South Africa: Guest of honour amongst the uninvited newcomers to England's great tradition

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Abstract
South Africa occupies a place, not to be envied, with regard to her literature. On the one hand she poises, uncomfortably, in African literature: her discomfort caused by our knowledge that her internationally recognized writers are White. On the other, we occasionally see her artfully forcing her way in with Commonwealth literature in the unabashed manner of Israel's participation in the 'Song for Europe'.

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South Africa: Guest of Honour Amongst the Uninvited Newcomers to England's Great Tradition

South Africa occupies a place, not to be envied, with regard to her literature. On the one hand she poises, uncomfortably, in African literature: her discomfort caused by our knowledge that her internationally recognized writers are White. On the other, we occasionally see her artfully forcing her way in with Commonwealth literature in the unabashed manner of Israel’s participation in the ‘Song for Europe’.

The dilemma of where to place South African writing is caused by an unusual response to her writers. While White South African writing is constantly placed before the reading public (through interviews and reviews for newspapers, magazines, radio and television, adaptations for film and sound, and distribution of books in shops, public and university libraries), Black South African writing poses an awkward problem for librarians, booksellers, and teachers of literature. A walk around university and council libraries, chain-store and community bookshops provides evidence of the ‘guest of honour’ and the ‘uninvited guest’ handling of White and Black South African writers. Publishers have to be commended for the first. But what do we say to them about the second? Should the market for literature continue to be assessed on such obviously racial lines?

Virginia Woolf writing in A Room of One’s Own almost a century ago, suggests that the three factors which deter women from writing are a ‘lack of education’, the ‘lack of access to publishing’, and the ‘certainty that women would not make a living from writing’. Have these deterrents been removed for women writers in the 1980s? For Black women writers? For the exiled Black woman writer?

Once we recognize that publishers believe the Black writer to be
writing for Black readers, the question of earning a living from writing, a universal problem, is exacerbated for Black writers in exile. White South African writers who live and write in South Africa are guaranteed an audience there and here. Black South African writers who are in exile know that their works are not circulated in South Africa, and that any market basing itself on the Black reading public in England will restrict publication of their work. The situation of the Black South African woman, *writing to earn a living in England*, has never been touched upon by any discussion of women writers’ or African writers’. Because it is the situation I am coping with, it is of concern to me.

I am an Indian and a Roman Catholic. These two facts were my passport out of South Africa and into Pius XII University College in Lesotho: there was no separate university for Indians when I matriculated, and the Separate Universities Bill was already in force.

At sixteen I travelled to Lesotho, then on to Zimbabwe, and finally to Zambia. These decisions were made without interference from my family, though they knew I’d be going to each of these countries without accompanying friends. The experience of ‘Roma’, in Lesotho, next to the freedom which the women and men in my family allowed my sisters and me, influenced my perspective of South Africa, and my attitude to male dominance. Ten years in independent Zambia added to what is now for me a matter of principle never to subscribe to the apartheid system by my mere presence there. Coming to England was a decision I opposed, but I was faced with the alternative of returning to South Africa — as a man’s unaccompanied baggage?

In Zambia I’d been teaching and writing articles for young people intended to provide them with a background to African history before colonialism. The usual procedure for any teacher coming to Britain is to apply for qualified teacher status. The Department of Education and Science withheld this from me ‘for the time being’, while granting it to some other South Africans. The effect on me was one of a tremendous loss of self-confidence.

Any woman forced to live in an environment where she is a foreigner, and then frustrated in her attempts to find employment will find herself in the isolated world that leaves writing as an only option. Since she can’t make a living in any other way, she will hope to make writing pay. Is it possible for a Black South African woman to make a living from writing in England in the 1980s?

At some stage I’d begun working on the ‘Bells’ manuscript, but my situation was such that I had almost no contact with English-speaking people. My mother-tongue, long since lost to me, isolated me from my
community. Still entertaining hopes of teaching, it occurred to me that I had a Biology degree, and those teachers who were now actively teaching were Arts graduates, rather despised in Africa, but obviously thought highly of here. With this simplistic notion in my mind, I applied to the Universities Central Council for Admission to do a first degree in English.

At one university, I offered the rough draft of the ‘Bells’ manuscript to be read before the interview in place of ‘recent essays’. The interviewer made flattering comments, but if I expected to have to appear knowledgeable about any literary work or figure, I was to be disappointed. I was questioned at length about the arrangements I would make for my children, travelling in winter, how I would cope with a full-time course while caring for my children, and ‘did I think that doing a degree was an easy thing?’ It didn’t require a supreme effort to realize that a man would never have been asked similar questions, and that my African degree counted for nothing.

At the second university the interviewer, confidently blunt said, ‘The university will expect you to do A-levels. After all you will be competing with English students who have just taken their A-levels.’ In retrospect, I excuse these remarks with the hope that the interviewers may have neglected to read the UCCA form. At the time their remarks seemed so typical of what I had come to expect that I risked the offer of a place by responding with anger to both interviewers. I ended the second interview with the words, ‘I already have a university degree’. Three universities made me unconditional offers.

At the university I chose to attend I faced three separate incidents of tutors not believing that the written work I was submitting was my own. They said, because I rarely spoke during seminars and tutorials. I believe, because criticism has become an area for arrogance, and there is a notion prevalent amongst English teachers today of the ‘native speaker of English’ distinct from the rest of the world of English speakers. At the time the incidents caused me considerable distress, since I was lacking in confidence, aware of my accent, and I bore constantly in mind the fact that I was in fact competing with teenagers who had no other responsibilities and who were fresh out of school. My writing, however, never reflected my lack of confidence.

The experimental novel What Passing Bells was completed while I did the English degree. The original draft was impressionistic, it’s form suggestive of a fractured society, of people in an apartheid system isolated from each other. It combined poetry with prose. It’s purpose was to frustrate the reader’s need for continuity because this is precisely how we
are frustrated in our understanding of the South African situation. I’ve seen other works published which are experimental and this reinforces my view that it isn’t simply that publishers determine what is acceptable for some prescribed market, but they have a stereotype of how one should write if belonging to a specific group. One publisher’s representative asserted very firmly that Black women write autobiographically. A Black woman experimenting with language and form has no business writing.

In the new Commonwealth, those writers who do not conform to these stereotypes are said to have been influenced by Western tradition, to have had an ‘English’ as opposed to a ‘Bantu’ or ‘Third World’ education, or they are said not to be writing for the ‘people’. These views are in current circulation amongst researchers and critics today. I’ve heard this said of Salman Rushdie, Dennis Brutus, Arthur Nortje, Chinua Achebe, etc. It is an evil. On the one hand it persuades us not to read certain writers; on the other it deprives us of sharing in our writers’ achievements. But the crunch comes when we disregard Western tradition and publishers’ stereotypes, and attempt to experiment — this isn’t tolerated.

Two degrees and a teaching certificate made no difference to my prospects in the job market. I accepted work as a secretary for a large institution where I experienced racism and male dominance. It was inevitable that I should want to avoid these situations.

1984 was my first year as a full-time writer. In that year I completely revised the ‘Bells’ manuscript, wrote an article about prejudice in education, most of the essays on ‘Woman’ and three short stories in a series ‘African in Exile’. Each of the three stories is associated with a European work of art. I had in mind an African in exile wandering through the galleries in Europe and reminded of situations at home. ‘Poppy’ is associated with ‘Field of Poppies’, ‘The Seed’ with Van Gogh’s ‘Old Woman in a Field’, and ‘The Dove’ with Picasso’s ‘Child and Dove’.

Except for the one-off publications that have appeared in Kunapipi, I’ve had nothing published in England. When I submitted the ‘Bells’ manuscript to a South African publisher, it was returned by the Customs.

A writer needs encouragement and a reading public. Encouragement for the writer is neither praise nor flattery. For the writer, encouragement can only come in the form of publication, whether in newspapers, magazines, journals, or books. Nor does publication mean what it appears to mean to numerous presses and publishers: writing for nothing. Publication in newspapers, magazines and journals, for a writer who expects to earn a living from writing means regular payment for short pieces of work while a longer work is in progress. How can a woman justify writing
for nothing when she has children to support? Should a publisher or editor expect a writer to contribute to a book without having budgeted for payment to the writers? Yet this is exactly how many publishers and editors do budget. In all the economic considerations for publication, the publisher, the printer, the stationery, the typesetter, the editor, receive remuneration, while the writer is not accounted for.

Why has it proved impossible for my work to be published in England? Is it a question of not being good enough? I like to think not. Many articles that appear in newspapers paraphrase what is published in scholarly journals. Women’s magazines and the women’s pages in newspapers feature articles that are without any depth. And a great deal of mediocre fiction is published by some English literary magazines.

The treatment of new writers in England has resulted in an increasing number of writers coming together to assess, perform and publish their own work.

The situation of the Black woman writer in England has not gone unnoticed. I am now in contact with a group of Black women attempting to set up a publishing company with the purpose of correcting this imbalance. And the experience I’ve gained from dealing with racism and male dominance at work (and in schools) has resulted in the ethnic minority community inviting me to chair a group that promotes good relations between the races and equal opportunities for minority groups.

I have neither a room, a table, nor a corner of my home that I can call my own in which to write. After twelve years in the colonial atmosphere of York — (York is to parochialism as Art is to the Louvre, Music to Vienna, Philosophy to Greece) — I have to decide whether it is better for me to return to South Africa and write within the confines of censorship but with the support of my family, or remain in England.

At no stage in my life did I make a conscious decision to be a writer. Nor can I remember ever entertaining the notion or desire to be one. I write out of a deep sense of frustration.