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## My life and my writing

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## My life and my writing

### Abstract

I find, writing about myself, does not come easily. Addressing the world about the little swirls of little events that loosely gather, tangle and disentangle – in short, my life, seems of very doubtful consequence. When at birth I was released into this motion of swirling little events my life was also set on rails and predetermined – free within the confines of turbulent change in South Africa. It was to take another thirty years for me to break loose, to burn the bridges, to leave South Africa and go into exile.

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I was born in the twilight of a spring September morning in rural Cabazi in South Africa, fifty three years ago. It had been a difficult struggle for both my mother and me, I am told. On the night of the second day, my grandfather, who knew the white doctor personally, had managed to persuade him to venture into the black reserve, by night, to save the life of his elder daughter and her unborn child. And so he did. I have often wondered at the nature of the relationship between these two men, Dr Bowen and Nyoni Cele, a black and a white, a professional and a peasant. I never understood it, even though I saw quite a bit of it when I grew up, a sickly child, who often visited the only doctor around. But to go back to that September dawn, I understand the doctor emerged from my grandmother's room (the labour room) and stared straight ahead, past my grandfather's questioning eyes (a reluctant friend across the many barriers) and gave a sideways nod, to indicate his success. In response to the taciturn doctor, my grandfather swung round with no acknowledging fawning smile. He quickened his steps as he tore the silent dawn with thunderous family poetry recitations, recalling the ancestors, generations of them, reporting my arrival and thanking each one and all for my birth. He then switched back to the living, starting with my mother, thanking her for my safe delivery and welcoming me as he went round encircling the whole homestead. He had done it with each one of his grandchildren and was to do it with many others who followed. Needless to say, the doctor was forced to turn around enthralled and watch, for the first time perhaps, the practitioner of the authentic African

literary expression. At the end of the performance my grandfather stopped next to the car and, staring the doctor in the eye, he murmured words of gratitude, a man to his equal. He then walked quietly to end the vigil of the two nights in his room in deep sleep. Dr Bowen drove off. He had just witnessed an age old tradition.

Poetry for us remains the only expression that translates and informs all occasions. It is performed to honour kings, to welcome newly born babies, and to rock them to their sleep. It is sung at weddings, at funerals and at war. It even heralds peace. I have vivid memories of peace offerings between my mother and my grandmother. Often my mother would be the first to relent. And when she did, she would approach the 'great house' and a hundred yards from the door she would start reciting the maternal family line first, followed by the paternal line, pass the doorway without stopping, walking in measured steps, another hundred yards to the end of the yard, turn back again and finally walk in. By the time she would sit down, still reciting, my grandmother would be nodding in concurrence and that would mark the end of the discord.

Over and above this general heritage, I had the fortune of being born into a family of story tellers. And my great-grandmother was a great composer of family poetry, for in my traditional society every child has personal poetry which will identify them even as adults within the family. Some of course, is composed in youth or upon achievement. My great grandmother was one of many wives and the least loved. She gave of her burgeoning spirits in compositions to her children — her three sons and one daughter. Her poetry reveals, in achingly beautiful words the depths of her pain and her desperate loneliness. Her only comfort must have been her children.

Unfortunately, this great literary tradition has been steadily subverted with the introduction of the scripted form of literature. The script has tended to divide society into the educated élite and the uneducated mass of the people. In this way it has become a source of alienation. But the reasons for the literary inhibitions do not lie with the script alone. We, in South Africa, have suffered an even greater cultural dislocation in our dismembered societies in the service of industrial development. People were bludgeoned into the cities with no alternative but to graft a new culture, a patchwork of the old, the new and the borrowed — a people forced, in the end, to frown upon their former selves, their heritage and their past. The migratory system in Apartheid South Africa has altered beyond recognition the structures of our societies. This has particularly affected the position of women, who traditionally played a very prominent part in the transmission of oral literature. Left alone in the

country areas, while their men work in far away cities, they are cut off from the cultural adaptations that their men make in the cities; they are left to hobble along, single-handed, transmitting the old traditions. Never has a system created such hardened divisions between men and women. In other words, the cultural mode in which literary life prospered has been splintered. The traditional literary forms have been replaced by the pale culture of the cities.

For me, having been brought up in the country, I had enjoyed a life that approximated the 'real thing' much more than the young people from the cities, whom I was later to meet in boarding schools and colleges. It was here that I slowly sensed the silent disapproval of the barefoot life-style and art that was part of my whole way of life. I was in the majority but I endured the status of a minority power which was loaded on the side of those who had made strides away from tradition. I felt even then that the whole ethos of the school projected more the borrowed culture of the city girls. I enjoyed learning in school, but I soon felt that I was caught up in a tug of warring cultures. Seeing myself through the eyes of others, I began to feel a disfigurement of outlook, a mutilation within. The conflict persisted even against the most arduous efforts to strike a balance. Purity of culture may not be possible anywhere nor be the ideal, but emotional conflict about one's practice of a culture, be it pure or not, can result in hybrid art. That is how I feel about my writing at times.

But this was not the last time I was to look at myself as others saw me. My father had died when I was barely eight. I was the first in a family of four. My mother was determined to have us all educated, regardless of sex. She was the sole bread winner of the family and the strain of paying for books, fees, stationery, fares was evident to all. The public openly condemned us, girls, who 'demanded' the same privileges as boys. In a family where mother had never made us aware of the preferences, the remarks were not only hurtful, but created a throbbing consciousness of one's burdensome value. Soon I began to feel that as a first born girl in the family it was best to leave school and let others get the opportunity. Girls in any society are seldom ever in the minority — yet I felt strongly marginalised because I was a girl. This was further exacerbated when I got to University — with a ratio of thirty five women students to five hundred men in those days. In some classes the preference given to male students was disarming. We joked about it, but we felt it keenly because at high school we had enjoyed equality of attention in our girls' school. At University there was sometimes the feeling of doing things on sufferance. It was as if black men could be understood to desire to filch away for

themselves some high education; but the black women — what need had they? Education was a preserve. To those who ventured close enough there were clear signals warning us what we could or could not take. Flashed in neon brightness were the professions such as teaching and nursing. Beyond that, on sufferance you could be admitted to medical or Law schools at some white Universities (later there was established a medical school for black people).

Writing or jobs in the media were not only unavailable but were clearly 'dangerous' unless the writers intuitively kept away from serious areas of journalism and confined themselves to popular writing. Writing had always been a fascination for me, but I had accepted earlier on that it was beyond bounds. I can even say I accepted it without bitterness. I convinced myself that it was not possible and that no one would have any interest at all in what I could say — not the men, not the white people, and not even the other women, for years of conditioning had taught us that only men have a voice and are worth listening to. This, over and above the intolerance engendered by Apartheid South Africa in all spheres of life. That tutored feeling of 'less-worthiness' has been a crippling factor in all my creative thinking. I wrote a number of articles and half-finished books which I discarded, burned as refuse each time we packed our bags for a new destination in our mobile exiled years.

When I came to Great Britain I felt very much alone — a minority of one against the world. In a strange way this isolation removed the social factor from my life. For a short while the majority/minority scale was discounted in my social calculation. Yet this social condition also conferred a beautiful feeling of release. For the first time I was just me. I wrote what I liked. Not that Britain conferred this on me — it was a temporary mental adjustment I made to my solitude. Up until then my life had been lived behind barriers and I had been demeaned even when I had been in the majority. In the minority/majority ratio I had accepted that it is not numbers that count; it is power. In this sea-saw, I had been permanently high on the powerless end. In Great Britain I was not only powerless but I was in the minority for the first time. And up to now, I am very much a member of this minority and I find a lot of my energy is consumed in the effort to gain admission into the greater society. I am back where I started.