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SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE - A LITERATURE OF COMMITMENT

(9.6.85)

What do we understand by women's literature?

In general it is understood to include the literary production by women writers. But can we also identify a specific women's content, a female voice reflecting women's specific experiences and a female way of writing, within women's literature?

Can we speak of a specific commitment and contribution of the female writer? And how does this relate to the South African situation of apartheid and colonialism which has produced a rotten, distorted culture of oppression? Is there a female voice in the literature committed to create a culture of resistance, protest and challenge?

Questions which are of relevance to female and male writers alike, and to all of us concerned with the culture of the other South Africa:

"South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white..."

"Only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief..."

"Where the doors of learning and of culture shall be opened!"

This paper, written by concerned outsiders from the Dutch Anti Apartheid Movement, is an attempt to contribute to a discussion on South African women's literature by raising some of the issues which are at stake.

A literature of commitment

I thought of you comrade
Daring the enemy underground
In the struggles' workshops
There making history flourish
Right there where the enemy's hatchet
Hovers over those who dream
Then step by step build
The greatness of man
Amid the ashes fertilizing spring...

I thought of you
In the theatre of war
Which all must enter
To find exits to life
Especially because when it broadcasts
And scatters us apart
It also defines precisely
To bind us closer

. Faces of commitment, Lindiwe Mabuza.

Drama

Dike, Fatima

The Sacrifice of Kreli, in Theatre One, ed. by S. Gray, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1978.

The First South African, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1979.

Mhlope, Gcina

Have you seen Zandile?

Tlali, Miriam

Crimen Injuria, 1986.

Anthologies

Brink, André and Coetzee, J.M. (eds.)

A Land Apart, A South African Reader, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1986. Contributions from Nadine Gordimer, Gcina Mhlope, Sheila Roberts, Carol Hermer/Maria Tholo and a number of women writers in Afrikaans.

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Like all South African cultural workers, writers are facing the challenge of creating a literature that voices the experiences, wishes and aspirations of the masses of the South African people. Inevitably this is a political choice and commitment to reject apartheid's culture of death and fear, and to challenge the distorted cultural identities based on racism and tribalism which colonialism and apartheid have created.

The regime tries by all means to silence that literature which confronts the state and political reality. Writers have been victims of censorship, bannings and have been forced to go into exile. Obviously black South African writers have been the subject of repressive measures more often and more harshly than their white colleagues.

This however is not solely the responsibility of the South African state, literature reviewers have to be blamed as well. A lot of South African literature, in particular that produced by black writers, is accused of political pamphleteering and of lacking any literary aesthetic value. The underlying premise is that politics reduces the status and purity of literature. Many reviewers judge by so-called eternal aesthetic criteria. Literature is valued for its 'universality', dealing with universal human issues, rather than with the specific issues of apartheid society.

This radical division between the internal, aesthetic properties of literature and the external forces of history and politics serves particular political interests. The effect is that a lot of South African literature has been made invisible and is ignored, not known by the international community indeed and even sometimes not known by the national South African community at home.

Few works of black South African writers have been translated into other languages. In turn they are even accused of having no relevance to their own people since they use English as a medium of expression. Those in exile are told to be living too far apart from the home front to be able to respond in a relevant way through their creative work. Yet at the same time they are not accepted as sensible writers about issues

within the exile societies where they are forced to live and work.

The situation of war in South Africa demands from all to take side in the conflict, and no exception can be made to take position for cultural workers/writers. A commitment to the struggle can be voiced through a literature which mirrors that struggle, a literature which can be used as a weapon in the struggle by arming the people with knowledge, hope, courage and optimism to destroy apartheid.

The female voice of commitment

The answer to the question whether women writers have a specific and different contribution to make in the field of literature is not easy to give.

Intro ✓ The argument that women have a specific role to play in the creation and maintenance of culture, embodies the potential danger of relegating women to a specific domain that is all too often a secondary one. Similar to society in general, where women are overwhelmingly burdened with the responsibility at the domestic front, again it has been argued that women should write about these domestic issues as they have inborn, natural qualities to handle these. This then would be of particular interest for a female audience. The argument in favour of women writers task to describe reality from a woman's perspective can too easily be hijacked by pinning women down on their biology. This in turn has become women's destiny and has given birth to stereotypic notions of the nature of women.

One of the commitments of women writers could be to challenge these stereotypes and myths of the female being. However in order to understand the relationship between women and culture one has to understand the conditions of women, living in the socio-economic reality of South Africa. Culture does not consist of individual, superficial aspects of human life, but has to be understood as the total being and consciousness of people. Culture is both the product of and the reflection of people's interaction with nature as well as with other people. Within that interaction one can identify women's specific conditions.

Selected Bibliography of South African Women's Literature in English

This bibliography contains a selection of South African women's literature, that originally has been written in English. It excludes the non-fictional, sociological and political works of women writers, although the demarcation between literature and socio-political writings is somehow artificial and arbitrary.

The literature is divided in the following categories:

Prose (novels and short stories), Poetry, Drama, Anthologies, (Auto)biographies).

The bibliography concludes with a few relevant titles on literature critique.

Prose: Novels and Short Stories

Altman, Phyllis

The Law of the Vultures, London, 1952.

Bernstein, Hilda

Death is Part of the Process, London, Sinclair Browne, 1983,
London, Grafton Books, 1986.

Fugard, Sheila

The Castaways, 1972.

Rite of Passage, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1976.

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A Guest of Honour, London, Jonathan Cape, 1971.

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A Soldier's Embrace, London, Jonathan Cape, 1980.

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A Sport of Nature, London, Jonathan Cape, 1987.

Head, Bessie

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A Question of Power, London, Heinemann AWS, 1973.

The Collection of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales,
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Karodia, Farida

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Ngcobo, Lauretta

Cross of Gold, London, Longman, 1981.

Palestrant, Ellen

Nosedive and other writings, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1983.

The Nigerian scholar Morala Ogundipe-Leslie has specified the conditions of African women. She argues that the African woman carries six mountains on her back:

- oppression from outside: colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism;
- the heritage of oppression: patriarchal practices and beliefs rooted in tradition;
- her backwardness: due to colonization and neo-colonialism, comprising poverty and ignorance;
- race/colour: racist hierarchies and ideologies that are not only a major dividing principle in South Africa but constitute an important variable of imperialism and neo-colonialism throughout the world;
- man: centuries' old attitudes of patriarchy which he does not wish to abandon because male domination is advantageous to him;
- the sixth mountain on the African woman's back is herself: the negative self-image of inferiority, dependency and fear due to centuries of interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchal and gender hierarchy.

According to Morala Ogundipe-Leslie the African female writer should commit herself to demolish those mountains in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a person aspiring for a better world. She has to be committed to her art, to do justice to her expertise. She should stand for her truth and defend it. In this she should know and understand how she herself is part of society and of the history of her people.

Her commitment as a woman first of all implies a destruction and correction of the false stereotypes and images of women. This implies to write about what it is to be a woman, and to voice the aspirations of women. This will mean a confrontation with often held notions by the media and men that women's liberation is just about women's individual sexual freedom. As a person aspiring for a better world, and thus a better South Africa, the female writer should be committed to a political consciousness offering an understanding of how colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism and apartheid affect people's lives and destinies.

In that sense it is an educative role that the female writer has to play. However we do not believe in a superior female moral responsibility in this field by nature, because of women

being mothers, educators, more experienced sufferers or moral and ethical beings. If that that would be the case it has to be explained by the conditions of women in society at large.

South African women writers

Women cultural workers, at least those we know of, tend to be predominantly active in the field of literature. During the past few years more and more books written by women have been published both inside and outside South Africa.

Still the talents of women are not fully exploited, a lot of their work is not known in public and most likely circulates in informal circuits as well as in oral form. Black women writers in particular are facing an enormous difficulty in creating the space and time to write down their work. Material conditions are largely responsible for this. The necessity of a room of one's own for a writer is a luxury that a black female (and male) writer hardly knows of. Even a table or corner of one's own is absent for most black writers.

In an autobiographic short story *The Toilet* describes Gcina Mhlope how she used a public toilet to read magazines and to write her poems and stories.

Few women can earn a living by their literary production only, and have to take up other jobs to survive. Miriam Tlali has been voicing that complaint very strongly. On top of that women are facing the responsibilities for their families at home, which makes it altogether impossible to concentrate on creative writing.

In spite of the increased level of education of black women the number of women writers has been relatively small. Amelia House compiled a checklist of black South African writers in English, and by 1980 identified 37 black women writers.

Women have produced a diversity of literary material: poetry and prose; short stories, novels, plays, (auto)biographies and more sociological works.

Most of the black women writers are poets. Their poetry is an evidence that 'words can be bullets'. A beautiful example is the anthology *Malibongwe - ANC Women: Poetry is also their weapon*. This anthology voices the commitment of women to the

struggle. The poems speak of the experiences of apartheid, war, violence, death, love, exile, dedication and strength of women. Women's militancy and power is beautifully expressed by Lindiwe Mabuza's poem *Super-Women* or *Militant Beauty* by Gloria Mtungwa. Stereotypes of female submissiveness and inferiority have been successfully eroded. A strong voice of hope and the future outrules the feelings of suffer, pain and sorrow expressed in the poems:

Come lest we crumble comrade
The very banks of our being
Swim comrade...
The people are waiting.

Rebecca Matlou

Yes to be young
To simply say
I want this need called freedom
In mountains and valleys
In cities and dorps
I will fight in my own South Africa
Till victory bounces and resounds
Away from the hands of begging facists

Yes to be young
To dream and build heavens
Down here on this earth.

Jeanette Solwandle

Poetry is a very strong and convenient medium of expression. It is faster to create, and also faster to destroy when danger threatens.

A lot of the literature written by women contains autobiographical elements. These we find in the autobiographies written by women as Ellen Kuzwayo and Helen Joseph, or in the prison diary of Ruth First. But also in novels and short stories women writers refer to and reflect upon their own experiences. The works of Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali, Noni Jabavu, Joyce Sikakane, Laurette Ngcobo and Zoë Wicomb give evidence of this. The autobiographical element however should not be interpreted in an individual sense, but should be seen to represent a family or group history. In that sense these works fulfill an educational task, of taking back the history to the people in a commitment to present a maintenance of community life which the system of apartheid denies to the African people. The history of struggle and resistance

is an important source of inspiration for women writers. Some white and 'coloured' women writers are looking into the position of their own communities in the apartheid society and in that way express their commitment to an undivided and democratic future South Africa.

In *You can't get lost in Cape Town* Zoë Wicomb tries to come to terms with her own rejected past. About the schizophrenic culture of the 'coloureds' she writes:

"Ag Frieda, but we're so new, don't we belong in estates like this? Coloureds haven't been around for that long, perhaps that's why we stray. Just think, in our teens we wanted to be white, now we want to be full-blooded Africans. We've never wanted to be ourselves and that's why we stray... across the continent, across the oceans and even here, right into the Tricameral Parliament, playing into their hands."

Out of *A State of Fear* by Menán du Plessis speaks the fear and insecurity of the liberal white South Africans, who observe the unrest and conflicts in their country from the side line. It is a very gloomy book and reflects the state of mind of liberal whites who have not (yet) dared to join the struggle.

Despite the diversity of women's literary production some common elements can be traced. Most works express daily-life experiences of people to which the audience, in particular South Africans, can easily relate. There is a focus on the specific experiences and emotions of women, which enriches the total body of South African literature. In particular women's emotions about childbirth, motherhood, rape, domestic violence and sisterhood require the female voice to reach a meaningful understanding of women's life and resistance under the yoke of apartheid.

My Tears

My life is at stake
My nipples are aching
My heart is pounding
My breast is swelling

I was happy for a moment
When pains of labour arrived
I thought I was delivering a baby
But it was a victim of oppression

Manoke Nchwe

Amsterdam, december 1987, Women's Committee Dutch Anti Apartheid Movement

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- 8, Palestrant, Ellen
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- 9) du Plessis, Menán
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- 10) Roberts, Sheila
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- 13) Wicomb, Zoë
You can't get lost in Cape Town, London, Virago, 1987.
- 14) Zwi, Rose
The Inverted Pyramid, 1981.
Another Year in Africa, 1982.
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Dauids, Jennifer
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- Fugard, Sheila
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- Roberts, Sheila
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- Thomas, Gladys
Cry Rage!, with James Matthews, Johannesburg, Spro-Cas Publishers, 1972.

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Serote, Wally

What can the world learn from South African literature? in Sechaba, London, ANC, July 1986, pp. 15+18+19.

Amsterdam, December 1987, Women's Committee Dutch Anti
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