

# POETRY OF RESISTANCE: NEW WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

by Mbulelo Mzamane

Don Mattera, *Azanian Love Song*, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1983, pp 115.

Achmat Dangor, *Bulldozer*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983, pp 102.

Modikwe Dikobe, *Dispossessed*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983, pp 116.

Jeremy Cronin, *Inside*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983 pp 103.

At home South African literature is enjoying an unprecedented boom period comparable to that enjoyed by African literature generally when Heinemann launched the *African Writers Series* in 1962. Publishers such as Ravan, Ad Donker, David Philip and Skotaville are providing South African writers with publication outlets previously denied them at home. Poetry continues to occupy the pride of place, despite prose fiction of considerable merit from writers such as Njabulo Ndebele, winner of the 1984 Noma Award for publishing in Africa. Poetry usurped first place from prose fiction during the literary renaissance of the late 1960's, following the repression unleashed on writers and political activists alike by the South African minority racist regime during the Sharpeville and Rivonia eras. Four recent collections of poetry, by Don Mattera, Achmat Dangor, Modikwe Dikobe and Jeremy Cronin, testify to this growing corpus.

*Azanian Love Song* by Don Mattera is a selection from poems written between 1960 and 1982. Don Mattera, Pitika Ntuli writes, "has had a checkered career: former gangster leader, agitator, man of God or Allah, politician and poet (also journalist). He is a total South African." Mattera was banned in 1973 for almost a decade and a promising poetic career seemed to have come to a premature end. His poems express his love-hate relationship with South Africa. In his pre-1973 poems, he swears vengeance upon white society (*Of Reason And Discovery*) and, in the next breath, restrains himself from carrying out his threat (*And Yet*), in the way Serote does in his early poems. The agony which accompanies Mattera's ambivalence is deeply felt and derives from the complexity of the South African situation.

Such poems may have a contemporary political didactic purpose, but Mattera is not a mere politician or journalist suddenly turned poet. These ear-

ly poems reveal his sincerity and sensitivity, and display his sense of structure and eloquence. There is very little public posturing in them. The social commentary, behind the deceptive simplicity, is incisive. In *For A Cent*, for instance, a beggar on the corner of Pritchard and Joubert, a common sight in that part of Johannesburg, "mutter: Thank you my Baas", even without looking up at his benefactor, another African who tosses him a coin: "Strange / That for a cent / A man can call his brother, BAAS!"

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**"Strange  
That for a cent  
A man can call his brother,  
BAAS!"**

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Though not devoid of feeling and energy, the later poems, especially after 1976, are not always executed with the skill of his early work. Musaemura Zimunya's harsh remarks apply mainly to Mattera's later work:

"Don Mattera has a lot of anger, sorrow and bitterness about his condition - the black condition - in South Africa. It is a condition determined by the racial order of that country. These poems show that he has suffered abundantly over the last two years in which he has been writing. Unfortunately, we know that no matter how deeply committed one is politically, the demands of the literary craft are so complex that an integration of the two is hard. Thus, Don Mattera's poems say more about his political tribulation than about the quality of his vision as a poet and writer. In fact there is nothing in this book to suggest that this writer owes his writing to any genuine contemplation or reflection of the 'complexity' of the South African situation."

Both Achmat Dangor and Modikwe Dikobe are deeply concerned with the subject of dispossession, whether through laws such as the Native Land Act and the Group Areas Act or through cruder *Kragdadigheid* methods, using a bulldozer.

Achmat Dangor distinguished himself as a short story writer with the publication of *Waiting For Leila*, which won the 1980 Mofolo-Plomer Award. *Bulldozer* demonstrates Dangor's versatility. The bulk of the poems deals with oppression and dispossession.

*Paradise* expresses the notion that South Africa might have been a land of peace and prosperity for all but for the fact that some are persecuted and deprived, as when the underprivileged and oppressed are evicted from places such as District Six. *A Note On Patriotism* shows that there is nothing to be patriotic about when you have been impoverished and dispossessed by a state whose sole function is to ensure you remain a second-class citizen.

*The leech loves the land / during the flowing harvest season*, and not when there is nothing to be gained from the land. Dangor's other poems range over a number of related subjects. *The Colour Of Love* employs images derived from Black Consciousness to assert that in South Africa only black people still have the capacity to love. The implication of such a statement is that the redemption of South Africa lies largely with the black underprivileged. There are other love poems, such as *Sheila's Day* and *Scorn*, which also carry implicit political messages. Dangor's poems about exile, such as *An Exile's Farewell* and *An Exile's Letter Home*, express solidarity with the plight of those in exile. However, Dangor asks, what have they to lose: "Lieberstein and sour bread?"

As in the work of the writers of the Black Consciousness era in general, the most interesting aspect of Dangor's work is the language used in a bid to proletarianise poetry. *Odyssey* merges Afrikaans and English in this way. We learn of the traveller, Doela that "hy's te proud / hy dink hy's wonderful". Dangor is bilingual and the second half of his collection consists of poems written in Afrikaans as spoken by the 'coloured' community, a device also used effectively to evoke atmosphere and authenticity by Adam Small in his 'Coloured' plays of the 1960's and 1970's. Like Mattera, Dangor was banned in 1973 but had his ban lifted five years later.

Modikwe Dikobe's preoccupations range from a concern with colonial subjugation, land dispossession, labour exploitation, cultural history, to more topical issues. The title poem, *Dispossessed*, exhibits all these elements. *My Umbilical Cord* deals with the issue of forced removals and the attendant alienation. Such a displacement of people from their ancestral land is traumatic and severs the emotional link any group feels towards the country. The subject resurfaces in Dikobe's references to



such other areas as Sophiatown and District Six, which were destroyed in accordance with the Group Areas act.

Some of the poems also deal, in a romantic sort of way, with historical themes. *Time Immemorial* paints, in stilted language, a picture of an idyllic past, with *festivals, weddings not in want. Cultural history comes up in poems such as Skokiaan*, a deadly concoction that used to be brewed in the heydays of prohibition, and *Marabastad*, the township that gave us the *marabi* dance in the 1930's. Many of the poems are concerned with the problems of the peasants, a group usually relegated to the background in South African literature, and the workers in the towns and cities.

Dikobe's craftsmanship, or lack of it, should arouse considerable controversy between adherents of the formalist school and advocates of a proletarian literature. In addition, like his novel *The Marabi Dance*, the collection is certain to be of interest to students and scholars of sociology, history, and literature alike. Dikobe resembles both Mofolo and Plaatje in that he has one foot in the past and the other in the present struggles of his people, for his life is contemporaneous with both - he is now past seventy. He can write authentically about both traditional and modern life. His poems gather together most of the strands that have characterised black South African poetry in English during the last hundred years or so.

Jeremy Cronin is one of the latest literary talents to emerge from South Africa and needs to be introduced at greater length. His poems dwell on important events and formative experiences of his life. However, as in most South African literature, even the most intensely personal such as the poems of Arthur Nortje, the dilemma of the individual highlights the general predicament.

He was born in South Africa in 1949. His father was an officer in the South African navy but died when he was only 34. The Cronins lived in various naval stations, where Jeremy Cronin grew up. After graduating from the University of Cape Town, Jeremy Cronin left for Paris for further studies. He returned to South Africa in 1974 and took up a post as a lecturer in Politics and Philosophy at the University of Cape Town. In 1976 he was arrested and charged under the Suppression of Communism Act for furthering the aims of a banned organisation, the

African National Congress. He was sentenced to seven years imprisonment and served most of his sentence at Pretoria Central Prison, South Africa's maximum security prison for Whites and the place where capital punishment in South Africa is carried out. Pronouncing sentence on Jeremy Cronin, the judge said:

"So far as you are concerned Cronin, I get the impression from the political statement you made from the dock yesterday that you are quite unrepentant. I do not suppose that the prison sentence I am going to give you is going to reform you.

"The judge's prophetic suppositions are borne out in the poems, written after Cronin had served his sentence. He was released in May 1983 and went back to live in Cape Town."

His poems are arranged under six sub-headings: *Inside, The Naval Base, Venture To The Interior, Some Uncertain Wires, Love Poems, and Isiququmadevu*. The first and most important part of his poems, about his prison experiences, is in the tradition of Dennis Brutus' *Letters To Martha*. The poems capture the morbidity and claustrophobic atmosphere of prison life, as in the following lines:

Overhead is mesh  
To one side the morgue,  
To one side the gallows wing, this  
Is our yard.

Like the rest of the poems in the collection, the prison poems are written without any pretentiousness, in a conversational tone. Though simple, they are also profound. *Walking On Air* reads in part:

In the prison workshop, also and otherwise named,  
where work is done by enforced dosage, between  
political discussion, theoretical discussion, tactical  
discussion, bemoaning of life without women,  
sawdust up the nose, while raging at bench 4, for  
a week long, a discussion raging, above the hum of  
the exhaust fans, on how to distinguish the concept  
'Productive' from the concept... 'Unproductive  
Labour'

The prison workshop is thus transformed into a seminar room where the inmates have an opportunity to further their political education. Prisoners previously with little knowledge of Marx's economic theory, even though sentenced to long prison terms under the Suppression of Communism Act, are schooled in the finer points of Marxism-Leninism, under state patronage.

Cronin's camera lens focuses on other political prisoners, back-stage hands and unsung heroes of the revolution. One such is John Matthews, who built the platform in Klip town where the Congress of the People was held in 1955, though he was not there himself on the day the delegates to the Congress adopted the Freedom Charter, the blueprint of the African National Congress for revolutionary change in South Africa. Always, Cronin's concern is with the fate of others.

*Death Row*, as Sheila Roberts points out, is a poem written in honour of three Africans awaiting execution in Pretoria Central Prison. The poem conveys the sound and repetition of harmonizing as the prisoners sing in defiance:

One voice leading:  
Arrraaise ye, high up-  
Everynight  
Deeper, two in the chorus:  
Prisoners from your slumbers  
Called and  
To boil or  
Respond like a  
Ripple like a  
Lurch like a  
Ukuhlabelela

Sheila Roberts errs, however, when she interprets *ukuhlabelela* as meaning *the great destroyer*. The Zulu word simply means *to sing*. The constant reminder in Cronin's poems about the fate of others helps focus his commitment on the liberation struggle. The daring tone of the poems testifies to the indomitable spirit of the oppressed and underprivileged in their quest for freedom. The world of prison in the poems, as in Dennis Brutus' becomes a microcosm of South African society, as we are reminded in *Plato's Cave*, a poem from a different section of the collection.

The *Naval Base* poems are reminiscences of his childhood spent in various bases, notably Simonstown. They recall places where, as a five-year-old boy, he:

"... would hide, nose pinched to  
stop his sneeze  
the point- being not to be found  
too soon"

However, the naval bases, like the child's hiding places, give white South African society a false sense of security. In the *Naval Base* poems, the olfactory

images used are most strong and the reader's nostrils are assailed by the stench of sea, water, fish, and oil.

The section *Venture To The Interior* takes its title from Laurence van der Post's book. From the world of childhood and innocence we re-enter the world of experience. The poems, such as *Karoo I* and *Karoo II*, explore other sights of South Africa, away from the naval bases. We are reminded of Arthur Nortje's words: "Yes, there is beauty: you make / the understandable mistake".

Further inland, the insecure and ugly world re-asserts itself:

"Our land holds its hard  
Wooden truths like a peach pip"

The imagery of the poems derives from the flora and the fauna and the landscape of South Africa: *Koppie, sheep-kraal, Koppie, / milkbus, the town location*, etc. The exploitation of black labour by white capital is also brought out in terms that evoke the slave era, as in *Ivory Trail*. During the slave trade, of course, Africans were known to slavers as 'black ivory'.

The three poems in the following section, *Some Uncertain Ways*, recall memories of his grandparents, whose narrow-mindedness and paranoia seem to have been handed down to succeeding generations of whites in South Africa.

His wife is the subject of the poems in the next section. While Jeremy Cronin was in prison, his wife died. In his *Love Poems*, he relives their life together, their shared anxiety over his political involvement. *Itchy with its / sound of crickets* and *Visiting Room* recall her visits to him in prison. *Tonight Is An Envelope* is about the 500-word, once-a-month, heavily censored letter he was allowed to write her from prison. There is not much expression of fury in the poems, though there is sadness, as in one of his most moving poems,

*I Saw your Mother:*

I saw your mother  
with two guards  
through a glass plate  
for one quarter hour  
on the day that you died.  
Extra visit, special favour'  
I was told, and warned  
The visit will be stopped  
If politics is discussed.  
Verstaan understand!?"

on the day that you died.

I couldn't place  
my arm around her,  
around your mother  
when she sobbed

Once again, his matter-of-factness rescues the poem from sloppy sentimentality.

The last section, *Isiququmadevu*, the bearded river monster, dips into African myth to convey the monstrosity of life in South Africa.

*Isiququmadevu lives there*, Cronin emphasises. Scattered here and there in Jeremy Cronin's poems are evocative, sometimes untranslatable phrases and sentences which give the poems an unmistakably authentic ring. The poems are remarkable for their complete lack of self-pity and bitterness.

The tone of South African literature is becoming increasingly grim, a clear barometer of the deteriorating conditions in the country. Don Mattera, Achmat Dangor, Modikwe Dikobe, and Jeremy Cronin are the historical witnesses of that process. They are also voices for the oppressed, underprivileged, and dispossessed.

Although the poets deal with suffer-

ing and their hatred of apartheid, this hatred exists side by side with a lofty patriotic love. The dignity of such love contrasts sharply with the alienation, the humiliation, and the decadence of life under apartheid. Their words are stark and clear and their images burning with passion.

They are engaged, too, in the process of announcing themselves and whom they would serve. Sometimes their poetry becomes a special kind of pamphleteering. As Mafika Gwala observes: 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. The South African poet may be writing for the moment now, to paraphrase Gwala, yet in the most inspired moments of this poetry, in the hands of its ablest exponents, there is a vision. The vision is not of a romantic, numinous world but a concrete one, entirely realisable, as Chris Searle points out, writing about similar trends in Frelimo poetry. Beyond the political aspirations expressed in the poems, the final vision is of a humanity liberated from all oppression and exploitation.

