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## *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa*

NJABULO S. NDEBELE

(What follows was the keynote address at the conference on *New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change* held at the Commonwealth Institute in November 1984. Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* (Ravan Press, 1983) won the prestigious Noma Award for African Literature. It is shortly to be reissued by Longman in their Drumbeat Series)

The history of Black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle. The visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation appear to have prompted over the years the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation. One is reminded here of Roland Barthes's essay on wrestling. Some of Barthes's observations on the wrestling match seem particularly apposite.<sup>1</sup> 'The virtue of all-in wrestling,' Barthes opens his essay, 'is that it is the spectacle of excess.'<sup>2</sup> It is the manifest display of violence and brutality that captures the imaginations of the spectators. Indeed, we have seen the highly organized spectacle of the political wrestling match of the South African social formation. Everything there has been mind-bogglingly spectacular: the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random massive pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation the ultimate symbol of which is the mining industry; the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations; the luxurious life-style of whites: servants, all encompassing privilege, swimming pools, and high commodity consumption; the sprawling monotony of architecture in African locations, which are the very picture of poverty and oppression. The symbols are all over: the quintessence of obscene social exhibitionism. And at the centre of it all, are the main actors: the aggressive Boer who has taken three centuries to develop the characteristics of the massive wrestler. It could be said, therefore, that the most outstanding feature of South African oppression is its brazen, exhibitionist openness. It is no wonder then, that the Black writer, sometimes a direct victim, sometimes a spectator, should have his imagination almost totally engaged by the spectacle before him.

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 15–25.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes, p. 15.

T. T. Moyana must have had this situation in mind when he pointed to the problematic relationship between art and objective reality in South Africa:

An additional difficulty to the creative artist in South Africa, especially the black writer, is that life itself is too fantastic to be outstripped by the creative imagination. Nkosi calls the theme of the absurd the theme of daily living in South. Indeed, many writers of the absurd school would find their plots too realistic to startle anybody into serious questioning of their deeper meaning. How would the quarrel over a bench in Edward Albee's *Zoo Story* startle anybody in a country where thousands of people have been daily quarrelling over who should sit on a particular park bench, and the country's parliament has had legislation on the matter? That's much more startling than Albee's little quarrel between two men. And Kafka himself would not have bettered the case told by Lewis Nkosi. He was arrested by a policeman who then phoned his superior to ask, 'What shall I charge him with?' Or the incident of a white man and a coloured woman who were tried for being caught kissing. The court got bogged down over the question of whether the kiss was 'platonic or passionate.' One reporter who covered the case for a local newspaper wrote: 'Lawyers and laymen are certain that the Minister of Justice will now have to consider an amendment to the law which will define the various degrees of kissing from the platonic to the passionate'.<sup>3</sup>

What is on display here, is the spectacle of social absurdity. The necessary ingredients of this display are precisely the triteness and barrenness of thought, the almost deliberate waste of intellectual energy on trivialities. It is, in fact, the 'emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs, (the) exhaustion of the content by the form.'<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming form is the method of displaying the culture of oppression to the utmost in bewilderment.

A very brief review of Black South African writing in English will reveal the glaring history of spectacular representation. The stories of R. R. R. Dhlomo, for example, are characterized by tightness of plot, emphasis on the most essential items of plot, the predominance of dialogue, and sudden, almost unexpected shocking endings, all of which are the ingredients of dramatic writing.<sup>5</sup> Dhlomo is interested only in the outward, obvious signs of individual or social behaviour. Causality is a matter of making simple connections in order to produce the most startling and shocking results. There is very little attempt to delve into intricacies of motive or social process. People and situations are either very good or very bad. Those who are bad, invariably used as the focus of moral lesson, either come to a well deserved bad end, or dramatically abandon their evil ways overnight. And so, Dhlomo takes us, in this highly dramatic manner, through the working conditions in the mines, through the physical and moral squalor of Prospect Township, and through the sophisticated domestic life of young African couples playing with the game of love.

In *Drum Magazine*, we see a similar penchant for the spectacular, although the symbols are slightly different. It is not so much the symbols of oppression that we see in most of the stories in *Drum*, but those showing the growth of sophisticated urban working and petty-bourgeois classes. The literary ingredients for the dramatic in these stories are: pacey style, suspenseful plots with the unexpected ending, characters speaking like Americans, dressed like them, and driving American cars.

<sup>3</sup> T. T. Moyana, 'Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa', in *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed., C. Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 95–6.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> See *English In Africa*, March 1975, Vol. 12, No. 1.

Perhaps the detective story serials of Arthur Mogale typify this kind of writing. Detective Morena is a self-made man, confident, fast talking, and quick thinking, playing the game of wits with his adversaries. He wins. Clearly, it is the spectacle of phenomenal social change and the growing confidence of the urban African population that we see being dramatized here.

It might be asked why the vast majority of these stories in *Drum* show an almost total lack of interest in the directly political issues of the time. After all, the Nationalists had just acquired power in 1948 and were busy 'putting the Kaffirs in their place.' The writers of these stories seemed keen only to tell fantastic stories so that readers could enjoy themselves much. They were pushed forward in their writings in order to indulge the lively imagination of the urban population. They reflected the tremendous energy that was generated in the urban areas of South Africa. But going hand-in-hand with these stories was a very lively journalism: the investigative journalism of Henry Nxumalo, for example, revealed much of the gross ugliness of economic exploitation in South Africa. The covering of strikes and political meetings was done in a highly spectacular journalistic fashion. There seemed no confusion at this time between the language of exposition on the one hand, the language of creative writing on the other. Creative writers simply titillated the readers with good stories, and the journalists concentrated on their work, writing about politics, sports, fashion, etc. What was common though, was the penchant for spectacular representation or reporting. The thick lines of spectacle were drawn with obvious relish.

At the end of the fifties, and following the banning of the ANC and the PAC, we begin to see the emergence of what has been called Protest Literature. This kind of writing follows the disillusionment that came in the wake of the bannings of the major political organizations. Here we see the return to the concerns of Dhlomo. We see the dramatic politicization of creative writing in which there is a movement away from the entertaining stories of *Drum*, towards stories revealing the spectacular ugliness of the South African situation in all its forms: the brutality of the Boer, the terrible farm conditions, the phenomenal hypocrisy of the English speaking liberal, the disillusionment of educated Africans, the poverty of African life, crime, and a host of other things. The bulk of the stories of James Matthews, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Webster Makaza, and others falls into this category.

Picking out a story at random, we shall find the firm outlines of this kind of writing. 'Coffee for the Road', a story by Alex La Guma, is about an Indian woman and her children driving through the Karroo on a long tiring journey to Cape Town. The strain of driving, and the lack of social amenities for Blacks to provide rest along the way are described vividly by La Guma:

The mother had been driving all night and she was fatigued, her eyes red, with the feeling of sand under the lids irritating the eyeballs. They had stopped for a short while along the road, the night before; parked in a gap off the road outside a small town. There had been nowhere to put up for the night: the hotels were for Whites only. In fact, only Whites lived in these towns and everybody else, except for the servants, lived in tumbledown mud houses in the locations beyond. Besides, they did not know anybody in this part of the country.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Alex La Guma 'Coffee for the Road', in *Modern African Stories*, eds. Ellis Ayitey Komey and Ezekiel Mphahlele, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 85–94.

The glaring contrasts are put there before us together with the very *obvious* explanation for their existence. The similarity to another dramatic story is evident here: the heavily pregnant Mary being turned away from every inn until the baby Jesus was born in a simple manger. The difference is that in La Guma's story there is no relief for the woman and her children. But it is the *ritualistic* enactment and the drawing of significant meaning that is at the aesthetic centre of these two stories.

The landscape is described in such a manner as to intensify the spectacle of meaning before us:

The landscape ripped by, like a film being run backwards, red-brown, yellow-red, pink-red, all studded with sparse bushes and broken boulders. To the east a huge outcrop of rock strata rose abruptly from the arid earth, like a titanic wedge of purple-and-lavender-layered cake topped with chocolate-coloured boulders. The car passed over a stretch of gravel road and the red dust boiled behind it like a flame-shot smoke-screen. A bird, its long, ribbon-like tail streaming behind it, skimmed the brush beyond the edge of the road, flitting along as fast as the car.

The symbolic barrenness of the landscape cannot be missed. The travellers pass a 'group of crumbling huts, like scattered, broken cubes;' and 'in a hollow near the road' they see 'a bank of naked, dusty, brown children.' They see three black men trudging 'in single file along the roadside, looking ahead into some unknown future, wrapped in tattered dusty blankets, oblivious of the heat, their heads shaded by the ruins of felt hats.'

But finally, they have to stop at a white town 'Just some place in the Karroo' in order to refill their coffee flask. Ignoring a 'foot-square hole where non-Whites were served,' the Indian mother simply walks into a cafe on the White side. The description of the White woman behind the counter is done with spectacular relish:

Behind the glass counter and a trio of soda fountains a broad, heavy woman in a green smock thumbed through a little stack of accounts, ignoring the group of dark faces pressing around the square hole in the side wall. She had a round-shouldered, thick body and reddish-complexioned face that looked as if it had been sand-blasted into its component parts: hard plains of cheeks and knobbly cheek-bones and a body ridge of nose that separated twin pools of dull grey; and the mouth a bitter gash, cold and malevolent as a lizard's chapped and serrated pink crack.

The very picture of a female ogre! Her response to the Indian woman's request for coffee is equally dramatic:

The crack opened and a screech came from it, harsh as the sound of metal rubbed against stone. 'Coffee? My Lord Jesus Christ!' the voice screeched. 'A bedamned *coolie* girl in here!' The eyes started in horror at the brown, tired, handsome Indian face with its smart sun-glasses, and the city cut of the tan suit. 'Coolies, Kaffirs and Hottentots outside,' she screamed. 'Don't you bloody well know? And you talk *English*, too, hey!'

The response of the Indian woman in heroically sudden, unpremeditated and spectacularly proper in its justice:

The mother stared at her, startled, and then somewhere inside her something went off, snapped like a tight-wound spring suddenly loose, jangling shrilly into action, and she cried out with disgust as her arm came up and the thermos flask hurled at the white woman.

At this point, it might be best to leave to the imagination of the reader what damage was inflicted on the white woman by the flask. But La Guma will not leave anything to imagination:

The flask spun through the air and, before the woman behind the counter could ward it off, it struck her forehead above an eyebrow, bounced away, tinkling as the thin glass inside the metal cover shattered. The woman behind the counter screeched and clapped a hand to the bleeding gash over her eye, staggering back. . . The dark faces at the square hatch gasped. The dark woman turned and stalked from the cafe in a rage.

Victory or retribution? It is bound to be one of the two, spectacularly drawn. Indeed, retribution follows. There is a road-block ahead:

A small riot-van, a Land Rover, its windows and spot light screened with thick wire mesh, had been pulled up half-way across the road, and a dusty automobile parked opposite to it, forming a barrier with just a car-wide space between them. A policeman in khaki shirt, trousers and flat cap leaned against the front fender of the automobile and held a Sten-gun across his thighs. Another man in khaki sat at the wheel of the car, and a third policeman stood by the gap, directing the traffic through after examining the drivers.

We see the travellers for the last time as they are escorted back to town, a police car in front and behind, their car, for whatever retribution is to follow; 'You make trouble here then you got to pay for it.'

Everything in La Guma's story points to spectacle: the complete exteriority of everything: the dramatic contrasts all over the story, the lack of specificity of place and character so that we have spectacular ritual instantly turned into symbol, with instant meaning (no interpretation here is necessary: seeing is meaning), and the intensifying device of hyphenated adjectives. Is it germane to ask whether there ever can be such unaccountably terrible people as the white woman in the story, such unaccountably dignified women as the Indian woman, such barren landscape, such utter desolation? Where is causality? Such questions are irrelevant. Subtlety is deliberately unintended. What *is* intended is spectacular demonstration at all costs. What matters is what is seen. Thinking is secondary to seeing. Subtlety is secondary to obviousness. What is finally left and deeply etched in our minds is the spectacular contest between the powerless and the powerful. Most of the time the contest ends in horror and tragedy for the powerless. But sometimes there are victories, but such victories are always proportionally secondary to the massively demonstrated horror that has gone before.

It needs only be stated briefly that spectacular representation is not confined to fiction; it is there in painting and sculpture where we are most likely to see grotesque figures in all kinds of contortions indicative of agony. In poetry, it will suffice to quote some lines from Denis Brutus's famous poem.

The sounds begin again;  
the siren in the night  
the thunder at the door  
the shriek of nerves in pain.

Then the keening crescendo  
of faces split by pain  
the wordless, endless wail  
only the unfree know.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond that, we can find the culture of the spectacular in *mbaqanga* music, in free-style township dance, even in football, where spectacular display of individual talent is often more memorable, more enjoyable, and ultimately more desirable than the final score.

Much of this writing has been denounced as unartistic, crude, and too political. There was more politics in it than art. In defence of the writing, it was asserted that there was nothing wrong with politics in literature because everything in South Africa, anyway, is political.<sup>8</sup> Both positions, it seems to me, miss the mark. As far as the former position is concerned, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike have comprehensively documented how a powerful Eurocentric school of criticism of African Literature has imposed on the literature evaluations based on false assumptions.<sup>9</sup> Such assumptions never enabled the critics using them to understand the real nature of much of what African Literature was doing and what its methods were. The same goes for the criticism of what has come to be known as Protest Literature in South Africa.

The fact of the matter is that once we begin to see an artistic convention emerging, once we see a body of writing exhibiting similar characteristics, we must attempt to identify its origins, its methods of operation, and its *effective* audience. Such factors will establish the validity of the writing. The writing will validate itself in terms of its own primary conventions; in terms of its own emergent, complex system of aesthetics. The whole plain of aesthetics here involves the transformation of objective reality into conventional tropes which become the predominant means by which that objective reality is artistically ritualized. The aesthetic validity of this literature to its own readership lies precisely in the readers' recognition of the spectacular rendering of a familiar oppressive reality. We have seen the South African origins of this literature, we have also had a glimpse of its methods in the La Guma Story, but what of its audience?

The question of the audience for this 'protest literature' is a problematic one. Conventional wisdom proclaims that the literature was premised on its supposed appeal to the conscience of the white oppressor: 'If the oppressor sees himself as evil, he will be revolted by his negative image, and will try to change.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the class position of most of the writers, the publications in which their writings appeared, the levels of literacy in English among the African population would *objectively* point a white audience: an English speaking liberal one at that. But that audience, schooled under a Eurocentric literary tradition, was in turn, schooled to reject this literature 'meant' for them. They rejected both the methods of representation as well as the

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Brutus, *A Simple Last*, (London: Heinemann AWS, 1973) p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Mbulelo Mzamane, 'Politics and Literature in Africa: A Review', *Staffrider* Vol. 3, No. 4, December/January, 1980; pp. 43–5.

<sup>9</sup> Chinweizu et al. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* Vol. I., (Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, 1980).

content. Where they yielded to accept the validity of the content, they emphasized the crudeness of method. But what of the audience for whom this literature was not 'objectively' meant? What about the *effective* audience?

We are familiar with how in the days when South Africa still participated in world soccer international teams visited the country for games. We are familiar with the spectacle of how African fans always cheered the visiting team against the white South African side. It happened in rugby too. It seems reasonable to assume that, at least at the populist level, if all Black South Africans could read this 'protest literature', they would naturally take sides much to their aesthetic delight. The Indian woman in La Guma's story would be cheered, while the white woman and the white policeman would be detested. The black audience in the story itself is described as having 'gasped', probably in shock. But I am also certain that this was the response of having witnessed the unexpected. Inwardly, they must have experienced a delightful thrill at this 'great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice.'<sup>10</sup> To evoke this response, the literature works this way: the more the brutality of the system is dramatized, the better; the more exploitation is revealed and starkly dramatized, the better. The more the hypocrisy of liberals is revealed, the better. Anyone, whose sensibility has not been fashioned by such conditions will find such spectacular dramatization somewhat jarring. In the same way that Western dancers of the waltz found African dancing 'primitive', the aesthetics of reading this literature, for the Black reader, is the aesthetics of recognition, understanding, historical documentation, and indictment. All these go together. For the white audience, on the other hand, what has been called 'protest literature' can, to borrow from Brecht, be considered a spectacular 'alienation effect'; a literature that refuses to be enjoyed precisely because it challenges 'conventional' methods of literary representation, and that it painfully shows up the ogre to himself.

Why the misnomer 'protest?' The misnomer devalues the literature as art since 'protest' carries the implications of political *and* specifically *expository* declaration of dissent. The misnomer is obviously taken from the concept of 'politics of protest.' But his literature, while definitely labouring under the pressure of the expository intention, deliberately sets out to use conventions of fiction not of exposition. To call it 'protest literature' is to deny it any literary and artistic value: and those values are to be found in the phenomenon of the spectacle. On this basis, it should be clear why I said above that even those who have come in defence of this literature have fallen into the same trap. They defiantly said: if you accuse us of being political hard luck, that's what our writing is going to be because that is what the conditions dictate. The fault is not so much in the statement itself, but in the assumption that the statement reinforces. It reinforces the expository intention without establishing its own evaluative literary grounds.

We can now summarize the characteristics of the spectacular in this context. The spectacular, documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, p. 19.



through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it.

Every convention will outlive its validity. Judging from some of the new writing that has emerged recently from the South African townships, one can come to the conclusion that the convention of the spectacular has run its course. Its tendency either to devalue or to ignore interiority has placed it firmly in that aspect of South African society that constitutes its fundamental weakness. South African society, as we have seen, is a very *public* society. It is public precisely in the sense that its greatest aberrations are fully exhibited. One effect of this is the suppression of deep-rooted individual as well as social fears. But not only fears are suppressed: the deepest dreams for love, hope, compassion, newness and justice, are also sacrificed to the spectacle of group survival. Rationality is never used for the refinement of sensibility, even for the group itself, but for the spectacular consolidation of group power at all costs. Ultimately, South African culture, in the hands of whites, the dominant force, is incapable of nurturing a civilization based on the perfection of the individual in order to permit maximum social creativity. Consequently, we have a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations. It is totally heroic. Even the progressive side has been domesticated by the hegemony of spectacle. For example, it will lambast interiority in character portrayal as so much bourgeois subjectivity. The entire ethos permits neither inner dialogue with the self, nor a social public dialogue. It breeds insensitivity, insincerity and delusion. We all know how, at least in the last twenty-five years of my fully conscious life, South Africa was always going to be free in the next five years: a prediction that is the very essence of the culture of spectacle. The powerful, on the other hand, have been convinced that they will rule forever. Clearly, the culture of the spectacular, in not permitting itself of the growth of complexity, has run its course.

I now want to introduce some of the new work that seems to me to break with this tradition of spectacle. It is as if these writers have said; the spectacular ethos has been well documented and is indelibly a deep aspect of our literary and national history. There should be no anxiety that its legitimate political springs are about to run dry. The water will continue to flow, only it is destined to become sweeter, if only because more life-sustaining minerals, the minute essences, will have been added to it. The three stories to be used as examples of this new trend significantly emerge out of the tense and bitter aftermath of the mass uprising and mass killings of June 16, 1976, another spectacle among spectacles. I want to look at 'The Conversion' by Michael Siluma,<sup>11</sup> 'Man Against Himself' by Joel Matlou,<sup>12</sup> and 'Mamlambo' by Bheki Maseko.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Staffrider*, Vol. 2, No. 4 November/December 1979, pp. 6–8.

<sup>12</sup> *Staffrider*, Vol. 2, No. 4 November/December, 1979, pp. 24–8.

<sup>13</sup> *Staffrider*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1982 pp. 22–7.

Siluma consciously participates in the spectacle tradition as he opens his story:

A heavily bandaged head; a puffed-up shiny black face with swollen black eyes reduced to mere slits; a mouth with swollen and broken front teeth. This was the picture in Mxolisi's mind when he entered the bedroom, trying to imagine what his cousin John looked like after what had reportedly befallen him three days before.

There are several other conventional symbols of oppression: John has lost his pass and since he is Xhosa speaking, he is referred to his Bantustan in order to fix his papers. But more immediately, John, a Bachelor of Science graduate working as a computer programmer for an American company, has been short changed by an unscrupulous 'Portuguese or Greek' café owner patronized at lunch time by 'labourers from a nearby construction site.' When John demands his correct change he is urged on by the workers to fight for his rights. He does so, and is severely beaten up by the café owner. A clear case of injustice drawn with all the customary details! The disillusioned figure of an educated African in South African fiction has long become a trope for the illustration of injustice. But there, Siluma parts with tradition.

As John recounts to his visiting cousin, Mxolisi, what took place, we note the tone of self-pity in him. He refers to what happens to him as 'strange things.' But Mxolisi is impatient with this self-pity. There is nothing 'strange' really about what happened to John. It is the experience of African people all the time in South Africa. Bitter with remorse and self-pity, John wants to avenge himself:

'You know, I feel like going back to that bloody white man's café and smashing all the windows. Then he could do his damndest,' John thundered, for a moment forgetting the pain in his body.

Traditionally this would be the moment for cheering him for he will have fulfilled the demands of spectacular justice. But Mxolisi is not impressed:

'You argue like a child, John. Look man. There are thousands and thousands of white people with mentalities like that cafe owner's. Smashing his windows might, according to you, serve the purpose of teaching him a lesson. But the others like him might still do the same thing he did to you, perhaps even killing you this time. Apart from satisfying your desire for revenge I still insist that your smashing his windows cannot solve the problem.

The problem, Mxolisi, argues, can only be solved by the unity of the 'discriminated against' through organized struggle. John must join the struggle.

'Unity, my cousin. Only when we are united as people who are discriminated against can we manage to solve the problem. We must never think that because we are B.Sc. or B.A. graduates and can earn lots of money that we are immune from the sufferings other Black people are forced to endure. We must remember that it is only a matter of WHEN we shall come face to face with these problems, just as you have now.

'Only a few months ago I invited you to a Hero's Day commemoration service and you told me you were not a politician. I hope what has happened to you knocks some commonsense into your so-called educated head.'

We notice immediately that Siluma has moved away from merely reflecting the situation of oppression, from merely documenting it, to offering methods for its redemptive transformation. His story combats, among other things, the tendency to

resort to self-pity by the powerless when their situation seems hopeless. His approach is dispassionately analytical. He de-romantizes the spectacular notion of struggle by adopting an analytical approach to the reality before him. For example, the system is seen to use words to validate falsehood: 'The people at the office of the Plural Relations (formerly Bantu Affairs Commissioner, formerly Native Affairs Commissioner. . .)' The same institution is given the false impression of having changed by the mere changing of its name. We have an example here of the manipulation of reality with language. The effect of this realization is also to reveal that *rationality can be detected behind the brutality of the system*. Previously, it was easy and falsely comforting to portray the enemy as being irrational.<sup>14</sup> Also John's self-delusion is shattered. Just because he has a good job at an American company, he thinks he has made it, and is free from the problems of his own people. In reality, he has been bought, and turned into a false symbol of legitimation. Thirdly, we learn that knowledge of the existence of oppression does not necessarily enable one to fight it. For example, the fellow Africans at the café, after having urged John to fight on do not help him when he is being severely beaten up in their presence by the café owner. People, without being actually organized, will not necessarily go out to fight for their rights. The story then, can be seen to work at various levels of analysis.

Siluma has gone beyond spectacle in order to reveal the necessary knowledge of actual reality so that we can purposefully deal with it. The manner in which the story is told reflects its own intentions. The analytical ability of Mxolisi is reflected in the manner in which the story is told so that the story itself is a demonstration of its own intentions. It is an analytical story; a story designed to deliberately break down the barriers of the obvious in order to reveal new possibilities of understanding and action. In other words, Siluma has *rediscovered the ordinary*. In this case, the ordinary is defined as the opposite of the spectacular. The ordinary is sobering rationality; it is the forcing of attention on necessary detail. Paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness. Mongane Serote typifies this attitude in the following words:

child  
if you stop weeping, you may see  
because that is how knowledge begins.<sup>15</sup>

Where before the South African reality was a symbol of spectacular moral wrong, it is now a direct object of change.

'Man Against Himself' by Joel Matlou forces onto us a terrible problem. If there is a sense of the ordinary that is the very antithesis of spectacle, it is to be found in this story. It displays a sense of the ordinary that may be frustrating and even exasperating. This is a kind of initiation story in which a young man in search of work, is advised to go and look for work at a mine, and there, he grows suddenly into a man. His journey to the mine is a long odyssey of suffering until he gets to the mine where he undergoes further suffering, and humiliation. The terrible working

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Heribert Adam, *Modernizing Racial Domination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Mongane Serote, *Tsetlo*, (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1974), p. 10.

conditions at the mine are amply revealed. The problem we have to deal with in this story is how a man who has undergone such brazen and humiliating exploitation should emerge from the entire experience feeling triumphant.

When he receives his pay, he remarks: 'The money was ninety-six rands. It was for my own work. I risked my life and reason for it.' And as he is leaving the mine, returning home, his money in his pockets, he thinks:

I just thrust it (the money) into my empty pocket and walked out of the main gate towards the bush to free myself. That time life was not endless but everlasting. The earth was once supposed to be flat. Well, so it is, from Hlatini to Northam. That fact does not prevent science from proving that the earth as a whole is spherical. We are still at the stage that life is flat – the distance from birth to death. Yet the probability is that life, too, is spherical and much more extensive and capacious than the hemisphere we know.

Here is deeply philosophical contemplation. Here is the discovery of complexity in a seemingly ordinary and faceless worker. For this faceless worker, life is complex. There is a lot to it than the inherent simplifications of spectacle. Even under oppression, there are certain fundamental lessons:

Suffering taught me many things. . . Suffering takes a man from known places to unknown places. Without suffering you are not a man. You will never suffer a second time because you have learned to suffer.

And right at the end of the story is the triumph more graphically expressed:

I learned to forget yesterdays and to think of tomorrows. Each morning in the township, I said to myself: 'today is a new life.' I overcame my fear of loneliness and my fear of want. I am happy and fairly successful now and have a lot of enthusiasm and love for life. I know now that I shall never again be afraid of sleeping under a tree alone, regardless of what life hands me. I don't have to fear blasting. I know that I can live one day at a time and that every day is a time for a wise man.

And what powerful writing Matlou can unleash! Listen to him when he sees beautiful girls on his return home:

When I saw the beautiful girls I thought of my own beautiful sweetheart, my bird of Africa, sea water, razor: green-coloured eyes like a snake, high wooden shoes like a cripple; with soft and beautiful skin, smelling of powder under her armpits like a small child, with black boots for winter like a soldier, and a beautiful figure like she does not eat, sleep, speak or become hungry. And she looks like an artificial girl or electric girl. But she was born of her parents, as I was.

A reader schooled in the tradition of spectacle may very well ask himself anxious questions: is the narrator a man labouring under a form of 'false consciousness?' Is this a man who has succumbed to the pressures of oppression and agreed to become a willing agent of the system? It is easy to disregard this story if the answer to these questions is 'yes.' Yet, would it be wise to do so? Can we easily dismiss the honesty, the piling up of detail, those brilliant flashes of philosophical revelation? Why is it that this man is not our proverbial miner (perhaps a figment of our bourgeois imagination?) who is supposed to present the image of a helpless, exploited victim? How do we account for this apparent ambiguity?

The Oral History Project at the National University of Lesotho has conducted numerous interviews with migrant workers, and has come up with a preliminary study of the group of Basotho who called themselves Russians: One particularly interesting informant declared:

I did not study. I just see blackness on these things, I can leave my letter at the post office not knowing that it is mine because I did not study. What I have is a natural sense that God gave me – and gifts – as for them they are many.<sup>16</sup>

His has been a life of jail, escape, fights, securing lawyers for the best defense, and a variety of jobs. Rantoa, comment the authors, 'is a man who has consciously developed a philosophy, a set of ideas, drawn from his own experience and which integrates his life and his understandings of it. . . His philosophy is not an abstract one, but emerges from concrete situations. He sees life as a struggle, a fight, in which one must always be consolidating one's forces, undermining the opposition, and developing a strategy which avoids the obvious, frontal attack and strikes where it is not expected.' The similarity of philosophy between Matlou's character and this real life informant is too striking to be ignored.

The political school of criticism will be exasperated by the seeming lack of direct political consciousness on the part of Matlou's character. But we must contend with the fact that even under the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying and struggling to maintain a semblance of normal social order. They will attempt to apply tradition and custom to manage their day to day family problems: they will resort to socially acquired behaviour patterns to eke out a means of subsistence. They apply systems of values that they know. Often those values will undergo changes under certain pressing conditions. The transformation of those values constitutes the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people.

The range of problems is ordinary enough but constitutes the active social consciousness of most people: will I like my daughter's boyfriends or prospective husband? how do I deal with my attraction to my friends' wife? what will my child become? Relatives can be a nuisance; someone I despise has bought a better car than mine; the principal is messing up the school, I'm going to try to be the next principal. The list is endless. We are confronted here with the honesty of the self in confrontation with itself. Literature can not give us lessons, but it can only provide a very compelling context for us to examine an infinite number of ethical issues which have a bearing on the sensitization of people towards the development of the entire range of culture?

So how do we deal with Matlou's character? The experience of working in the mines has a human dimension to it seldom accepted; a personal testimony that shatters the liberal image of pathetic sufferers. We are faced with the validity of his experience against the problematic nature of the method of experiencing. This is the kind of tension that is the very substance of narrative complexity. That the writer did not explore the ultimate implications of his materials is no doubt connected to his inexperience both as a writer and in the inadequacy of his education. But the

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane, *The Ma-Rashea: A Participant's Perspective*, (Unpublished paper).

significance of the story is that the writer has given us an honest rendering of the subjective experience of his character. There is no unearned heroism here, there is the unproclaimed heroism of the ordinary person.

Finally, the crux of the matter is that it is natural for us to want to condemn the obvious exploitative conditions of work in the mines. But we should be careful that that condemnation does not extend to condemning the necessity for work and the satisfaction that can result from it. Indeed, that aspect of Matlou's work which celebrates the values of work and experience should be rescued and separated from the conditions of exploitation in which that work is done. The necessary vilification of exploitation should be separated from the human triumph associated with work, a triumph which constitutes a positive value for the future. Matlou confronts us with the painful dialectic of suffering and the sense of redemption that can result from it.

We shall spend less space on the next story because I think the point has been made already. 'Mamlambo' is a story that participates in that aspect of the folk tradition that concerns luck. How does one come across the luck to push one towards success and the achievement of goals? One can turn to an *inyanga*, *isangoma*, to a faith healer or to other similar people who are believed to have control over the forces of nature. In this case, a woman, in the backyards of posh white suburbs in Johannesburg, has had no luck getting a regular partner. She turns to an *inyanga* who seems to live somewhere in the city too. The *inyanga* gives the woman Umamlabo, the mythical snake that brings luck to anyone who possesses it. Indeed, the woman gets a Malawian lover who marries her. But she has to pass on the snake. This she does in a most amusing manner. As the story ends, she sees below her, Johannesburg getting smaller and smaller as the plane takes to the sky on her way to Malawi.

Of the three stories, this is probably the most thematically ordinary. A woman simply wants to get a man. She desires the security of a lover, a husband. Yet what vibrancy of imagination is displayed by the writer! African folk culture has an independent life of its own right bang in the middle of 'civilization', of Western 'rationality'. The surrounding 'superior' civilization is rendered of no consequence whatsoever. It is as good as not there. The experience is accorded a validity that does not have to justify itself at all. Bheki Maseko's stories always remind me of Haitian painting: vibrant with colour, a combination of naturalistic and fantastic elements. Indeed, as Soyinka asserts,<sup>17</sup> the rational and non-rational constitute a single sphere of reality in African lore. Bheki Maseko's stories represent this living continuity between the past and the present. What we have here is a story of escape and fulfilment, but it is the imaginative cultural context evoked that is most memorable.

It now remains for us to draw some theoretical conclusions from the phenomenon before us. It should be stated from the onset that the overwhelming injustice inherent in the South African social formation is something that cannot be ignored under any circumstances. For this reason, it is natural to expect that people engaged in every human endeavour ought to make a contribution towards the eradication of injustice. The problem, as we have seen, is that it now appears as if the means of combating the situation have become too narrow and constricting. This weakness has been

<sup>17</sup> Wole, Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1978), p. 65.

premised on the demand that everything must make a spectacular political statement. According to this attitude, Maseko's and Matlou's stories could very easily be dismissed as irrelevant since they offer no obvious political insight. Even if Siluma's story could qualify, its message though, could easily be embraced at the expense of the sobering details such as given above. The habit of looking at the spectacle has forced us to gloss over the nooks and crannies.

The significance of these stories for me is that they point the way in which South African literature might possibly develop. By rediscovering the ordinary, the stories remind us necessarily, that the problems of the South African social formation are complex and all embracing; that they cannot be reduced to a single, simple formulation. In fact, one novel has already attempted an infusion of the ordinary into the spectacle. Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*<sup>18</sup> attempts to deal with the ordinary concerns of people while placing those problems within the broad political situation in the country. In the end, though, the spectacle takes over and the novel throws away the vitality of the tension generated by the dialectic between the personal and public.

These three stories remind us that the ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions. If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live. That means a range of complex ethical issues involving man-man, man-woman, woman-woman, man-nature, man-society relationships. These kinds of concerns are destined to find their way into our literature, making it more complex and richer. As the struggle intensifies, for example, there will be accidental deaths, missing children, loss of property, disruption of the general social fabric resulting in tremendous inconvenience. Every individual will be forced, in a most personal manner, to take a position with regard to the entire situation. The majority will be riddled with doubts. Yet, there will be those marked by fate to experience the tragedy of carrying their certitudes to the level of seeming fanaticism. It will be the task of literature to provide an occasion within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up. The revolution, as Lenin pointed out, will not necessarily take place out of every 'revolutionary situation'. Also essential is the subjective 'capacity of the revolutionary *class* to take the mass revolutionary actions that are strong enough to smash (or break up) the old government, which, not even in time of crises, will "fall" unless it is "dropped"'.<sup>19</sup> The new literature can contribute to the development of this subjective capacity of the people to be committed, but only on the basis of as complete a knowledge of themselves and the objective situation as possible. The growth of consciousness is a necessary ingredient of this subjective capacity.

It is germane at this point to point out that there are some serious weaknesses in the three stories discussed above. In 'Mamlambo' for example, the flight to Malawi does not really go together with the growth of consciousness on the part of the protagonist

<sup>18</sup> Mongane, Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Lenin, 'The Symptoms of a Revolutionary Situation', in *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 276.

on the very question of matrimony, on the question of luck, on the question of leaving to start a new life in Malawi. Matlou's character also, sees no social implications of his triumph beyond himself. What are the actual ultimate implications of his growth to maturity? The problem of course, is not entirely the writer's. Most are victims of Bantu Education which has deliberately stunted the intellectual growth of the average African child. Most of these writers, in a superhuman effort, read more outside of the deliberately narrow focus of the classroom. The more serious problem, because it is self-inflicted, is the fact that the intellectual tradition governing either politics or literature has not broadened the scope of its social interest. Political visions of the future have not reached art with sufficient, let alone, committed theoretical clarity.

Perhaps it was this realization that prompted Soyinka to observe that South African writers might yet be envied for their invidious position by their brothers up north.<sup>20</sup> Young writers appear to have taken up the challenge, albeit unwittingly. The possibilities are vast, for the human tragedy to be confronted, together with the immense challenging responsibility to create a new society, demand an uncompromisingly toughminded creative will to build a new civilization. And no civilization worth the name will emerge without the payment of disciplined and rigorous attention to detail.

<sup>20</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'The Writer in a Modern African State', in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, Per Wastberg ed., (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies), p. 15.