

¹The Arts of Resistance- Mafika Gwala and South African Poetry

Ari Sitas

At first I thought that a reading and a republishing of my Traditions of Poetry in Natal² which attempted to situate Mafika Pascal Gwala's work in the late 1980s would be appropriate in marking his legacy. The more I re-read what I had said then the more despondent I got about the fate of the poetic and what I hear around me as what is appropriate for our times and what was inappropriate in those times. I have kept my analysis of his poems of the 1970s and 1980s largely unaltered, hoping that I could expand on his newer stuff that he promised he had in piles back home. To my horror, I found out from Omar Badsha that in a bout of absent-mindedness he had left it all in a bag in a taxi as he was going to get them copied in town. What remained where the number of conversations I had with him since, his anger at the "academic crawl" and what the suburbs had done to the township and its poetry.

Remembering Mafika Pascal Gwala brought with it a haunting sensation. It was about the landscape that threaded together, Umlazi, KwaMashu, Inanda, Mpumalanga, Edendale, Dambuza, Sobantu and Mpophomeni. It was a common landscape of black experience, hope and fire. It was where, the poet found the Children of Nonti Nzimande and found them...resilient. Listen:

Nonti Nzimande died long, long ago
Yet his children still live.
Generation after generation, they live on;
Death comes to the children of Nonti
And the children of Nonti cry but won't panic
And there is survival in the children of Nonti.

Poverty swoops its deathly wings. But tough,
Strong and witty are the children of Nonti.
The wet rains fall. The roads become like
The marshed rice paddies of the Far East;
And on these desolate roads there is song
Song in the Black voices of the children of Nonti.

....There is still free laughter
In the children of Nonti.

....Truth is truth
And lies are lies amongst the children of Nonti.
For when the summer takes its place after the winter
The children of Nonti rejoice
And call it proof of Truth
Truth reigns among the children of Nonti.

¹ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 16 no,2, 1990.

For there is oneness in the children of Nonti.

And later, later when the sun
Is like forever down;
Later when the dark rules
Above the light of Truth
The black children of Nonti will rise and speak.
...Nothing is more vital than standing up
For the Truths that Nonti lived for.
Then shall there be Freedom in that stand
By the children of Nonti.
Truthful tales shall be told
Of how the children of Nonti pushed their will;
And continued to live by the peace
The peace that Nonti once taught to them.³

There is song, there is truth, there is oneness, there is laughter and struggle in the Children of Nonti. There is a metanarrative and an intricate narrative of liberation. There is art and there is resistance.

Despite the ugliness, despite the violence and civil war that gutted Hammarsdale and Mpumalanga, despite the closing of one textile mill and clothing factory after another, despite the enduring hardships, we want to believe that there is laughter and song, but is there resilience in the children of Nonti?

*

Mafika Pascal Gwala was born in 1946 in Verulam. His father worked on the railways and his mother was a domestic worker. He emerged at the time of the budding black consciousness and had much to do with the movement's self-definition. He was anthologised early, yet he was too self-destructive to enjoy sustained liberal patronage.

His two books met with some muted applause, *Joliínkomo* (1977) and *No More Lullabies* (1982) were there by the late 70s and early 1980s. By then next, a collective book *Exiles Within*, the allure of black writing was in decline. The struggle got ugly, the words uglier, Gwala entered the fray of the civil war by working alongside many of us trying to modify the rising authoritarian populism of Zulu-ness, his and Liz Gunner's *Musho!* (1991) made the case for an imbongi tradition "from below"- by then he found himself squarely in the Communist trends of the Congress Movement writing the izibongo of Harry Gwala and Govan Mbeki.

The discomfort with writing like Gwala's had been there for some time- as he told me often in the 1980s, black poetry was always an act of contrition for "you whites": it always warranted inclusion in South African collections edited by whites but it was a poetry that needed qualification and a footnote. The dominant view was that its "artlessness" was explicable and marked by the harshness of Apartheid. The suburbs were not quite comfortable with much of its tendentiousness. It had nevertheless, something poetic about it.

³ From *Joliínkomo* (1977)

Since Albie Sachs' *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom* (1990), with his plea to move away from the ugliness of resistance art, its monochromatic binaries, the suburbs in his words, fought hard to wrest the Academy back from the township, the breathing space opened had emboldened many want-to-be gatekeepers of culture, of the arts and of good taste to be unashamedly white and ethnocentric.

I want to take his insight further: they can do so without saying so because a number of theoretical constellations from the Neo-Conservative West have provided the language to be dominant but non-imperial. Post-modern enough to worry about surface and surfacing, to worry about the complexity of surface readings and their inter-surfacing and the inter-textuality necessary to approximate a post-colonial desire of difference. That writing like that, understandable in those days, is too wedded to binaries to be art. If it is depressing enough to read much of what parades as judgement, it is numbskull-shrinking to think that the victory of aesthetic nobodies was handed over to them by the "township".

In refusing to be patronised by whites, the best of the black intelligentsia pinned its hopes outside the existing cultural networks and institutions. They were left in the lurch when the ANC, despite bold noise since the early 1980s about the arts, culture and creativity (remember Gabarone, remember CASA?) handed the cultural apparatus of the country to Inkatha and its creativity to the market.

The aesthetic gatekeepers in turn, guardians of the complex and the uncontaminated have been sophisticated enough as not to appear as an avant-garde, a bloc, a dinner-party set or a movement. Rather, they have achieved psychic and material integrity through the control of symbolic events and institutions that valorise "good-ness"- the media, publishing, galleries and the academy.

The "good-ness" in turn was immediately known via a peculiar enchanting osmosis rather than analysis; a hint at a critique of monochrome pasts of apartheid or resistance, and a very subtle comment of the past as a time-warp filled with limitations- you will not read a substantive critique of prior work, Wally Serote's or Mafika Gwala's, no never... but a Limitation- all they are doing to save our aesthetic integrity, admittedly from a vague ontological or epistemological ground, is taking the discourse beyond those limits into an undefined plenitude. Can't we see? Beyond resistance, beyond the township, beyond the metanarrative of class, nation, race, ethnicity, clan, sib..(to where? – to which undisclosed authenticity?)

When the metanarrative is vaporised like that there are two possible consequences since no energy ever disappears- it wafts, it is there as a dangerous gas always available to be ignited. Alternatively- it is there but the gas is not being ignited because the matches were wet or given away or taken away.

Whom we find in this noxious and liminal space is the well-attuned reader who claims that her reading (of book, city, taxi or human interaction) is one among many readings. But instead of redistributing both salary and plane tickets to all millions of people who methodologically ought to have their own different/deferred readings as valid as all others, s/he clings to the payroll, the business class seat and the podium. The difference between her and others is that s/he gets paid to read and therefore from her "positionality's" perspective s/he is always right.

But there is a tragic tone in the reading because the toxicity of so much gas reddens the eyes, the pollution is ever-present and the ambivalent narrative is disturbed by the refusal of a whole range of mad people who will not let it go. They appear as little irruptions, irrits, spasmodic forms of noise without reason or history. And then, there are these predictable others: the Comintern and Trotsky types, the Populists and Nationalists, the Blades, the Alexanders and the Ntulis...a landscape frustrated by the wearing out of all its flint. The idea that all these irruptions and noise might be interwoven by a thread, invisible to the reader is impossible because it is theoretically implausible, it is a bowing down to what has been surpassed, it is the endurance of dark matter from a broken constellation or a symptomatic reading so if the eyes are reddening, eye-drops are still cheap and handy. It is not a melancholy mode but bathos of some scale.⁴

The trope now is one of a decline- our new aesthetes abhor this society. They never dare say that since the blacks or the ANC have taken over in the 1990s things have gone to.... – all middle-class tabloids avoid saying that, although they hint at it *ad nauseum*. Obviously, one needs a more sophisticated reading, I am told.

This reading had to have a strong literary alibi- enter poor J.M Coetzee- his *Disgrace* has emerged as a metaphor for both a feeling and a reading. Its utility is, whatever its own merits and there are more than plenty of merits as writing of the highest quality, that its Prof destabilises the old liberal subject sighted in Schreiner, Paton, Gordimer or Brink whilst at the same time it constitutes a legitimate fence of feeling that barely keeps the Other from cutting it to violate the Self and the whiteness of the estate it demarcates.

I can understand the impatience of many whites with the moral protagonists of the past: the good doctor, the good lawyer and the good Samaritan that ran through each literary page of the 50s and 60s. They are sick of needing to invent or to deal with a Zigmund Gumede of their guilt. Depth psychology anyway has died as well with symptomatic reading as the subject is fragmented, de-centred, poly-styrened. There was always a moral sense- in the English-speaking community in the country that has also been surpassed- of being good by doing good, from the Bantu Men's Social Centre and King Kong to Carmen in Khayelitsha. I understand that it irks.

*

Before an answer is rehearsed we need a prior visit to the gallery, the image- archive of our recent past. You must have guessed, the disappearance of a threading worries me. Place all the works of art that speak to whiteness from the 1970s , 1980s or 1990s in this gallery, 1000, 2000 pieces who cares- you will get the point quickly!

I/we cannot walk past Kentridge or Breytenbach or Siopis (I am choosing these three because I know them better) without being struck by a character so much there then, who has gone missing. This is not the tortured character of the artist, no! There is a continuity between the

⁴ Melancholy at least had a noble past. At least in the pages of a Stephen Watson it never spoke *to* or *for* blacks: the vivid description of the subject of melancholia, the subject's "w-ness", was white and its meanings were tentative, its ontology vulnerable, its foothold on the continent questionable, its landscape harsh, its winds ferocious and very very Capetownesque. See his *Collected Essays* (1990) Cape Town: Carrefour.

“tortured” artist be it in Breyten Breytenbach, and his Panus, in William Kentridge and his Felix and the post-liberal and “decentered” subject that the posse of post-modern devotees celebrate.

Who is missing, who has been erased is none other than Soho Eckstein- so much larger than life everywhere in the recent past: his excesses, his wealth, his mines, his violence, his charities and linked to that, on the next wall, writ large on the women’s bodies that Siopis had crafted. They have been disappeared. And so has the relationship between our good man Soho and the tortured artists. And so has the story of this land.

Soho Eckstein had to be evaporated if the control of the expressive and academic apparatus was to be achieved and sustained as a question of “difference”. With his disappearance the meta-narrative itself, the thread that holds together the pulse of need and greed here can be ignored.

So what would the predictable leftie thing be that would so obviously follow? That the shards of the broken constellation are threaded? That the meta-narrative exists? That they inhabit spaces invisible to the suburban and read-erly eye? That the processes to teach those others to write, sing, dance and articulate well are doomed to failure? That the real intellectual formation that animates these spaces we call Africa South is outside their reach? That 5 million people quite darker in skin tone deeply depend on Soho and another 5 million, are killing to depend on him? That is a quarter of the people in this land. That, if you soared up, for a second, to see the shacks and the matchboxes amassing around suburbia, would have statistically an HIV person per one and a half unit?

Tragically, nobody pinched the matches. I and my compeers in the liberation movement gave the matches away. Gwala had a stronger idea: we pissed on them before handing them away. When we (Natal Culture Congress) were negotiating with the Natal Performing Arts Council he kept on saying, stop pissing on them. And so, the suburb dragged us in and drugged us deep. I can spend many pages showing how a little compromise here or there made it difficult to hold onto a sense of moral virtue and enjoy the produce of the new plantations we came to co-own.

But Marikana has brought the metanarrative back in. And the Rhodes Must Fall movement has brought Soho Eckstein back in. In the words of Gwala to Rampolokeng return: “we were granted freedom but not liberation”.

*

Mafika Pascal Gwala was a political poet: he was 9 years old when the Charter was adopted and 14 when Sharpeville scuttled hope for a while. His erstwhile influences growing up in Apartheid South Africa ranged from rapport with the Unity Movement where he learnt the language of class, and in everyday life from Grey Street to Verulam, where he learnt the camaraderie of blackness as Indians and Africans were beginning to defy Apartheid in subtle and creative ways. By the end of the 1960s, he was an outspoken member of the emerging Black Consciousness Movement, he wrote position papers and as he gained confidence, poems and collective work proliferated, his influence in the formation of Art Associations under the banner of Black Consciousness was swift, with the Mpumalanga Arts Association/Ensemble was rivalling their equivalents in Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

By 1973, he followed Omar Badsha into the trade union movement and had some influence in the formation of coops and self-help associations under the banner of BCP. Gradually, his allegiance shifted towards the Congress Movement and the ANC. As he told Lesego Rampolokeng, “we didn’t take Black Consciousness as a kind of Bible, it was just a trend . . . a necessary one . . .as I said in 1971: black consciousness (was) not an end in itself. It’s a means towards an end. We needed black consciousness to correct the many errors that had been committed by our leadership. . . .So we had definite goals within black consciousness. But then we started losing them one by one, dropping them off, dropping them off. The more dashikis we had, the more bourgeois we got.”

His assessment of Biko was rather harsh: “there is no Biko without bourgeois background. He aspired to bourgeois rights. That’s why we didn’t agree with him. As a writer, as a poet, categorically, I agreed with him, I admired him, we got along very well. But when it came to politics he would readily say, the trouble with you is that you are a Stalinist.” He would call me a Stalinist. We were friends, we used to drink together. He enjoyed beer, I enjoyed beer (laughs). So he would say, you know, the trouble with you is that you’re a Stalinist. But there was nothing Stalinist about it. It was just that he was not seeing the revolutionary path.”

In the late 1980s, he often advised me and others in COSAW and the Natal Culture Congress to take what was best in Black Consciousness: the idea of getting the younger black generation into collective ensembles for all the creative fields. By then he was beginning to work seriously in isiZulu and to look for ways of getting his studies back on track.

III

I have argued before that Mafika Gwala exists within a continuum of poetry in Natal- a continuum that he ruptures: there are the primordial moments of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi writing in Zulu and establishing defiant sense of nationhood which contrasts sharply with HIE Dhlomo’s English take on nationhood and class. A close reading of their respective poems on the Valley of a Thousand Hills would be a starting point.⁵ Both mark the shift from Native to African. Then, there is the poetry of Mazisi Kunene which takes Africanism, Zulu-ness and resistance to a new level. The irony was that Mazisi Kunene wrote in isiZulu and had to translate his work into English due to his exile years. And there is Mafika Gwala.

As a belated response to Albie Sachs, we have to incend into the craft of ugliness if we are to get anywhere near the arts of resistance that Gwala advocated. What was special about Gwala’s craft and where did it go right or wrong?

Gwala from “Jol’inkomo” through to “No more Lullabies” to finally, the few but remarkable poems to have appeared in “Exiles Within” has exhausted the creative limits of the scripted word here: beyond his poetry lay as I argued then an unknown, an untested terrain, for every subsequent poet in KwaZulu-Natal has been consciously or unconsciously writing in his shadow. Form the gutsy exuberance of the first work, to the tortured lines of the second, to finally the authority of line, rhythm and sound of the third, we are faced with a complex inheritance.

Part of its complexity has to do with the fact that most black consciousness poetry in the

years of its origin in the late 1960s and early 1970s to its later late 1970s decline was PERFORMED poetry – initially among small groups of black militants, to move in larger and larger concentric circles outwards to reach the black working class. Save in a few instances though and Gwals's is one of them, it did not reach that far. And although it developed a rhythmic vibrancy and an orating quality of its own style, it got imprisoned before it came to be challenged by the people. So what was written for performance retreated back onto the page, reaffirming orality.

“*Jol'inkomo*” is a distorted echo of Kunene's call, it is distorted and “polluted” by the shackworlds of Mpumalanga and the grit of Durban and it is transcribed from Zulu back into English. But Gwala's is a different English, it is consciously “donnered” (as he insists) by people's everyday speech-genres, machine rhythms and localisms.

With him the universe shrinks: it is hardly a “cosmos” – it is a space of urban grime. The moon hangs palefaced from the jet-infested sky where “skylabs bid for power”. His lines do not walk on the “red beachsands” commanding crabs to follow (as they do in Kunene's) – they step over pebbles from eroded valleys, gashed rocks and chipped hillsides. There is no festival – but rather allnight gigs, drunken stokvels and lovemaking under gum-trees with one's backside pierced by mosquitos amassing from the nearby pulp factory's industrial waste swamp. There is no ecstasy or abandon – just being “jazzhappy”. We are faced with a world where, “Blackness blacktalents/Blackness echoes the real blues/Blackness chucks out the death and fear in our streets”. But within this oppressive cosmos, there is a resilience, there is struggle, there is “blikksam vim” in the children of Nonti. Gwala takes one through the everyday struggles of poverty in “Gumba, Gumba, Gumba”. He engages with the hassled lives of communities like Clermont, and argues despairingly with the soul of urban streets like “Grey Street:” in Durban. And it is this constricted cosmos of tin, of clocks and machines, of black struggle but also of class struggle that haunts any reader – where middle class “non-whites” have become a “fuckburden” to blacks. Within this world, Gwala assumes the role of an urban imbongi of scripted letters.

If “*Jol'inkomo*” teems with gutsy exuberance, “No more Lullabies”, his second collection, is a disturbing mixture of poems: angry, human and transitional, it feels like a work of anticipation rather than arrival. The poems continue being the sounds of the

township that service Apartheid's factories. They are marked by the wastelands of Hammarsdale and Mpumalanga and they grind on with their "spinle now/...machineblues" as the black working class is pummeled with the deceiving comforts of Castle Beer, Wimpy Bars and Kentucky Chicken in this age of "plastic" and "robot man". Gwala writes from the "visceral monotony of the surroundings", pounded by Natal's sun, "its glowing heat gnawing like/wild dogs at us" and haunted by the sounds of so many fathers who "wobble through the night/...piss drunk, who do not even know their names". He writes from the danger-zone, the "moment of Rise or Crawl/where this place becomes Mpumalanga".

But there is also an unresolved restlessness in the poems, which strikes out at targets with different moods, or with the same ones striking over and over again. It is ironic, angry, humane and prophetic. His jabbing at the black middle class intensifies as we see it emerging "from behind stockpiles/of books/now clad in Afo-style", wearing dashikis manufactured in Hong Kong. His frankness also intensifies as he asks aggressively, "what's poetic/about shooting defenceless kids/in a Soweto street?" Anger is mixed with analysis and references to the political figures of Lumumba, Fanon and Cabral tempered slightly with the "jazzhappy" horn of a Charlie Parker solo. But not enough to stop him from ranting against class leeches and oppressors.

Gwala is caught between a deep affinity with the sounds of the street but also with the defiant growth of the mulberry tree in the backyard of his ghetto. And further, there is warmth and compassion when he whispers that "there is with all the odds against/a will to watch a child grow". Knowing at the same time that the dockers in Durban's harbour are "waiting for a tornado/or something to snap". Then, "history will be written/on the factory gates/at the unemployment offices/in the scorched queues of dying mouths" ... There is compassion, but no more lullabies for the children of Africa after the Soweto insurrection have lost all tears. In this work Gwala can still self-deprecate his art by calling himself a "sharpwitted writer/far better on essays than on poems", but by 1985 poetic essays he develops in "*Exiles Within*" are of a breathtaking intensity.

In a poem like "*New Dawn*", Gwala creates a remarkable sense of rhythm within his "donnered" English, so that each line out with tremendous authority to deliver what is in essence a castigation and a diatribe against the real trends of black middle-classism –

its spurious consumerism, its new “academic crawl” in a “*New Dawn*”, where the “Furher wears a black mask”. Gwala is caught in the night fighting against such a dispensation, but it is a night of also crawling as he waits, “my belly to the grassy ground”, and in this state and from this darkness he dreams of another dawn, as the Casspirs haunt the township. Listen to the night:

“Tonight, this echoless night
Like a dried cistern,
A night so quiet;
It’s the dry quiet of a pod
Shed of its seeds by the wintry winds
But I have seen carnations of Truth before,
Sniffed the red roses of hope
As my country bends
With the grey dawn wind.
I hear hisses of the mamba

As the browning leaves rattle
Like a kettle on the boil.
The Afrika wind smiles at me
and kisses the willow tree
so full of red bloom promises:
By the summer the red blossom
will cast my ears to whispers
of a future wrested.”

The landscape we are left with is still harsh and many of our poets are experiencing a new “exile within”, as the blackwhite discourse gains prominence and the dashiki that Gwala laughed at with such guttural joy has been replaced by the penguin suit. Many too are still waiting for the “tornado or for something to snap”. We need to restore Soho Eckstein and the Fuhrer with the black mask once again. We have to revisit the meanings of liberation and their metanarratives and the craft they implied, because there is a future to be wrested away from greed and need. It has always been the poet who has allowed us to dream of the festival,

Gwala, often jazzhappy, often black and furious, needs to be remembered for such a social service in the arts of resistance.

Biblio.

Mafika Pascal Gwala's, two volumes were published by Ravan Press in 1977 and 1982 respectively. *Exiles Within*, was put together under the banner of *Writers'Forum*. And was self-published in Cape Town in 1986. *Musho!* Was published by Michigan State University. What he thought of the emerging worker and popular democratic movement of the 1980s is in *Staffrider* vol 7 no. 1.(1988).

My traditions piece was first published by *Writers'Notebook* in Durban 1990, before Liz Gunner pulled it in to her special edition of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* in 1991. Lesego Rampolokeng's interview with Mafika Gwala was published last year in *Chimurenga Mag*.

For those in doubt about Soho's prowess in Kentridge's work, please revisit his great animations of the late 1980s and late 1990s.