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Interview

Abstract

Kirsten Hoist Petersen interviewed Njabulu Ndebele at the African Writers' Conference in London in November, 1984.

10. Lucien Goldmann, 'Dialectical Materialism and Literary History', *New Left Review* 92 (1975), pp. 36-37.
11. Alan Swingewood, op. cit., p. 57.
12. Eddie Iroh, *Forty-eight Guns for the General* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 8.
13. Ibid., p. 110.
14. J.P. Clark, 'The Hero as a Villain', Inaugural lecture, University of Lagos, 1978, p. 15.
15. *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, p. 8.
16. See Basil Davidson, *Which Way Africa?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 148.
17. Chukwuemeka Ike, *Sunset at Dawn* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1976), p. 192.
18. Ibid., p. 14.
19. Ibid., p. 246.
20. John Munonye, *A Wreath for the Maidens* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 90.
21. Ibid., p. 148.
22. Ibid., p. 157.
23. Ibid., p. 190.

Njabulu Ndebele

INTERVIEW

Kirsten Holst Petersen interviewed Njabulu Ndebele at the African Writers' Conference in London in November, 1984.

Could you say something about literary developments among black writers in South Africa today.

I could make a beginning by saying that the history of black South African fiction is really the history of the short story. This was tied to the fact that most of the writing appeared in newspapers, literary journals or other kinds of magazines so the development of black South African fiction is part of the history of journalism. People have asked why the South Africans write short stories and not novels. I know that Mphahlele is

one of those who has said that it is because people do not have the leisure to write a novel and that their bitterness is so great sometimes that they want to get it out quickly, but I am not totally convinced by that argument. Those who have been writing in the indigenous languages have been writing novels from the beginning. Are we, then, to assume that they are less angry? I think that the crux of the matter has a lot to do with the sociology of the written word in South Africa. Publishers were available, and people were encouraged to write novels in the indigenous languages, but it is only recently that publishers have been willing to publish long works of fiction in English written by Africans. I am thinking of publishers like Donkers, Ravan Press, Jonathan Cape, and David Philip. The political and literary climate in South Africa at the moment is such that these publishing houses have a vested interest in encouraging the development of the novel. This, I think, is a much more plausible reason for the emergence of novels in English now.

This development means that writers are now becoming much more aware of the demands of the craft. The longer your story is, the more interested you are in it, and therefore the more concerned you become to maintain high levels of interest, high levels of tension in the plot, in the narrative. Otherwise you lose the reader, so you become more conscious of the need and means to play around with the fictional form in order to ensure your readers' interest. You become much more sensitive to the development of the plot, the characterization, the conflict in the story, etc. An example of this is *To Every Birth its Blood*, in which M.W. Serote plays around with the narrative point of view, and in Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirl-wind* you find an interest in plot. It is a kind of 'mission to kill' plot, and so this keeps the reader wanting to find out what happens at the end. Mbulelo Mzamane's *The Children of Soweto* represents an interesting experiment from the point of view of technique of fiction, although I don't think he succeeds entirely, but there is definitely a consciousness of form.

Would you think that I was entirely wrong if I said that To Every Birth its Blood seems a longer rewrite of Alex la Guma's A Walk in the Night with regard to both style and theme?

You are right that both novels are full of social detail, movements, sounds like dogs barking, feet hurrying, etc., but I think that the major difference would be that because Serote's book is longer, it obviously can say more, and it is also much more experimentally daring. I also think there is much more depth of character development in Serote's book.

Do you see it as a problem that you are dogged by this overwhelming theme of apartheid?

I think it dogs everybody, and everybody is trying to find a way of most effectively dealing with it, but for me the solution is by way of making a very clear distinction between the language of fiction and the language of political exposition, and it should be understood that the relationship between narrative and the real world is a metaphorical relationship. It is a relationship by analogy, not a one-to-one relationship. That means that the world of fiction is mediated by the complex resonances of language. The language of art is by definition a language that demands to be interpreted, it is supposed to induce contemplation and enjoyment.

Would you say that your poets have been more successful in making this distinction between reportage and literature?

I doubt it. I think that the poetry has shown a lot of raw anger. It is a poetry of protest. On the other hand, the fiction of protest has concentrated on the objective evidence of oppression, so in the one case the emphasis is inner, in the other it is external. The best writing, both of poetry and of fiction, is the writing in which the writer has depended on the rich expressions of the language of art to reach their audiences through the magic of connotations, metaphor, and irony.

In your lecture at this conference you said that you saw a present movement away from the protest theme towards a theme of affirmation, even towards something as absurd in South Africa as a possible joy in life. Could you comment on that?

Some people said after my lecture that there was a danger in my approach because it implies an acceptance of the situation. This is not at all true. What I was trying to say was that in any revolutionary situation sometimes people can understand grievance and the cause of it without actually doing anything about it. I agree with Lenin's analysis in an essay which is called 'The Revolutionary Situation' in which he says that sometimes people do not take advantage of a revolutionary situation, because people do not have the subjective readiness to actually do something about an objective wrong that they perceive. It seems to me that the new development in this literature is precisely creating and consolidating a subjective confidence which will enable people to have the will to go out with an inner commitment to smash the oppression that is keeping them down. So when I say that someone wakes up in the

morning and says 'I am ready for a new day', it is not an acceptance of oppression, but a recognition of inner resources which can allow him to be on top of the situation, and this I see as an inner triumph.

Do you see this as a reaction against the by now only too well known image of the black South African as oppressed and a victim, an object of sympathy?

I think that if there is one thing this literature can do, it is to get away — in a most welcome manner — from that image of a totally debased people whose only reason for existence is to receive the sympathy of the world. There is this total mental liberation that is taking place which, as I said, is perhaps not even conscious. It is a result of the black consciousness movement which, of course, in its theoretical aspect is a very conscious rejection. I think that most of the young writers are caught up in that process of re-evaluation.

In his lecture, when Njabulu Ndebele discussed the theme of affirmation, he referred in particular to Bheki Maseko and his story of 'Mamlambo', the snake no-one wanted. Bheki Maseko has kindly agreed to let us re-print his story.

Njabulu Ndebele's prize-winning collection of stories is reviewed in this issue of *Kunapipi*.

Editor