

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE SYMPOSIUM - GABORONE 1982The Role Of The Black Writer In South African Society

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In assessing the role of the black writer in South Africa, I realise that I shall be saying nothing very new but I hope that I shall at least be saying it somewhat differently. Many have traversed the same ground to the extent that one may rightly ask 'What profiteth it to sermone of it moore'? But we must constantly evaluate and analyse our own position since no situation remains static. As much as our responses differ so also will those of the ruling elite.

The word black has recently in South Africa become a very sensitive one. I am not suggesting sensitivity about it on the part of the white ruling class who, in either case, must have far more pressing problems for them to be sensitive about. I am speaking about sensitivity on the part of the vast majority of the population, the unenfranchised non-citizens who are discriminated against because their skins are not 'white'. In Soweto the word black is used with a feeling of identity and a sense of pride. In the Western Cape it is regarded as reactionary and contrary to the tenets of non-racialism. Without indulging too deeply into the semantics of the argument, I am going to use the term black in its widest possible context, implying that quality most discernible in any individual, his skin colour. So that I shall call black all those in South Africa discriminated against because of the colour of their skin.

Were the whites in South Africa to realise their 'new' dispensation, their effort to create a new order in South African politics, their attempt to bring about a change from white and non-white to black and non-black, were the so-called 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' to become honorary white, it would be interesting to speculate on the implications of such a move. Does it mean that at the stroke of the white authoritarian pen they will cease to be black, just as the majority of people in that country, at the stroke of the white authoritarian pen ceased to be South Africans and were labelled foreigners in the land of their birth?

Any true South African strives towards the creation and realisation of a non-racial democracy where discrimination on grounds

of colour, religion, sex, ethnicity will be outlawed. We might still be some distance from realising this. But what in the meanwhile is and should be the role of the black writer in a society which has laws which discriminate against him as a person? Has he a special function which differs from that of the discriminated-against non-writer?

At a conference organized by the African-Scandinavian Society in Stockholm during February, 1967, the theme was 'The Writer in Modern Africa'. One of the topics which came up for discussion was the role that the African writer should play in the affairs of his country. Wole Soyinka said:

Poets have lately taken to gun-running and writers are heard of holding up radio stations. In several independent states the writer is part of some underground movement; one coup at least in Africa is reputed to have involved a novelist and a poet.

There was much discussion about such an activist interpretation of the writer's role which, in fairness, Soyinka had merely made in passing. There were those who felt that the writer must physically involve himself in bringing about change and others who felt that physical involvement was outside the writer's orbit. Some felt that the writer owes allegiance to liberatory movements and others felt his allegiance was to the republic of letters.

The black South African writer in particular came under heavy fire from the activist school who asked somewhat petulantly:

What is the South African writer doing for himself? A little less talking and protest and a bit more action, especially from the so-called exiles might be to the point.

To this Soyinka replied, voicing the opinion of many, that he saw that kind of remark as one which proves very clearly that the easiest solution to any problem is to maintain complete ignorance of it.

If one were to see these different viewpoints in the South African context, there would be those who see the writer as a black South African who is also a writer and others who see him as a writer who is also a black South African. It then becomes a matter of emphasis. Is he first and foremost a black or a writer?

I would see him as both with emphasis on both the black and the writer. I consider his being a black writer to be as important as his being a black south African. Were I to call him merely a writer as opposed to a black writer I would be ignoring an additional dimension. If I were to call him a black writer as opposed to a black South African writer I would be ignoring an extra dimension.

I believe that he owes an allegiance both to his writing and his society, to his craft and to his humanity. He is everyman but has the attribute that he is an articulate everyman. He has skills whereby he is able to translate the commonplace into words in such a way that he gives a new meaning and a new direction to it. His socio-political experiences are by no means unique. His ability to translate and transliterate those experiences into words, is unique. And thus he must realise what his special function is just as a plumber must recognise his, and the milkman and the mechanic. It was Martin Luther King who said (I am quoting from memory) that if you are a garbage collector it is your duty to become the best garbage collector that ever was. You must create a poetry out of garbage collecting.

I do not hold a brief for those who see the writer's role as too special a one. This tends to smack of elitism as abhorrent as academic snobbery or indeed racial and class arrogance. But unfortunately I am here speaking as a writer about writing, so will restrict myself to the writer's role as I see it without adding any mystique to his function or elevation to his position.

If the black South African writer could be split into several parts one might say that this part of him must write and that part must indulge in gun-running and that other part must address mass meetings and so on. But we cannot split him up. Like any other person he is a complex unity fulfilling several functions as they affect him. His role is that of any other person in a similar position but in his case that which he is best able to do is to write. That is his special function but not necessarily his only function.

What then should be the purpose of his writing? Can he abstract himself from the realities he finds surrounding

him and concentrate on describing universalities such as love, hate, beauty and ugliness? If he ignores the society in which he functions and ignores the problems of that society, is he not open to the accusation that he has abdicated from his responsibility as a human and concentrated on his art? We know that Jane Austen wrote novels during the Napoleonic Wars without a single reference to them. But can the black South African writer afford that kind of abstraction given the realities of being black in South Africa? Can he indulge in description of love, hate, beauty and ugliness when, as Aime Cesaire wrote:

As there are hyena-men and panther-men
 so I shall be a Jew man
 a Kaffir man
 a Hindu-from-Calcutta man
 a Man-from-Harlem-who-hasn't-got-the-vote.?

If I argue that the black South African writer cannot fully abstract himself it may be said that I am therefore prescribing a special role to him. No, I am not prescribing any special role to him. But the position he finds himself in, does; and so does the exigencies of the situation in which he functions. So that although he will certainly write about love, hate, beauty and ugliness, he must explore how they function in his peculiar society. He must explore his environment and if it is a discriminatory environment he must explore the origins, effect and consequences of that discrimination. It cannot be otherwise. Once he does so, he is forced to pass value judgements on his society and explore how it affects him and how it ought to affect him.

The effect of South African society on any individual, especially the black man, is a very real one. Waterloo was thousands of miles and centuries removed from the quiet of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey. But Soweto, Guguletu and Bonteheuwel are in and around us and are happening to us at this very moment.

The black writer cannot therefore create and at the same time ignore the realities of the situation surrounding him. Of course he will occupy himself with other functions; he can fornicate, address mass meetings or work in his garden, but that which makes him a writer compels him to do what he

can do best, and that is to write. And this affects not only what he writes but how he writes. It might sound somewhat pretentious but the writer does owe allegiance to what Lewis Nkosi referred to as the republic of letters. No matter how urgent the message he must state it as best he can. He must bring his skills and craft to bear on his subject matter. The medium is just as important as the message.

He uses his writing to create and maintain a climate within which he hopes meaningful change will become effective. He uses his writing in order to give new dimensions to the past since the past is relevant to interpret the present in order to realise the future. Part of the colonialising process is to deny a subject people access to their past either by cutting them off from it or by making them ashamed of it. The rulers then set up their own so-called 'achievements' as yardsticks so that literature even for blacks must be measured against Shakespeare or Shaw or van Wyk Louw or Dirk Opperman. Those works coming from the oppressed are considered quaint, folksy or at the most of interest to anthropologists. They certainly do not warrant detailed study at schools or universities. The motivation behind ruling class thinking appears to be literary but is thinly disguised cultural and political domination. Up to recently black literature in South Africa was considered inconsequential and it is only now that writers like Achebe have managed to slip into syllabuses as an ethnic sop. One must understand the arrogance of white attitudes of the past in order to interpret their arrogance of the present.

And why should the present be interpreted? It is very true that a people wishing to emancipate itself must understand the methods of its own oppression. This one may attempt to understand through debate, discussion, pamphleteering and propagandising. But how necessary is it to tell an oppressed people about its oppression? Surely there is a greater need to tell them about the motives behind their oppression and then to give shape and direction to their determination to rid themselves of that yoke. The role of the writer is to expose ruling class motives and give shape and direction

for the future. Through his art he is able to bring an immediacy and intimacy to problems to the extent that no pamphlet can achieve.

The history books may tell us what District Six was like but there is greater immediacy when one is able to identify with Alex la Guma's Michael Adonis. The sociology books may tell us about pre-independence Lagos but there is greater immediacy when one is able to identify with Chinua Achebe's Obi Okonkwo. The political books may tell us about Malay Camp in Johannesburg but there is greater immediacy when one is able to identify with Peter Abrahams' Xuma. And through this personalising of history, sociology and politics, it is easier and less traumatic for the individual to understand and analyse his own position in his own society through the fictionalised though real experiences of others. One must interpret the realities of the present in order to realise the future.

And what is the future that should be realised? Is it really the function of the black writer to prescribe direction? Indeed he has as much right as any to do so and define his objectives and how to realise them. But he does this through his writing and will continue to assess, interpret and prophecy until he will be able to say with conviction, free at last. And even after that time when he will have other problems to face and other battles to fight.

The writer therefore does not only create literature but creates literature in a particular climate. If that climate is not conducive to his realisation of himself as a human being then he must, through his art, try to change that society. To do so he must not only have a viewpoint but also a vision. It is correct to state that 'where there is no vision the people perish'. It is the writer's duty to give direction towards the realisation of that vision. If he restricts himself to his viewpoint he could skate perilously near to outright propaganda and dogma. He might be sacrificing how it must be said for what must be said and not realise that the two are indistinguishable. If he confines himself to a viewpoint, his creativity must suffer. Its lifespan will be restricted and its effect limited. But Achebe has

shown that one can marry content and style and still have vision. And so has Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Mongo Beti and Léopold Senghor and the long line of black writers who have explored the past, the present and the future. In the process they have never lost sight of the vision splendid. One must realise the future in order to interpret the present and understand the past.

Let me conclude by reaffirming my belief that the writer has many functions and the black South African writer, whether he wishes so or not, many additional functions. Through his art and his personalising of individual experience he will show his society what it was, what it is and what it is heading towards. Let me end by quoting from that great South African poet, Arthur Nortje, who before his tragic and untimely death, realised fully the complexity of functions facing all of us interested in making of South Africa the land it ought to be.

for some of us must storm the castles
some define the happenings.

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