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Can Themba: The Legacy of a South African Writer

Abstract. The article seeks to explore the world of Can Themba, a foremost literary figure during the era of apartheid. Through an examination of a selection of his short stories we realise that writers often found sub-textual ways of confronting that pernicious system. This article argues that Themba did just that. Finally it also seeks to make problematic issues of labelling and stereotyping.

Key words: apartheid, township, myopic, allegorical, cultural morality, Tsotsi.

This article hopes to perhaps revive an interest in Can Themba's writing. To do this it explores and examines Can Themba's short stories with particular reference to 'Mob Passion', 'Passionate Stranger', 'The Dube Train', 'Forbidden Love', and 'The Will To Die'. These stories exemplify the veneer of 'normality' propagated by a regime intent on a systemic cultural hegemony, where the lives of swathes of people were usurped at the expense of privileging the few.

By definition a work of art eschews superficial and inconsequential criticism. Instead, its literary significance arises in many diverse contexts. A work of fiction is no different. For any literary work to be meaningful to an audience it not only has to be appreciated in terms of its entertainment value but perhaps of greater import is its place in a contextual literary milieu. Can Themba's work suggests a rebuttal of a system (of apartheid) that had become so entrenched in the social and individual mores of that society, that it had become the norm and therefore unproblematic. Through an analysis of some of his short stories we see his narratives exploring deeply intertwined nuances of the apartheid system. We also begin to understand that they also demonstrate an ideological shift from the tacit acceptance (of apartheid norms) to a more symbolically oriented critique of the system. We as audience enjoy his engaging storytelling and then also begin to ponder their sub-textual revelations.

The name Can Themba means something to the 'Drum generation'. In the fifties and sixties he exemplified the easy flowing literary style of the intellectualized 'township' individual who wrote under apartheid. He weaved into his writing closely observed snapshots of life under siege but not at the expense of satire and comedic revelation. He was as Achebe once remarked a person who

‘moved and had their being in society’. Achebe clearly meant that Can Themba’s skill as an author was predicated on an intricate knowledge of the nuances of township life where shebeens³ presented themselves as social havens to the foraging street-wise youths. His talents were apparent to all in that era especially the way in which his vividly described characters were often upstaged by his currency of ironic twists.

He was born Daniel Canadoise D’orsay in Marabad South Africa in 1924. He graduated with a first class degree in English from Fort Hare University in 1947. He was a person who lived his life to the full in a landscape where the shebeens, with their infusion of township jazz, informed his cultural horizons. He was to exploit this immersion by writing short stories for *Drum* magazine. It presented him with a vehicle to exploit his talents and in particular, his representations of township life. Themba was of course part of that life himself since he drew his characterizations from those with whom he interacted. Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, he fell prey to the scourge of alcoholism that led him to be sacked as Assistant Editor of *Drum* in 1959. Thereafter he went into voluntary exile in Swaziland in 1963 where he worked both as a teacher and writer. In 1966 he was labelled as a ‘statutory communist’ under South Africa’s infamous Suppression of Communism Amendment act. His writing as a result became proscribed in South Africa. He died in 1967 from cardiac failure.

In every story we see Themba’s characters interplay their moments of literary ‘humanity’ at differing junctures of their everyday lives in their apartheid conceived ‘townships’, that in turn served as artifices of social division, repression and control.

We also suggest that an analysis of Themba’s works reveal a deeper structure intertwined with intimations of Fanon’s ‘fictionality’⁴. Although his characters display universal norms and mores they arguably serve as symbolic representations of Themba’s denunciation of apartheid.

In ‘Mob passion’ he looks at a world of fratricidal terror. Whereas in ‘Passionate Stranger’ the minutiae of ordinary lives are laid bare. He brings us down to earth in ‘The Dube Train’ where he excels. His allegorical style demonizing (symbolically) the South African state as it then was. It is in this story where the ‘unmasking’ of one of its main characters, the ‘Hulk’ occurs and where Themba ensures that he (the ‘Hulk’) becomes a symbol of people power. In ‘Forbidden love’ he demonstrates his awareness of social conflict engendered by a process of stereo-typing and labelling. Finally as Foxy in ‘The Will To Die’ he portrays himself.

‘Mob Passion’ was his prize winning short story and earned him fifty pounds from *Drum* magazine. It has the overtones of a favourite Shakespearean tragedy; *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the setting of the story typifies Themba’s chosen location; that of the township. Crime is rife and the internecine feuding represents the inward violence adopted by people in despair. Despite Themba’s depiction of gang related crime and violence he engages his audience in a manner that elicits sympathy for his characters.

3 Shebeen; loosely approximating an informal place, often a house, where alcohol is sold

4 Fanon 1967. *Black Skin. White Masks*. New York: Grove Press

The very beginning of 'Mob Passion' sets the focus of the story. The writer immediately engages his audience by suggesting the implicit fear engendered by the railway station:

They were heaving and pressing, elbows in faces, bundles bursting, weak ones kneaded. Even at the opposite side people were balancing precariously to escape being shoved off the platform. Here and there deft fingers were exploring unwary pockets. **Themba:7**

This is South Africa in the raw.

Themba's characterizations are significant in the story and we are witnesses to his attempt to 'normalize' his characters under the abnormality of the apartheid system. He says of his main character:

Linga was a tall, slender fellow, more man than boy. He was not particularly handsome but he had those tense eyes of the young student who was ever innerly protesting against some wrong or other. **Themba:7**

Keeping in mind that this was Can Themba's first significant short story we see his Romeo and Juliet theme dominating a story that is suffused with the violence of the township. Juliet (Mapula) attempts to save Linga (Romeo) from her uncle Alpheus who represents the 'aggrieved' party. She in turn turns on her uncle and axes him:

it sank into his neck and down he went. She stepped on his chest and pulled out the axe.....the she saw the mangled body of the man she loved and her nerve snapped. The axe slipped from her hand and she dropped on Linga's body, crying piteously. **Themba:16**

The 'impossible' love story is played out in Themba's Shakespearean theme where the only winner is the apartheid system that encourages inter-ethnic violence and killing.

'Passionate Stranger' is another important story of Themba's that addresses the issue of outdated ethnic traditions that seem to prevail in modern society. Compared to 'Mob Passion' it is written in a light and humorous style whilst portraying a serious dislocation between a father and his daughter.

In this story Themba 'escapes' from the overwhelming inflictions of the apartheid era by providing his audience with both humour and passion. The male protagonist is Reginald Tshayi who meets the sister (Ellen) of his friend Osbourne under circumstances where he is branded a 'tsotsi'. Ellen had already been promised to the son of a chief in an arranged forthcoming marriage. However it was love at first sight.

They lay in each other's arms long and still,.....The first storm of passion spent a great peace descended on them as soul met soul in perfect unity. **Themba:3**

However her father wants her to adhere to his wishes. Eventually she confronts the chief's representatives and convinces them of her love for another. The marriage is called off and we the audience realize that Ellen's defiance stands both as a motif and as a symbol of her individuality and resistance to an outmoded (apartheid) system.

The 'Dube Train' is another of Can Themba's stories brim full of symbolic representations of the South African state in the '50's. His allegorical style, in this story aptly demonizes a myopic and oligarchic South Africa. His description of the main character the 'Hulk' conjures up visions of a cartoon-like depiction of a stereo-typical figure with concomitant exaggerated features:

The neck was thick and corded, and the enormous chest was a live barrel that heaved back and forth.

Themba: 150

The story opens with a description of a new day. Themba himself seems to portray the narrator who feels 'rotten' in a depressing world. His forthcoming train journey provided no respite from his state of mind. The train journey itself merely reinforces his depressive world view where he says:

'congested trains filled with sour-smelling humanity'. **Themba:149**

Through Themba's eyes we see life as a journey that has to be undertaken but where the road is never quite certain and its *raison d'être* unclear.

It is in a third class carriage that the narrator awaits the journey and recognizes his good fortune in boarding the train at all! Themba's description of the carriage parallels the narrator's mood. One of the doors is obviously broken and in disrepair just as the carriage windows are. Here again Themba uses his close descriptions in an allegorical fashion. The windows are 'paneless' and depict moral servitude.

The narrator comments on his fellow passengers by observing their normality. He allows his readers to wallow in their misconceptions and to believe that this particular journey will be nothing out of the ordinary. The way in which the *tsotsi* boards the train is particularly well observed.

he turned nonchalantly and tripped along backwards towards an open door. It amazed me how these boys know exactly where the edge of the platform comes when they run like that backwards. **Themba:150**

This *tsotsi* (thug) is the central focus of the story and demands our attention since he arguably exemplifies the thuggery of apartheid and is in turn its creation in all its base crudity. He is drawn from Themba's own experience of the under-class where the *tsotsi*'s de-humanized acts (on the train) complement the systemic 'flogging' of the population by the ruling elite.

In the story itself, Themba introduces the enormous figure of the 'Hulk' who seems to symbolically represent the oppressed masses of South Africa. However it is the *tsotsi* to whom Themba invests with such malignance so that we as the audience are able to see in him, the socialized manifestations of the worst excesses of the system. The *tsotsi* has no respect for humanity and reifies his fellow humans. On boarding the train he attempts to engage a young woman who had been 'ducking' him. He swaggers around with an uninhibited nonchalance showing his contempt for womanhood. He refers to the woman as 'rubberneck' with a fully fledged disdain. This is his form of address although she had not met or seen her before. She, is however fully aware of his callousness and his raw and obscene language. Her protestations lead to a vicious slap that sends her hurtling over the narrator.

The Tsotsi is the crude invention of a system so enshrined in the social and political landscape of apartheid South Africa that at one and the same time it repulses and attracts us; makes us laugh and makes us cry. He is keenly observed by Can Themba as the narrator draws our attention to him via his behaviour towards the young woman in his carriage. The only person to react to this outrage; an old woman says:

Lord, you call yourself men! You poltroons! You let a small ruffian insult you. Fancy, he grabs at a girl in front of you...you might be your daughter.....if there were real men here, they'd pull him off and give him such a leathering he'd never sit down for a week. **Themba:152**

In response the tsotsi hurls vile invective at the woman'. Finally the quiet hulk-like figure responds:

'Hela you street urchin, that woman is your mother'. **Themba:153**

The tsotsi had never been insulted in this manner before. Was he not the 'owner' of the train? Parallels begin to appear at this juncture with the apartheid system. We begin to discern, symbolically, the nature of the tsotsi. His character seems to represent the metaphorical apartheid 'beast' whereas the hulk appears as the embodiment of the pilloried masses under apartheid.

The knife wielding thug lunges at the hulk's jugular without fear. A deflection caused by the train's movement causes him to miss his mark and instead the knife causes a superficial gash across the hulk's chest. He reacts by:

He caught the boy by the upper arm with the left hand and between his legs with the right and lifted him bodily.....The flight went clean through the paneless window... **Themba:153**

Justice prevails and the tsotsi's reign ends among the detritus; the cans, the bottles, the cardboard of a sick, vomiting dying system.

'Forbidden love's' theme sharply differs from the one above. It was published in 1955 and is a good example of one of his favourite themes; love. This time we see lovers across the artificial lines of colour and 'race' as defined and given legal credibility in apartheid South Africa.

Michael is from the 'black' race and Dora is a 'coloured'. Once your 'race' was ascribed in apartheid era South Africa you were provided with a designation. This ascription was not only marked on your identity document but it also affected where you lived, whom you could marry and socialize with and your voting rights. In fact Dora alludes to this when she says:

Why wasn't it I Mike? Why wasn't I dark, instead of fair. Then you might not have been so afraid of my love. **Themba:24**

The divide and rule policy of the apartheid regime ensured that those pigeon-holed and labelled, sometimes arbitrarily, by apartheid driven legislation still absorbed and accepted those divisions as part of their cultural morality. It is this that Themba questions. There is no escape from the pernicious affects of the apartheid regime even where love is concerned. The fear of reprisals

and consequences are aptly described by Themba as the lovers are punished for their crime. However the tale ends with a degree of redemption when the two lovers finally ignore the demands of the regime and stand up for themselves. A victory against apartheid!

The final expose of Themba's writing is in the form of a semi-autobiographical piece entitled 'The Will to Die'. Themba himself is Philip Matauoane a teacher and graduate from Fort Hare (Themba's alma mater). Foxy as Philip is known is a 'runt of a man'⁵ who 'wore clothes that swallowed him'⁶

However when Foxy spoke everyone knew 'that in that unlikely body, resided a live restless brain'

Themba:89

Foxy knows that dissolution and despair of his situation can only end in disaster as he attempts to absorb societal expectations (of him) through marriage, children and drink. Ultimately he pays the final price by being beaten to death by:

'four or five men singing hymns in the sitting room'. **Themba:92**

Themba's suicidal tendencies are exposed in the character of Foxy who represents an intellectual elite who fail to confront the regime head-on and who ultimately prefer the final solution to all one's problems; suicide.

The literary output of Can Themba during the apartheid era in South Africa demonstrates, without doubt, the enormous reservoir of actual and potential talent that went to waste in that era. We feel strongly that literary icons such as Can Themba need to be re-engaged in the process of coming to terms with the massive upheavals caused by the apartheid regime.

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