

**'POPULAR MEMORY' AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORICAL
DRAMA OF THE SEVENTIES IN ENGLISH: THE CASE OF CREDO MUTWA'S
UNOSILIMELA**

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'Light from the past passes through a kind of glass to reach us. We can either look for the accurate though somewhat unexciting image or we can look for the glorious technicolour. This is where the writer's integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to re-create will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides'. (Achebe, 1978).

To me, this metaphorical 'glass' to which Achebe refers in the above quotation, is the ideological prism that stands between objective reality and its subjective interpretation by the artist. It is in this ideological prism that certain political and gender identities are constructed and maintained as insular. Where language and literature are 'called into the service of a profound and embracing nationalism' (Ashcroft et al, 1989:23), this ideology needs unpacking, if only to discern the assumptions upon which it is predicated. Social change can thus be wrestled from the constrictions of nationalism and, to a certain extent, dialectical materialism. As Keyan Tomaselli argues:

If ideology accounts for the 'lived' relations between people and their world, then we must accept that meaning is saturated with the ideological imperatives of a society.... In nearly every case, the conditions we 'see' through decoding the signs contained in the code are only imaginary in the sense that they are a mental construction distilled from what the individual consciously or unconsciously elects to absorb from his/her environment. (Tomaselli, 1985:15).

The struggle for meaning fought on the territory of historical representation of reality should thus be seen in this light.

Mutwa's ideological intentions are made clear in King Magadlemzini's short speech during the marriage between his daughter, Bagangile, a Zulu, and what in *uNosilimela* is referred to

as a 'moSotho groom'. He addresses the groom as a 'horse-meat-eating son of a moSotho!' (Mutwa, 1981:19). (Of course, this will be familiar to those conversant with ethnic tensions between the various black South African ethnic groups). But Mutwa's intention is not to endorse these divisions. In fact, he intends showing that, while they do exist, they have been blown out of proportion by the 'divide-and-rule' apartheid policy. Perhaps this position is what may explain why Magadlemzini, in spite of the 'foreign gibberish' by which the groom responds to his demand for a vow of commitment to his daughter, asks the patrons not to mind his 'ritual teasing' for 'it is a fellow blackman's voice'. (Ibid:19).

It seems to me that the notion of 'a fellow blackman's voice' is far too simplistic to gloss over inconvenient historical conflicts, and is incompatible with the play's conservative ideological stance. The 'ritual teasing' and the slapstick comic mode within which it is encapsulated, does not go beyond surface reconciliations. As a result, comedy is simply used to 'terminate accounts of change and transformation' (White, 1973), accounts which the play seems to avoid at all costs. There are various pointers to this failure of the play to engage in the arduous task of explaining the role of history as a vehicle for social change in contemporary South Africa. For example, the 'Storyteller's' story of 'self-understanding, self-discovery, love of your neighbour and love and respect for the laws and religion of your civilized forefathers' (Mutwa, 1981:8) is problematic. The problem of discovering a unified 'self' in history is concealed, and self-discovery is treated as an occasion that comes about naturally through one's recourse to historical fact. This 'self' is seen to be essentially tied to the past selves, which can be transposed to the present conditions of split subjectivities. The complexity of the present social environment within which this is articulated, is far too pronounced to allow such an unadulterated transposition.

In this regard, I see Mutwa's retreat to history, in the way he does, as backward-looking and utopian. In his play there is no sense that recourse to history as guide to present action is an act of repetition. In this act, as Homi Bhabha argues, the 'self' 'can neither be original' by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it, nor 'identical' - by virtue of the difference that it defines. Consequently, '(its) presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative, and its articulation as repetition and difference'. (Bhabha, 1985:150). Thus the ironical distance between the past and the present is substituted for the play's revelatory disposition. Historical realism in a context fraught with identity crises can only serve to stifle change rather than to effect it.

With this whole historical import, the play entrenches and perpetuates the same old stereotypes which have determined gendered power relations in traditional societies. For example, women are still perceived as mysterious creatures, who either possess superhuman qualities, like the 'goddess' uNosilimela, or are obstinate and historical outcasts, as Namdazulwana is. As a result, the play freely confines them to the margins of society, with uNosilimela being refused the right to engage in a love affair, and Namdazulwana consumed by fire for refusing to listen to her husband, King Magadlemzini, who, throughout the play, is depicted as a noble patriarch.

Despite uNosilimela's protest about the 'tribal stuffiness' (Mutwa, 1981:26) of traditional social organization, and her eventual exile in the city, in order to justify the authority of the tribal gods, the play eventually punishes her with blindness and hopeless prostitution. In the end, she is saved from total annihilation by her brother, Solemamba, only to return home as a prodigal child. This biblical play-within-the-play best illustrates the sociology of Mutwa as a conservative historian-playwright.

The play's conservatism can also be noted in the play's plot shift from the rural setting to the urban environment of Johannesburg. Black people in Johannesburg are depicted as social and historical outcasts (thugs, whores, crass tycoons, greedy and corpulent shebeen queens and inyangas). There is no indication of the material conditions that produce such 'statuses' and/or classes of people. Even though that may be assumed, such an assumption is undermined by the broader argument implicit in the play's structural motif. In other words, their social positions appear to be a result of their having defied their tribal gods by emigrating to the city, where, apparently, they do not belong. Eventually, the nuclear holocaust wipes out the whole of mankind except rural inhabitants, who are spared from the disaster by their tribal gods. 'No matter how strong a society's spirits and gods may be, it is straining credulity to suggest that the society can be spared from the disaster of a nuclear holocaust merely by hiding in a mountain tunnel'. (Shava, 1989:131). At the time Mutwa wrote his play, black people had become 'so proletarianized and urbanized that the return to the past that Mutwa postulates is impracticable and defeatist'. (Ibid:13).

This problem in Mutwa's historical representation is further explored by Robert Kavanagh in his introduction to the play. He argues that 'Mutwa's rejection of the modern city, its technology and its children in favour of a mystical paradise presided over by a religious hierarchy, stamps him as a romantic visionary and a conservative. Hence his passionate

hatred of the product of the brash, modern environment of the Rand and the Cape'. (Mutwa, 1981:xx). Of course, Kavanagh refers to Mutwa's participation in the state's efforts to crush the seventies upheavals and the subsequent burning down of his house by the resisting masses. But Kavanagh's choice of words also curiously situates him within Mutwa's conservative stance. For example, his description of the emergent radical resistance culture as 'brash' and of its participants as 'children', is by implication, conservative. Although the uprisings were sparked off by the youth, it cannot be assumed that they were the only people involved. A cursory glance at the historical context from which this is drawn makes his assumption unjustifiable. Therefore, one may read his criticism of Mutwa as that which calls upon Mutwa to be a loving parent, but still with the authority of the 'origin' and the 'wise'.

The relationship between the King and his subjects also requires close critical attention, if only to 'measure' the extent to which the play challenges and/or reinforces conventional historico-political subjectivities. In *uNosilimela*, the authoritarianism characteristic of Magadlemzini's relationship with his subjects is mystified in the play's depiction of him as a feudal king, whose authority is equivalent to that of the gods. This entails the danger of perpetually excluding dissenting 'voices', in the same way that the play silences those of the urban proletariat and lumpen-proletariat. Magadlemzini, for example, enjoys the freedom of addressing his subjects as 'dogs', and the historical realism with which that relationship is endorsed defeats the modern historiographic project in the light of which the play may have been conceptualized and written.

The conservative historiography of the play finally reaches its most absurd conclusions in *uNosilimela*'s fall from grace, after her brief involvement with the Roman Catholic Church as a 'highly qualified teacher'. (Ibid:35). According to the play, she became so 'dangerously ill, partly due to a feeling of guilt and confusion that boiled from the deeps of her soul', that she was eventually admitted at Baragwanath Hospital for treatment. She was subsequently thrown out of the hospital simply because she refused to be treated by the doctors whom she overheard discussing, 'for all the world', the symptoms of her illness, as if they were discussing the symptoms of 'a sick and mindless animal'. (Ibid:35). On her departure, she loses consciousness, and is found lying on the ground by Mamoloi, a shebeen queen, who plans to use her as a shebeen whore. With the best will in the world, it is inconceivable that one can reconcile these two disparate identities afforded *uNosilimela*. They can only be reconciled by the historical determinism of the play.

One needs only to read Lewis Nkosi's novel, *Mating Birds*, to see how the cultural hybrid around which *uNosilimela* could have developed its plot, (especially where the issue of colonizer-colonized is concerned), can best serve as a basis for cultural change. If the struggle for social change is the struggle for extending the sign beyond its traditional confinement in the service of nationalism and other social categories, then Nonkanyezi's hopes for her son Ndi can be seen as predicated on that recognition. She says of her son: '(a) real devil Ndi is going to be with a pen, you wait and see'. Here she hopes that Ndi's 'encounter, however brief, with books, would confer upon (him) awesome powers of the occult, an almost miraculous ability to manipulate the universe at will'. (Nkosi, 1987:85). Rather than being made to retreat to the obscure world of the gods, *uNosilimela* could have worked within the claims made by the dominant about its dominance, in order to undermine its authority.

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