminent as a result of the mounting frustration of Blacks:

how this silence  
I hear  
breeds  
on avenues of despair  
I'll never know

I speak  
of a silence  
I fear (p.10)

The Soweto upheavals of 1976 which erupted from the most unexpected sources, schoolchildren, were a vindication of his views expressed in the poem a year earlier. The key words in the extract, 'breeds,... despair,... fear', invoke the volatile situation. 'The brooding silence' he talks about elsewhere in the poem describes the build up, which he so dreads, of resentment and tension among Blacks (p.9).

'Walled in', as they are by repressive laws, their discontentment mounts, 'making of each moment / pebbles of time' (p.9). The metaphor describes how South African society is sitting on a powder keg. However, this allusion to stones is uncannily accurate for, lacking sophisticated weapons, the Black community, when its predicted anger erupted a year later, resorted to pelting government troops with stones. Sepamla shows the folly of construing the silence in the community for impotence, acquiescence, or resignation. He compares the mood of the community to the still waters of 'a river sipping / the marrow of aged rocks' (p.9). His metaphorical reference to the erosion of a rock by water flowing over it is a forecast of the ultimate triumph of

Blacks. Their resistance throbs deep in their hearts and goes back in history a few centuries.

'To Makana and Nongqawuse', which first appeared in Ophir Number 22 in December 1975, employs such a historical perspective to demonstrate the long and glorious history of African resistance to European occupation. After they had occupied the Cape for the second time in 1806, the British set out to destroy all the powerful Xhosa kingdoms which had been hostile to European occupation. They banished some of the African leaders who had continuously led the resistance to European occupation. Makana was imprisoned on Robben Island in 1819 and Maqoma in the 1850s. Both had been great warriors of the AmaXhosa, a people who had fought courageously at least nine times against the colonial invaders, until subjugated by the superior arms of the British forces. Makana escaped from Robben Island and was drowned in the process. Robben Island has been known to the Africans ever since as the Island of Makana. Nongqawuse's story is celebrated in H.I.E. Dhlomo's The Girl who killed to save (Nongqause the Liberator), the first known play to be written in English by a Black in South Africa and published in 1935, and in Mtutuzeli Matshoba's short story, 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion'. As told in these various accounts by African writers, Nongqawuse, the daughter of Mhlakaza, had tried to create a situation in which her people would be compelled to fight the European invaders to the bitter end. Her plan had misfired when, impelled by her vision, her people had slaughtered all their livestock and burnt their crops. But, instead of hurling themselves against the European invaders, they had sat back to await deliverance from their oppressors by providence, thus completely misreading Nongqawuse's vision of deliverance. This last-ditch-stand by Nongqawuse's people had culminated in the Great Xhosa Tragedy of 1858.

In 'To Makana and Nongqawuse', Sepamla explains the new strategy for liberation adopted by the Africans since the nineteenth century Wars of Dispossession: 'we've seen the wars of the day / demand brief cases and cotton ties' (p.23). Resistance to European conquest continues, albeit through

the use of new methods. These alternative, modern strategies, the petitions and protests to which Sepamla is alluding, were first advocated in literature by Citashe, an important Xhosa poet of the nineteenth century, even before the formation of the South African Native National Congress (renamed the African National Congress in 1925) in 1912. In a poem which links with Sepamla's, Citashe exhorts the Africans to acquire education and wage war against the European settlers with their pens:

Your cattle are gone, my countrymen!  
Go rescue them! Go rescue them!  
Leave the breech loader alone  
And turn to the pen.  
Take paper and ink,  
For that is your shield.  
Your rights are going!  
So pick up your pen,  
Load it, load it with ink.  
Sit in your chair,  
Repair not to Hoho  
But fire with your pen 71

Sepamla notes how over the years Africans have increasingly come to rely on 'the whizz of bullet words', instead of their spears as of old, in their struggle for liberation (p.23). However, his attitude differs from Citashe's in that, much as he would like to see a peaceful transition to majority rule, he does not share Citashe's unqualified faith in the process of peaceful negotiation. He has the advantage over Citashe that the history of the African liberation struggle since 1912 has taught him that words can be useless in bringing about meaningful change. However, he remains ambivalent in his attitude and wary of advocating armed insurrection. He cautions restraint, learnt from the lessons of the past. At the same time, he invokes the warrior spirit of Makana and Nongqawuse:

O spirit of the departed prophets  
let me meet you instead at street-corners  
and from the brow of your unwrinkled face  
I'll learn the secrets of this life (p.23)

He tacitly admits that the decisive battles are going to be fought and won in the streets, not in the drawing rooms where the people with briefcases and ties talk incessantly without results. The politics of petitions and protests must eventually give way to confrontation and challenge, such as

Makana, Nongqawuse, and other heroes and heroines of the African resistance movement employed. But he does not spell out unambiguously the course of action open to Blacks; he does not explain clearly what confrontation and challenge entail. His poem is too ambiguous to enable the reader to determine his attitude to guerrilla warfare. However, it is probably fair to surmise that he is speaking less about military uprising, as such, than about the need for Black people, whose morale had been shattered by Sharpeville and its aftermath, to shed their self-pity, fear, and apathy. A few other poems in The Blues is you in me confirm this interpretation.

'Now is the time' carries his message further and, as the title suggests, recommends that the time to reorganize the Black community politically has come:

Now is the time  
For great hearts  
To come forward  
Now is the time  
For the public-spirited  
To surge onward  
Now is the time  
To find this us (p.69)

Sepamla employs the same rhetoric structure as Kgositsile in 'For Afro America', in which Kgositsile writes:

Now  
I can see  
ghetto smells going  
up in smoke...<sup>72</sup>

Both emphasize the urgency of the matter. Kgositsile replaces Sepamla's mild manner by invective and images of bloodshed and arson. The main thrust of Sepamla's poem is the restatement of the need to redevelop political consciousness and renew resistance to apartheid. He shows in 'I'll come to You' that victory for Blacks is imminent, if they put up a fight. He describes the kind of determination Africans will require to attain their freedom. Once again, as in 'The Ash Urns', he uses the language of a suitor who has been forced to live apart from his loved one. At a different level, the separation described applies to African families separated by apartheid, through migrant labour, influx control and other regulations that separate husbands from their wives.

The poem has relevance, too, as an indictment of the system of Bantustans, which keep various Black ethnic groups apart. His people, whose emancipation he desires, are the object of his love. They shall be free one day, even if it means 'wading through the bloodied dust' to attain their freedom (p.49). He acknowledges that serious obstacles have been placed on his path, but assures his lover that he has devised plans to circumvent these obstacles. The lyricism of his verse underlines his enormous faith in the realization of his ideals:

I'll come to you...

I might swivel  
like the earth made giddy  
in the midday sun  
lift one shoulder  
yoke the other on the coming moment  
strain forward on impossibilities  
and again strain  
to surge beyond bedevilled situations  
feign and fan before those deeds  
intent on anchoring  
hope and faith  
on inconsequential intrigues. (p.40)

He reiterates Serote's optimistic message in 'Hell, Well, Heaven', in which Serote writes with comparable lyricism. Both poems exude confidence and, together with Kgositsile's poems, are characterized by restlessness accompanied by forward motion. Despite the 'impossibilities,... bedevilled situations, ... intrigues' and other setbacks mentioned in Sepamla's poem, its predominant mood is triumphant. Terms which suggest progress and transcendency, 'coming,... forward,... beyond, ... inconsequential', are used to qualify the obstacles enumerated in the poem. 'Hope', 'faith', and 'triumph' are the key words which carry the essence of Sepamla's message in the poem.

In these poems, Sepamla goes some way beyond protest. They challenge and affirm, within the framework of Black Consciousness, which he was to project even less apologetically in his poems written after the Soweto uprising on 16 June, 1976.

THE SOWETO I LOVE\*

Sepamla's poems written after the Soweto uprising, which appear in The Soweto I Love and in several magazines, reflect a change of direction and a new emphasis in his writing, also projected in his novel of the Soweto uprising, A Ride on the Whirlwind. These works show how his conception of his role as a writer altered. In his first two collections, as in his short stories and in his first novel, The Root is One, he writes in an indirect, satiric way about the economic and political plight of Blacks and about their struggle. As Sue Douglas writes, in these earlier works the politics, never totally absent, is 'disguised like a pill with a sugar coating. You swallow the lot and benefit from it without noticing.' After Soweto he cast off his mask. The events which erupted in Soweto on 16 June 1976 sparked his desire to place on record many of the horrors which were committed against the school children, followed by police detentions, deaths in prison and other acts of reprisal by the state. 'I'm an historian,' he told Sue Douglas explaining his role in the context of Soweto and its aftermath. 'And I've only scratched at the surface so far... Blacks have been silent for too long.'<sup>73</sup> The last utterance, in particular, is significant in that it reveals his own decision after Soweto to be more outspoken, more overtly political in his writing.

Feeling depressed by events in South Africa after the outbreak of the Soweto uprising, he left for Swaziland for a while to savour a little freedom, an event described in his interview with Stephen Gray. Once back in South Africa, he found it impossible to distance himself emotionally from events and every day seemed to add fuel to the fire. Repression had intensified, with roadblocks and raids on the homes of people suspected of being engaged in politics. These and other repressive acts by the state became the order of the day to the extent that he felt:

The Whites are really breathing down our necks. They are creating a violent situation for themselves - through

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\*The Soweto I Love, London: Rex Collins, 1977.

All page references are given after quotations in the text.

their fear. But they are stirring people's consciences. Someone else's words spring to my mind: 'I like all these roadblocks and harassment - it's really good for Black Consciousness.'

After Soweto, therefore, Sepamla reassessed his role and redefined it more precisely than he had ever done. With repression in the increase, he saw his role as being a witness to the injustices and atrocities suffered by his fellow Blacks. He turned his back on his previous stance, whereby one of his primary objectives as a writer had been to delight his readers, and declared that he now saw his duty as being 'to spread hope for the future and sympathy for the present'.<sup>74</sup>

Many, though by no means all, of his poems written in response to Soweto and its aftermath exhibit, in Clive Wake's words, 'a certain prosaic quality here and there deriving from the poet's more explicit association of image and moral'.<sup>75</sup> In these poems, Sepamla resorted to the documentary technique, described by Stephen Gray as 'an element of journalism'. They are comparatively less reflective and more passionate than his previous collections. They were written under different circumstances and deal with highly emotive issues. But neither the passion nor the journalistic flavour are altogether absent from his previous collections, in which poems like 'I remember Sharpeville' handle similarly emotive issues and exhibit the same tendency towards the prosaic and explicit. 'I remember Sharpeville' and the other poems deriving from events unleashed by Sharpeville are written from a considerable distance in time, after the events they describe. They recreate these events less emotionally and more contemplatively. Comparing his previous collection with his Soweto poems, Sepamla stated that:

Well, I think that one must accept that if you write as soon as I have done after events that have just taken place, one is less concerned with things of the mind; I think it is more the feelings that one was after here. I tried to capture the feeling, not only of myself, but of those involved in the riots. And I think that if that's the case, one has lost the contemplative element of writing; but I don't think you'll find that I have been philosophical in my approach to this last work. I've been earthy that's all.<sup>76</sup>

The Soweto I Love may be artistically less impressive than

his previous volumes but, as Clive Wake points out, the collection is a 'significant celebration of this tragedy' and, despite a few rough edges in some of the poems, they are nonetheless susceptible to a friendly analysis.<sup>77</sup> A closer examination of The Soweto I Love reveals the strengths and defects of the poems. The poems in the collection are of two kinds. There are those which deal with the Soweto upheavals and related events and others which are concerned with various aspects of life under apartheid.

'I saw this morning', which opens the collection, records the events of 16 June 1976 and highlights some of the most horrendous spectacles he witnessed:

I saw this morning  
panic in the location  
little children clasping schoolbags  
put to flight  
I saw them run across an open veld (p.1)

Sepamla's shock at the genocide committed is comparable to William Blake's outraged feelings at child abuse, which drives him to complain:

Is this a holy thing to see  
In a rich and fruitful land -  
Babes reduced to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?<sup>78</sup>

Both poets are witnesses who register their protest against cruelty to children, in very simple terms. The situation Sepamla describes is far worse in that it involves the actual slaughter of the innocents. Sepamla's poem, like others on the same subject, emphasizes the fact that he was an eye-witness to these events. 'I saw' is repeated four times in the poem and is reinforced by 'I heard'. His use of the first person narrative emphasizes this fact. His shock at the atrocities which were perpetrated against innocent school children is authentic. One of the school children, whose fate is described in the poem, was a cripple. Such callous deeds strike Sepamla forcefully. Their destructive potential is the stronger for the threat they pose to his own children. He can personalize these cruel acts, as a father of five himself, in a way in which in his previous poems, which largely describe the misfortunes of others with no immediate prospects of the same events occurring directly in his own life, he could not. The



emotional distance between himself and the episodes described is considerably reduced. He writes more as an aggrieved party himself than as a spokesman for the oppressed but one who is in many ways considerably more fortunate than the rest of his people. He now finds himself cast in the arena. The open veld in which the events related in the poem occur is symbolic of exposure, vulnerability, and defencelessness. The veld is where you hunt buck, which is what the children have been reduced to by the state-troops. Sepamla's craftsmanship is again in evidence in the second line of the poem, in which he uses 'panic' to refer to the fright experienced by the children and the loss of nerve among the troops which leads them to fire at unarmed children. 'Monster' and 'hippo' appear repeatedly in these poems, as in 'A Child Dies' and 'Like a Hippo', to describe the police. His repertoire of images is more limited in this volume than in his previous collections; nevertheless his consistent use of these symbols achieves an intensity of feeling that is not far removed from Serote's.

In the Soweto poems, Sepamla dispenses with his humorous pose and characteristic wit. 'For a Laugh' explains this change of attitude which accounts for the sombre mood of his poems:

i was beginning to say  
the whole idea was too grand  
it deserved a hard laugh

but came the riots  
they shot us down with violent bullets (p.13)

Death is no laughing matter. Nor can he afford any more to suggest that, 'We don't need to be more angry.'<sup>79</sup> Soweto pushed him to embrace the fierce and uncompromising stance adopted by poets in the mainstream of Black Consciousness. He had learnt Bloke Modisane's lesson of some two decades earlier that for the Black person in South Africa there can be no absolute retreat from politics. In his autobiography, Blame me on History, Modisane describes how he was inevitably dragged into politics by the repressive methods used indiscriminately by the state against any Black person. 'Intellectually I resisted involvement with political parties,

rejected attempts to be drawn into political discussion,' Modisane says in a statement that could describe Sepamla's own position. 'There was no choice, during riots the police shot their rifles and sten guns at anything which was black.'<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Sepamla's Soweto poems show his vacillation between disengagement and partisanship. He is caught between his wish to continue advocating restraint and a reasoned approach to the problem, on the one hand, and his instinctive urge to give free vent to his passion, on the other hand. His vacillation inevitably leads to indecisiveness and inaction and he must first resolve his conflict, before he can progress beyond the stage where he will cease to wonder about the turn of events and take a resolute stand in support of the liberation struggle. As these poems reveal, he does not possess Serote's aggressive stance. Although plagued by considerable self-doubt, he still believes that he can construct bridges of understanding and establish areas of human contact. He wants to continue with his task of trying to reconcile the divergent and antagonistic forces of African nationalism and White domination. His faith and his hope, which even the catastrophe in Soweto could not stall permanently, lie in a peaceful resolution to South Africa's racial problems. However, Soweto did map a new direction for Sepamla. The Soweto poems turned him in the direction of rousing the passions, so long held in check, and the moral indignation of the oppressed. His previous advocacy of moderation under all circumstances, his fears about the possible counterproductive effect of radical politics, and his misgivings about confrontation were shelved for a while. Soweto throttled all the laughter out of his system and compelled him to come out more openly. 'On Judgement Day' declares ominously that:

nobody really sees the storm raging within us  
nobody cares to know that we've reached our own bottom  
laughing has become agonizing (p.25)

Two other poems, 'A Child Dies' and 'How a Brother Died', from the same period take the form of obituaries. 'A Child Dies' describes the death of a young child in the hands of the state troops:

He was a mere kid  
consumed by curiosity

which brought him one morning  
to a burning scene of a shop (p.2)

The collocation of expressions such as 'consumed, burning, eating up, fire, rages' brings out the horror in the treatment of the child. The association of these terms with the fate of both the child and the shop illustrates Sepamla's contention that the capitalist establishment, represented by the burning shop, is committing acts which will lead to the destruction of Whites as much as Blacks. Sepamla is equally economic in describing the child's irrational fear and the over-reaction of the state, as in the following lines:

because a monster was known to stalk the streets  
unthinking  
the child fled (p.2)

'Unthinking' is positioned in such a way that it describes the behaviour of the monster and that of the child. Some traditional elements are employed in the poem. The monster who stalks the streets, who is called the 'towering giant' elsewhere in the poem, is the mythical evil creature, izimu, of the traditional Xhosa intsomi (p.2). Izimu is described in a footnote to A.C. Jordan's Tales from Southern Africa as 'a cannibalistic creature which, though it has but one leg, is capable of great speed. When the Zim [izimu] is born its parents pounce on it and eat the infant's one sweet leg (the other is bitter).'<sup>81</sup> Cannibalism is in the nature of the izimu, who is likened in Sepamla's poem to the state. The image of the monster brings out the nightmarish quality of the child's experience. Sepamla employs a simile borrowed from traditional life in his description of how the child was brought down by the monster and how 'like grain / he was pounded and pounded' (p.2). The horrific image of a child reduced to pulp with a gun-butt is as shocking as Mtshali's description of township mongrels fighting over the corpse of a baby dumped by its mother. 'How a Brother Died' relates another cruel event involving the poet-narrator's brother, a spruce, decent, apolitical man who 'flew no flags' (p.10). Despite his decency and political disengagement, he is killed along with the rest. In these poems, Sepamla, like Serote whose declared aim is to keep the record straight, is a witness: 'I want to remember these things / that I may tell

them to my little brother' (p.10). He is shaken out of his political apathy and infuriated almost beyond endurance by these deplorable events. 'I want to remember these things,' he reiterates, 'because I had never known such hate before' (p.11). The atrocious events serve to arouse his wrath and to raise his political consciousness.

'At Sunset' and 'At the Dawn of another Day' continue the saga of Soweto. 'At Sunset' is a report on the outbreak of arson on the night the uprising began. As the workers returned from work:

flames leaped into the air  
as offices, banks, libraries, shops,  
buses, trucks, Kombis, cars belched  
billows that rose hurriedly into the blackened sky  
empty tins and bin-lids clattering desperately  
amidst a maddened triumph (p.4)

The arson and the momentary triumph of the youth in Soweto are described in some detail by Mshengu, who visited Soweto at the time and observed that: 'Not only were government plants and buildings worth millions of rands destroyed, but almost the entire infrastructure of Bantu administration, which is responsible for rents, housing, enforcement of local government and apartheid regulations, ethnic segregation, the selling of beer and spirits, and so forth was burnt to the ground.' The newspapers claimed that only two Whites had died in the incidents, but township residents put the number of Whites killed at a much higher figure. 'Armed white policemen lay dead in the streets, left behind as their comrades were forced to retreat,' Mshengu adds.<sup>82</sup> In the poem, Sepamla reports on the short-lived triumph of the students:

the guns were in ominous retreat  
no trace of a new tragedy signalled  
until the dawn of another day (p.4)

But the next day signalled more confrontation, as Blacks had now vowed 'to pay the debt with defiance' (p.5). Dawn in this poem and in its counterpart, 'At the Dawn of Another Day', foreshadows the day on which the dead will be finally avenged, when Blacks take over power.

In his analysis of these events, Mshengu concludes by stating that, 'The accumulated effect of the retreat of the police on 16 June, the temporary liberation of Soweto... had a psychological impact which one can only compare to the

retreat of the South African forces from Angola.' The residents of Soweto had learnt that 'the oppressive machine could be beaten. A population had been conscientized - from a toddler who brandished a tiny fist and shouted "Power!" to the old people aghast perhaps at what was happening but recognizing its necessity. The people had been educated in the need and the possibility of resisting, of disdaining all artificial tribalistic divisions and of understanding the nature of the economic exploitation and of ways of ending it.'<sup>83</sup> In line with Mshengu's account of the events, 'At the Dawn of Another Day' relates how the rebellion of the youth exploded the myth of White invincibility. The poem notes how Black 'rage spilled all over the place / unleashing its own energy / confounding the moment / exploding the lie' (pp.6-7). 'On Fear' deals with how Blacks overcame their fears, instilled by events after Sharpeville and police excesses in Soweto. Despite their eventual failure, the poem shows how Soweto indicated that 'we'll yet triumph over fear' (p.47).

Whereas it would have been inappropriate to sound amused when dealing with death and other painful episodes which happened in Soweto, Sepamla's incisive wit and humour return when he is not describing the massacres. His account of the shebeen boycotts initiated by the students in Soweto shows all his characteristic wit and humour. During the Soweto upheavals, the students had managed to set up a de facto local government, which regulated the excessive drinking habits of the people. On the days the students had set aside for mourning their dead colleagues, relatives, and acquaintances, they ordered the shebeens to shut down. Football fixtures, concerts, weddings and other social activities were cancelled for the period. The students explained that, by imposing these severe restrictions, they meant to remind members of the Black community of their political obligations. A circular issued by the Soweto Students Representative Council stated that, 'A number of lives have been lost because of the operation of these shebeens.'<sup>84</sup> The students' rigid position over the operation of shebeens immediately revealed contradictions and elicited conflict among Blacks. Over many years, shebeens had been

the traditional safety valve of Black unemployment and underpayment. Much as many parents supported the students, the closure of the shebeens posed a threat to their livelihood and that of many students, too, whose parents supported them from the proceeds of illicit liquor sales in the shebeens. 'Queens / Kings' reveals these contradictions and conflicts and shows how the liquor traders set out to circumvent the order to shut down their shebeens. Half-mockingly and half-seriously, a body representing the traders declares its support for the students and promises to shut down their shebeens. But almost from the moment they state in their resolution of support that 'we starve / we want proper education for our kids', it becomes clear that they cannot carry out their onerous task without starving themselves and their children to death (p.20). With characteristic cunning which Blacks in South Africa require to stay alive, the wordly-wise Sis Rosie shows the other shebeen kings and queens the way out of their dilemma. She proclaims loudly before her customers:

i'm not mad  
i must pay rent  
i must pay school-fees  
i have no husband  
i swear i won't sell on tick  
only take-away (p.21)

Since she does not allow anyone to drink on her premises, she cannot be accused of having broken her promise or disregarded the instructions issued by the students. On the contrary, she abides by her promise to assist the students, who include her own children, by ministering to their material needs from the proceeds of her business. At the same time, the boycott helps her to solve a perennial source of irritation to her.

Henceforth, her customers will no longer be able to buy on credit, only to be a nuisance to her afterwards when she demands to be paid. The new risks she has to incur to provide her services and the fact that she sells take-aways only demand strict cash. Sis' Rosie embodies the chakijane or mmutlanyane (Brer' rabbit) motif found in traditional Southern African folktales. Chakijane or mmutlanyane is the Anansy figure of traditional Southern African folklore. The poem is about tactics of survival in which chakijane excels.

Sepamla's evocation is richly comic, but shot through with an underlying seriousness that offers penetrating insights into the dilemma of Black parents, who walked a tight rope during the Soweto upheavals.

The workers' strikes which the students enforced were of even greater significance than the shebeen boycott. The first of these strikes began on 1 August, 1976. A second stay-at-home on 23, 24, and 25 August was broken up by migrant workers from the Mzimhlophe male hostel in Soweto. There were allegations, which were denied by the police, that they had incited the migrant workers to go on the rampage through the streets of Soweto, killing on sight, breaking into people's homes, and raping frightened women. Nat Serache, who was hidden in a coalbox at Mzimhlophe hostel, reported, at the height of the plunder in Soweto, that he had overheard a policeman telling the migrant workers: 'We didn't order you to destroy West Rand property. You were asked to fight people only.'<sup>85</sup> Sepamla recreates these atrocities in a narrative poem, 'The Outrage'. The poem employs stark images to bring out the horror of these events. 'Rip off his penis / and foul up the women's wombs,' someone shouts. This account has a strong journalistic element. The account lacks Mtshali's skill for recreating horror which he displays in 'An Abandoned Bundle'. But Sepamla has little need to strive for effect. The events he deals with were so remarkable that the need to fictionalise does not arise. However, Sepamla sees the need to put the record straight, in the light of official denials. This is an example of what Nkosi, too unsympathetically perhaps, describes as 'the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature',<sup>86</sup> . But such accounts, which Blacks can only recount through the medium of creative writing, are essential. In this respect, creative writing in South Africa becomes in certain circumstances a means of bridging the gap between imaginative literature and history, a device for telling 'more of the truth than the historian'.<sup>87</sup>

The Soweto poems, which recreate the massacres, the shebeen boycott, the workers' strikes, the march against the police headquarters at John Vorster Square in

Johannesburg and other events, tell the story from the point of view of Black people. In the absence of a Black press in South Africa, creative writers such as Sepamla, Serote and others have the onerous task of correcting distortions in the White press. They seek to convey, in a way that the several accounts by White reporters do not, what it felt like to be one of those involved, and to convey how life in the townships was transformed in response to the call of the students. The poems are written to preserve the memories of these events.

Repression after Soweto intensified to a degree that compelled Sepamla to address himself to issues he had not paid much attention to before: house arrest, imprisonment, and exile. These repressive methods recalled Sharpeville and Sepamla felt he could no longer ignore them. At the same time, the government initiated certain reforms in the wake of the Soweto uprising. Some of Sepamla's poems take a close look at these reforms to see whether they heralded any significant changes for Blacks. Other poems in the collection examine slum life, in much the same way as Sepamla does in most of his earlier poems.

'A Lover's Diary' deals with the effects of house arrest upon two lovers and examines its implications for the victims. The poem is built on a contrast between the earlier life of the couple, before one of the lovers is placed under house arrest, and the pathos of their separation. The boyfriend who has been placed under house detention and prohibited from seeing his girlfriend, complains against state interference in his private life. He accuses the state of trying to take over their love life and banish love from their hearts. But, he assures his companion:

it isn't over yet with us  
those that have banned me from living  
cannot banish love that easily (p.48)

The prevalence of this defiant spirit in the Black community is illustrated through two related events, which slightly pre-date Sepamla's poem and may have had some bearing on the genesis of his own views on the matter. Mzwandile Maqina's play, Give us this day, which was reviewed in Sketsh, the theatre magazine Sepamla edits, was based on the life of



Abraham Tiro. Before he was hounded by the police, Tiro had told a large audience on Saturday April 1972 during a graduation ceremony at Turfloop University that, 'Mr Vorster must understand that he can ban people, but he cannot ban ideas from people's minds.'<sup>88</sup> Tiro's statement and similar sentiments expressed by banned Black leaders, together with Maqina's Give us this Day, which employed the theme of two lovers separated from each other by banning, were important to Sepamla in the crystallization of his own views on the matter, as reflected in 'A Lover's Diary'. The love theme in Give us this Day, as in 'A Lover's Diary', demonstrates that far from suppressing love between people, house arrest strengthens these bonds. 'My house arrest doesn't reach my touching you,' the banned lover jots in his diary, 'in a way / I've only been taught the cruelty of loneliness' (p.48). In addition, Sepamla illustrates how sympathy is generated for the victims of apartheid within the Black community. The allegory of the lovers in his poem demonstrates the futility of trying to suppress feelings and ideas, while at the same time showing the deplorable nature of such repression. Instead of altering the political views and attitudes of those affected, repression serves to strengthen their resolution. Sepamla's technique illustrates, in human terms, how this is possible. The love between the two, far from being violated, is elevated to a higher spiritual plane.

'Measure for Measure' examines the theme of repression further, in a more light-hearted vein, and shows that subjugation can never be complete while the will of the oppressed to resist persists:

show me only those kinds of love  
which will make me aware of my place at all times

and when all that is done  
let me tell you this  
you'll never know how far i stand from you (p.14)

Louis Couperus has observed that the oppressed African 'reads his overlord with a single penetrating glance'. He despises his inhumanity and 'sees in him the illusion of civilization and humanity and he knows that they are non-existent'. He gives him the homage due to the master, while secretly 'he is profoundly conscious of his democratic, commercial nature

and despises him for it in silence and judges him with a smile... Never does he offend against the form of slavish servility; and, with his salaam, he acts as though he were the inferior, but he is silently aware that he is the superior.'<sup>89</sup> Sepamla's poem demonstrates this spiritual superiority. The victims of apartheid know that its tenets can never be made to take root in their hearts if they do not want them to. The ultimate failure of apartheid lies in the superficial changes it brings about in people. Strict regimentation through influx control, through fostering tribalism, through providing inferior education for Blacks, and other measures fail to arrest the ideas of the oppressed and their yearning for freedom. The poem shows that in the end Whites are left as uncertain as before of what Blacks really think. Whereas 'Measure for Measure' deals with the attitudes of the ruling National Party, 'If' is concerned with the more liberal approach of members of the White opposition parties and Christians, whom Sepamla accuses of paying lip-service to egalitarian principles and Christian fellowship. He rejects White patronage in whatever guise. His attitude towards the softer approach of liberals is similar to Gwala's in 'Paper Curtains' and his message to them is that they should learn to 'match word with deed always' (p.44). Blacks refuse to be hoodwinked either by the advocates of grand apartheid or their more liberal, hypocritical counterparts who advocate gradualism. Both evince different faces of repression. In the end, both are exposed as espousing meaningless changes as far as Blacks in South Africa are concerned.

Pursuing the theme of repression even further, Sepamla turns to the subject of imprisonment for political offences and exposes the alarming increase since Soweto in the rate of detentions without trial, deaths in detention, and other iniquities fostered by the penal system. The revelations are startling: prisoners allegedly hang themselves with blankets or pieces of cloth torn from their jeans; while under interrogation, a detainee hurls himself 'to death from the ninth floor of a building'; a woman returns 'home pregnant from a prison cell' (p.30). Sepamla rejects official

explanations of how such deaths, which are ascribed to suicide, occur as attempts to cover-up police culpability. This rejection of official explanations of how prisoners in detention die comes through in Mafika Gwala's essay, 'Steve Bantu Biko', when he writes: 'Amongst us blacks no one has bothered to ask, why did Steve have to die? We all know where the whole fix lies.'<sup>90</sup> The death of Steve Biko in prison on 12 September 1977 and the evidence subsequently produced before the inquest intensified the scepticism displayed by Gwala and Sepamla, by members of the Black community, and by numerous other people.

It has been argued before that probably if Biko had not been widely recognized as a symbol of Black Consciousness his death might have received the same perfunctory treatment as the preceding forty-five recorded deaths, which Sepamla has in mind in his poem, of people like Mapetla Mohapi, Ahmed Timol, the Imam Abdullah Haron and others. In a bid to cover-up, Jimmy Kruger, the Minister of Police, first suggested that Biko's death had been self-inflicted through a hunger strike. He told a National Party conference that Biko's death 'leaves me cold', and added, amid laughter from his audience, that prisoners in South Africa had 'the democratic right to starve themselves to death'.<sup>91</sup> But details of the autopsy report soon leaked out, revealing that Biko had died from brain concussion caused by repeated blows to his head and that his body had been covered with bruises and abrasions. Under severe criticism, Kruger ordered an inquest, which uncovered more incriminating evidence of Biko's brutal treatment in prison. But the presiding magistrate returned an open verdict and ruled that no one could be held personally responsible for Biko's death.<sup>92</sup> Sepamla reviews such callous acts and shameless verdicts. In 'Tell Me News', he asks whether these tragic events do not weigh heavily on the consciences of White society, too, despite the glib dismissal of such episodes by insensitive autocrats like Kruger:

Tell me, tell me sir  
has the gruesome sight  
of a mangled corpse  
not begun to sit on your conscience (p.31)

Prison literature has been growing steadily in South Africa since Sharpeville, and the Soweto writers return to the theme. Turning from prisons on the mainland to Robben Island, South Africa's maximum security prison, in 'The Island' Sepamla makes Robben Island talk:

I am strong  
my grip will drain the blood of anyone  
see how Mandela and Sisulu have grown grey  
but their spirits still defy me (p.38)

The island is cast in the role of the izimu, the evil cannibal, who is helplessly aware of his limitations and weaknesses. Robben Island epitomizes the repressive state and its failure to break men's spirits. Sepamla applies the technique employed by Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, and others of using prison as a microcosm of South African society. His poem does not offer any of the penetrating insights of life on Robben Island such as one finds in Brutus's Letters to Martha, D.M. Zwelonke's Robben Island, and other first hand accounts. But it reveals man's irrepressible quest for freedom and shows how apartheid is bursting at the seams. The Island is worried that 'it'll be deserted one day' (p.39). The poem conveys the hope of the oppressed that they shall be freed some day. His empathy for the prisoners of apartheid extends to political refugees. 'The Exile', which first appeared in New Classic Number 4 in 1977, is again concerned with giving hope to the victims of apartheid. 'Will-power' is a key phrase in the poem, which ends in the following words of exhortation: 'but strength to your elbow / mother's child' (p.37).

Against the background of increasing repression and suffering, Sepamla turns a cynical ear to all the schemes for reform hatched by the South African government, a cynicism shared by most intelligent Blacks. Themba Miya, one of the lesser known poets from Soweto, in 'Petty-Stuff', published by Sepamla in New Classic Number 3 of 1976, responds with devastating sarcasm to the reforms introduced by the government:

So everybody's happy  
Petty-apartheid is removed  
No more 'Whites only' libraries  
No more 'Europeans only' benches

No more 'bantu and goods lift'  
No more 'No kaffirs and Dogs allowed'

No more petty....  
ONLY APARTHEID<sup>93</sup>

Both Miya and Sepamla expose the meaninglessness for the majority of Blacks in South Africa of such reforms which do nothing to tamper with the instruments of grand apartheid.

'Words, Words, Words' and 'The Late, Late Show' reflect Sepamla's attitude to these proclaimed reforms. 'Words, Words, Words', as the title suggests, attacks the South African government's habit of playing about with words. Changing the name of the Department of Bantu Administration to the Department of Plural Relations, and then to the Department of Co-operation, is like rearranging the same old furniture within the same decrepit apartheid edifice, adding a new coat of paint and some varnish to the same rickety, crumbling building. In the same vein, Homeland independence is a meaningless exercise which brings no qualitative changes. The government merely grants certain concessions to carefully vetoed Black 'leaders', in exchange for their services in operating the institutions of apartheid. With biting irony, Sepamla dismisses this etymological exercise by stating that 'there's a kind of poetic licence / doing the rounds in these parts' (p.41). In 'The Late, Late Show', he argues that even if some of these reformist measures were sincerely carried out, it is probably too late to buy time by creating a stable, increasingly bourgeois, Black urban community, properly housed, well 'educated' and holding positions of 'responsibility', as a buffer caste against Black militancy and rural poverty. Scoffing at these conciliatory measures adopted by the government, the Chamber of Commerce, and other parties with vested interests, especially in the wake of the Soweto uprising, Sepamla writes with some disdain:

I see them scurry about me  
    paving my streets with gold  
I hear the little noises they make  
    wanting to share with me the moon's dark side  
I can feel my grin turn to a grimace  
    my patience has been wearing thin (p.33)

Sepamla declares that these contemplated measures are

cosmetic and unlikely to be responsive to Black pressure on the shop-floor and thus avert revolution.

Although Sepamla remained aloof from direct political involvement, maintaining a great deal of his previous detachment, Black Consciousness permeates his attitudes in The Soweto I Love. Some of the Soweto poems simply restate Black Consciousness teachings; others reflect his growing sadness and anger. His plea for inter-racial understanding and a negotiated settlement assumes greater urgency in the light of the Soweto uprising.

'In Search of Roots' is an assertion of his cultural identity:

We will have to use animal fat  
and not bother with cosmetics and so on...

we will have to read time from the sun  
and stop hurting our wrists (p.52)

Some of these assertions are absurd. But these romanticized views are used in a hyperbolic sense only, in the manner of Negritude. Fundamental to Sepamla's meaning is that Africans must cease being politically compliant, cultural mimics. Coupled with these exaggerated notions of his Africanness are less symbolic statements of how Blacks must assert their political rights: 'We will have to seek out / black, green and golden flowers' (p.52). Black, green, and gold are the colours of the ANC. In what is really the main thrust of his argument, Sepamla is suggesting that Blacks must reorganize themselves politically, behind the banner of their traditional political organizations which have been suppressed since Sharpeville. He rejects White liberal spokesmen, in line with Black Consciousness thinking on the subject, by stating that, 'We will have to speak up / because for too long others have spoken for us' (p.52).

'Civilization Aha' takes a look at Western Civilization from a Black Consciousness perspective, as in James Matthews's 'White Syphilization'. This short poem is characterized by a rejection of the Black stereotypes that have been fostered by White Consciousness, a rejection of the alien world view which has been superimposed over his own, a rejection of all forms of indoctrination, religious, cultural or political:



how can I say this is home  
when mother has to plug wounds dripping blood  
with sweat-stained hands  
when sister has to shield from bullets  
breasts drooping squirting pain (p.15)

However, even at the height of his frustration he can still proclaim his undying commitment to his fatherland. Amid all the rage and despair, he clings to a single vision of racial harmony in which all his conflicts are resolved. His concluding statement in 'A Wish', the last poem in The Soweto I Love, leaves one with this impression of hope for the future which lingers from reading Sepamla's poems. 'But a wish of mine remains,' he says, 'peace at all times with all men' (p.53).

#### . THE UNCOLLECTED POEMS

Events in Soweto continued to haunt Sepamla long after the appearance of The Soweto I Love. A Ride on the Whirlwind, which was banned soon after its publication, returned to the theme of the student inspired uprising. A new factor, which came up in the novel, was the increase in guerrilla incursions. Apart from the earlier attacks on the property of the West Rand Administration Board, the intensification of the guerrilla struggle was manifested through bolder and more direct attacks on Whites, causing the government to react mercilessly. On 13 June 1977 two White men were killed in a shoot-out with three guerrillas at Goch Street in Johannesburg. In April 1979 Solomon Mahlangu, who had left South Africa as a high school student in 1976 to join the guerrilla armies, was sentenced to death for the murder of the two White men, despite evidence that Mahlangu had not actually fired a weapon. The Black community regarded Mahlangu, after whom the ANC school in the Tanzanian town of Morogoro was named, as a martyr. In January and again in August 1977 two bombs exploded at the Carlton Centre, South Africa's largest shopping complex. These guerrilla attacks, which were more intense than the sabotage campaign that broke out after Sharpeville, supplemented the numerous student boycotts and workers' strikes. Such co-ordination of the student campaigns and the guerrilla attacks provide





in the later Soweto poems; helplessness gives way to defiance.<sup>94</sup>

'A New Vocabulary', which appeared in the same issue of Donga, returns to the theme of 'The Late, Late Show' and 'Words, Words, Words'. Sepamla is not impressed by the new euphemisms employed by state agencies to camouflage the repressive and exploitative policies they implement. They coin new terms such as 'Slum clearance / squatter removals / state security / the sale of defence bonds'. The first two phrases mentioned are meant to justify the resettlement of Blacks which is carried out in accordance with the Group Areas Act or the Bantustan policy, whereby Black communities are removed from areas coveted by Whites. Repression is carried out in the name of state security; support for the repressive army is presented as investment in defence bonds. There is no evidence of any change of heart in the people who wield power. Their hearts remain 'frozen / not as in Iceland but Siberia'. Siberia, as a penal settlement, conjures the repressive atmosphere, which the new but unconvincing vocabulary is designed to disguise. Sepamla is not deceived:

I don't know if I care  
I'm only concerned with  
the ferreting of my soul.

Blacks want qualitative changes which will reach down to the souls of everyone.<sup>95</sup>

Similarly, in 'Stop the lie', which first appeared in Staffrider Volume 4 Number 1 of April/May 1981, he calls for an end to all such deception:

I want you to stop the lie  
don't tell me how much you feed the poor  
because you made hunger  
when you dropped those of my blood into the hole of gold.

There are echoes of Blake, who writes in 'The Human Abstract':

Pity would be no more  
If we did not make somebody poor  
And Mercy no more could be  
If all were as happy as we<sup>96</sup>

Sepamla, too, is scornful of charity while the exploitation of Black labour in the mines and elsewhere continues. The schools, clinics and hospitals, which these same agencies of exploitation boast of having built for Blacks, are

designed to ameliorate conditions and to make Blacks better fed and healthier slaves. They do not address themselves to the root cause of the problem. He further argues that the system 'made ignorance / by creating an education only for my kind'. Apartheid is equally responsible for the widespread disease among Blacks: 'you made disease / when you paid pittance for my labour.' The poem exposes the poor economic conditions for Blacks under apartheid and ends in an appeal for complete equality between Blacks and Whites and for the recognition of the human rights and dignity of all Blacks.<sup>97</sup>

Another poem from the same issue of Staffrider, 'Nightfall', as its title suggests, predicts the collapse of the apartheid regime and appeals for a settlement to be negotiated quickly, if Whites care about their survival. Reports that South Africa has exploded its own nuclear bomb and such other bellicose actions will not avert the final disaster. The sound of gun fire and bomb blasts carried out by the state troops, far from ensuring the security of the White community, elicit from them pathetic 'sounds of old men who groan of wasted time / moans from widowed mothers / wails of betrothed sweethearts / children orphaned by stubborn arrogance'. South Africa's acts of aggression are counterproductive. The war, when it inevitably comes, will only breed more suffering for both Blacks and Whites. Sepamla warns, like Serote in 'Time has run out' and other poems, that, indeed, time is running out. He appeals to 'the man', the Whites who wield power, to negotiate a settlement with Blacks, 'before the big shit starts to shoot rounds / louder than the cries / at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange'. His tough warning is emphasized through his use of invective. Whites must realize that they stand to lose all their investments, if they refuse to resolve the racial question peacefully. What's more, their very survival is threatened by their stubbornness. 'There'll be no time to scuttle to Jan Smuts,' they will soon discover. Their superior arms may yet prove to be as ineffective as rifles which spout water in forestalling the inevitable 'night' such as the one which fell over Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. With growing impatience he warns:

listen man  
bullets can turn to water...  
especially as night falls  
it did over Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

The Soweto poems search for continuities hidden under the oppressed face of the land. The situation is desperate and volatile. Lasting solutions must be found quickly. Whites cannot hope to buy time any longer or stall matters indefinitely. These poems convey the strong passions roused by Soweto. However, Sepamla's voice of moderation continues to be heard above all the warlike noises. His commitment has become more fierce, in line with the prevalent mood within the Black community. But, as many of these poems demonstrate, he has lost none of his craftsmanship, subtlety, humour, or compassion. His satire can still be as devastating and penetrating as in his previous collections; while his humour bears constant testimony to his persistent goodwill and his unyielding hope that the racial problem will yet be resolved amicably. There is also some considerable juggling with emotions in these poems; love alternates with hate, hope with despair. The moods interchange. This emotional fluctuation may well be an ominous indication of how his goodwill and generosity, and that of the Black community, could easily be swamped by events, and lead to the adoption of more desperate measures. Despite the vacillation and ambiguity, the Soweto poems veer more towards commitment, with mild protest giving way more and more to uncompromising challenge. His language grows stronger and, at times, rougher, as he sees chances for negotiation and compromise receding further to the background. The poems reflect the anger that was the natural outcome of the tragic events which took place in Soweto and other Black residential areas. They are an eye-witness account by one of the leading Black writers still living in South Africa today. They capture, more vividly perhaps than any photograph, newspaper or television flash, the mood of Blacks in South Africa during the period of the student inspired uprising.

Prose lends itself more readily to narrative than verse, so that in order to record the events which transpired Sepamla has turned his energies more and more to prose fiction since

the Soweto uprising. He has himself admitted that one of the most remarkable things about Black South African writers is that, with very few exceptions, they develop in a haphazard fashion, a point also made by Mafika Gwala. Sepamla had plans for another volume of poems upon his return from the Iowa Writers' Programme, but that has not yet materialized. A selected edition of his poems is under preparation and will be published in 1983 by Ad Donker.

Sepamla is a typical figure of the cultural renaissance: music impresario, dramatist, poet, short story writer, critic, novelist, and editor. After trying his hand in prose and drama, he took to poetry seriously in 1968. He burst on the South African literary scene with the publication of 'To Whom it May Concern', first, in the May 1972 issue of Playboy and, subsequently, in Royston's anthology. He derived his poetic inspiration and momentum from the success of Mtshali and Serote and from the poetic renaissance during the era of Black Consciousness. As with the other poets of the literary revival period, his concerns are personal, social, and political.

Sepamla is a poet in the modern Afro-American style, with fewer traces of traditional verse forms consciously absorbed or reflected in his work. He is more of a township poet than Serote, Mtshali, and several others who try to bring traditional influences to bear on their work. He feels the need to do this less acutely than the younger poets, who were deprived of all the literature and most of the writers they might have related to by the censorship and exile which followed after Sharpeville. The emphasis in his work on his urban background is also an outcome of the influence of writers of the Drum generation and the Sophiatown renaissance. Sepamla has one foot in the Drum and Sophiatown era and another in the Black Consciousness and Soweto era. He can write authentically about either period because his life is contemporaneous with both.

He develops from protest to challenge, dwelling at greater length than Serote and the other younger poets on the Sharpeville crisis and its after-effects, an era which is more vivid in his mind than in the minds of the younger poets. In addition, his first two collections, Hurry up to it and The Blues is you in me, are concerned with the effects of apartheid upon individuals and the community and with recreating township life. His early work shows his ambivalence towards Black Consciousness, but he is never at any moment as hostile to or as distant from it as Adam Small in the latter's writings of the 1960s. His conversion to Black Consciousness, never total or absolute at any stage

in his career, becomes more complete after Soweto. His ambiguity is less apparent in The Soweto I Love and in his uncollected poems. However, he continues to look over his shoulder at the White community more frequently than the other writers of the Black Consciousness era. He recoils from confrontation when it can be avoided. His vision of reconciliation is unaffected by Soweto but, on the contrary, Soweto impresses upon him the urgency of his appeal. His close encounter with racial violence during Sharpeville and again in Soweto confirms him in his conviction that he must look for bridges between Blacks and Whites in South Africa.

One of Sepamla's major contributions to South African literature is in the sphere of language. He has been responsible, more than any other person, for bringing the language of South African poetry close to the language spoken by ordinary Africans. He is the most humorous poet among his contemporaries and has the greatest gift among them for social comedy and political satire.

CHAPTER FOUR

A SURVEY OF OTHER POETS  
OF THE BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS ERA

The Black Consciousness era produced several other poets whose published collections in the period 1967-1980 were not as numerous as Serote's or Sepamla's. The following are some of the poets whose work appeared in magazines and anthologies in substantial numbers or whose collections were published during the period covered in this study: Dollar Brand, Oswald Mtshali, James Matthews, Mafika Gwala, Mafika Mbuli, Njabulo Ndebele, Mandlenkosi Langa, Don Mattera, Adam Small, Essop Patel, Shabbir Banoobhai, Christopher Van Wyk, Fhazel Johennesse, and Ingoapele Madingoane. Not all of them belonged to Black Consciousness organisations but they were all influenced by Black Consciousness in one way or the other. Some, like Mtshali and Small, were hostile to its ideals at the beginning and became converts to it later; others, like Gwala and Ndebele, were drawn towards it from its conception and were among its leading exponents. Soweto marked the climax of the Black Consciousness era and produced the new writers' movement with the formation of writers' groups of Black Consciousness persuasion all over South Africa. This chapter provides a selective rather than a comprehensive survey to show the characteristics which were peculiar to each poet from the period under discussion and the relationship and common traits between them.

Dollar Brand published the first substantial number of poems in English by a Black South African to appear in the 1960s in any magazine in South Africa and, by so doing, he shifted the emphasis from prose fiction, which had hitherto dominated Black South African literature in English, to poetry. Through his work, the drab life of the townships, as in La Guma's stories of District Six, became an acceptable subject for poetry. In his work, political matters, which are never absent from South African literature, became less dominant and the language less lofty. The influence of the



English classical poets waned and poetry was brought closer to the rhythms of township speech and jazz (with a strong African beat), thus paving the way for bolder linguistic, technical, and thematic innovations. Mphahlele describes the changes which came with Dollar Brand's advent over poetry written by Blacks in English and the release of the poetic imagination brought about by Dollar Brand to explore every area of Black experience:

It is quite evident that if you look into your community and avoid the big broad general theme of the black-white encounter, you will find a diversity of material you could not exhaust in a lifetime. And yet you can still use the encounter, the European presence, as a frame of reference. Dollar Brand, pianist and jazz composer, is another writer who weaves verse out of the substance of ghetto life. Like District Six (Cape Town) - the 'sixth-sensed district' as he calls it. He uses the sounds and sights and smells of the place to weave images in a way a musician might do when he improvises on an instrument.<sup>1</sup>

Dollar Brand's poems, under the title 'Africa, Music and Show Business - An Analytical Survey', first appeared in 1967 in Volume 2 Number 3 of Classic and subsequently in Cosmo Pieterse's anthology, Seven South African Poets.\*

In 1960, he went to Europe with a small group of musicians and they played in Switzerland and Scandinavia. After six years he moved to America, returning to South Africa in 1968. His poems deal with his experiences and impressions of life in South Africa and in other parts of the world. He conducts his analysis in musical terms reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's 'Preludes'. The poems are divided like a musical composition. There are twelve movements and a finale. Though each poem is an entity in itself, all are held together by their stylistic features and the common themes which run through them. Viewed together, they are statements on the social, political, cultural, and musical aspects of Dollar Brand's life and the Black Community. They have a personal and a universal dimension to them. He

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\*Seven South African Poets, London: Heinemann, 1971, pp.3-11. Hereafter referred to in abbreviated form as SSAP. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

does not avoid politics, as the quotation from Mphahlele would seem to suggest, but his writing is stringent and devoid of political rhetoric, even when his subject is most pointedly political.

In the first movement, entitled 'Geography', he denounces the ideological warfare that is being fought by the superpowers over Africa:

So many theories of east and west abound  
one thing is certain though  
this earth  
is round (SSAP, p.3)

He refuses to be baffled by the ideological conflict between East and West which is threatening to engulf the world. He wants to retain his integrity, independence, and identity as an African.

In the fourth movement, which follows the blues song pattern, he opposes the cultural strangulation of Blacks by people from the West. The poem, which is entitled 'Western Influence', reads:

my baybee eesah cryink baa baa  
forra me  
i geef her de mango  
i geef her de banana  
but she's stillah cryink baa baa  
forra me (SSAP, p.4)

The mango and the banana are extensively grown in tropical countries, where the predominant population is Black. But the Black child, now accustomed to Western diet, refuses to eat the indigenous fruit. The child has been indoctrinated and has turned her back on tradition, so that her cry signifies self-denial. In his use of English, as in his music, Dollar Brand affirms African rhythms derived from the African chant or ingoma. The Black and the White worlds are fused in a manner that points to the kind of cultural synthesis he prefers.

The fifth movement, entitled 'Rhythm Mystique', is an affirmation of Africa's mystical experiences which her encounter with the West has not been able to invalidate. The poem reads:

joey had the biggest feet  
so he played tenor (SSAP, p.4)

A Western band or orchestra would have wanted to audition

Joey first. What Dollar Brand is saying is that in Africa, where music is in the blood, such auditions are considered unnecessary. It is often enough to look at Joey's feet and pronounce that with such large feet he should make a good tenor saxophonist, able to tap his feet to keep rhythm, the basic ingredient in African music. In other words, there is hardly much to choose from between one aspiring musician and the next, since all Africans are musical. The syncretistic elements we find in Dollar Brand's music and in his poetry are here represented by the importance attached to rhythm, which is conceived of by Dollar Brand as being essentially Negroid (as in Negritude poetry), and by the saxophone, a Western instrument.

Some of Dollar Brand's poems are typical of the exile poems of writers such as Dennis Brutus. Dollar Brand spends long periods abroad and then returns to South Africa, before taking off again. His world straddles District Six, his birth place, the rest of South Africa, and the world at large. He experiences emotional vacillation between the oppressive atmosphere of South Africa, his home, and the freedom of the outside world, which he sometimes finds cold and inhospitable. The sixth movement, 'Blues for District Six', shows his love for District Six, which he nonetheless finds vicious. The seventh movement, 'Where loneliness' still waters meet nostalgia', expresses the nostalgia he feels when he is abroad. Such sentiments occur frequently in Dennis Brutus as in 'By the waters of Babylon', in which Brutus evokes the situation of the children of Israel driven by hostile forces out of their homeland and likens their situation to the agony, loneliness, and destitution felt by Black South African exiles. Upon his return to South Africa, Dollar Brand soon discovers that the South Africa he has been hankering after is repressive and frustrating and offers little scope for the unrestrained development of his creative potential, which is best realized abroad but under severe emotional and physical strain. Such mixed feelings are characteristic of South African poetry, particularly by exiles. Dollar Brand's work, in music and poetry, provides the bridge between the artists functioning from exile and those who continue to operate from South

Africa. The love-hate relationship Dollar Brand defines is intensified in Serote and in many of Dollar Brand's other successors.

Dollar Brand's last two poems describe the world of music. In the twelfth piece, 'The Harmonica', he depicts the waning success of a musician who first receives world-wide acclaim and subsequently fades into oblivion. His harmonica rattles 'back into the gutter' (SSAP, p.9). The poem projects the fate of many artists of promise, particularly from slum areas. Dollar Brand is like Kgositsile, who also berates White entrepreneurs for their exploitation of African musicians in 'Whistle for Pennies', a poem which foreshadowed many features of the new verse from the townships: its conversational tone and the fusion of vernacular expressions into the English text as part of a revised standard English usage. Kgositsile's poem is concerned with the attitudes of White promoters towards mbaqanga or township jazz, 'dubbed kwela by white critics who hear the music as nothing more than an expression of the noisy happiness of simple-minded township natives and a gold mine for recording companies. Fuduwa ousi...' (SSAP, p.98). Dollar Brand's attack is less blunt. But the harmonica player of Dollar Brand's poem, who has a meteoric rise and then fades as dramatically, is a victim of exploitation similar to that which is described by Kgositsile. Dollar Brand's poem expresses the haunting fears of many artists who have made it to the top.

'Finale' is Dollar Brand's manifesto as a musician; it is also a statement of his poetic creed. He resembles Kgositsile and Serote in his rejection of White patronage. He regards his music, like African art in general, as having come of age. He asserts his artistic independence, rejects those musicologists who approach African music like anthropologists as though the music was static, and undertakes to develop his music in the most exciting and unexpected directions, a promise he has richly fulfilled. His poems portray developments in the social, cultural, political, economic, and musical spheres which have some bearing upon his life as an individual, a musician, and a member of an oppressed race. His music is the over-riding influence in his poetry, in its arrangement and in its idiom.

Primarily a musician and only incidentally a poet, he has not published any poetry of significance since 'Africa, Music and Show Business'. He remains more committed to music than to poetry.

Although Dollar Brand inaugurated the Black poetic renaissance in South Africa, it was Oswald Mtshali who gave it an impetus it may otherwise never have received. His fame preceded his publication in book form; in 1970 he was listed in a directory of 1,100 important living poets in English by the St. James Press, London. The success of his book, Sounds of a Cowhide Drum<sup>\*</sup>, which appeared the following year, enabled publishers to place more poetic works by Black and White poets on the market. His book whetted the appetites of many South African readers for poetry and many bookshops had long waiting lists of customers who had ordered the book. It was reprinted six times in twelve months. 'Its unprecedentedly high sales - 16,000 in South Africa alone - established a record, for it is the only book of South African poetry ever to have made a profit for its publisher,' Gillian Goldstein notes.<sup>2</sup>

His reception in the press was enthusiastic. Renoster publications claimed in the blurb of his book that his was 'the first sustained voice in the English poetry of this country for at least twenty years'. But, as Mphahlele pointed out in response to this claim, 'Could it be that Dennis Brutus and Mazisi Kunene's work is not considered "the English poetry of this country"?'<sup>3</sup> In her foreword to Mtshali's collection, Nadine Gordimer wrote: 'Many people write poetry, but there are few poets in any generation, in any country. There is a new poet in Africa, and his name is Oswald Mtshali' (SCD, p.v). Responding to Nadine Gordimer's foreword, Tim Couzens wrote: 'Its over-laudatory tone is unfortunate and has been attacked by many South Africans. In

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\*Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, Johannesburg: Renoster Publications, 1971. Hereafter referred to in abbreviated form as SCD. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

the long run it can do Mtshali little good. For the truth is that Mtshali's poetry is marred by many faults, and patronization by the liberal elements of white (and rich) South Africa will not help to iron out these faults.'<sup>4</sup> Reviews continued to pour in which found Serote's work wanting by comparison with Mtshali's. In his review of Yakhal' inkomo, Stephen Gray wrote: 'Yakhal' inkomo misses out on the incisiveness of Mtshali's social criticism. And where Mtshali could just manage to lasso in a whole herd of images with a catch-all punchline, Serote ventures forth in a poem with no sense of direction, and the result is a run-away sprawl.'<sup>5</sup> It was left to Tim Couzens once again to warn against the tendency of White publishers and reviewers to patronize certain Black writers and to pontificate about literary developments in the Black community. In his review of Yakhal' inkomo, Tim Couzens drew the following comparison between Serote and Mtshali:

The book has not been received nearly as well as Oswald Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum published the previous year. The reviewers have not been very sympathetic but since they have often been liberal whites this may be a point in the book's favour. There could be two reasons contributing towards the failure of the book to sell as well as Mtshali's. The first is precisely the fact that Mtshali's book had already come out, liberal South Africa had made its fuss over a black writer, fashion must move to something else. The second is that some reviewers detected a note of black power in the poems and shied away. Serote's poems seem to me, however, to display a sharper intellect and a more complex poetic skill than Mtshali's writing.<sup>6</sup>

Mtshali's poems are informed by both the urban environment he has chosen and by his rural background. Born in 1940 in KwaBhanya near Vryheid, Natal, he came to Johannesburg at the age of eighteen. Almost alone among the poets of the revival period, the majority of whom have lived virtually all their lives in the cities, he weaves his tribal past into his poems. 'Inside my Zulu Hut' (there is an intended pun on 'hut', which also refers to his heart) employs a pastoral setting to describe the erosion of traditional life. He describes his Zulu hut as 'a hive / without any bees', to show how the productive people from the villages have been lost to the cities (SCD, p.9). A number of his poems deal with the problems of the neglected

rural communities and again in this he is unique among the poets of the revival period. He recalls his life in the countryside with fond memories, with nostalgia for the 'calabashes of sour milk' and the 'claypots of foaming beer' in the villages (SCD, p.9).

While Mtshali looks romantically at tradition and the rural communities, he also realizes that he has become a detribalised person with a new base in the cities. In common with his contemporaries, he uses a township setting in most of his poems. 'An Abandoned Bundle', which is about a new-born baby who is dumped in a gutter, is one of his most popular 'township' poems and one of his most typical. In this poem, as in many of his other poems, his attack is two-fold. First, the poem is directed against the political and economic system which produces the physically and morally degrading conditions under which most Blacks live. These conditions are suggested in his description of the people as 'fish caught in a net' (SCD, p.60). The social, political, and economic morass from which they cannot extricate themselves explains, at least in part, the desperation that drives a mother to dump her baby in a gutter. The environment in which Blacks live is polluted and unwholesome, 'like a gigantic sore oozing pus' (SCD, p.60). Secondly, without being blind to the extraneous factors at work, Mtshali disapproves of the inhuman way in which Blacks, particularly in the townships, respond to their situation. Whether one appreciates the mother's economic plight or not, the act of abandoning a new-born baby to the mercy of scavenging township mongrels is essentially a callous one. 'An Abandoned Bundle' is a grim, horrifying, and factual account of man's inhumanity to man and of the dehumanization which derives from apartheid. The romantic vocabulary at the end of the poem - 'her face glittering with innocence / her heart as pure as untrampled dew' (SCD, p.60) - accentuates the sense of the grotesque and shows what a master of the understatement Mtshali is. Although he is disgusted with the conditions he is describing, he does not wave his fists but drops broad hints all the time. Nadine Gordimer describes 'An Abandoned Bundle' as 'one of the most shocking poems

ever written, and yet a triumph, since it could have been achieved only by forging from bitterness a steely compassion, by plunging into horror deep enough to bring forth tenderness' (SCD, p.viii). Mtshali's most successful township poems, such as 'The Detribalised', strike a balance between the horror or tragedy of the situation evoked and his bitterness, on the one hand, and his compassion and the tenderness with which he handles such situations, on the other hand.

Mtshali resembles writers in the realist tradition such as Ousmane in that his thematic concerns are shaped by his work experience. The death of his mother in 1958 forced Mtshali to abandon his plan of following his brother to Pius XII University College in Lesotho. He came to Johannesburg, hoping to enrol at the University of the Witwatersrand. But due to the introduction of segregation at the universities, in accordance with the 1959 Extension of University Education Act, he was refused admission. His aspirations and frustrations emerge from 'This Kid is no Goat', which is about the frustrated desires of a person for a higher standard of education and living. Unable to enter university or to obtain employment as a journalist, he worked in a variety of menial tasks - as a dishwasher, a floorscrubber, and a messenger. As a result, in a number of his poems he shows concern for the plight of the workers: washerwomen, factory hands, miners, nightwatchmen, roadworkers, and domestic workers. 'The Washerwoman's Prayer' describes the drudgery of a washerwoman who takes care of all the laundry of her White employer and his family. Her ageing face is 'like a bean skin soaked in brine' and her hands have turned 'raw, knobbly and calloused' (SCD, p.5). He contrasts her state of deprivation with her employer's ostentatious way of life. Her pathos is the greater, for not only is she an exploited woman but she is also old and infirm. The same concern with the infirm and aged emerges from 'An Old Man in a Church', which is also an indictment of religion. During the week the old man, a factory hand, is 'a machine working at full throttle', but every Sunday the old machine comes to church for greasing (SCD, p.20). We also see in



Mtshali's poems the grave risks Black workers take in the services of their unappreciative masters. In 'The Miner', the workers risk their lives in the dangerous depths and unhealthy conditions of the mine pit for a pittance. The mine 'boys' work until their hands become gnarled and 'their armpits mouldy with [the] sweat of pushing a cocopan / down the rails into the ore crushing mill' (SCD, p.36). In 'The Watchman's Blues', the nightwatchman lays down his life for his master. When he is dead, all his master can say to his widow is: 'Here's ten pounds / Jim was a good boy' (SCD, p.46). Mtshali resorts to such punchlines to expose inhumanity and exploitation.

The impression created in the poems already considered is that the workers are resigned to their fate. However, such an impression is soon dispelled by observing the reaction of a team of road diggers at work. They are defiant and their song conveys their rebelliousness and indignation: 'Abelungu ngo' dam - Whites are damned / Basibiza ngo Jim - They call us Jim' (SCD, p.13). 'A Roadgang's Cry', quoted above, is one of Mtshali's rare poems from his first collection to use invective. The murmur of the roadgang which rises to a crescendo reflects an upsurge of resistance among them. A spirit of militancy among the Black workers is in the air and occasionally flares up, as in the Durban workers's strikes of 1973 - 74 or in the widespread strike action which followed the Soweto revolt.

Although considered by radical Blacks as being too timid in his condemnation of apartheid, Mtshali is in some respects more of a proletarian poet than many of his contemporaries and his predecessors, in his handling of the problems of the workers in their various work situations. Sounds of a Cowhide Drum shows Mtshali as a writer who was still groping for a political creed and an appropriate register. Ambiguity clouds his political views. He seems to be searching after personal glory and advancement, in a decidedly bourgeois direction: 'I want my heaven now / here on earth in Houghton and Parktown' (SCD, p.25). Houghton and Parktown are Johannesburg's wealthiest White suburbs. At the same time, Mtshali articulates the aspirations of the

workers in all spheres of industry, mining, commerce, and agriculture as no other poet of his generation. His work contains certain technical flaws; he spins ready-made images; and, as Mphahlele says of him, he resorts to rhetoric instead of expressing his feelings in his own way. His poems lack the intensity and the originality of Serote's, Gwala's, Ndebele's, or Langa's poems. However, more than any other poet, Mtshali must be credited with the distinction of making poetry the popular medium it became during the Black Consciousness era.

His next collection, Fire Flames, appeared in 1980. In the intervening period, he came out openly in support of Black Consciousness and said that the reason he had undergone such a change of heart was that Whites still did not recognize him as a person, although many of them professed to be enamoured of him and his work. He was quoted in the Sunday Tribune of 30 July 1972 as having told a meeting of Whites in Cape Town that, 'The only way in which we Black people can make our presence felt is by rejecting you Whites completely, having nothing to do with you. We have reached the stage of a complete polarisation of the races where the colour of your skin determines everything.' He said that it was regrettable that Blacks had to close ranks in a manner which seemed to suggest racism in reverse, but that it was the Whites who had taught Blacks racial discrimination. He announced that he would not publish his poems in South Africa any more. The publication of Fire Flames by Shuter and Shooter in Pietermaritzburg indicates that he has reversed his decision. But for nine years he did not publish in South Africa. He was also dropping English in preference for Zulu, he had told his Cape Town audience. Fire Flames shows how he reached the kind of compromise Mazisi Kunene had reached, by providing English translations for his poems. His second collection bears out what he said to Ursula Barnett: 'I once thought I could evangelise and convert Whites to give us back our dignity. But now I have abandoned that line of approach. It is naiveté at its highest. I have now turned to inspire my fellow Blacks to be proud, to strive, to seek their true identity as a single solid group.'<sup>7</sup>

Fire Flames incorporates poems written between 1972 and 1979.\* Some of the poems were written before Mtshali's departure for America in 1974 to take up further studies, but the majority were written in New York. Others have been translated from Zulu and include the work of A.M. Nzimande, E.E.N.T. Mkize, Simon T. Mtinkulu, and Nichodemus Zungu. In the Author's Note, Mtshali explains his new ideological position and describes his pre-occupations as follows: 'These poems, written during the past few years, were inspired by personal, social, economic, and, most especially, political events in South Africa.' They reflect momentous events during a period he considers to have been 'the most crucial period in our relentless, tear-stained and blood-soaked struggle for our total liberation from racism, exploitation, and dehumanisation.' Some of the Zulu poems, such as A.M. Nzimande's praise poem to Black school children in South Africa, Simon T. Mtinkulu's and Nichodemus Zungu's poems in praise of the stars, and Mtshali's 'God is Good', employ Zulu poetic modes, particularly the izibongo form. Nzimande's 'Schoolchildren, you are beautiful!' contains the following lines:

Your beauty is  
like water springing from a fountain  
under the mountain of Ngele (FF, p.5)

Many of the poems echo Zulu speech habits (for instance, the double subject in the title of Nzimande's poem), and the African landscape ('the mountain of Ngele') looms larger in them than in the poems from Mtshali's first collection.

A number of the poems are set in New York. The New York poems depict his homesickness, as in 'News from Home' in which he employs words such as 'fog, dreams, vapour, ephemeral, rainbow, nebulous, bubbles' to describe his home, which is beginning to assume features of unreality in his mind as a result of his long absence (FF, p.15). Nostalgia increases the longer he remains in America and reaches a climax in 'A Depressingly Humid Day in New York', written on 25 July 1979

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\*Fire Flames, Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1980.  
Hereafter referred to as FF.

shortly before he returned home. The hot, humid weather has the effect of making his spirits sink 'lower into the dumps of ennui' (FF, p.55). The rest of the New York poems convey Mtshali's astonishment at the sights of the city: its underground railway network, the skyscrapers of Manhattan, the snow, and other novelties. He is the Third World figure wonderstruck in a naive sort of way, particularly by the technological marvels of the First World. However, much as these poems manage to capture Mtshali's wonder and homesickness, they lack Serote's or Senghor's incisive criticism of American political institutions and culture.

The South African poems are more successful. A few of them convey his disillusionment with Western culture and South Africa's political institutions and reflect the new direction his politics have taken. 'Back to the Bush' is a symbolic poem in which his preference for traditional rituals, amabeshu (skin worn by Zulu men round their loins), and dashikis (Afro-shirts) in place of Catholic ceremonies and European attire reflects his renunciation of Western culture and religion:

I will put on my dashiki or beshu  
comb my hair in a bushy style  
When you hear the black goat bleat,  
Know that I have cut its throat,  
drunk its blood as a sacrifice,  
bathed myself with its bile  
so that I will forever  
stay fortified with Black Power. (FF, p.49)

The bulk of the poems have overtones of 'Black Power' and the expression is used several times in the volume. His Black Power poems employ images of flames, fire-arms, blood, and death, as a warning against the horrors of an impending racial war in South Africa. Prophecy is a significant element in 'Flames of Fury', which has been translated from Zulu and which warns against 'the blood that will flow wider / than the Tugela river in flood' (FF, p.19). 'A Song for South Africa' comes close to Kgositsile's Black Power poems. Both poets invoke Mandela's spirit from Robben Island. Mtshali writes: 'Nelson Mandela, we remember you / in the island of heroes' (FF, p.27). Kgositsile expresses similar sentiments when he writes: 'Yes, Mandela, we shall be moved... / We are Men enough to immortalize your song'

(SSAP, p.95). A significant difference between the two poets is that Kgositsile is committed to a global revolution; whereas Mtshali's most striking anti-imperialist poem in this global sense is 'The Dawn of a New Era', which links the revolution in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Guinea Bissau with the struggle in Southern Africa. However, the bulk of Mtshali's Black Power poems are specifically South African and deal with the horrors unleashed by the South African regime upon Blacks.

'Abraham Ongkoepoetse [sic] Tiro, a Young Martyr' was written for a memorial service at the Regina Mundi Catholic church in Soweto on 17 February 1974 following Tiro's death. 'Hector Peterson - the Young Martyr' was written in memory of the thirteen-year old schoolboy who was the first child to be shot in the Soweto uprising, which is a focal point in the collection. 'The Raging Generation' is one of the best realized of Mtshali's Soweto poems in which his tribute to the youth of Soweto takes the form of izibongo, which are essentially songs composed for national heroes. His language is apocalyptic and his images suggest conquest and transcendence:

Menchildren in the promised land of your forefathers  
returning swallows who presage the coming of our summers,  
the bane of the receding winters of our oppression,  
unbroken steeds, whose hooves raised the dust  
of Soweto streets,...

I salute your fearlessness;  
I stand in awe of your bravery,  
and I bend my knee at the shrine of your steadfastness.

(FF, p.33)

Mtshali's achievement in Fire Flames is uneven, with some poems better realized than others. 'Flames of Fury' exhibits some of the collection's characteristic faults.

The poem is wordy, as in the lines:

and the blood that will flow wider  
than the Tugela River in flood  
when it bursts its banks. (FF, p.19)

The last line quoted is redundant. Mtshali's language still carries overtones of political rhetoric and clichés ('symbols of our bondage... shackles of our oppression and exploitation'), which dissipate the intended emotional intensity of the poems (FF, p.19). The poems occasionally display affectation and faked gravity (for example, his use

of bombastic terms like 'tintinnabulations' in place of 'ringing bells'). Mtshali has little aptitude for expressing intense feeling and is at his best writing light satire. In Fire Flames, the oblique social commentary of Sounds of a Cowhide Drum gives way to overt political statement, in the manner of James Matthews. Mtshali has found his ideological bearings but has still to merge his craftsmanship with his commitment, in the manner of Serote, Gwala, and Ndebele.

The impact of James Matthews upon the emerging writers of the revival period was greater than Dollar Brand's or Mtshali's. He became the most widely imitated of the new poets and the link between poets from Cape Town, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, Durban, and even Zimbabwe. He emerged as the elder-brother figure in the early years of the literary revival and actively encouraged the emergence of new poets and the formation of writers's groups, in his dual capacity as a publisher and as a compiler of anthologies. In his first poetry publication, Cry Rage, he appeared with Gladys Thomas, who contributed ten poems to Matthews's seventy.\*

The encouragement James Matthews gave to Gladys Thomas and others who were looking up to him for direction can be gleaned from his introduction to Cry Rage, in which he wrote: 'The declarations in this book are by a housewife and myself, a man of no account, who refuse to remain silent at all the injustices done to blacks. Our voices are not lone voices crying in the wilderness. At first, I thought we were the only ones voicing our protest but now I know there are other voices.' James Matthews and the poets he helped to uncover were daring, contemptuous of the establishment, and pledged to open defiance. In conformity with their declared purpose, their work showed a complete disregard for accepted poetic norms. In his review of Cry Rage, Tim Couzens observes that, 'As poetry' it is perhaps not a great book, but it does introduce a new style of unpoetic direct

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\*Cry Rage, Johannesburg: Spro-cas Publications, 1972.  
Hereafter referred to as CR.

statement.'<sup>8</sup> Black Voices Shout, which Matthews compiled and published himself and in which he appeared with eight others (including Serote and Gwala), is even less 'poetic' and gives free vent to the pent-up feelings of the poets represented. Not all those represented showed staying power as writers but the volume released the talent of Christine Douts Qunta, whose first collection, Hoyi Na ! Azania (1979), published from exile in Australia, where she had been studying for a law degree, established her as one of the leading female poets from South Africa. James Matthews's only solo effort of the 1970s in poetry was a 44-page collection, Pass Me a Meatball, Jones\* written after his release from Victor Verster Maximum security prison in 1976 and released without any charges being brought against him.

His vocabulary has been shaped by Afro-American writers such as James Baldwin and John Echles. The latter coined the phrase 'White syphilization' which Matthews employs in one of his poems from Black Voices Shout and in another poem from the same anthology we find the phrase, 'the fire next time', which is the title of one of Baldwin's books (BVS, pp.29 & 70). Jazz is his other predominant influence and the name of the Afro-American blues singer, Nina Simone, is mentioned several times in his poems. His perspective on Black unity resembles Kgositsile's in that he shares the pain and suffering of Black people everywhere. 'I share the pain of my black brother' from Cry Rage expresses his wish to bring together Black people from Harlem, Notting Hill, Soweto, and Manenberg in Cape Town. His verse has also been shaped by the slum conditions in South Africa. The concept of Black Power, which his poems helped to spread, is strong in his work. Occasionally, he returns to the themes of his short stories dating back to the 1950s, some of which he reissued in 1974 under the imprint of his publishing house in Athlone.

James Matthews, who is essentially a short story writer, has no illusions about his capabilities as a poet. In his

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\*Pass Me a Meatball, Jones, Athlone: Blac Publishing House, 1977. Hereafter referred to as PMJ.

opening and closing poems from Cry Rage, he describes his purpose and his shortcomings as a poet. 'The words I write / are of pain and of rage,' he says in the one (CR, p.1). He is even more emphatic in the other:

to label my utterings poetry  
and myself a poet  
would be as self-deluding  
as the planners of parallel development.  
I record the anguish of the persecuted (CR, p.70)

He is the ghetto poet who took over from where Dollar Brand left off. There are distinct echoes of Dollar Brand's thematic concerns in at least two of James Matthews's poems from Cry Rage in which he deals with the despondency of an unsuccessful township musician who has been reduced to 'nervously darting for a crumb' (CR, p.20). James Matthews does not paint pretty pictures but in his strident language he deals with the grim realities of ghetto life: pimps, prostitutes, robbers, dope addicts, drunks, shebeen queens, and society's dropouts. He is as much a poet of Manenberg and District Six as he is a poet of Dimbaza and Limehill. He is concerned with slum conditions in the cities as well as with the effects of resettlement, whereby Black communities are removed from land they had previously occupied for generations to make room for White settlement. He regards the rural population, already more impoverished than everybody else, as suffering most from the effects of resettlement. In his introduction to Cry Rage, he mentions the high infant mortality rate in Dimbaza and other resettlement areas and the subject of infant mortality and rural poverty recurs in several of his poems from the same collection. He condemns the double standards displayed by those people who bewail human suffering in one part of the world and turn a blind eye to similar suffering in another part of the world. 'They speak so sorrowfully / about the children dying of hunger in Biafra,' he complains, 'but sleep unconcerned about the rib-thin / children of Dimbaza' (CR, p.6). The suffering brought about by resettlement is closely related to migrant labour, which separates families and turns human beings into 'men-oxen', in the phrase used in the introduction to Cry Rage.



The destruction of family life is acutely felt by both Matthews and Thomas. Race classification, which requires all South Africans to be classified according to their races, affects people of mixed races in the most adverse manner. The reclassification of a child of mixed parentage born into White society often has traumatic effects upon the individuals concerned. The affected child has to contend, in Matthews's words, with 'the horror of becoming / a second-class citizen' (CR, p.59). Matthews views the race classification boards as 'mental torture chambers' (CR, p.54). In a poem from Black Voices Shout, he describes the officials of the boards as exercising 'powers that God never uses' (BVS, p.2). Matthews and Thomas also disapprove of the laws which prohibit love across the colour line and show the psychological devastation brought about by them. In the introduction to their collection, Matthews mentions the fact that love between a Black and a White person is considered obscene in South Africa, so that laws like the Immorality and the Mixed Marriages Acts have had to be enacted to forbid mixed marriages and sex between Blacks and Whites. Thomas's 'Immoral Love' expresses her disapproval of this flagrant violation of the freedom of the individuals concerned. Her contributions to Cry Rage, though lacking in poetic refinement, show concerns of motherhood and womanhood and are interesting for the female perspective she brings to bear upon the problems created by apartheid. The problems arising from Race Classification, the Immorality and the Mixed Marriages Acts are of particular interest to the 'Coloureds', who are South Africa's twilight people and are often caught in ambivalent situations between people of African and European descent.

Matthews laments the fact that Whites have not extended to Blacks the rights and privileges which Whites enjoy. He states in his introduction to Cry Rage that 'Democracy is one of the ruling principles of white South Africa; it spells tyranny for blacks who do not enjoy democratic rights shared by whites.' Ruthless repression and the violation of human rights are manifested in the prevalence of detention without trial and in the death of detainees in prison. 'For those who have been banned, jailed, exiled or dead' accuses the

Government of trying to suppress legitimate opposition 'with intimidatory threat of house-arrest / and imprisonment under the 180-day Act' and he predicts that 'the walls of Jericho will fall' (BVS, p.5 and CR, p.13). He mentions the Imam Abdullah Haron, the Muslim leader from District Six who died on 27 September 1969 when he allegedly fell down a flight of stairs; Robert Sobukwe and Nelson Mandela; and Bessie Head, who has lived in exile in Botswana since 1963. The Imam Abdullah Haron cuts a saintly figure in the poems and Matthews presents the other people mentioned as heroes of the African struggle for liberation.

Pass Me a Meatbal, Jones is a personal testimony of Matthews's prison experiences, in the tradition of Brutus's Letters to Martha. Surprisingly for someone who raves and rages in the way James Matthews does at the injustices committed against his people, his prison poems are self-contained and tranquil. Although marred by grammatical slips, they are reflective, serene, and dignified. His appeal and his sense of grief and loss are conveyed with touching simplicity, as in the following lines from the closing poem of his collection:

think of me, sometime,  
as you lay enfold  
in your lover's arms  
enchanted by the music  
of hearts beating in time  
while i make love to myself (PMJ, p.44)

Black Consciousness themes stick out prominently in his verse. His disapproval of White liberals, also the subject of his earlier story 'The Party', and his denunciation of hypocrites who claim to be Christians are favourite Black Consciousness themes. A number of other themes in his work stem from Black Consciousness, but he differs from writers in the mainstream of Black Consciousness in that he also shows admiration for the selfless, dedicated White students lashed by the police on the steps of Cape Town's Anglican Cathedral during an anti-apartheid rally. They make him feel ashamed of himself for standing at and watching the scuffle from a distance, frightened. Despite the racial overtones of most of his poems, in the dedication page of Black Voices Shout he says that he is fighting for 'a South

Africa free of racial taints'. He is counteracting racism with what Sartre, in his introduction to Senghor's poems, describes as an anti-racist racism of his own. Such paradoxical situations are an inherent feature of Black Consciousness as much as they were characteristics of Negritude. James Matthews's other poems are written in the 'Black is Beautiful' idiom which is used by Biko, Gwala, Sepamla, and other advocates or exponents of Black Consciousness. Matthews resembles Serote in the manner in which he eulogizes Black women and their contribution to the liberation struggle, as in the following lines by Matthews from 'My Woman':

my woman  
give me courage  
let me draw strength from the hot  
house of our love  
teach me how to die  
like a man (BVS, p.24)

Black women represent the positive principle, like the women in D.H. Lawrence. They are life-giving and a gateway to man's self-realization. Matthews believes that a woman who has not been brainwashed and is a person in her own individual right can be a strengthening and liberating force to men. Matthews is assertive and his poems illustrate his belief in himself and in the ability of his people to set themselves free.

Mafika Gwala's poems first appeared in 1969 in Volume 3 Number 2 of Classic and are as critical of South African society as Matthews's and Serote's. He has become, like Matthews, an elder-brother figure. He was a founder member of Black Consciousness and worked for the movement in its Research and Publications Unit, alongside Biko and Serote. He subscribes to Black Consciousness and is one of its leading theoreticians and literary exponents. He has been as prolific as Serote and Sepamla but remains very modest about his achievements. His first volume of poems, Jol' iinkomo,\* came out in 1977, but many of his poems remain uncollected. 'I have never looked upon myself as a poet,' he says.

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\*Jol'iinkomo, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1977.

All page references to Jol'iinkomo (abbreviated, J) are given after quotations in the text.

'Jol'iinkomo only came out when some publishers and individuals were asking me to get out a collection.'<sup>9</sup> Jol'iinkomo is his clan name (isibongo or isiduko, in Nguni); it is also the shout of the village elders to the herdboys to return home with the cattle after sunset. The dedication page of his collection reads:

Jol'iinkomo is also to stay  
I should bring some lines home  
to the kraal of my Black experience.

He is represented in many anthologies, including Royston's Black Poets in South Africa.<sup>\*</sup> The AWA Newsletter, published by the African Writers Association formed by Black writers in South Africa in 1981, in its March/April 1982 issue (Volume 1 Number 2) announced a forthcoming collection of Gwala's poems. He is a versatile writer who has published essays and short stories.

Gwala is rated by literary critics such as Richard Rive, Cherry Wilhelm and others as being more talented than James Matthews. He responds with a vigorous imagination, political clear-sightedness, and adequate technical resourcefulness to the socio-political situation in South Africa. He is a proletarian poet who is unrelenting in his criticism of the Black middle class for its ambivalence and opportunism. He is wary of their empty rhetoric ('Hitler used socialist rhetoric and economic planning to fight socialism') and what he describes as their 'dashiki cult'.<sup>10</sup>

Gwala was born in Verulam near Durban in 1946 of an African father and a 'Coloured' mother. His genealogy combines every racial strain in South Africa. 'I have Coloured and Indian cousins, nephews and nieces, uncles and aunties. Some who even pass for white,' he wrote in a paper published in Staffrider in 1979 but which was to have been delivered at the writers' conference of 17-19 April 1976 organized by Sepamla in Johannesburg.<sup>11</sup> He explains how he tasted and came to hate racism at a young age, in the

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\*Black Poets in South Africa, edited by Robert Royston, London: Heinemann, 1973.

All page references to Black Poets in South Africa (abbreviated, BPSA) are given after quotations in the text.

following terms:

As my cousins went to 'Coloured' and 'Indian' schools I would go to 'Native' or 'Bantu' schools. After school I read their books, saw their homework, and rhymed with them. I noticed there was something wrong with what I was being given, separately. Yet I kind of shined once they'd taught me the things they did at their schools. On my mother's side I often came across ostracism - 'cos ma had gone for a kaffir. On my father's side too we were sometimes treated coldly because pa 'wathatha i-Boesman' [said of one who marries a 'Coloured' or 'Boesman', as people of mixed race are sometimes called].<sup>12</sup>

He matriculated in 1965 at the Catholic high school in Inkamana, Natal, and read for his B.A.(Law) at the segregated University of Zululand. But after a year he dropped out of university when he was labelled a 'Communist' by White lecturers for challenging some of their ideas and advancing 'precocious' questions. 'I had read widely on various subjects,' he explains.<sup>13</sup> Since leaving school, he has worked as a legal clerk, factory employee, secondary school teacher, trade union organiser, freelance reporter, and researcher.

Gwala resembles Serote and Matthews in that from the beginning of his writing career his work met with approval from a large section of the Black community in South Africa. Gwala, Serote, and Matthews are ideologically close and admire one another's work. They actively supported Black Consciousness through their writings and other activities. 'Black Status Seekers' by Gwala starts by paying tribute to Serote for his defiant stance conveyed in 'What's Wrong with this Black Shit' and proceeds to make a scathing attack on the Black middle class, who fake commitment to the Black cause while aspiring to positions of privilege. The poem also unleashes a tirade against 'non-white women' who 'rouge themselves redder than Jesus' blood' (J, p.35). Frantz Fanon's work provides a springboard for the poem. Fanon teaches that many Blacks in the midst of Whites make a constant effort to run away from their true selves, their individuality, and to annihilate their own presence as Blacks. They have developed what Fanon calls a 'psychological minus-value' and have learnt from their White colonial masters to look upon themselves in negative terms.<sup>14</sup> Gwala strives to disalienate such Blacks by teaching them not to remain slaves

to White archetypes and urges them to desist from seeing themselves as Non-Europeans, Non-Whites, and Non-beings. They must free themselves from the arsenal of complexes they have developed. Gwala satirizes their language and appearance. They wear European dress or fashionable dashikis to pass as 'soul' brothers. They straighten their hair to make it look like White people's hair, boast of their travels to Western capitals, and speak bombastic English to sound learned. They are alienated beings who do not realize that they are mistaking the external trappings of Western culture for its essence, like Ocol in p'Bitek or Soyinka's Lakunle. Their pathetic efforts turn them into imitational Whites, cultural outcasts, social climbers, and status seekers. Their practices are an exercise in self-denial and are symptoms of their psychological enslavement. Gwala's poems are an attack on apartheid, since such estranged beings are a product of the socio-political and economic system in which they live, and a castigation of the Black people concerned. Gwala's psycho-analytical treatment is as penetrating as Fanon's.

Gwala identifies with the broad masses and stands guard against the Black middle class, who have betrayed the Black cause in order to feather their own nest. He cautions against Blacks who wear ties, symbols of self-denial and of their aspiration to White status, and read cheap paperbacks, escapist trash. They hanker after White patronage and want accommodation within the White power structure. He warns such characters that the Black community is watching closely:

Mount a tie and be a fool  
their stories are saying  
to the young man next to me.  
He seems to feel the pricks  
for he clutches his James Hadley Chase novel  
with his girlish fingers -  
as if it were the very life. (J, p.26)

But Gwala does not fall into the temptation of idealizing ordinary people. The husband who bashes his wife or the tsotsi who knifes other Blacks are as vicious as the police who kick Black women. 'Gumba, Gumba, Gumba', which was first published in Ophir Number 15 in December 1971, reads:

If you have seen...

Seen a man's guts - the man walking still

Seen a man blue-eye his wife;

Seen a woman being kicked by a cop.

You seen struggle. (J, p.31)

The poem is addressed to Blacks, who are as much in need of liberation from their vicious selves as from the brutal agents of the state. In Gwala, Black Consciousness seeks to create an awareness of how the system turns Blacks against themselves, as the first step towards counteracting the system's sinister designs; Black Consciousness acknowledges the fact that a section of the enemy barracks is situated inside Black territory and takes the form of fratricide, hooliganism, opportunism, and inferiority complex.

Gwala's poems expose the hoax that is South Africa's policy of separate development. 'Paper Curtains' exposes the hypocrisy of Whites who claim that they are all for equality between Blacks and Whites, but only if it comes gradually. Such people are trying to retain their privileges as Whites and enjoy the confidence of Blacks at the same time. They are 'stuntist frauds' who are living behind 'paper curtains' (J, p.14-15). 'Election Pincers', which first appeared in Ophir Number 11 in June 1970, again shows how fraudulent it is for Whites to speak of promoting Black advancement when they are pushing Blacks into overcrowded, unproductive areas in the Bantustans, away from the rich cities unless such Blacks are required as labourers. The old man of the poem is not taken in by the promises of a job, better education for his children, and an old-age home for himself 'in the greencountry atmosphere of the Transkei', since these promises fall short of his requirements: 'higher wages, reduced taxes and more grazing land' (J, p.18). Gwala demonstrates the pointlessness of talking about separate but equal freedoms for Blacks and Whites within their designated territories, when one section of the community has free education, free medical services and the other has not; when one section of the population has all the lush land and the other is continuously asked to cull the number of its cattle because grazing land is inadequate; when there are Job Reservation laws to protect the interests of one section

of the populace; when people of different colours are not paid the same wages for doing the same amount of work.

Gwala's poems also dwell on township themes, as in Serote, Sepamla, and other poets of the revival period. In some of these poems, he is making an effort to come to terms with his environment and his evolving urban culture of shebeens ('The Shebeen Queen') and mbaqanga or African jazz ('An Attempt at Communication'). Without rejecting Western culture outright, he asserts the primacy of his own cultural heritage. 'The Children of Nonti' is an experimental poem based on traditional Zulu poetry, which he wrote in June 1972 but which was first published in Ophir Number 22 in December 1975. Nonti is a traditional female figure who represents fertility, creativity, and resilience. Black people are the children of Nonti, whose qualities they have assimilated.

'There is survival in the children of Nonti,' Gwala says, and free laughter, song, truth, and oneness (j, p.46). He pursues his experiment in 'A Reminder' from Staffrider, in which he freely employs Zulu expressions alongside standard English usage. The poem reminds his readers of their revolutionary task, of their brave warrior-ancestors, and of their exiled, imprisoned, and dead comrades-in-arms. The names of Shaka, Sekhukhuni, Nyameko Pityana, Strinivasa Moodley, Langa, and others are cleverly built into the syntax as part of the poem's meaning. For instance, 'Strin'ing beans on the Isle of Makhanda' is a reminder about Moodley serving sentence on Robben Island; and the Island of Makana is renamed the 'Isle of Makhanda', after another of Gwala's associates.<sup>15</sup>

Gwala responded to the Soweto massacres with a sense of outrage that was typical of the Black community's response. In a short bilingual poem, 'Old Man Nxele's Remorse: 20 June 1976' he wrote:

Sons

They are gunning down  
our children in Soweto  
What more  
are we living for?

The Zulu version sounds even more ominous. When an outraged Zulu warrior asks, as in the last two lines of the poem: 'Yini enye pho / esisayiphilela?', he is ready, regardless of the consequences, to hurl himself headlong against tanks



and machine guns.<sup>16</sup> 1979, the year on which Gwala's poem was published, marked the centenary of the Battle of Isandlwana between the British and Zulu forces, when the British suffered their heaviest defeat at the hands of the Zulu forces. Old Man Nxele's warrior spirit harks back to historical times. He is the custodian of his people's warrior tradition, which he wants to instil into the hearts of the young. In another poem from the same issue of Staffrider in which 'Old Man Nxele's Remorse' appeared, Gwala employs a historical perspective again to describe, more explicitly this time, the horrors unleashed upon generation after generation of Blacks, as if the Whites in South Africa were bent upon rubbing salt into the festering wounds of Black people:

Rough, wet winds  
parch my agonized face  
as if salting the wounds of  
                    Bulhoek  
                    Sharpeville  
Soweto. <sup>17</sup>

The Bulhoek massacres occurred on 24 May 1921, when 163 Africans belonging to a religious community were killed and 129 others wounded for their refusal to comply with a government order evicting them from their homes. Gwala links Bulhoek, Sharpeville, and Soweto on the long road to freedom, as in his poem from the July/August 1978 issue of Staffrider in which he writes about the hopes 'fanned by endless zeal / decisive against the spectre of Sharpeville' and 'hardened by the tears of Soweto'.<sup>18</sup> The horrific events unleashed upon Blacks after June 1976 dominate Gwala's poems from this period so that, besides the massacre of school children, he writes about the widespread arrests of Black political activists and the liquidation of Black Consciousness leaders, culminating in Steve Biko's death. the 'ABC Jig', published in July/August 1979 in Staffrider, relates to these various episodes of deaths and arrests. His poems of this period espouse revolution more overtly. 'You can't think of a solution / Without your mind spelling revolution,' he says in a poem published in 1980 in Volume 2 Number 2 of the MEDU Newsletter and again in the September/October 1980 issue of Staffrider.<sup>19</sup> The poem was written for Heroes Day to

commemorate Sharpeville on 21 March 1980 and was read in public for the first time at the Austerville residence of the University of Natal's Black section. It spells out the need for armed insurrection and exhorts Blacks to take to arms.

Gwala employs a class analysis of society, in the Tabata tradition. Iyavar Chetty, an exiled Durban lawyer and academic (for whom 'Letter to a Friend in Exile' in Jol'iinkomo was written) and a member of the Unity Movement of South Africa led by Tabata, tells us how Gwala took in everything Tabata had written and recalls their (Gwala and Chetty) first meeting in 1966 as follows:

When I first met him, he was on vacation as a first year student at Ngoye - the 'Zulu University'!... He came to talk to me because somebody told him I was banned and was in the Unity Movement, and he was, even then, quite interested in the struggle... And when he got into trouble because of his politics at the 'Bush College', I got him a job in a legal office. A measure of his seriousness may be seen in the fact that he spent a whole fortnight copying out in long-hand, word for word, Tabata's The Awakening of a People<sup>20</sup>

Gwala views the Unity Movement, established in the 1940s as the Non-European Unity Movement with a racially integrated membership of all the oppressed ('Coloureds', Asians, and African), and its offshoot of the 1960s, the African People's Democratic Union of South Africa, as having come closest to diagnosing accurately and prescribing the correct solution to the national problem in South Africa. He regrets its organisational deficiencies and its failure to reach the Black proletariat and the peasants but still believes that, 'The only organization that came close to Black awareness was the NEUM-APDUSA. But then intellectualism and general aloofness from the masses (if you'll remember, it was never banned as an organisation) - where PAC considered itself closest - robbed the NEUM-APDUSA leadership of the chances they had in the People's hour of trial.' He regards Black Consciousness as necessary to rally Blacks around a common banner but transitory. To him, the real divide is not colour but class based on economic interests. The South African struggle for liberation is 'a class struggle tubed into a racial pipeline'. To illustrate his point, he cites several

examples: 'the admittance of Blacks in 5-star hotels, the white trips to the casino spots in "independent" neighbouring "states", the fact of Bantustan non-racialism and class privilege, the laxity in separate facilities at public places, the white desire to create elites in black townships, who get better housing, company cars and equal pay with whites; not mentioning the involvement of multi-companies and the South Africa Foundation.'<sup>21</sup> The developments enumerated by Gwala became more marked after Soweto and the pace was stepped up after P.W. Botha came to power in 1978 as Prime Minister.

Gwala has continued to live in South Africa and remains one of the most significant influences among writers of the Soweto era. He is a strong pillar of the new writers' movement and heads the Mpumalanga Arts Ensemble, based in Hammersdale near Durban, with fellow poets, Mafika Mbuli, Nkathazo kaMnyayiza, and others.

Mafika Mbuli, whose poems first appeared at the same time as Mtshali's earliest published poems, still has to publish a collection. However, Mbuli's earliest published poems were anthologized in Royston's book. They deal with suffering, oppression, and exploitation. 'Out', one of three poems that he published in the 1968 Classic, presents South Africa's indigenous people in the guise of a woman who is sexually exploited by unscrupulous, lecherous men. The man to whom the woman was originally betrothed complains that, 'They came in droves / for your abandoned charms' (BPSA, p.74). But he feels impotent and powerless to prevent the indecent assault upon her. On the other hand, she, too, has lost the will to resist the unsolicited attentions of her false lovers. She feels ashamed and does not relish the forced attentions of her ravishers and he is left slinking in humiliation and feeling emasculated. His emasculation and her acquiescence reflect Black subjugation and the political will of the Black community which was dampened by events after Sharpeville. In Mbuli, Whites have raped both the land and its people and a further manifestation of exploitation is their treatment of mine workers. Unlike Mtshali

in a poem such as 'The Miner', Mbuli is concerned with more than the physical effects of the mine labour system. To Mbuli, the ultimate indictment against the system is that it undermines the whole of man and renders man soft in the head. 'This dungeon' (which is the mine pit), he writes in 'The Miners', 'makes the mind weary' (BPSA, p.70). The mine pit, with its associations in the poem with hell, corresponds to the countrywide repressive situation. To Blacks, living in South Africa is like living in hell.

As with most of his contemporaries, the events of June 1976 broke down Mbuli's restraint and characteristic subtlety. But unlike the majority of the new poets who emerged in the wake of Soweto, he did not yield to the temptation to substitute political rhetoric for feeling. He resembles Serote, Gwala, Ndebele, Langa, and a few more mature poets of the revival period in that, even at his angriest or saddest, he does not allow his poetic propensity for form and structure to desert him. 'Vortex', from the Staffrider of July/August 1979, begins with a statement on the death of Mapetla Mohapi, the Black Consciousness leader who died like Steve Biko under mysterious circumstances while held in police custody. Mbuli regards such deaths as sacrificial. Vortex, the cosmic matter carried round in rapid rotation, was said to account for every phenomenon and all motion in the universe, according to early cosmological theories, especially that of Descartes. To Mbuli, martyrdom is of the same order in that it generates new and higher forms of life and strengthens Blacks in their resolve to overthrow the apartheid regime. From the vortex of Mapetla's death, a new order is going to spring. Mbuli expresses the paradox of life in death, in the following terms:

Tell them there shall be rain  
When my body is retracted  
Into the womb of the earth  
Tell them fire will burn  
When I am forged with the earth  
Compounding the last sacrifice

To the land.

His poems give expression to the notion that the land is the life of the people and link the conditions under which Blacks live in their impoverished areas to the erosion of their humanity. In 'Lament', from the same issue of Staffrider as

'Vortex', he mourns for:

the wasted land  
of parched soil and  
scorched demented souls

'Lament' ends by castigating his ancestral gods for deserting the people in their greatest hour of need. He rededicates himself to the struggle for a restoration of the old order in which the traditional, humanistic values and mores of man's regard for his fellow man shall prevail once again. His idiom and style reflect the African tradition he advocates, as in the ending of the poem:

To this I lay my bequest!  
The incarnation of an African god.  
That shall live wise, and mindful  
Of its children.<sup>22</sup>

Njabulo Ndebele emerged as the most methodical and literary conscious poet of the revival period in his quest for an appropriate mode of poetic expression to reflect his African personality and convey a genuinely African response to African phenomena. He has also been the most successful in this regard, although his quest has not been without its problems and some mental agony.

Born in Johannesburg in 1948, he went to high school at St. Christopher's in Swaziland, where he started his writing career. He wrote and produced several plays with a cast of his fellow students. At about the same time (1965/66), he began to write poetry in Zulu and English. He spent two years studying for his A levels in English before he started reading for a B.A. degree at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS) in 1969. He became the President of the Students Representative Council in 1971, in which capacity he helped to formulate and to propagate the precepts of Black Consciousness. In one of his papers, written for the SASO annual conference of July 1972, he articulates the suspicions which Africans harbour against Whites who profess liberal views on racial matters, in the following terms:

The liberal cry against the oppression of the black man is essentially ethical. They do not want a politically free black man, they simply want a happy labour force. They have publicly declared that the happier the blacks,

the more they can produce economically. To the liberal, the black person is still a thing, only the thing must be given more oil to function with better efficiency. 23

He does not spare the Black intelligentsia either and criticizes them for their individualism, their acquisitiveness, and their lack of creativity and commitment. He describes the Black middle class as the darlings of the White liberals, a description which finds amplification in Biko and Gwala. Ndebele was one of the people behind the inaugural conference of SASM, a federation of Black University student organisations to which SASO was affiliated, which was held in 1973 at UBLS, Lesotho.

In 1970, he became the editor of Expression, a journal of the English society at UBLS, and began in its columns to expound his views on the use of traditional poetic modes. He initiated a movement back to tradition and advocated the use of African imagery. In the 1970 issue of Expression, he suggested that African poets could draw their inspiration from their environment more as well as from African myths, beliefs, and moral codes. In his editorial, he mentioned that for the African writer turning to tradition would mean a full recognition of the interdependence between man and the earth and he demonstrated his theories in the poetry he wrote, particularly in its symbolism. During a conference in Wilgespruit, Roodepoort, in July 1976, he read a paper on literary archetypes as represented by the Xhosa intsomi, the Zulu ingane kwane, and the Sotho t̂somo. He argued that literary studies in Africa should begin with such literary archetypes, which he employs frequently in his own poetry.

His work first came to the notice of the reading public in 1969 with the publication of a fairly conventional love poem, 'Looking at the Girl I Love', in Volume 3 Number 2 of Classic. Three more of his poems appeared in 1970 in Volume 3 Number 3 of Classic. 'Little Dudu' is representative of his work and is built on the contrast between innocence and experience which we still find in his work written after Soweto. From being a young boy, chasing after butterflies, trapping birds in the veld, and playing hide-and-seek, Dudu grows up and starts playing dice and indulging in other adult experiences which harden his heart and destroy his

reverence for human beings. Dudu's origin is described in African mythological terms. He is 'the beggar's wish-bone' which 'slid off a cheek of God / And was born into the world' (BPSA, p.37). The further Dudu distances himself from the pristine world of nature the more misanthropic he becomes. The city, as conveyed in 'I Hid My Love', has the same alienating and dehumanising effect on Africans, whose traditional values and qualities go down the city's sewerage drains. 'A Child's Delirium' employs the format used for children's rhymes: 'mama, mama, i am afraid, / i fear the elephant outside' (BPSA, p.40). The lines echo the words of a children's rhyme which is recited in a game in which the children chase one another, with one or a group of them impersonating a tiger. The rhyme, which is traditional and constitutes the backdrop to the action and is the archetype from which Ndebele's poem derives, goes as follows:

Bantwana bam!	My children!
Me!	Mama!
Yizani la.	Come over here.
Siyesaba.	We're scared.
Nesaba ini?	Scared of what?
Ingwe.	The Tiger.
Iphi?	Where's it?
Nayiya	There.
Balekani-ke!	Run then!

The children who are scared of the tiger that is lying in wait for them outside are the counterparts of the delirious child in Ndebele's poem, which retains the statement-and-response format of the traditional rhyme. The contrast between the traditional man who is secure in his customs and the modern man who lacks guidance from and lives outside the protective framework of tradition is brought out in the inconsolable child's delirious state, in whose mind the mythical animals assume real proportions. The inability of the mother to allay her child's fears reflects the failure of most Black parents to provide adequately for their children, as a result of conditions in South Africa. The absence of the child's father further illustrates the insecurity that is created by conditions which undermine the traditional way of life and traditional roles, destroy family life, and alienate human beings from their natural state. Ndebele's poems from Classic, Expression, Izwi, and

Staffrider exploit traditional African folklore, myths, and beliefs.

After graduating from UBLs in 1973, he left Lesotho for further studies in Cambridge and returned in 1975 to lecture at the University. In the same period, he was beginning to have doubts about continuing to write in English. After his poems had appeared in Royston's anthology, he stopped publishing in English and declared, like Mtshali, that he would only write in Zulu and Sesotho. 'The literary situation in South Africa is as sterile as is the Australian one, the New Zealand one, and the Canadian one, because all these have struggled to be cultural satellites of a progressively anaemic English literary culture that long lost its international centrality,' he wrote in a letter of 15 September 1977. In the same letter, he said that Black writers could only function alone in their effort to find new avenues of expression. His agonizing, earnest search for a language and a literary form which would best reflect his soul is demonstrated by the projects he started but never finished during this period. For example, in a letter of 21 June 1977 he wrote:

The muse has come back. But he has come back in the guise of prose. I am in the middle of the first chapter of a novel. The novel has been planned already - the broad framework - chapter by chapter. I'm going through it now planning it to the smallest detail, though I have already started on the first chapter. At the rate I'm going, the bloody thing will take me five years. Sometimes I write a paragraph a day. Perhaps coming back to it the following day. It sometimes makes me feel that I am the character in Camus' The Plague, who struggled over a few sentences for the rest of his life, trying to be a writer. Concurrently with the novel, I am writing a short story for Siphso Sepamla. That too is giving me headaches.

A year and a half later he had shelved both these projects and embarked on a new one, which he was to drop also. In a letter of 14 January 1979 he wrote:

I think I must have told you that I was working on a long poem. I finished the damn thing with great difficulty. I filled a couple of full-scap papers with poetry, two lines of poetry to each full-scap page, and I had already started typing it out. It was probably going to be an eighty-page thing in double-spacing. But I have grown very dissatisfied with the literary form I have chosen for the subject. An accidental reading of Herman Hesse's



Siddharta convinced me that I was right; that I should abandon the pure poetic form and write a poetic novel. The thing is coming on very well. I have finished the prologue and I am now busy on the first chapter. If all goes well, I will be struggling with the last chapters around Easter. The going is tough but most of the work has really been done since the whole poem itself is a very good draft. I think I have something up my sleeve.

In the same letter, he explained that he was arranging to go to America to study creative writing. He said that he wanted to spend a few years studying technique instead of groping in the dark alone. 'If people can study music, sculpture, painting, drama etc., I guess if I want to be a good writer I should put aside time to learn the art and craft of writing,' he added. 'Much as I am studying Zulu and Sesotho intensely, I will do the bulk of my writing in English.' He had finally resolved his language problem. Simultaneously, he hoped to take an intensive course in translation, in order to be able to contribute effectively to the growth of literature in the indigenous languages by translating some of the best works from either English or German.

With his problems behind him, he published his first new poem in almost a decade in the Staffrider of December/January 1980/81. 'The Revolution of the aged' is one of the best realized poems written in response to the Soweto uprising, its successes and failings. The persona of the poem is a traditional sage who embodies the wisdom of the ages. The old man makes the point, not out of arrogance but out of the knowledge enshrined in tradition, that 'grey hair has placed on my brow / the verdict of wisdom'. In Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel, Baroka, the traditional leader of Ilujinle, makes precisely the same point when he says that youth must learn to temper its action by reference to age. In both Soyinka and Ndebele, we see the revolutionary potential that lies in tradition and old age, when properly employed as points of reference for the campaigns mounted by the younger, immature, and inexperienced members of the community. 'The Revolution of the aged' is built on the contrast between youth and age, passion and reason, impulse and calculation. The old man sounds a word of warning to the youth 'hot for quick results', 'loaded with revolutionary

maxims', and scornful of the past efforts of the community. He criticizes the young people's lack of an overall strategy, based on a series of carefully worked out fall-back positions, and teaches them the wisdom of making a strategic retreat whenever the odds are heavily loaded against them. He shows them that their intemperate characters and impetuous approach are suicidal. 'If you cannot master the wind', he says, 'flow with it / letting know all the time that you are resisting.' His advice is couched in riddles, anecdotes, and proverbs, as in the following lines: 'do not eat an unripe apple / its bitterness is a tingling knife.' The youth must make proper preparations and bide their time, so that they can 'pluck the apple' when it is ripe 'and feed the future with its ripeness'. In addition, he tells them a tale of woe about his flute, borrowed from him a long time ago by a stranger who now refuses to return it. As in Mbuli's 'Out', the moral of the old man's story has a bearing upon the history of European conquest and the exploitation and plunder which followed. The anecdote also has a lesson for the future and demonstrates that the ultimate irony in the position of the oppressors lies in the fact that the more ruthless their actions become the less firmly entrenched their future prospects are likely to be. Their triumphs have turned sour on them and their victories hollow. By contrast, their victims are gathering strength all the time for the final onslaught against White privilege. Though weakening and beginning to totter towards his grave, the old man claims that in his hand he carries 'the weapon of youth', a paradox he uses to predict victory for the forces of liberation. The flute, whose shape suggests the barrel of a gun, has turned into an instrument of death through which the oppressor 'hisses death' and no longer produces music. In all this, the youth must learn that if they continue to act without proper indebtedness to their past, they risk putting off the final outcome of the struggle by repeating the mistakes of the past: 'it is a blind progeny / that acts without indebtedness to the past.' To Ndebele, the children's undoing in Soweto and other townships lay in their lack of appreciation of the dynamic relationship between the past, present, and future struggles of their people. 'The

Revolution on the aged' marks the culmination of Ndebele's search for an appropriate poetic form, language, and style.<sup>24</sup>

Since September 1979 he has been studying creative writing and fulfilling his long cherished desire at the University of Denver in America. He is preparing a collection of short stories, in lieu of a thesis. 'The Music of the Violin', which appeared in the September/October 1980 issue of Staffrider, is among the twelve stories he hopes to submit in 1982 for his doctorate. He hopes to publish most of his short stories when he returns to southern Africa. But, as with Gwala, publication does not mean everything to him and so he remains less well known than his considerable talents warrant. In a letter of 5 July 1982 he explains with characteristic earnestness: 'Looking deep into myself, I find that I am totally indifferent to the publication of my work. I enjoy only the moment of creativity, not the result of it....' Of course, I will try to get my stuff published, but it is not a consuming passion.'

Mandlenkosi Langa's position is similar to Gwala's and Ndebele's. Langa came to prominence with the publication of two of his poems in Royston's anthology. Although he does not delve into tradition to the same extent as the others, his style is as free of soapbox oratory as Ndebele's. He has been equally reluctant to release his work for publication, except in Black Consciousness publications such as the SASO Newsletter and Solidarity. He has participated with Serote and others, under the auspices of MEDU Art Ensemble, in theatrical programmes featuring their jointly-written plays and dramatization of their poems. Excerpts from his work written after Soweto have appeared in Marang, MEDU Newsletter, Staffrider, and Reconstruction, the latter compiled and edited by Mthobi Mutloatse. A dual English/German version of his Soweto poems is in preparation.\*

In 'The Pension Jive Ass', Langa exposes White callousness

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\*Our Flight in Winter MS (hereafter OFW) and The Blind Eye of the Seer MS (hereafter BES).

in the same satiric vein that characterizes a great deal of the early poetry of the revival period. The subject of his poem is an old African woman who comes to the Bantu Administration office to apply for her pension but encounters hostility from the White official in charge. Langa uses the metaphor of ice to describe the coldness of the White official and depicts his insensitivity in inanimate terms, as in the following lines: 'Blue ice chips gaze / And a red slash gapes' (BPSA, p.30). Despite the age of the woman, 'a sepia figure 100 years old', the White official uses derogatory language in addressing her and adopts an imperious tone towards her. The poem shows the futility of appealing to the White man's sense of justice, a futility which is implicit in the language gap between the old woman and the young official. They communicate through an interpreter, rendering a further breakdown of communication between them imminent. The African interpreter is unable to mediate and is more concerned with retaining his job and placating both parties. Langa shows the Black people's impotence in the face of White power. Yet despite this impotence, in a country such as South Africa where violence tends to be endemic, the old woman's reference to the old wars of resistance is ominous. 'I was born before the great wars / And saw my father slit your likes' throats!' she tells the official, as a warning against the recurrence of racial warfare (BPSA, p.30). The official who represents the apartheid state is cast in the role of someone who is provoking conflict and open warfare by his conduct. Langa can distance himself from life, in the manner of the interpreter in the poem, to hide his outraged sensitivity. His detachment, seen by some as cynicism, is no more than a protective device necessary for his survival in a cold and impersonal world which seeks to destroy him. An attack on him in an editorial comment in the MEDU Newsletter reads: 'Mandla is not only cynical, but has definitely taken a negative attitude to the sacrifice, creativity and determination of the people of South Africa to liberate themselves.' However, his critic acknowledges that, 'Easily Mandlenkosi Langa rates among the best African writers from South Africa. This is because he has a bare-nerve sensitivity to the usage of words; has mastered the possibilities of the craft of writing to the

extent that when we read what he writes, it is as if we have never heard things said the way he says them. He can penetrate, using simple language, complex thoughts and ideas.<sup>25</sup>

'Mother's Ode to a Stillborn Child', his other poem from Royston's anthology, is an equally powerful indictment of apartheid. He demonstrates how Blacks are plagued by the system from birth until death. In a sense, the unborn, such as the stillborn child of the poem, are more fortunate. 'His irony says more than any tract describing in spent emotives the life-expectations of the black ghetto under white oppression in the police state,' Nadine Gordimer observes.<sup>26</sup> The majority of Blacks who survive the high rate of infant mortality soon experience other adverse effects of life under South Africa's apartheid regime, such as police brutality or, in the graphic language of the poem, stopping 'a police truncheon' with one's head, and imprisonment on Robben Island (BPSA, p.31). In another poem, written after the Soweto massacres, he says: 'Blessed are those in these hours whose wombs never felt the kick of life' (OFW, p.5). Langa fled South Africa before Soweto to settle first in Botswana and subsequently in Lesotho, in order to avoid being turned into 'a permanent resident / of a prison island' (BPSA, p.31). His concern with the fate of children is deep, as shown in his article on the United Nations Year of the Child (1979) in the first issue of the MEDU Newsletter. 'To the man of colour, no matter how low he might be, a child is the logical extension of his will to survive, both as an individual and as a member of his race,' he wrote in explaining his attitude towards the young, who are the focal points of his poems, particularly his Soweto poems. 'The child is the black man's most prized and treasured possession because it is the clan's, the tribe's, the nation's regeneration.'

In an article published in 1979 in Staffrider, Gwala points out that 'Langa is one of the few black poets who often find their strange way out of this society's suppressed expression'.<sup>27</sup> Gwala quotes from one of Langa's poems, 'We beg your pardon South Africa', written before Soweto to illustrate his ironic stance. 'We beg your pardon South Africa', first published in the SASO Newsletter of March/April

1976, is a mock apology for South Africa, 'for the lies your enemies and the press / have heaped upon you'.<sup>28</sup> The poem unleashes an attack, indirectly, against oppression, the murder of political detainees, detention without trial, migrant labour, and other iniquities of the apartheid state. 'This approach of Mandlenkosi Langa is akin to the traditional songs of praise (Izibongo in Zulu) whereby the imbongi can freely go to town on the shortcomings of the king and not face punishment,' Gwala comments. By appearing to agree with the propaganda of the South African government, Langa avails himself of the licence to mention subjects which are considered taboo in South Africa. Without seeming to do so, he lays bare all the facts and strips South Africa's case of its validity. Like an imbongi, he speaks, as Gwala again points out, 'the truth of which the King's subjects shall be aware'.<sup>29</sup> But occasionally Langa drops his ironic stance. 'To Those', written in Gaborone in 1977 and first published in Marang in 1978, is a blunt attack on John Vorster, his Security Police, and the rest of his aides who cause Blacks hardships.

Langa has arranged his poems written between 1976 and 1978 in response to Soweto and its aftermath in two volumes. The first volume, Our Flight in Winter, is in two parts. Part 1 is a long song of lament in seven movements written in Gaborone in 1978 for the children who died in Soweto and other Black residential areas and those who fled from their homes during the winter of 1976. The typescript runs to thirty-three pages. What has been interpreted as negative and cynical in his work is, in fact, legitimate criticism of society and of the responses of the majority of Blacks to the Soweto crisis. He lays the blame for the death of the school children upon the army as much as upon everybody else, Black or White, who stood by watching or, at best, raising their fists in ineffectual protest. Culpability for the children's death lies with society, so that he describes the bullets which killed the children as coming from both the army and 'the cold heart of our cowardice' (OFW, p.4). His poem is free of self-deception, self-pity, and idealism. He brings out the truth about the tragic events which befell the Black community and analyses the community's weaknesses in

order to make a realistic estimate of their strengths and true potential. His diction is measured and dignified and conveys his deepest feelings. Part 2 consists of six shorter poems. 'The Stamp: Made in South Africa' is the earliest of these and was written in Gaborone in 1976. It makes the connection between the economic exploitation and the political oppression of Blacks. Both are products of apartheid which bear the stamp: Made in South Africa. 'The Final Clenching' together with an earlier poem, 'A Cold, Cold City', both of which appear in the 1977 PELCULEF Newsletter, were featured in 'An Anthem for Liberation', the dramatization of poetry which he, Serote, and other members of the Pelandaba Cultural Effort produced.

The second volume of his Soweto poems is entitled The Blind Eye of the Seers and is made up of a single poem, 56 pages long and divided into eighteen movements. The typescript was completed in Gaborone in 1978. The Blind Eye of the Seers is inclined to be prosaic and is not as outstanding as his other poems, although occasional flashes of his brilliance come to light, as in his description of apartheid legislation as 'laws passed in the / highest moments of paying tribute to lawlessness' (BES, p.18). In his preface, he explains his misunderstood views on the significance of the Soweto uprising more fully and equates the silence of the majority of his people to abetting apartheid:

It is only when those we have found fit in our hearts to call beloved - those we feel brave enough to regard as our children - start berating us and vilifying our memory; it is only when all those people start spitting on our images and shrines and remembrances and all that we have held sacred and clear; it is only then that we shall start seeing the gravity of our crime of silence in a country where silence does not only viciously club one into the unhealthy fellowship of accomplices, and this silence is not only criminal but brutally makes for genocidal rumblings that have found their widest and loudest expression in the midst of Winter 1976, in the darkest and bleakest ghettos of South Africa.

In The Blind Eye of the Seer, Langa reminisces about his youth. He deals, without cynicism or defeatism, with the exile experiences of the children who fled South Africa after Soweto. He believes in the ultimate triumph of the forces of liberation. However, he would like to see deeper commitment and better organisation brought to bear upon the execution

of the Black people's struggle for liberation in South Africa. He appeals for unity among the oppressed, an appeal he repeats in another of his unpublished poems, 'You who have journeyed', from Our Flight in Winter. He clings tenaciously to hope in the midst of much anguish and despair. He realizes that he may have assumed the mantle of a prophet who is not appreciated by his own people:

it is in our nature to mock  
it is in our nature to chastise and bar the attempts  
of our brethren who try to better our lot  
with us - -  
with us it is not even the case of the prophet  
not being appreciated in his own backyard (BES, p.4)

But he will not flinch from discharging his duty, from carrying out his self-appointed, thankless task of being the mirror of his society. He belongs to a rare breed of South African writers who are brave enough to come out in the open and criticize the mismanagement of the South African struggle for liberation by both the traditional nationalist movements and the nascent organisations led by the students. His most pointed attack on self-seeking leaders of the revolution reads:

we shall soon see companies like the struggle (pty) l.t.d.  
and when people open their mouths in disbelief  
we'll stand on the sidelines and say you see i told you  
the seers the real heroes saw a vision of a new land  
and the utterers said words that would shape  
all tomorrows  
not knowing that this earth prefers blindness  
and deaf-and-dumbness  
and too much searching into the meaning of hidden things  
was hazardous to their health. (BES, p.31)

The work of Don Monnapula Lebakeng Mattered, which has been banned in South Africa since 1973, is as representative of the period between Sharpeville and Soweto as the early work of Mtshali, Matthews, Serote, Gwala, Sepamla, Mbuli, Ndebele, and Langa. However, few people outside South Africa knew about Mattered until Index on Censorship, followed by Kunapipi, brought out his work. In South Africa his work was well known to readers of literary magazines such as Izwi, in which his poems and an eighteen-page autobiographical



article first appeared.<sup>30</sup>

Mattera was born in Sophiatown in 1935 and describes himself as a second generation Coloured' and 'a product of miscegenation'.<sup>31</sup> His grandfather, Fransesco Mattera (1878-1967), came as a sailor to South Africa from Naples at the age of twenty-six. He jumped ship in Cape Town and married a woman of Xhosa-Dutch and Griqua descent in Graaf-Reinett. They moved to Kimberly, acquired some diamonds and left after nineteen years to settle in Sophiatown, where they started one of the first bus companies for Africans in Johannesburg. Don Mattera's father, Bosquala Graaf Mattera, married Agnes Dinkie Lebakeng, a Motswana woman, but they separated in 1943 and sent Don Mattera to a Catholic boarding school in Durban. He returned to Sophiatown in 1950 and turned into a gangster as an act of rebellion against 'everything that represented law, order, discipline and demand'.<sup>32</sup> He managed to complete his high school education, obtaining a second class pass matriculation certificate in 1957. His reformation set in gradually as a result of attending political rallies organized by the ANC in Sophiatown's Freedom Square and addressed by speakers such as Trevor Huddleston to protest against passes, increased bus fares, prison labour conditions, the removal of Sophiatown, and other issues of the time. He read Richard Wright, Native Son and The Black Boy, and Alan Paton. 'I found in the books a new world, as I read about life in America,' he says. 'Somehow the contents seemed so very familiar and domestic. A book called Cry, the Beloved Country by Alan Paton injected a strange passion into me.'<sup>33</sup> He became a member of the ANC's Youth League but later joined the PAC, when it was formed, which he found more radical and less White oriented. When the ANC and the PAC were banned after Sharpeville, he joined the Coloured Labour Party, which was acceptable to the government. He hoped he could work within the system to undermine it from inside. Despite his membership of the CLP, he remained opposed to ethnicity, which the government was trying to encourage. He broke with the CLP in 1971 and joined the Black People's Convention. In November 1973 he was banned for five years and in 1978 his banning order was

renewed for a further five years. In terms of his banning order, he is forbidden from attending public meetings, from being in the company of more than two people at the same time, and from being published or quoted in South Africa. However, he is allowed to work and is a subeditor of the Star, a Johannesburg daily newspaper.

'His poems are no less interesting for they straddle the period from Sharpeville and its aftermath of defeat and despair to the pre-Soweto days with their spirit of defiance and challenge,' Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre observes. 'They also reflect the evolution of the late sixties and early seventies, associated as they are with the Black Consciousness Movement.'<sup>34</sup> Some of his poems describe the common experiences of Blacks and show the dehumanization brought about by poor living conditions under apartheid. 'For a Cent', which was published in the first issue of Izwi, describes an African who has been reduced to begging. From sheer force of habit he murmurs: 'THANK YOU, MY BAAS' even to another African who tosses him a coin.<sup>35</sup> 'Friday Night' from the August 1972 issue of Izwi deals with the misdirected violence of Blacks who kill one another in the townships. Mattera resembles Biko and Serote in that he laments such fratricidal actions. His love-hate relationship with South Africa, which is conveyed in 'God Bless' and 'Offering', is similar to Serote's and Sepamla's. His love for his country of birth conflicts with his resentment of apartheid. The conflict spills over and affects his attitude towards Whites. He swears vengeance upon White society and, in the next breath, restrains himself from carrying out his threat, in the way Serote does in his early poems. 'And Yet' reiterates his effort to free himself from the stranglehold of hatred and retain his humanism, as in the following lines:

I cannot hate  
try as I want to  
I cannot hate, WHY?<sup>36</sup>

'Love' is a recurring word in Mattera's poems, but he dreads the violence that must be the inevitable consequence of White intransigence. He turns to the Black community for a solution to his country's problems and for a resolution of his conflict. Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre puts it this way:

Mattera turns primarily to his black brothers. Like his colleagues of the Black Consciousness Movement, he has realized that the black man is truly on his own, that his passivity and lack of combativeness play a part in the perpetuation of apartheid. The time for reasoning and praying is over: the black man must now stand up and claim his rights. The 'We've had enough' theme comes up over and over again under different forms, at first a cry of anguish and then a declaration of war. The rhetoric has clearly a mobilizing purpose but it is also meant as a therapy, for the black man has internalized the white man's depreciation of himself.<sup>37</sup>

His poems have a didactic purpose but he is not a politician or journalist suddenly turned poet. His poems reveal his sensitivity and display his sense of structure and his eloquence. There is no public posturing in them.

The high esteem in which Mattera is held in the Black community is shown by the tributes which came from his fellow poets after he had been banned in 1973, from Serote in 'For Don M - Banned' in Tsetlo and from Leonard Koza in an Afrikaans poem, 'Aan Don Mattera' in Volume 3 Number 18 of Izwi (October 1974).

Adam Small is one of the most enigmatic figures in South African literature. In the early years of the literary revival, he stood on the opposite side of the political spectrum from James Matthews and Don Mattera. His early works in prose, poetry, and drama were welded to 'the Afrikaans and Afrikaner tradition, whereby the "coloured" was looked upon with ambiguity and paternal affection and regarded as a sort of "brown Afrikaner"'.<sup>38</sup> His image of the 'Cape Coloured' derived from the writings of White South African authors. In his plays such as Kanna Hy Kō Hystoe (Kanna, He's Coming Home), his characters act out their parts in a White regulated world and their responses are conditioned by White expectations. His writings exhibit characteristics of 'ambiguity and near-kinship' towards White society.<sup>39</sup> His politics have been as contentious as his writings. His decision to write in Afrikaans, identified by Blacks as the language of the oppressor, alienated many of his Black readers. Their alienation is ironic when one considers that

Afrikaans is the mother tongue of the majority of people of mixed racial origin in South Africa. In Mind Your Colour, February devotes a chapter to a discussion of Small and explains the refutation of Afrikaans by 'Coloured' intellectuals by pointing out that '"Coloureds" all realize that a mastery of the English language will bring in its wake an accessibility to a greater culture, and to greater cultural values'.<sup>40</sup> Small's use of dialect, sometimes called Kaaps (Capey) or Kleurling-Afrikaans (Coloured Afrikaans) and regarded as a mark of cultural inferiority and low social status by the majority of the Coloureds, has been attacked on the grounds that it confirms Afrikaner prejudices about the linguistic and cultural inferiority of 'Coloureds'. By comparison, in his use of patois La Guma has not encountered the same kind of opposition as Small, even though Small's language is closer than La Guma's English approximations to the actual language of the working class communities both writers seek to depict in their work. La Guma's language has been more readily acceptable since he does not seek to ridicule and his attitude towards his 'Coloured' characters does not derive, as Small's attitude does, from the kind of mockery and condescension that are common features of White Afrikaans literature. During this phase in his life, Small was an advocate of closer cultural and political co-operation between 'Coloureds' and Afrikaners. But with the advent of Black Consciousness, his political stance changed. In a televised interview in 1978 on South African television, he explained how he was converted to Black Consciousness by Biko. The influence of Black Consciousness in Small found its literary expression in Black Bronze Beautiful, his first volume of poems to be published in English, which contains fifty quatrains.\*

In Black Bronze Beautiful, Small acknowledges his change of political and literary direction. In his epigraph, he describes his poems as poems written to 'a rhythm, new for / Africa's people, as we are growing together'. He seeks closer

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\*Black Bronze Beautiful (hereafter BBB), Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975.

co-operation with his darker brethren and no longer with the Afrikaners. He acknowledges and embraces his Africanness. He subscribes to Black Consciousness as a necessary, if transitory, phase in the struggle for the psychological emancipation of Blacks and for the restoration of their human dignity. This idea is conveyed in his opening quatrain when he says: 'I know, my love, this beauty too will wilt / Still, now I bare my breasts and hold my head' (BBB, p.1). Other pieces describe his physical attributes as a Black person. His images and associations conjure Black beauty, pride, and power. Some of the images used are 'black, lamb, ebony, bronze, wine, soil, honey, sun, warmth'. He also employs highly sensuous images which are intended to reflect the vitality of Blacks, in spite of the fact that they are oppressed and disadvantaged. His self-discovery is reflected through the abundant anatomical images he uses to describe himself. The quatrains describe his rise from 'black unconsciousness' (BBB, p.46).

Black Bronze Beautiful shows that Small still desires reconciliation between Blacks and Whites but on terms laid down by Blacks, terms which are consistent with their dignity and humanity. He offers Whites his heart which, though filled with grief from his illtreatment by them, is as life-giving as the sun. 'I am of the warm sun where things grow,' he says and wishes to extend a life-line to Whites (BBB, p.7). If they scorn his proffered hand, they do so at their own detriment. His continent has all the resources necessary to sustain Whites, alongside its indigenous population. Besides, its people are forgiving; their love is as abundant as its resources. In the twelfth and thirteenth quatrains, he describes himself as the European settlers' source of life, their oasis, their fountain, and water spout. He is also the source of all fertility and creativity. He is the ideal lover with the capacity to give his partner considerable sexual gratification: 'My body can fulfil you... / Its pasture is rich, is dark - be like a playful foal' (BBB, p.10). His concept of healthy interpersonal relationships as a source of one's own personality development is Lawrentian. But the stud image he uses conjures too many unpleasant associations and

humiliating episodes of slaves on American and Caribbean plantations to be effective as a symbol and an expression of Black dignity. Nonetheless, 'the slave chain and the whip' are integral parts of the Black experience (BBB, p.15). He is concerned with the rehabilitation of African history, without underplaying some of its unsavoury aspects. This rehabilitation process is manifested in lines such as: 'My breasts have fed Zimbabwe, suckled Pyramids / I've nurtured the millennial awe and beauty of the Sphinx' (BBB, p.20). Despite his pride in being an African, contradictions occasionally arise in Small as a result of his mixed racial origin.

In Black Bronze Beautiful, his most profound and original statements tend to be those which have some bearing upon his personal life, as opposed to his generalizations about his Blackness: 'you would understand me truly if you hold / the desert sand esteemed just like the flooding Nile' (BBB, p.22). Here we get a personal statement of his ambivalence as well as a more balanced picture of Africa, its glories set beside its less majestic elements. The final thrust in his poems is towards reconciliation between Blacks and Whites, with the roles reversed and Blacks dispensing all the great gifts of life to Whites.

The lyrical quality of Small's verse suffers an occasional jolt due to clumsily constructed lines, in archaic constructions, as in the following quatrain:

Anointment to be true must nothing lack  
must cover the head, the navel, and the feet  
extremities and centre: fragrant it must be  
and full - fullness being black (BBB, p.6)

He rearranges words for the sake of his rhyme scheme, which sounds forced. His use of clichés is another fault in these poems. His biblical reference to King Solomon's Black lover has become trite from overuse by writers from the Harlem renaissance to the Sophiatown renaissance. Moreover, to readers who are familiar with Negritude poetry some of his concepts are equally cliché-ridden. For instance, the last line of the tenth quatrain reads: 'My reason like my body is intuitive' (BBB, p.10). The idea that intuition and rhythm are the primary features of African culture derives

from Negritude and has been discredited by many critics. In his 'Remarks on Negritude' at the conference on African Literature and the University Curriculum held at the Facult<sup>e</sup> de Lettres, University of Dakar, 26-29 March 1963, Mphahlele addressed himself to these same notions romanticized by Small, in the following terms: 'Who is so stupid as to deny the historical fact of negritude as both a protest and a positive assertion of African cultural values? All this is valid. What I do not accept is the way in which too much of the poetry inspired by it romanticizes Africa - as a symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness.'<sup>41</sup> In the fourteenth issue of Présence Africaine, Albert Franklin in his article, 'La Negritude: realite ou mystification', further argues that reason is not any more Greek than emotion is Negro. However, Small is conscious all the time of a pressing need to forge an accessible myth to foster solidarity among the Black oppressed. Once that has been accomplished, Small hopes that Black Consciousness will be transcended the way Negritude was abandoned once it had served its purpose.

Black Consciousness enabled Small for a while to reconcile his politics with his writings. His judgement of the Afrikaans poet, Breyten Breytenbach, after the latter had recanted his previous political beliefs and asked the South African Prime Minister to forgive him for supporting Blacks in their struggle against White domination, was primarily political and echoed some of the early criticisms made against Small himself. 'How many of the verses which can still be read as one would want them to be read, how many of the verses can still remain standing after what Breytenbach has said in court?' Small asked. 'It is as if Breyten would now have to start writing all over again, it is as if he had destroyed a large part of his own work.'<sup>42</sup> Small has shown a similar tendency to backslide. He vacillates a great deal, as on the occasion he gave permission for Kanna Hy Kô Hystoe to be performed before a segregated White audience; as a result he was not allowed to see the performance. His action was seen as betrayal and invited a stream of abuse from the Black community by people who were trying to resuscitate the boycott of segregated institutions. Since then, his political direction has once again become uncertain

and unpredictable. February observes that: 'The aura of ambiguity continues to cling to him, notwithstanding his more political pronouncements in the seventies.'<sup>43</sup>

Unlike Adam Small, Essop Patel has hitherto attracted little attention to himself. Patel is best known for his work in compiling The World of Nat Nakasa but he also produced a steady output of poems in the 1970s which appeared in various literary magazines. He has a remarkable talent for writing poems which give a powerful visual effect but which are difficult to reproduce without proper typesetting. His first collection, They came at Dawn, came out in 1980 and contains fifty-three poems, an introduction by James Matthews, and a letter from Patel. In his letter, Patel says: 'My poems are love poems... the contempt for the oppressor is an affirmation of love for the oppressed.' James Matthews writes that few Black South African poets show 'sensitivity coupled with creativity and technique to make simple words sound new as Essop Patel does when he describes the injustices under which Blacks live. With others, the injustices become clichés that should be strung on to a pamphlet and the writer reveals himself as a pamphleteer not a poet.' Patel's poems are not devoid of public posturing at all times. Occasionally, what we get from him are stock responses to apartheid so that we are left ignorant of how he felt, how he reacted, and how the experiences he relates moved him as an individual. We do not always get his personal vision, a vision which transcends the usual sentiments of protest. A few of the poems in which Patel speaks in his personal rather than public voice are vividly realized. 'The Beggar Girl' is a moving poem about a Hubakusha girl, a survivor of a bomb blast, 'begging for the lost pieces of her body', her face 'held by a controlled sculpture of bones'. Patel is responsible, together with Tim Couzens, for an anthology of Black South African poetry in the past century, Ask any Black Man, to be published by Ravan Press.



Shabbir Banoobhai, who lives in Durban and lectures in the Department of Accountancy and Auditing at the segregated university for Indians in Durban-Westville, first received critical attention in 1975 from Douglas Livingstone. In a paper read at the Indian Teachers' Conference in Durban and subsequently published in New Classic in 1976, Livingstone described Banoobhai as 'a most promising young poet....whose work has recently started to appear in Bolt, Contrast and New Coin'.<sup>44</sup> Banoobhai's work has also appeared in Izwi, Unisa English Studies, and Staffrider. He has waited for nearly a decade to publish his first volume, Echoes of My Other Self, which appeared in 1980.\*

Banoobhai's poems combine social concerns with his personal concerns. He speaks more in his individual voice and less with the public voice that characterizes the work of most Black South African poets. However, in Banoobhai, as in Nortje, individual concerns highlight the general predicament. His style is casual and serene but, underneath, the poems reveal strong feelings and deep convictions. Besides the playwright, Ronnie Govender, and the short story writer, Ahmed Essop, Banoobhai is one of the few writers in South Africa to weave his Asian background into his work. He also brings in his Muslim background into his poems, in the way Essop in The Hajji and Other Stories and Govender in Lahnee's Pleasure bring in their Hindu background.

'Prying the Oyster of My Soul', which opens Banoobhai's collection, is an introspective poem. As the title suggests, the poet engages in self-examination, which he describes as his 'spring cleaning' (Echoes, p.1). He travels down memory lane to what he calls 'the lambing days / of my field-green childhood' (Echoes, p.1). His poetry is characterised by this kind of reassessment of himself, his experiences and their significance. His poems are quietly thoughtful. His individual voice often merges with his public voice, as in 'God, please...', in which he objects to having his life cut out to serve another's economic purposes and

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\*Echoes of My Other Self (hereafter, Echoes) Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980.

and his thoughts regulated to conform:

do not let them turn me into a shop  
to be opened at six in the morning  
and closed at six in the evening  
regulated in the thoughts... (Echoes, p.33)

Even though the poem does refer to his own profession as an accountant, the life of drudgery and exploitation which Banoobhai describes is more characteristic of the Black working class, so that he is speaking more on their behalf than on his own behalf. His metaphors, borrowed from accountancy, are interesting in their application to his White oppressors, his 'self-appointed auditors' who have rendered him insolvent and condemned him to penal servitude to be fed 'impoverished thoughts / for the best years of my life' (Echoes, p.33). He speaks differently and as originally as any poet in South Africa.

In his meditations, he ponders over subjects of national importance, which he treats with a casualness that disguises his true feelings. 'Weeds' is about the oppressed who are condemned, like weeds, to a life of worthlessness. However, society's weeds, he points out, can be used as compost manure to 'enrich the soil / and give the garden life' (Echoes, p.34). Banoobhai describes the insurrection which the oppressed are hatching, even as the oppressors imagine that they are putting the oppressed to good use, in the following terms:

as long as the garden looks beautiful  
who cares about  
the mouldering weeds beneath (Echoes, p.34).

'Mouldering' implies discontent and brewing insurrection. Similarly, though less subtly expressed than in 'Weeds', 'The Border' warns against insurgency by guerrilla forces, despite strict vigilance by the South African armed forces. The border patrols give a false sense of security; in reality, they are as secure 'as your door / against the unwanted knock' (Echoes, p.36). Banoobhai forecasts an end to White rule and anarchy. The days of the springbok, South Africa's national symbol, and the lion, symbol of anarchy, are numbered, he proclaims in 'Land of Lion and Springbok'. The lion and the springbok 'claw blindly', as a mark of their desperation, and fail to notice 'the sun / shining black in the sky' (Echoes, p.39). 'It's only your imagination,

only a dream' shows the self-deception to which Whites have become accustomed so much that they fail to recognize the inevitability of social and political transformation which Banoobhai believes is bound to take place in South Africa. His desire for social and political change is highlighted in the Iqbal poem which appears towards the end of his collection. Banoobhai's note in the acknowledgement page reads: 'Muhamman Iqbal (1873-1938) was born in Sialkot, Pakistan. He was a poet and a philosopher whose main source of inspiration was the Quran and who endeavoured in his work to show the excellence of the Islamic way of life. He kindled the movement that ultimately gave rise to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.' Banoobhai invokes Iqbal's spirit and appeals for enlightenment and spiritual regeneration to illuminate South African society.

In contrast to the intimidation, apathy, stagnation, and pessimism, which set in after Sharpeville, Soweto was followed by the biggest literary outburst South Africa has known, an outburst of literary and other cultural activity which marked the climax of the Black Consciousness era. In defiance of the government's efforts to suppress Black cultural and political expression, many cultural groups of Black Consciousness persuasion emerged after Soweto. These new artists' groups were modelled after such groups as the Dashiki Poets, Mihloti, and Mdali. The first of these new writers' groups to emerge was Medupe from Soweto. Their original name had been the Azanian Poets and Writers' Association (AZAPOWA), which was changed when its members thought that the use of 'Azania' was too open an invitation to the government to ban the association. 'Azania' is the name by which Blacks and their cultural and political organisations in South Africa prefer to designate their country. It derives from the name given by the Greek geographers to the coast of East Africa and its hinterland from the Straits of Bab al-mandib to the cape called Prason, which was thought to be near the southern limit of the

world. In an article published in Donga in September 1977, Dumakude Ndlovu, a founder member and the publicity secretary of Medupe, described the birth of the new writers' movement, which has been responsible for the growth of literature since 1976, in the following terms:

Medupe was formed this year and has been in existence for only six months. However, in these six months we have achieved very much: we have held more than thirty poetry reading meetings, some of them at schools, but mostly at DOCC/YMCA Orlando.

Today one can hardly say that Medupe was formed by slightly less than twenty people, as it has soared in numbers and can already boast of a membership of more than 200. This achievement... is evidence of the amount of interest poetry is attracting these days.<sup>45</sup>

Other groups mushroomed throughout the country: Mpumalanga Arts Ensemble, Malopoets, Bayajula Arts Group, Creative Youth Association, Madi Group, Allah Poets, and many others. Mike Kirkwood resigned his post as a lecturer at the University of Natal to take over as the director of Ravan Press from Peter Randall, who had been served with a five-year banning order in 1977. Mike Kirkwood helped to launch Staffrider, which emerged in March 1978, after Donga had been banned, as the mouthpiece of the new writers' movement. Kirkwood describes the new writers' movement as follows:

half-inchoate; very loosely structured; a core group of perhaps a thousand; intellectually diverse - from the highly educated to the newly literate; a prevailing collective identity which includes within it some vulnerable and alienated life-experiences; a high degree of political commitment within the broad framework of black consciousness; needing urgently to set down collectively perceived key experiences of the oppressed; exulting in the discovery of a potentially new huge audience with whom the writers feel at one; occasionally looking over the shoulder at those readers in the 'dominant' culture the 'dominated' writers used to address.<sup>46</sup>

The most celebrated, prolific, and representative poets of the new writers' movement are Christopher Van Wyk, Fhazel Johennesse, and Ingoapele Madingoane.\*

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\*Christopher Van Wyk, It is time to go Home (hereafter, Home), Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1979.

Fhazel Johennesse, The Rainmaker (hereafter, TR), Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979.

Ingoapele Madingoane, Africa My Beginning (hereafter, AMB), Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979.

Christopher Van Wyk was born in 1957 and matriculated from the Riverlea High School for 'Coloureds' in Johannesburg. After leaving school, he worked as a clerk and subsequently as a producer of easy-to-read material for people learning English under the auspices of the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), an independent educational trust. It is time to go Home is his first book and consists of poems written between 1976 and 1978. Some of the poems in the collection had previously appeared in Donga, Inspan, New Classic, Staffrider, and The Voice.

Christopher Van Wyk is a typical 'Coloured' youth of the new generation. He talks the language of Black Consciousness with overtones of Negritude:

we are a black bust moulded from dongas  
and dirt and tears  
and the ugly smut of oppression  
But we are proud. (Home, p.11)

He writes in the tradition of Serote, Sepamla, and Gwala. In the quoted excerpt, 'donga' is a recurring Serote image. Another of his poems, 'About Graffiti', works like Gwala's 'Gumba, Gumba, Gumba' but with Van Wyk's distinctive wit and humour: 'Graffiti shouts from the lips of a township / Kyk voor die Welfare sal agter jou kyk' (Look in front of you the Welfare will look after you) (Home, p.15). Van Wyk's Afrikaans, which is actually Tsotsitaal, does not represent half-literacy among peasants who cannot see beyond next harvest's crop. 'Die lanie het 'n levah', the title of one of his poems, would be rendered as 'Die wit man het ge praat' (the White man has spoken) in standard Afrikaans. Van Wyk's language, even more than Sepamla's, is the language of assertion, defiance, and subversion; it enables him to propound the views of Mao Tse Tung and to tell his township readers about the achievements of FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique), without his oppressors being in any way the wiser for it.

Though classified as 'Coloured', Van Wyk identifies with Africans and is free of the identity crisis which plagues some older 'Coloured' authors such as Adam Small. As with Fhazel Johennesse, Van Wyk's close literary collaborator, Black Consciousness has enabled Van Wyk to resolve his identity crisis. Two of his poems which reflect his identification with the African people appeared in Donga

Number 7 in September 1977. The first, 'On Learning Sotho', associates learning Sesotho with the development of his personality. It is the opposite of Adam Small, in his early work, hankering after recognition and acceptance by the Afrikaners. Van Wyk derives his fulfilment from his acceptance as an African and not as a brown Afrikaner. He looks to the African for his natural allies in his fight against racism and oppression. He wants to share their cries and laughter, so that to him learning Sesotho becomes a process, not only of closing the language gap between himself and the Africans but also, of closing ranks and cementing solidarity with them. The second of his poems of identification, 'It is sleepy in the "Coloured" townships', is critical of the indifference of the 'Coloured' communities of Riverlea, Noordgesig, Eldorado Park, Bosmont, and Newclare, an indifference reflected in their failure to rally to the support of Africans during the Soweto upheavals despite their proximity to Soweto. Sharpeville, when he was 'hardly out of a napkin', means less to Van Wyk than Soweto: 'Now, after June 16 / puberty attacks suddenly' (Home, p.9). He is not content any longer to sit on the sidelines but declares his support for the African cause. He does more than predict and warn against impending revolution and a possible blood-bath; he actually wills such developments to purge society: 'Now I have an urge... / for a tumultous upheaval of blood' (Home, p.20). His attitude demonstrates the militancy which swept through the Black townships in the wake of the Soweto revolts.

Christopher Van Wyk's poems show evidence of his wide reading: South African poetry, particularly Nortje's work; the war poems of Owen and Sassoon; and African literature, particularly Ngugi's work. The best writers of the Soweto generation show evidence of having overcome the disadvantages brought about by the absence of a vigorous and continuous Black South African literary tradition, an absence which handicapped the inaugurators of the literary revival after Sharpeville. Van Wyk's work is in the mainstream of Black Consciousness. He shares Black Consciousness aversion for White liberal patronage, as in 'Beware of White ladies when spring is here'. He is also a poet of the Soweto era, who

shares the pre-occupations of the Soweto poets: revolt, death, detention, and exile.

Fhazel Johennesse, who came together with Christopher Van Wyk in 1980 to establish SABLE BOOKS and launch Wietie, was born in 1956 in Johannesburg. The Rainmaker, his first collection of poems, appeared in a joint edition with Neil Williams's short novel, Just a Little Stretch of Road. 'I have been told that writing poetry about being black is "troublemaking",' he says in the blurb of his book. 'But that is so wrong. My writing is a confirmation of my humanity, a celebration of my blackness.' Some of his poems in the volume have previously appeared in magazines such as New Classic and Staffrider.

Fhazel Johennesse portrays characters and scenes from Johannesburg and from the townships: the taxi driver; his neighbours; the nightwatchman; fruit, newspaper, and fish-and-chips sellers; the police; and mine workers. Many of his poems are miniature portraits of working class people. They show the pathos in the position of the newspaper boy selling 'news of a life / that always / passes him by' (TR, p.89), the taxi driver whose 'only certainty / is the next forty cents' (TR, p.86), the fruit trader selling fruits he craves to eat himself, and the miner digging out gold to make others wealthy. In the 'Biza' poems, he changes his idiom to Tsotsitaal to discuss serious social and political matters with his Black readers in a tone of confidentiality. 'Biza' is a common tsotsi name; Johennesse's 'Biza' is Everyman.

Johennesse resembles Mtshali in that he is at his best when he is describing the social side and the common features of township life. 'Living in a flat in Eldorado Park' describes 'the parade of life' outside the door of his flat:

the drunk trying to mount the steps  
swearing as he skids in [his] predecessors's vomit  
and a curious two-year-old watching  
his antics and a woman of indeterminate age  
dragging an impossible bundle of washing...  
and the infuriating  
tap tap tap on the ceiling as  
some brat upstairs explores the  
mysteries of his floor with a hammer (TR, p.75)

'Living in a Flat in Eldorado Park' telescopes all his social concerns. He employs all his senses to convey the cheap quality of life in South Africa's Black ghettos. Images of vomit, excreta, and putrefaction convey his disgust. The contrast between youth and old age indicates the children's destiny. The poem parades drunks, old women, toddlers, door-to-door salesmen, and other township types. Johannesburg has not written anything as evocative, vibrant, and rich in variety as 'Living in a Flat in Eldorado Park'. The rest of his poems from The Rainmaker deal with historical themes such as the Great Trek. The history of White encroachment is seen from a Black perspective. Other poems from the collection satirize White obsession with suppressing insurrection in a war they can never win.

Ingoapele Madingoane is a member of Mhloti, founded by Pheto, Serote, and others to promote Black Consciousness through culture. Madingoane is the new poet laureate of Soweto, whose first collection Africa My Beginning, published in March 1979, sold 2,000 copies in five weeks. It was banned soon after it had been reprinted in April 1979. Madingoane and Mhloti give free performances, sometimes at the backyards of small township shops, to ordinary township audiences of all ages. They employ African drums, music, dance, and mime to dramatize their message of liberation. Their popularity and success (they appeared on British television in 1980) is evidence of the strides Black South African poets have taken since Dollar Brand inaugurated the poetic renaissance in 1967. Madingoane's work has also been published in an anthology, The International Portland Review 1980, representing 170 writers from fifty-five countries in forty-two languages. Madingoane's work appears regularly in Staffrider. He is on the executive committee of the African Writers' Association formed in 1981.

Madingoane's oral epic poem, 'Black Trial', written in the izibongo tradition, reiterates most of the apartheid themes of South African literature. He prays for the redemption of his soul and appeals for a repeal of apartheid



as the only means by which his soul can be redeemed:

shower my soul oh you who love me  
play me a tune to soothe my anger  
lest i explode to avenge my castration  
and reap the wrath of ancient gods (AMB, p.5)

His poem contains a string of associated words to describe human suffering: 'pain, anguish, tears, strife, wounds, destruction, crushing, degraded, tortured, cruelty, weariness, despair, fear'. The mournful streak in the poem is counterbalanced by his assertion, usually in the form of a refrain such as 'go man go / black man go' (used in the sixth movement - AMB, pp.9-11) and in the recurrence of words such as 'courage' and 'love'. The purpose of his poem is to motivate Blacks to fight apartheid, so that he presents their suffering as a trial of their strength and their virtues in the face of adversity. He dwells on his people's reawakening, which he describes as their 'genesis vision' brought about by the events in Soweto (AMB, p.27), events which mark their 'awakening / and the death of a long painful slumber' (AMB, p.8). In the seventh and eighth movements, he records the painful events which occurred in Soweto; and in the fifteenth movement, he links the Soweto tragedy with the death of Mapetla Mohapi, Steve Biko, Onkgopotse Tiro, and Hector Peterson. He fulfils the role of an historian, like Serote, who has been a major influence in Madingoane's development. He views all these tragedies as sacrifices which herald 'the dawn of / a new age' (AMB, p.20). He also conjures Black pride and dignity, through his allusions to Soyinka's work, as in the lines: 'hail ogun / hail abibiman' (AMB, p.20), and in his injection of Swahili expressions to identify with free Africans in other parts of the continent, with the 'fulanis of nigerian jies of uganda / eastafrican mbutis abantu tirikis' (AMB, p.24). 'Abantu' and 'tirikis' are words from some of the indigenous languages of Africa and both words mean 'people'. Black Consciousness themes such as the glorification or celebration of the beauty of African women also come up in the poem:

say how beautiful  
runs the rows  
of your plaited hair  
mosadi hee mosadi (AMB, p.29)

'Mosadi' is the Setwana word for 'woman'. In his task of liberating Africa, he invokes the wisdom and warrior spirit

of his ancestral gods ('badimo besc', AMB, p.31), of Shaka, Moshoeshoe, and Khama the Great. 'Black Trial' envisions Africa free of racial strife and tension.

His remaining poem, 'Africa My Beginning', which gives his book its title, is much shorter and describes Africa's history of conquest and exploitation by European settlers, culminating in their ignominious defeat in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, examples of Africa triumphant from which Blacks in South Africa can take heart. The poem is also written like a praise chant, with the words 'africa my beginning / and africa my ending' used as a refrain throughout the poem (AMB, pp.33-35). Staffrider in its November/December 1979 issue published an excerpt from his new work, 'Behold, My Son', which projects an apocalyptic vision of strife in South Africa:

behold the last eruptions  
of emergent afrika  
with anger as sharp as Shaka's spear.<sup>47</sup>

The eruptions culminate in the full restoration of the rights and dignity of Africans in the land of their birth.

Madingoane's poems, '"Black Trial" and its shorter sequel, "Africa My Beginning" have been heard "live" by many thousand South Africans. Their memories can't be banned, though the book is - it may be possessed, but not distributed in South Africa'.<sup>48</sup>

The period 1967-1980 unleashed the talents of Black South Africans too many to mention or to deal with exhaustively. Some of the poets who have not been dealt with in this survey include Farouk Asvat and Achmat Dangor, whose work first appeared in Izwi and who were both banned in 1973 until 1978, when their banning restrictions were lifted. Asvat appears with Madingoane in Cindy Ragland's anthology, The International Portland Review 1980 and his satiric verse appears regularly in Staffrider. Achmat Dangor took more to prose and was the winner of the Mofolo/Plomer prize in 1980 for his collection of short stories published as Waiting for Leila. His poems have also appeared in New Classic and Staffrider and his first volume is to be published by Ravan

Press. Leonard Koza has published his poems in Izwi, Marang, and other literary magazines. Nkathazo ka Mnyayiza, who is a member of the Mpumalanga Arts Ensemble, has been a regular contributor to Ophir, New Classic, and Staffrider. AWA Newsletter of March/April 1982 announced his forthcoming collection of poems and also announced the coming of Dangor's first volume of poems. Christine Douts Qunta's poems were first published in Black Voices Shout but her first volume, Hoyi Na! Azania, was published in and incorporated poems written from exile. The bulk of her work was lost when she fled South Africa in 1975. Another leading female writer is Fatima Dike, whose poems appeared in New Classic. However, Dike is better known as a playwright and the author of such plays as The Sacrifice of Kreli, The First South African, and The Glasshouse. Mothobi Mutloatse, founding Chairman of the African Writers' Association and Mike Kirkwood's co-director at Ravan Press, is best known for his contribution of a narrative poem, 'Don't Lock up our Sweethearts', to Stephen Gray's anthology, On the Edge of the World (enlarged and reissued as Modern South African Stories), and as the editor of Casey Motsisi's posthumous collection of prose, Casey and Co, and Reconstruction. Although he has published a few poems in literary magazines such as Izwi, Ophir, and New Classic, his talents are better suited to journalism and prose-fiction.

There are new Black South African poets born with each new issue of Staffrider. The African Writers' Association, formed in 1981, is reviving Classic and its editorial committee is made up of established Black South African writers such as Miriam Tlali, Essop Patel, Sipho Sepamla, Mothobi Mutloatse, and Ezekiel Mphahlele (who returned to South Africa in 1978 after twenty years in exile). According to Mike Kirkwood's letter of 24 May 1982, 'Developments at Ravan are heading us in the direction of launching a sort of "Staffrider Press" at the beginning of 1984. Basically this means that the "black writing" side of the industry will hive off and be its own thing: wholly black owned, etc., taking over the existing platform (stock of books, personnel) that resides with Ravan Press.' Jaki Seroke, a promising young poet who is in the executive of AWA and also in the editorial

board of Classic, and Christopher Van Wyk constitute an editorial unit within Ravan which will be handling Ravan's Black writer output, with increasing independence during the transition time. Black South African written literature appears set for a boom period unequalled in the 150 years of its existence. Prose and drama are in the upsurge but poetry is still in the lead, as it has been since 1967. The new writers are propelled by the impact of Black Consciousness and, since 1976, by the events in Soweto and other Black residential areas.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

'All literature, to the extent that it deals with individuals in society, contains elements of social and political theory. Obviously the creative writer does not always write with the intention of propagating a particular idea, but he cannot create in a vacuum. When he depicts a character or an incident his judgements come into play, thereby revealing some of the value choices he has made either consciously or unconsciously. All literature depicts the values of the people and the period.'<sup>1</sup> Black South African literature between 1967 and 1980 reflects the socio-political preoccupations of the period. These are mainly reflected in the concerns of Black Consciousness, the dominant political ideology of the period. Black Consciousness was contemporaneous with the emergence of the poets who are the subject of this study. A reading of Black South African poetry in this period refutes the myth that poetry is in a world of its own, or separate from the sufferings, struggles, and victories of real life. Black Consciousness poetry is a commentary on and the expression of the energies, aspirations, and realisation of a national consciousness that has been accompanied by a political process over the last fifteen years in South Africa - from the ravages of Sharpeville, through the cultural renaissance and the Black Consciousness era, to the Soweto era.

The poems written during the years after Sharpeville grew directly from the inspiration of the suffering people. They are an expression of the people's brutal experiences of massacres, imprisonment, torture, political and cultural repression, economic exploitation, and racism. Black Consciousness is an expression of an internal revolt against the oppressor. The oppressor is admittedly powerful but the oppressed potentially even more so. The revolt of words in Black Consciousness poetry is shot through with Black Power and the imagery of Negritude. Although the poets deal with suffering and their hatred of apartheid, this hatred exists side by side with a patriotic love. The dignity of this love

Contrasts sharply with the alienation, the humiliation, and the decadence of life under apartheid.

Most of this poetry arose from Black Consciousness. As Black Consciousness met with support and success in the Black schools and universities and in the townships, the hopes and fears, the aspirations and frustrations of the people found their expression in the accompanying literary renaissance. The Black Consciousness poets were student leaders, political activists, persecuted militants, and their sympathizers. They wrote to 'conscientize' the people with whom they lived. They also wrote to define their new-found cultural identity and political consciousness. Their words were clear and stark and their images burning with passion. The poetry was that of young Blacks announcing themselves and whom they would serve. Sometimes it became a special kind of pamphleteering, defining and defying the enemy and inspiring the people. There was nothing obscure in the poetic vocabulary, nothing blurred or cloudy in the imagery. Yet in the most inspired moments of this poetry, in the hands of its ablest exponents such as Serote and Sepamla, there is a vision. This vision is not of a romantic, numinous world but a concrete one, entirely realizable. Beyond the political aspirations expressed in the poems, the final vision is of a humanity liberated from all oppression and exploitation.

Social conditions in South Africa prevent Black writers from becoming professional poets; the poets wrote in their spare time. 'With us South African Blacks engaged in writing,' Mafika Gwala explains, 'so much time goes to other more pressing issues - whereby writing then becomes a bourgeois luxury and artistic expression takes on other forms. In our situation it is the moment NOW that dictates. Just as concerned painters may at some time or stage be forced to do posters for the struggle, writers may have to do pamphleteering, scrawl graffiti and do plain propaganda poetry.'<sup>2</sup> Most of the work of the new poets was written on the inspiration of the moment to be recited in public, so that it exhibited oral traits in the form of the people's speech habits. 'Read-poetry is for the people,' wrote Dumakude kaNdlovu, one of the exponents of the new poetry. 'It gives them a message to take

home. It is simpler than written poetry so that even the layman can understand it.'<sup>3</sup> The tradition is to declaim from the heart, in the manner of traditional izibongo or lithoko, at public meetings, church services, funerals, weddings, parties, concerts, and other social, religious, and political functions. There is no barrier which separates the new poetry from the social and political reality. The words of the Black Consciousness poets are as solid as their objectives: to build a new country and finish with the exploitation of man by man. They are socially and politically committed and write with this commitment in mind. They see their poetry as part of the task of creating an orderly, egalitarian society out of the chaos of apartheid South Africa. They are engaged in the recreation of Black dignity and identity.

'It should be stressed that the literature does not concern itself particularly with how these changes are going to be brought about, nor is it necessary that it does so in order to serve as a source of social and political theory. In their expression of preferences for certain outcomes over others, the writers are acting within their roles as recorders, interpreters and especially judges of the society of which they are a part. To the extent that they offer choices and criticisms of social phenomena, their ideas have a clear social and political relevance.'<sup>4</sup> The above statement needs to be qualified to reflect the fact that in the work of Serote and of a few of the more ideologically advanced and revolutionary poets the means of bringing about the envisaged social and political transformation are spelt out. Literature in African society, both traditional and modern, functions as a commentary on public events and personages and on society as a whole. In African society, art has traditionally been functional, and the Black Consciousness poets identify with this tradition. They create poetry based on the ideas, problems, experiences, and aspirations of their people. Their poetry is a communal event and they are the izimbongi come to life. They carry the functions of the izimbongi into the midst of the fractured lives of the prisoners of apartheid. They are the sympathetic observers who voice the hopes and fears, aspirations and frustrations of others. But sometimes they will advise and at a crucial juncture they will advocate

action. They look for the continuities hidden under the oppressed face of the land.

The leading poets of the Black Consciousness era in South Africa, Mongane Serote and Sipho Sepamla, are also the most representative poets of the period. Their concerns are personal, social, cultural, economic, and political. Both reflect the preoccupations of the period, as derived from Black Consciousness: the political and cultural reawakening of the Black community after Sharpeville, the rejection of servility and protégé mentality, the need to foster Black solidarity, the repudiation of the social cannibalism and fratricide that are prevalent in the Black community, and the non-acceptance of Bantustans and other apartheid institutions. The Soweto era and its attendant problems is the culminating point of their work. Both address themselves primarily to Blacks, as reflected in the oral tone and other stylistic features of their poetry. However, their political creeds have developed in different directions: Serote's towards advocating a military solution as the only realistic option left for Blacks and Sepamla's towards an intensification of his call for reconciliation before the racial situation explodes. Despite this difference of emphasis in their work, both entertain a similar vision they share with members of their community: a vision of the common brotherhood of man, of the restoration of the land and the rights of Black people in South Africa, and of the recognition of the dignity and the humanity of every South African irrespective of race, class, or creed.



APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH MONGANE SEROTE

Mongane Wally Serote and I first conceived of this interview in April 1979 for my weekly programme of contemporary African literature, BOOKSHELF, which I had started the previous month for Radio Botswana. For various reasons, we were compelled to drop the idea of broadcasting the interview. When I later embarked on my research on the poets of the Black Consciousness era, we revived the project by correspondence. In January 1980 he sent me his responses, in written form, to my original questions.

Can you tell us something about your life history: about when and where you were born, where you grew up, what it was like there, and about your educational background and work experience in general?

Serote: I was born in Sophiatown in 1944. I know very little about that Township. My parents moved out of it to Alexandra when I was still a small boy. Vaguely, I seem to remember that it was built like Alexandra, that is, there were lots of shacks which were packed in one yard and spread throughout Sophiatown. Sophiatown, like most old townships in South Africa, was erased, I think around 1956 or so, by the Group Areas Act. That is, police dogs, batons and guns and bulldozers were used to force people out of it. The people left Sophiatown at gunpoint. The story of Alexandra, that is, the story which made and still makes the young who come out of there, begins for me when I began to suspect that it would seem that Alexandra was not meant for people to live in. I do not come from a poor family. I cannot say, though, that I come from a rich family. But my parents did make a home for us, their children, which enabled me to see that other people were worse off than us. Most people in Alexandra are very poor indeed. That and also the fact that Alexandra is one of those Townships in South Africa which has a long history of political battle. My grandfather by belonging to something called the Alexandra Residents

committee or something like that, dropped cues for us the children about that Township. That committee was fighting to have toilets, dust bins, water taps and decent streets for Alexandra. I remember that most times my grandfather was with other old men and women, talking about how to fight. They stayed for hours at my grandfather's house, talking and then going out to fight. Later, when my grandfather died, my grandmother took over and started fighting together with the other old people. By the time I went through primary education, Alexandra had fought through the bus boycott, the potato boycott, cigarette boycott (I think people were not smoking Lexington), and what that means is that tanks or rather saracens, guns, and at times mounted police invaded Alexandra. There was the boycott against Bantu education, which affected our schooling, and made us come face to face with the police, their ranks and guns and all. I was going through primary education then. By the time I reached high school, the country had gone through an intense political action, which exploded in Sharpeville. Like many children in South Africa, I struggled through high school. Bantu education is bad, it is not a system of education which prepares children for becoming educated adults; first, it is an education system systematised to set traps and cheat and then produce frustrated semi-literate adults. Secondly, schooling is made impossible for the majority of the people. Everything is made, deliberately so, very difficult for any black child to get an education. That there are doctors and lawyers, and teachers, priests etc. who come out of this education, is nothing else but dedication and extreme hard work on the part of the people; you can't put the people down. That is my background, that is the background of children in South Africa, black children. I ducked going into industry. I do not know how I did it, but ended up putting hours and hours behind the typewriter. You must remember that I was trying to learn English while writing. I was also discovering thought processes. I started writing, by trying my hand very seriously, on a thriller, which was confiscated by a Catholic priest from me in Lesotho, who said I was wasting my school time. I was in form one then, and that is a long time ago.

When and How did you first start writing poetry?

Serote: I started writing poetry when I was in form three. The way I started to write it was to write it. I don't know what happened to the manuscripts.

Can one talk of any influences upon your poetry, say, from other established poets?

Serote: I do not really know who influenced me. I read a lot though, a great deal, and I read almost everything I came across. I think I was beginning to be selective in my reading when I started reading Classic. That is in the sixties.

Some Black South African writers have complained about the lack of avenues for publication for Black writers in South Africa. Perhaps you would like to comment on that? How did you first come to publish your work?

Serote: Publishing is a problem for Black writers in South Africa. That is, distribution is a problem. Publishing houses are owned by whites, and whites in South Africa have no way of knowing that Blacks can write books. That is, blacks are inferior, period. Whites believe that. So how can a black write a book? Then came the period when those who thought about publishing black writers stopped there, they just thought about it, but then, it would be bad for business, because, books by blacks ran the risk of being banned. They would be banned. The Government in South Africa is mad. Then it became fashionable, and financially nice to publish blacks. That is when I started looking for a publisher. My first publisher was Renoster books. Then came Ad Donker publishers.

When your work first came to the notice of the public, how were you received, first, by Black readers and, secondly, by white critics?

Serote: White critics called me a Black Consciousness poet. Black people said now and then, they think I should write some more.

Other Black South African writers, among them Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele, have expressed the view that Blacks in South Africa live under conditions of such extreme

deprivation that the realization of their fullest potential as artists, academics etc. must necessarily be curtailed by the adverse conditions under which they live. Would you say while writing from inside South Africa itself you ever experienced any such constraints upon your development as a poet?

Serote: My first book Yakhal' inkomo, which is really a selection from many many poems or even words collected together purporting to be poems, was a real struggle to eventually put between two covers as it appears now. There was the queen's language. It was a problem. There was the idea that I was writing poetry, which is what? I struggled through. Then there is the grievous fact: I am a South African, a black, that is oppressed, repressed, exploited. All doors shut. The room you are in is pitch dark. Some people died before they could go through the door which leads to prison, poverty and madness. And those who go through the door, it is not because they are more intelligent than those who died, it is only because they learn from the dead, and climb on them to open the door.

As a writer who has lived inside and outside South Africa, what would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of writing from within South Africa itself and writing from exile?

Serote: An artist, like everybody else, must live in their country, that is not a privilege. If they leave, they should come back. So you can't talk about advantages and disadvantages. It is like saying which way is best to burn, on the stove or inside?

What subject(s) would you say your poetry, to date, has been concerned with? Secondly, do you write with any specific objective in mind, I mean, is there anything you feel your poetry ought to accomplish?

Serote: I want to be an honest and good writer. Everything about the life of where I come from is my subject. I come from an oppressed and toiling people, that is, I come from among fighters against oppression and for a happy life and peace. I hope that says something about my writing. When I

read some of my early books, I realise that I put much emphasis on the effects of oppression and suffering of people. In a sense, Alexandra gave me no choice. But I realise now that, in fact, the fact that people live in Alexandra, for so long, that people have survived the odds of the racist Government, terrible odds, there must be something else; and that is, people have been creative fighters. For some time now I have been trying to find out ways of finding out about that.

You have also written and published some short stories, would you like to say more about those? Can you explain why you chose to write poetry instead of using the short story medium which had engaged many Black writers before you; writers like Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Can Themba and others before your era?

Serote: I do not know why I started writing poetry first, rather than short stories. I don't know. I have written short stories, long time ago, and I seem to go back to them now. La Guma, Mphahlele, Themba and others, play an important role in my cultivating that skill.

When you began to write did the absence of a sustained poetry tradition among Black South Africans writing in English in anyway hinder your development as a poet?

Serote: I had problems writing in English. Who are you writing for when you write in English? So maybe I have never written in English.

Since leaving South Africa you have met many established writers: South African writers in exile, writers of Afro-American extraction and others from Africa in general. Can you name any of these writers who have made an impression on you? What has impressed you about their work?

Serote: There is a man called Kgositsile, a short, thin, fragile man, who, since 1974, has almost destroyed my style of writing. And that is because he is, in my opinion, a very good writer.

How do you see yourself in relation to white writers in general?

Serote: I have neglected that area. It is my grievous fault.

What do you think of the state of creative writing in South Africa today?

Serote: It is very difficult to say. I think the writing standard in the magazine, Staffrider, which most writers are using, is very low. Then you read Call me not a Man, you think a bit about what I said.

Since your arrival in Botswana you have participated in and conducted a few workshops at the University College of Botswana for Batswana writers and teachers. What are your views on the state of literature in Botswana?

Serote: I have heard many people, many, easily good writers from Botswana, say that there is nothing to write about in Botswana; no one must say a thing like that. People live, eat, drink, love, hate, die here, and there is nothing to write about? Some people like Onalenna Selolwane, like Sebotso Molefe, when she is serious, write and continue to write. There is hope.

Recently in Botswana you have been involved in drama under the auspices, first, of Pelandaba Cultural Effort and, now, of MEDU - this of course, was not your first involvement in dramatic activities - would you like to throw more light on the activities of these organizations as well as those in which you were involved in South Africa?

Serote: MEDU Art Ensemble is a cultural group of both South African political exiles and Batswana. Here, while trying to train each other, we are also finding out ways of collective participation in the arts. We have done lots of work - plays, photographs, posters, songs, dances, and we now and then have writers' and drama workshops. We are finding ways of preserving, developing, promoting and unearthing our culture, that it is scientific and popular. We are a young group faced by many many problems. But we work. While in South Africa, I worked a lot in cultural groups, like Mihloti Black Theatre, Music, Drama, Art, Literature Institute and South African Black Theatre Union, all of which were founded in the Black community.

Is there any work of a creative nature, a novel, perhaps, upon which you are currently working?

Serote: I am presently working on a novel and short stories.

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