

Writing Resistance on the Margins of Power: Rampolokeng's Poetry and the Restoration of Community in South African

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i belong to the shithouse
but it's on shit that i thrive
(Rampolokeng 1990:70).

Recent debates on the state of South African writing have tended to suggest that the theme of apartheid, and by implication the theme of resistance within the context of 'decolonisation', may have become exhausted. Njabulo Ndebele has once again thrown into focus the crisis that South African writers, black and white, are likely to face in the new political dispensation. 'What we are likely to have in our hands', Ndebele writes, 'is a general loss of focus. And there lies the crisis of culture in our country' (Ndebele 1992:25). For Ndebele (1992:25), 'the possibilities for new writings are inseparable from the quest for a new society'. In other words, for Ndebele, the creative agenda is intricably bound to the challenges that are likely to be thrown up by the new political scenario in the country. As early as 1987, Lewis Nkosi had suggested that apartheid had become a sterile source of inspiration for black South African writers, and he went further to suggest that only fresh ways of looking at the apartheid theme can salvage black South African writing from its present state of stagnation. He wrote:

only NEW ways of telling the story of Apartheid and resistance against Apartheid can dust up the old plots of township removals, resettlements and police shootings and make them seem new (Nkosi 1987:50).

Given the quality of South African black writing over the last three decades or so, the anxiety of these two leading South African critics is understandable. In an earlier article, entitled 'Turkish Tales', Ndebele had drawn attention to the superficial way in which black writers probed into the South African experience. 'This superficiality', he wrote, 'comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of South African reality' (1991:23). Ndebele's argument is now familiar and seems to me to be sufficiently forceful enough to need repeating in this

paper. What interests me in this paper is the possible misunderstanding that this position may create. For example, it is possible to believe that because the apartheid theme and resistance narrative in South Africa has been badly handled by some writers, the past as a theme has also become irrelevant. It is also possible to be led into believing that the bulk of black art was badly crafted simply because they were rooted in the surface symbols of apartheid, and that in order to release new creative energies, there is a need to look beyond apartheid history. But is it true that even in the quest for a new democracy we can easily forget the experience of apartheid? The old adage that those who forget their history are likely to repeat it seems to me to be relevant here and, as Rampolokeng (1990:64) reminds us, 'plastic visions of history' come with dangerous consequences. Apartheid history, just like the Jewish holocaust, continues to haunt the imagination of many South Africans that any attempts to suppress it is unlikely to succeed. At any rate, can we argue that we have adequately disposed of the theme of the apartheid past? Has resistance—the act of decolonisation—become irrelevant in South Africa's emergent nation state? It is these and other related issues that, I believe, Rampolokeng contests in his poetry.

My aim in this paper is to locate Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry within the tradition of what Edward Said (1994:252f) has called resistance literature, which aims to 'reconstitute a shattered community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all pressures of the colonial system'. The paper aims at showing that Rampolokeng's poetry belongs to a corpus of African literature which not only begins by probing and asserting its functionality within the context of decolonisation, but also becomes 'an instrument that wills new ... realities into being, that imagines alternative configurations of our "real histories" to either affirm or transcend them' (Gikandi 1991:2). In this act of imagination, the paper argues, Rampolokeng's poetry asserts the relevance of apartheid past in any meaningful ordering of the present nation state and in the building of a universally humane society. In *Horns of Hondo* (1990), Rampolokeng seems to be convinced that the apartheid past and present is still a relevant theme and, like Achebe, he insists that we must dispose of the first things first. This concern is so real and urgent in Rampolokeng's imagination that he cannot agree with fellow poets that the re-telling of apartheid has suddenly become sterile. In an obvious reference to the leading black poets, Willie Koorapetse Kgotsile and Wally Serote, Rampolokeng flatly rejects their censure:

bra willie tell us
how do we sing the sunrise
deep night in our hearts' loins
caught in castrating clutches
of transitions (Rampolokeng 1993:24).

bra wally there's no beautiful poetry
in cowardice's distortion season
where through the mist in god's eye
the devil finger descends
caught in pit bull terror worship (Rampolokeng 1993:27).

Born in Soweto, Rampolokeng grew up under the shadow of political resistance and the cultural renaissance of the Seventies. It is therefore proper that his poetry should be located within the tradition of struggle against political and cultural repression in South Africa. The effect of apartheid's denials not only of the black people's humanity, but more significantly of their cultural integrity and their capacity to create any culture worthy of name, seems to be at the heart of Rampolokeng's poetry. For Rampolokeng, the history of apartheid South Africa has been a history of struggle over the cultural protocols of imagination, of intellectual and figurative means of seeing and rethinking relations of domination. Like Frantz Fanon's native poet, it is the struggle to lay claim to that terrain of creative energy which offers the possibility of willing new realities into being and repossessing/restoring, through the power of the word, that which had been fractured by generations of domination—the sense and fact of human community. If nationhood had been appropriated by a powerful racial group, Rampolokeng seeks to restore the imprisoned nation to itself: to 'put this land to psychological examination to combat its extermination' (Rampolokeng 1990:76). But how does one restore an imprisoned community to itself? Alternatively, how does a culture seeking to become independent of domination imagine itself? Edward Said (1993:258) has suggested that there are three choices:

One choice is to do it as Ariel does, that is, as willing servant of Prospero; Ariel does what he is told obligingly, and, when he gains his freedom he returns to his native element, a sort of bourgeois native untroubled by his collaboration with Prospero. A second choice is to do it like Caliban, aware of and accepting his mongrel past but not disabled for future development. A third choice is to do it like Caliban who sheds his current servitude and physical disfigurements in the process of discovering his essential, pre-colonial self.

Edward Said makes the point that both Calibans nourish and require each other in order to produce the radical cultural intervention capable of restoring the imprisoned community to itself. In fact, Said (1993:258f) seems to be well convinced that it is difficult to understand the

history of empire—throughout most of the nineteenth century ... unless one recognises that sense of beleaguered imprisonment infused with a passion for community that grounds anti-imperial resistance in cultural effort.

But Rampolokeng is only a Caliban to the extent that he rebels and asserts an identity free from the centre. His fundamental recognition that Caliban is capable of development and creativity to which only whites had seemed entitled is significant. But this is as far as the Caliban analogy goes: Rampolokeng does not seek to discover his essential, pre-colonial self. Like the Martiniquen poet, Aime Cesaire in *Return to My Native Land*, Rampolokeng's (1990:77f) poetry may evoke violent images of change and revolution, but his guiding ideology is rooted in universal humanism:

celebration of humanity is my quest
blessed is the god who grants this request
let them who bar this incur the wrath of humankind
let the tide of time leave them behind (Rampolokeng 1990:81).

It seems to me that Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry of the last few years, while continuing in the tradition of resistance poetry that has tended to characterise black poetry in South Africa, redefines resistance and seeks to reach out for new aesthetic and political horizons. If Rampolokeng's poetry seeks to restore the imprisoned community/nation to itself, it also attempts to reconstitute resistance into an alternative way of conceiving humanity rather than just as a mere reaction to imperialism—to push humanity towards a more integrated view of human community and human liberation. If his poetry is full of obsession 'with the past and its accumulated injustices', as Andries Oliphant (in Rampolokeng 1990:iii) correctly suggests, it is because that past is still too fresh in memory to be forgotten so easily, as many are wont to suggest. But Rampolokeng's poetry also subverts the simple binary polarities we tend to associate with oppositional narratives, because his poems seek to transform and humanise those relations of power that have kept his people in servitude, and in this Rampolokeng is unrelenting in his insistence that true humanity can only flower where hate is bathed with love and when 'domination becomes an abomination' (1990:61f,6):

when one seeks another's domination
he becomes an abomination
vile as the devil's corruption
impure of mind as an abortion
i was born not vomited
but inhumanity was excreted
if man's freedom is a life distant
to give mine i'll be content (Rampolokeng 1990:6).

In order to restore the imprisoned community to itself, Rampolokeng starts by rejecting the conditions of marginalisation by dedicating himself to the art of praxis. The

first question of resistance that Lesego seeks to dispose of is what constitutes good poetry. Who sets the standards? And why has black writing been received with so much scepticism and disdain? To raise these questions is not only to confront the whole issue about literary canonicity—the process and conditions in which some literary works are accepted and others denigrated—but it is also to contest the literary terrain as well as redefining a new literary imagination away from the centre.

For these reasons, Rampolokeng positions himself as the community's prophet/griot and rejects any attempts to channel his creative energies according to some grand literary convention, nor is he prepared to pervert his art for commercial gain:

dear lesego
if you want us to give you an ear
tell us something we want to hear
make the deed supersede the motive
our applause will be explosive
dance action more than dense thought
is what more often bought
make our minds drown
our hands will give you a crown
nothing that lingers in the mind
is what we flock behind
replace your pocketful of hope
with bucketsful of dallas soap
ag man polemics is mos nie poetry
give our minds toiletry
look at the way of james hadley chase (Rampolokeng 1990:2).

'This double-edgedness', writes Andries Oliphant, 'constitutes the matrix of Rampolokeng's work' ('Introduction'; Rampolokeng 1990:iii). He displays that acute anxiety to protect his freedom as a poet and to cultivate new aesthetic ethos that are neither compromised by commodification of art nor the naked mimicry of conventions of white or black literary barons. And on this he is unapologetic:

some say my poetry has a sick soul
it belongs in a deep hole
dread colour of fire and blood
till i come like flood
my words are wine & rose
a lover's perfume in a progressive nose
my words gush rush in a storm
lacking all poetic form (Rampolokeng 1993:1).

And in an indifferent tone of sarcasm, he asserts:

i'm neither keats nor yeats
juggling words stretching doing acrobatic feats

....

i'm no william shakespeare
i write in the flight of the nations's spear (Rampolokeng 1993:23).

Rampolokeng's play on the way the idea of rhyme has been mystified in high art is tongue in cheek. He undermines by appropriating the rules of high art and subordinating them to his mischief. And yet, whether we agree with Rampolokeng's sarcastic references to Keats, Yeats and Shakespeare is besides the point. We are bound to agree with the fact that in spite of the intrinsic qualities in the works of these giants of Western literary tradition, their works have always been used as the ultimate measure of good art and therefore the standard to which the black 'Other' in South Africa and the rest of the empire must aspire. Thus, in the terrain of cultural struggle, the black poet/griot is constantly pushed to the margins and he/she has to rely on the novelty of his/her poetic genius to transcend reification and the constraints that received literary conventions impose on his or her creativity. For Rampolokeng, his poetic language derives from what Pierre Macherey (1978:48) would call 'self-constituting power'—the rescuing of what Foucault has called 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault [1972]1980: 81).

The significance of Rampolokeng's poetry lies in the fact that he locates his poetry within the rap tradition. Traditionally, rap has remained the art of the underdog and the marginalised. It has been used to open up social space and to reclaim back a lost humanity. As Richard Shusterman (1992:201) reminds us:

... rap's cultural roots and prime following belong to the black underclass of American society; and its militant black pride and thematizing of the ghetto experience represent a threatening siren to that society's complacent status quo.

Rampolokeng's poetry disturbs the status quo in a number of ways. Written largely for the oppressed blacks of South Africa and the continent in general, Rampolokeng insists on the imperative of resistance and its celebration. This he does by locating his poetry within the terrain of struggle and positioning himself as the people's voice. If the common convention in South Africa is to elevate the so-called high art and to denigrate popular art emanating from the ranks of the oppressed, Rampolokeng disrupts this:

i come to enlighten
therefore absorb & brighten
now is the time
for a progressive rhyme (Rampolokeng 1990:14).

By positioning himself within the tradition of rap poetry, Rampolokeng is actually introducing a radical black genre which challenges and revises the nature and conditions of creativity as spelt out by the mainstream literary canon in South Africa. Far from turning to some untouched, pristine Africanity, Rampolokeng's poetry displays distinct syncretic complexity. By rooting himself in the aesthetic rules of rap which are premised on what Paul Gilroy has described as the 'dialectic of rescuing, appropriation and recombination' (Gilroy 1994), Rampolokeng's poetry fractures the norm and in a Brechtian version of the 'montage', creates images appropriate to the extreme historical conditions that shape them as in the poem, 'Broederbondage':

(i cause a riot where iscariot rides the chariot of flame
come to carry man home where calm is storm
in the treasonous season of unreason)

i move from the jackal laughter fraternity
comic stripping man
making the word make god
in full stop of bullets
in the heart of humanity

darkness deeper than bible covers
of human skin colour judgement (Rampolokeng 1993:11).

Or

holocaust is nuclear radiation
touted as a country's international station
when the choice is brainwash education
or a nation's extermination
man is caught in a satanic-spider-web situation
thus revolution god's solution (Rampolokeng 1990:19).

The dense and implosive combinations of diverse forms which clash and contrast, releasing jarring images, can only reflect the instability of lived and profane social horror that remains the nightmare of the new nation. The violent images themselves undermine convention through shock and artistic estrangement as in the fracturing of

western standard idiom: 'a rose on a piece of shit won't make it smell sweet' (Rampolokeng 1990:5). The fragmentation and dislocation of society is most evident when he deploys the grotesque images:

i belong to the shithouse
but it's on shit i thrive (Rampolokeng 1990:70).

One can safely argue that Rampolokeng's art defies the rigid distinction between the so-called high and popular arts, made purely on aesthetic grounds, just as it puts into question the very notion of such pure grounds. Rampolokeng's poetry is also different in the sense that it is devoid of the polemical lines that we tend to associate with black poetry. If black poetry turned the barrenness of language into weapons of attack against formalism dictated by the custodians of high art, Rampolokeng revels in the poetic qualities of his rap. The poetry reveals features of high art of alliteration and assonance: 'flower fallacies' and 'freedom-flash' (Rampolokeng 1990:42), alongside appropriation of the occasional styles akin to praise poetry. Included are also the local idioms like 'dallas soap' and the popular 'james hadley chase' (Rampolokeng 1990:2), as well as colloquial Afrikaans 'mos nie poetry' and many other vernacular expressions of keen insights, but also forms of subtlety and multiple levels of meaning whose complexity, ambiguity, and intertextuality can easily put to shame those of high arts.

out of my mouth roll snippets
that cling to the heart like limpets
i only pierce your ears
to allay your fears
let my fire warm your soul
that we may play a fiery role
as we put this life's tragedy on the stage
to show the extent of our rage
out of the sea man came without a human tie
like the penguin bird that cannot fly
i dipped my spear in a sea of blood
to summon a second noah's flood
to cleanse & wash away this vileness
that made me resort to violence
when inhumanity came
i became game
to hunt down with guns
to fill greed's barns (Rampolokeng 1990:4).

Rampolokeng works through the inversion of language as an act of resistance against

received convention. The quality of the poems lie in their deliberately fractured forms, while simultaneously appropriating some of the qualities that we associate with conventional poetry. An aesthetic stress is laid upon the sheer social and cultural distance which formerly separated the diverse elements now dislocated into novel meanings by their provocative aural/visual juxtaposition. The poems are reminiscent of Adorno's ([1938]1978:127) remarks in another, far distant context:

They call [it] uncreative because [it] suspends their concept of creation itself. Everything with which it occupies itself is already there ... in vulgarised form; its themes are expropriated ones. Nevertheless nothing sounds as it was wont to do; all things are diverted as if by a magnet. What is worn out yields pliantly to the improvising hand; the used parts win second life as variants.

Rampolokeng also directs his rap against the colonial heresy that Africans had no history:

to unbounded prophesy
against colonial heresy
i echoed to the ruins of Zimbabwe
harare uzakukhululeka nawe
stand taller than a mountain (Rampolokeng 1990:14).

As the prophet/poet of the community whose role is to inveigh against the 'moral putrefaction' (Rampolokeng 1990:19) within society, he cannot abdicate his responsibility to teach and uphold the truth. These twin-duties involve de-remembering and remembering. De-remembering the colonial narrative of mental and spiritual slavery—the narrative that came with colonial conquest. It also entails remembering and retrieving repressed history to restore social and historical agency, back to the oppressed blacks. If his detractors insist on art for entertainment, Rampolokeng (1990:25), rejects the easy option, and instead weaves 'a rap against the oppressors's trap' and blows the horn of hondo to prophesy the dawn of freedom. Poetry then is a metaphor for struggle and rap poetry in particular is a vehicle for decolonising the mind. These decolonising poems, the poet avers, the profiteers will not touch:

profiteers won't publish
my struggle is not for sale (Rampolokeng 1990:17).

It is Rampolokeng's refusal to prostitute his art that gives him the cutting edge in a society where 'justice's prophets are prisoners' (Rampolokeng 1990:18) and truth is treasonable. He is like Ngugi's *Matigari* who inhabits a space where truth and justice are outlawed.

If he derides the sick and fragmented community engendered by apartheid as grotesque and revolting, he is equally conscious of the possibilities of regeneration:

the sun shall rise out of earth's bowels
light rays shall dry tears like giant towels
erupting fire balls
shall break oppressive walls
no longer shall god be man
& human life lie on man's altar like a slit-throated hen
the land shall be bathed in light
saluting the flag of humanity's fight
....
freedom's fire shall lick children's tears dry
& there shall inhumanity fry (Rampolokeng 1990:83f).

But the nature of resistance and decolonisation that Rampolokeng celebrates in his poetry goes on long after the political establishment of independence. In this he is in agreement with writers like Ivan Vladislavic, who question the much celebrated idea of the post-apartheid state—the rainbow nation—which seeks to conflate class and race differences, and to suggest that the long-awaited kingdom has at last arrived (Vladislavic 1996). Rampolokeng displays serious apprehensions about the new dispensation which, he believes, has been compromised:

we spin in circles of terror
caught in cycles of a nightmare
of judgement
where the mirror
of the present
shows the surface of error
in transition
...
we whirl on our stand
kicking skulls on soccer-field
& from the grandstand
applause rings in blood-drops
celebrating the abortion
of freedom's child
in transition (Rampolokeng 1993:17).

In displaying his apprehensions about the 'post-apartheid' euphoria, Rampolokeng is moving away from the triumphant ideologies of the new nation. He is caught between

the mortar and the pestle because he is writing between the margins of the white canon and the celebratory art demanded of black artists in the new dispensation. If the bulk of the poems in *Horns for Hondo* (1990) are written on the margins of the dominant white literary canon, in *Talking Rain* (1993), Rampolokeng could be said to be writing on the margins of the emergent black art which now insists on an uncritical celebration of the rainbow nation.

Whatever the ultimate fate of South Africa's fledgling democracy, Rampolokeng seems to be suggesting that a great deal has been lost in the brief transition period. He refuses to celebrate at the shrine of the new dawn that seeks conformity in the form of uniform mediocrity:

heaven is burning in the gorge of the grotesque
i chew the commandments
my alleycat condition meows a discordant NO to
regimentation's
ORDER COMRADE ORDER (Rampolokeng 1993:27).

Although Rampolokeng's collection of poems in *Talking Rain* (1993) shows a melancholic poet displaying something akin to existentialist *angst*, he still seeks redemption in poetry. His apparent alienation is the result of a national liberation betrayed and a fragmented societal vision which poetry must order, and give hope to the present state of dislocation because only the magic of poetry can bring 'a smile on the face of a mental case' and 'sunrays beyond our sorry days' (Rampolokeng 1993:38). And in the poem, 'History', he warns:

revolution or evolution
the game is still the same
reconciliation negotiation
it won't take the bait
it's too late for hate
when fate is your only mate
wipe the slate
you can't dictate history's date
BLACK on the attack
won't turn back
or slack (1993:35).

The moment of history will come, but for now the poet's 'metaphoric pen of fire' initiated by the likes of Agostino Neto must continue in the act of decolonisation (Rampolokeng 1990:16).

In conclusion, I want to suggest that Rampolokeng's poetry gestures towards that redemptive option of 'a new radical cultural politics' which Fredrick Jameson (1984:85-89) suggests is the result of the disintegration of traditional modernist boundaries—a postmodern aesthetic which 'foregrounds the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture'. Rampolokeng's poetry is also special in the sense that it combines the best elements of high art and those of popular art, thereby undermining the artificial dichotomy often created between these art forms. And finally, in rejecting commodification of art, Rampolokeng also creates what Jameson (1984:85-89) has called the 'minimal aesthetic distance' necessary for art to stand 'outside the massive Being of capital'—the radical rapture from the cultural logic of late capitalism.

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