


  

# Footnote on Hofmeyr

The historical analysis of any literature needs a theoretical framework to be meaningful, just as theoretical sophistication without reference to a specific historical base is mere frippery. As Isabel Hofmeyr and I agree about the necessity for a materialist critical approach to South African literature, and the dangers of reductionism by 'vulgar' proponents of this approach, I see our articles as in some ways complimentary.

Mine was meant as a study of historical events, concerned in the main with analysing writers' class positions and the changes in general literary form. I did not wish to give general guidelines for materialist criticism, and she has filled this gap. We both tend to err in different ways: I make too close a correlation between writing and political organisations, or between ideology and art. She makes a few historical mistakes and misconceives the full definition of class. (For example, it is not indicative to compare the formal aspects of the work of R.R.R. Dhlomo with a novel written at least twenty years later by Dikobe, and J.T. Jabavu's petty-bourgeois class position is not contradictory to his acting as an ideological functionary of the Cape liberals at the historical conjuncture in question).

The following is a brief summary of a few specific problems with both articles.



## Literary Mode of Production?

I had previously understood the debate on modes of production simply pertained to whether the concept could be applied to a whole social formation or to the entire economic level of a social formation. The use made of it here puzzles me.

Is the 'literary mode of production' a useful term or a confusing one?

After all, the publishing industry consists of labourers, non-labourers and means of production: it employs workers, uses capital, produces and circulates books, etc. However, the term 'mode of production' keys itself upon the materialist premise that the economy as a whole is crucial in the determinance of a social formation. 'Mode of production' does not refer to a sector of production but to the economy itself:

"My view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised, and to which definite social forms of thought correspond; that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political and intellectual life generally..." (Marx, Capital Vol 1. My emphasis.)

"A mode of production is an articulated combination of relations and forces of production structured by the dominance of the relations of production. The relations of production define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour and the specific form of social distribution of the means of production corresponding to that mode of appropriation of surplus-labour." (Hindess & Hirst, 1975)

Modes of production differ in the mode of appropriation of surplus-labour, which in turn has conditions or effects most importantly at the level of the relations of production. According to Hindess & Hirst, each variant form must be able to be constructed as a distinct and determinate articulated combination of relations and forces of production: no simple juxtaposition of a set of relations and a set of forces will give us anything but an arbitrary variation, distorting the concept.

'Literary production' at present obviously exists only as interlinked in the wider capitalist mode of production. I would argue that many recently coined modes of production (industrial mode of production, Durban mode of production, literary mode of production) are mistaken in conception. This error in terminology can be due to arbitrary variation or to a technicist understanding of the word 'production'.

However, if Hofmeyr is talking about 'production and circulation of books, access to publishing, libraries etc.' she has hit on a crucial and fascinating area of research. The BMSC library in Eloff Street would seem to have been an important means of access to books for black writers, for instance, if Peter Abrahams' Tell Freedom is anything to go by.



### Eurocentric Tendencies

Hofmeyr points out the problems and pitfalls of accepting European

theorists wholesale in African literature. These theorists are dealing with a centuries' old tradition of written literature, quite apart from the effect their own critical and cultural prejudices have on their work. In South Africa we are concerned with a relatively recent written black literature. This emerged out of the interplay of oral and written forms and African and European culture and was, until fairly recently, practically unknown and undervalued even within this country.

For example, the work of Eliot, Pound and Yeats in Europe is highly mediated. By contrast, early written Xhosa literature is less mediated: the connection between class position and ideology is very apparent. It is less accurate, of course, to make a close content-correlation much later in time between the poems of Dhlomo and Nhlapo and the political manoeuvrings of the ANC. In the forties we have to account for a greater accretion of written literature and an extremely complex intersection of historical themes.

Nevertheless the politics-art connection in Africa is still far closer than in modern Europe. Not all art need be political, but African art is often crucially politically linked. We need only look at the influence of the black consciousness movements on poetry in recent history here. I agree with Hofmeyr's criticisms in principle: I do not always agree with her specifically.

In addition, the fact that some concepts pertaining to the ideological level of the social formation first grew out of studies of European 'normal' capitalist states should be borne in mind. In other societies such concepts must be elaborated with the greatest care, if they are used at all. For instance, to what extent can it be said that the 'hegemonic fraction' of the dominating classes succeeds in imposing its ideology on the dominated classes of modern South Africa? It is important to subject all cultural, ideological and art analysis in African social formations to the closest theoretical and historical scrutiny before use.



#### The Writer and Apartheid

The criticism of the rather unco-ordinated aspects of this section in my article is often apt. It sought to emphasise the class position of the young black writers of the fifties vis-a-vis the mass by reference to their own often confused self-perceptions, e.g. Ezekiel Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane. The black petty-bourgeoisie during the fifties and early sixties found that class alliances upwards (with any fraction of the bourgeoisie) became very difficult, and this is perhaps why they see themselves as 'proletarian' writers.

There is some continuity in their work with what went before, particularly in journalistic influences, flirtation with white liberals and class position (Mphahlele and Gordimer notwithstanding). But I must draw attention again to the consciousness they had of their own uniqueness. Thus, 'breaking with the previous written literature, without literary heroes or moral examples, they set out to forge a new literary tradition' paraphrases Lewis Nkosi.

There is some significance in the way the young writers saw themselves as cut off from their own previous literature. Before the 'wave' of black literature starting in the late 40s with Abrahams and Mphahlele most black writers still had some working knowledge of traditional literature, with the immediate exception of Herbert Dhlomo. It is also with the writing of the fifties and sixties that the vast majority of works published are, for the first time, written in English. (1)

The emergence of these young writers more or less coincides with the appearance of apartheid. Without positing a cause-effect relationship between the two, it is tempting to speculate that both are in some way connected with the huge increase in black urbanisation during World War II (resulting in the enormously overcrowded squatter camps, the ~~Sofaxake~~ movement, and so on) and the looming crisis in the South African state at the time.

### 'Township English'

This is a vague and confusing term. The raciness of language in Can Themba's stories or the Drum columns of Matshikiza and Motsisi ('the black Damon Runyon') is a far cry from more recent examples of 'township English', which demonstrate the special dialect resulting from the mixing of languages in the townships. (see Mutloase's poem 'Don't Lock Up Our Sweethearts' and Sepamla's 'Statement: the dodger' and 'Mnta kazibani-bani'.)

### Publishing: the Racket

It is only with the burgeoning in publication of African literature in the last two or three decades that its sources of control have become opaque. Before that, production and output were small and mainly controlled by the church and white liberals. The whole process of marketing of South African literature at home and abroad (often done simultaneously) is now of some significance. Questions as to who decides

what will sell, what 'image' is marketable, what interests the 'experts' on South African literature represent need to be asked. This is particularly interesting in the heady atmosphere of 'relevance' and 'commitment' in which so many bourgeois and petty-bourgeois writers in this country today publish.

1970s

Black artists are apparently increasingly concerned where their work is directed. Groups as diverse as poetry workshops (see Donga 7, 1977) and the Soweto Arts Association aim at facilitating and encouraging the work of black artists in many fields:

"The aim is to prevent the exploitation of Black artists by the town gallery system and to return the Black people to their base in their own culture. We want the guy next door to see works such as these - after all, he inspired them. Even the little kids from the creches should see art. We want to plant flowers in the ghetto" (Themba ka Miya, SOARTA chairman. Quoted Sunday Express 16/10/77)

Young black poets from Soweto have in conversation shown increasing antagonism to anyone who publishes at all. ("Anyone who publishes is suspect.") This extreme position is, when applied to the big publishing houses and established system of patronage in South Africa, an insightful one. But whether this antagonism is due to class position, political differences or relative reward is in some cases unclear.

Poems are sometimes read at the funerals of students killed in Soweto. The religious nature, audience concentration and silence of these occasions have been discernible at some poetry readings as well. Of course, there is no link between traditional oral literature in South Africa and modern 'oral' Soweto poetry. The young poets are not reciting traditional praise poems - the present mode of delivery was initially dictated more by circumstances than by inclination, but has since lead to the full possibilities of this 'oral' form being explored. It should also be noted that, in a sense, movements such as Negritude, black consciousness, Garveyism and so forth imply a break with the past. The past is rediscovered and revalued for present political and cultural purposes.

It would be informative to find out to what extent black American literature has influenced black art and ideology in South Africa since the beginning of the century. At present a few of the young Soweto poets seem to have read the limited poetry available. Mtshali and Serote are at present studying in the USA, and Mothibi Mutloase has returned already. At least one or two exiled writers (like Keorapetse

Kgositsile) have been similarly affected.

Black poetry has in the last few months come very much under attack from official quarters: see Kruger's speech (Pretoria University) and Mulder's (Lichtenburg) in early October. The Security Police have also been interfering for some time with poetry readings in Soweto. This is due to the continuing need for fresh scapegoats by the establishment. Black poetry stands in danger of being distorted into a cause, rather than the effect which it is (2).

Drama has received scant attention from both Hofmeyr and myself. It is hoped that somebody will remedy this.

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1. When Hofmeyr says 'the writers had a finger in Houghton, they also had two feet in the mbaqanga world' she is mixing up class position/aspiration with biography. The question is not where these writers were, but where they wanted to be. What did they think literature and 'great art' should be? (influenced by the white liberal ideology of their day). Their autobiographies are informative in this matter: Themba and Oscar Wilde; Nkosi growing up on Dumas, Kingsley etc.; Abrahams and Shakespeare; Modisane's incessant quoting of Shakespeare and Omar Khayyam and his love of Mozart, Dylan Thomas and Leslie Charteris.

2. Subsequent events seem to confirm this view. It is realistic to say that the new wave of repression of black writing has by no means ended with the banning of the World and Medupe and yet another book of poetry (is a campaign analogous to the early 60s under way in this respect? It would seem so. "If we did not take the sort of action that we took in the early 1960s, if we did not act against individuals and organisations as we acted in the early 1960s, then you and I would not be sitting here tonight." - BJ Vorster at NP rally, Alberton. Quoted RDM 21/10/77.)

It is doubtful that the suppression of black expression will be as successful now as then however, in the context of the vastly different historical forces and pressures at work. There are also signs that black writers may not continue to bear the brunt on their own.

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