

Social Concerns in C.T. Msimang's *IZULU ELADUMA ESANDLWANA*

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Introduction

Social concern/ commitment refers to preparedness and ability to tackle social problems, conflicts, and needs besetting the society. Given that the problems (cultural, political, religious, etc.) that afflicted the Africans were so vast during the apartheid period, no practitioner of literature should have failed to reflect them and their causes, and to offer solutions. As part of the dramatic expression in serious literature, a socially committed author must identify the ills besetting society, and take aim at one or two of them. Targeting becomes necessary because if too many ills are presented, the force is dispersed. The next step should be the creation of a metaphoric image, consisting of fictional characters and events, which reflect the social ills the author is highlighting. Through the fictional characters and events the manifestations of the ills should be shown, with one or more workable solutions suggested. A socially committed work could challenge the society to alter itself and its circumstances through a catharsis, if the work is dramatic; through laughter at itself, if the work is comic. As Ngara (1985: vii) points out:

Committed writers are extremely sensitive to the social problems of their day and are constantly coming to grips with them, hoping to play their part in changing society for the better. They are therefore constantly defining the role of art in society and endeavouring to develop literary forms that match their social vision.

According to Marx:

Literary works are not mysteriously inspired or explicable simply in terms of their authors' psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world which is the social mentality or ideology of an age (Eagleton 1976:6).

Craig (1975 in Selepe 1991:95) supports the Marxist view that for the work of art to be successful as a reflection of a social process:

... a writer is great to the extent that he can provide society in general, (or the reading public of the time) with a true mirror of itself, of its conflicts and problems.

It is generally accepted that literature mirrors society, i.e. it is inspired by social conflicts and needs; it expresses such conflicts and offers solutions to them, thus ideally leading society out of its ills. Yet one should guard against limiting and enslaving art's nature and scope to social problems (especially great sufferings) only, when in actual fact it can also be inspired by great pleasures, joys, discoveries, etc. Social commitment is just one side of literature, which has to do with the type of content to be coupled with the form—the base of literature. Literature is more than just social relevance, otherwise bucolic, symbolic and lyric poetry could not be considered as literature.

The social significance of art lies, among other features, in the fact that:

Art comes from a particular content and understanding that work involves responding to it as an element within that largest canvas of its own time (Orkin 1987:13).

Hence we need to look at the social, economic and political conditions that prevailed at the time the work was produced for possible motivation, and not merely photographically reproduce 'the surface phenomena of society without penetrating to the significant essences' (Eagleton 1976:30). Life is made up of history, geography, politics, economics, religion, and education

amongst others. For literature to be adequate, it must throw a beam of light on these aspects. Only then can we speak of literature as typifying social relations.

The struggle between the aristocracy and the working classes is the soul of Marxist theories. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1984; 1987; 1993; 1997) transposes the theory to the colonial and post-colonial situation in Africa. Ngugi insists on the anti-imperialist struggle. He displays an intense sense of progressive socio-political commitment and this anti-imperialist thrust recurs throughout his social philosophy (Amuta 1989:96). His socio-political thought is part of the dialectical theory that has society as the starting point and then spreads to its products to command relevance. He aligns himself with the broad masses, and to him commitment in Africa means moving away from literature which is 'deeply rooted in the liberal bourgeois tradition, with its emphasis on value-free culture and art for art's sake', to making literature socially relevant through making it 'an object of intellectual dispute'.

Amuta (1989:114) aptly asserts that 'engaged and committed (*African*) literature' articulates 'the parameters and manifestations of commitment in several ways'. It involves writing about the daily issues and also assuming the role of a teacher by guiding the society; and tackling public issues. This could imply mediating in the socio-political, socio-cultural, economic and religious worlds inhabited by the writer. In short, social commitment is literature compelled to face the socio-historical challenges of time and space. But it is taken for granted that the literary work becomes committed if it commands relevance by striking socio-political significance.

Amuta (1989) points out that commitment is a matter of being 'consciously' aligned or consciously prepared to change alignment in response to the social realities in question. It is the change of position which makes the writer relevant. In the apartheid era, for instance, it was the question of conscious alignment with challenges to grapple with the aberrations of apartheid. Each era presents challenges to literature and forces it to take sides for or against the progressive forces. This, however, must not change the fundamental fact that literature is essentially 'artistic'.

Amuta (1989:115) aptly sums up this interdependence thus:

Commitment in literature is essentially artistic; the commitment in a literary work of art strikes us through the laws of artistic composition. When artistic commitment appeals according to the laws of mundane social rhetoric, art yields to propaganda.

This implies that commitment is intrinsic to art, and where art yields to propaganda, it is no longer art. Social commitment is no new concept in Zulu literature. Folktales were mainly told in response to social needs; *izibongo* were performed by the monitoring traditional *imbongi* as popular reflections of feelings towards persons and events; *izaga* were employed as expression of social norms. During the period of tremendous pain and oppression we expected not only socio-political commitment of literature but also historical, cultural, religious and educational commitment. In times of social change and transformation we still expect literature to deal with the aforementioned aspects

Izulu Eladuma ESandlwana: Drama synopsis

The play is about the events which led to the battle of Sandlwana, which is the most memorable battle that ever took place between the Zulu nation and the British Empire. When the story opens we see Cetshwayo a disgruntled man. He is worried about the outcome of the discussions regarding the contested land of Zungeni. The Boers have, without permission, occupied the land that rightfully belongs to the Zulus, but Cetshwayo hopes that Sir Theophilus Shepstone will uphold the rights of the Zulus. The king later learns that the decision over the land has not been in his favour. Soon after this he gets a report that Mehlokazulu has killed two of Sihayo's wives on Natal soil, and, according to the agreement with the British, no Zulu armed men were allowed into Natal. The Natal government sends an ultimatum with the demand that the guilty party be sent to Pietermaritzburg for a court case. If the demand is not complied with by the king, it could mean war with the colonial government. This demand is coupled with the imposition of a heavy penalty of 600 cattle, and the request of disbandment of the regiments protecting the Zulu empire. This is a clear insult to the independence of the king and a thorn sore enough to make war inevitable. Cetshwayo has had enough of the British who have already taken his land and given it to the

Boers. He is prepared to fight the British and this is just the spark to start the fire that leads to the battle. After meeting with his councillors, Cetshwayo decides to challenge the colonial government by sending it a bag of *uphoko* (grain), warning of the number of soldiers that he could field if the British intolerance is not checked. Cetshwayo's refusal to comply with the terms of the ultimatum provides the colonial government with a pretext to attack him. The British soon enter Zululand but are defeated by the Zulu army at Sandlwana.

Social Concerns in *Izulu Eladuma ESandlwana*

The play politically reflects on the reasons for the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, namely, the white man's land hunger and British arrogance. Cetshwayo fights for the maintenance of the Zulu traditional way of life, for Zulu independence and for the integrity of Zulu freedom. Canonici (1998:62) points out that, in *Izulu Eladuma ESandlwana*:

The author reflects on the reasons that led to the bloody Anglo-Zulu war of 1879: the colonists' hunger for land, and the British colonial arrogance to impose their way of life on the various black populations with the excuse of bringing western 'civilization' to them.

The process of African decolonisation had begun in 1958. But whilst most countries in Africa were obtaining independence, South Africa remained firmly governed by a white minority government which imposed strict conditions on the black majority. This minority government excluded blacks from political life, and imprisoned or forced into exile leaders of black political organisations and individuals. Msimang's play, which appeared at the same time as the Soweto students' riots of 1976, is a bold demand for Zulu (and, by extension, South Africa's) freedom and independence. It is a cry for re-acquisition of the national right to be oneself on our continent and in our country. Through Cetshwayo's words and actions, the play describes independence at various levels (which applied to both 1879 and 1976).

In *Izulu Eladuma ESandlwana* the land issue is central. Cetshwayo is prepared to die rather than lose the land he keeps in trust for his people.

Physically, the whole country must legitimately return to the original owners, the Africans. Or, at least, the government's tricks to increase white-owned land by re-settling Africans on barren land must stop. The independence and integrity of the land is a pre-requisite for freedom. The play opens with the king expressing his loss of patience for having to wait for many days to hear the verdict on the disputed land. This is a struggle for physical independence: when the kingdom does not have to answer to any outsiders, and the land is secure in Zulu hands.

Ngihlatshwe yiva lapha nceku yami. Isihlungu saleli va singicima inhliziyi sengathi isihlungu seva logagane noma lesinqawe.
(I have been pricked by a thorn, my attendant. Its poison affects my heart-beat as if it were a mimosa thorn tree poison or that of a small scrubby thorn mimosa tree.) (Msimang 1976:1).

Cetshwayo's language is never direct. All he means is, the pain he feels while he is waiting for the verdict of Zungeni, makes him explode. It is threatening to cause him to stop tolerating the trouble he is forced to tolerate. In fact the issue of the disputed land makes him fed up.

Cetshwayo intensifies the discomfort by using the expression 'iminjunju eqaqambayo' (excruciating pain), but indicates that he wants to get the views of Mnyamana and Bhejane, because one benefits by the experience of others—'injobo ithungelwa ebandla' (Msimang 1976:1). Bhejane and Mnyamana, who have just joined Cetshwayo and Makhasana, both take him literally and as a result they do not grasp the metaphor. Realising that he has spoken past their ears, Cetshwayo explains that it is his heart that is throbbing painfully because the Whites have taken portions of his land without consulting him. There is a clash of tradition on the land issue. Cetshwayo, as the custodian of the land, has the sole right to distribute it. But, contrary to this thinking, the British have usurped the authority to assign it to whoever they want. Mnyamana cools the King down and tells him to completely rely on 'ubaba uSomtsewu' (Lord Shepstone) for everything. Mnyamana is evidently short-sighted with regard to the issue of land distribution, and since Somtsewu has become the father to the Zulu nation, he has ironically secured the authority to distribute land. The most relied upon and trusted Somtsewu yet is part of the system and therefore

cannot be expected to act against other whites.

Cetshwayo is a law-abiding king who needs to be treated with honour and respect. But honour and respect is never deserved by a man who does not defend the rape of land. The possibility of losing the contested land makes him cogently say:

Ngithi Mnyamana izwe yinto yokufelwa!

(Mnyamana, I say land is something worth dying for!) (Msimang 1976:2).

The fact that the quoted words are repeated three times in the first three pages, is an indication that the king is in a bad mood. The way his speech threatens war makes us wonder what would have happened if he was directly talking to his offenders. For Cetshwayo land loss has to be prevented at all costs, even at the cost of life. He clearly indicates that were it not for the oath he made when he was installed, he would have taken action to rectify the situation.

Angizikhohliwe izifungo engazenza eMlambongwenya.

(I have not forgotten the terms of the oath that I made at Mlambongwenya.) (Msimang 1976:2).

Land is culturally the mother that gives life to and feeds everything and everybody. It is the body of the nation that is why Africans never sold or allowed it to be disposed of. But the new comers (Whites) do not understand it in this way. For them it is only an economic transaction that is why they have taken the Zungeni land (after the sacrilegious cession of Natal by Dingane and Mpande, which Cetshwayo never accepted) as their own, not as tenants for the king or the Zulu nation.

He regrets the day he made a present to Somtsewu. He realises that he should not have accepted Somtsewu on the day of his installation. He had thought they were sincere friends of his father, Mpande, but that implied his recognition of their authority over himself. The British wanted to introduce a system of patronage, regulated by a set of mutual rights and duties. The system works in time of peace, but not when hostility is encouraged by arrogant behaviour.

Yeka izinkomo zami inyoni kayiphumuli engamnyathelisa ngayo mhlazane ezongibeka.

(I regret ever presenting him with white cattle to dispose him favourably (usher him in) on the day he installed me.) (Msimang 1976:27).

Cetshwayo has not yet fully reached a stage of realisation. If he had he would not say: '*ezongibeka*'. He needs a person with a clear mind to remind him that an African king is never installed by whites. But, any way, he pronounces a total resentment of the white administration.

Khumu! Sengiyakhumuka manje.

(Hold on! I am breaking away from them now.) (Msimang 1976:28).

It makes Cetshwayo despair to learn that Somtsewu has seen it fit to support the Boers at his expense. He does no longer want to have anything to do with the white man. At this stage, although he is concerned, 'the related notions of "commitment", "choice" and "decision"', have not forced their way to the centre to make him more concerned (Bartley 1962:4). In that way he is going to find a simple substitute type of commitment. That is why Mnyamana can still plead with him to please try and find an alternative to going to war against the British. The king soon finds that he can no longer stand this open contempt by the British, as reflected in the words:

Kukhona esebenyele umtapo. Ibumba selilibi, sibe sisalibumbe liyabhidlika.

(Some people have relieved themselves in the clay supply quarry. The clay is now spoiled. Each time we try to mould something it breaks down.) (Msimang 1976:40).

Legally Africans must be free to run the country according to their own traditions and laws, without interference from the colonial powers. Africans must be consulted on matters pertaining to laws, especially those regarding them, for example, coronation laws, the death penalty, etc. Economically, the country must be free to use its own devices and resources to survive and prosper (e.g. regimental system for both economic and security reasons).

Morally, the king must be free to govern the country according to its own ancient customs and traditions, without outside interference, allowing for dynamic development of the local traditions. Without this, the country has no soul and no life. These are the main points of the ultimatum as raised and summarised in the play. Also the Soweto students' fight against Afrikaans was a battle for consultation, independence and freedom.

The incident between Mehlokazulu and Sihayo's wives (Mehlokazulu's incursion into Natal) is considered by the government in Pietermaritzburg as a deliberate violation of the 'coronation laws' and of the system of mutual understanding agreed upon in the 1873 coronation ceremony. As regard this violation, the two parties have different perspectives: Cetshwayo offers a reparation gift of 50 white cattle, hoping this would re-establish the balance and the friendly relations between the two governments. As if the British want to exacerbate the situation and force Cetshwayo to declare war on them, they impose a bigger fine of 600 heads of cattle, as well as the handing over of Mehlokazulu to be tried and punished according to Natal law, on the grounds that the crime has been committed on Natal soil.

If the English cannot be appeased, it means that everything is going to fall apart. It has become clear that the colonial administrators have a different view of justice. If the fine cannot appease them, what purpose is it meant to serve? The king has run short of choices, except to fight and die, if that is the necessary end.

Ngiqoma ukufa kunokubizwa ngevaka elanikela ngabantu balo ngokwesaba ukulahlekelwa ngubukhosi balo.

(I prefer to die rather than to be called a coward who betrayed his people for fear of the loss of kingship.) (Msimang 1976:42).

Cetshwayo is beginning to act and think selflessly and impatiently. But all along he has been a good leader, not acting in haste, and in control of the situation. We realise that, for every person, trying times may come and go, leaving one with very little choice but to commit oneself. Such times came twice for king Cetshwayo. First, when he had to accept Mpande-Mbuyazi's challenge and fight at Ndongakusuka; secondly, when he had to fight the British at Sandlwana. He makes a decision from which there is no turning

back, knowing well that it is going to be firearms against spears. But a British conquest should only come over his dead body:

Kuleli lawoJama umlungu uyochachaza ngifile.

(In this land of Jama, the white man will have his way only when I'm dead.) (Msimang 1976:60).

When Cetshwayo replies that it is impossible to comply with the demands regarding Mehlokazulu, the Natal government sends him an ultimatum that, if not accepted, would mean the loss of physical, moral, military and legal independence. Cetshwayo evidently cannot accept his nation's suicide, and war becomes inevitable. Thinking of the servitude he will have to endure under the British yoke makes Cetshwayo brave in his resistance against the advancing British artillery. That is why when he sends his army to Sandlwana he tells them that it's life or death: they should fight to the victory or die fighting, to avoid living under the fetters of British oppression:

Le mpi ngizoyilwa ilanga libe linye, ngibachithe abafokazana ndini.

(This war is going to take me one day to fight and defeat these despicable strangers.) (Msimang 1976:71).

Indeed the soldiers fight bravely to preserve their independence. They shock the British army by dealing them a heavy blow at Sandlwana. The British are the first ones to invade (the aggressor) the Zulu kingdom. This shows colonial arrogance and deception. Cetshwayo's diplomatic attempts to prevent the rape of the land by colonists as well as the imposition of their rule on him all fell on deaf ears, because Sir Bartle Frere wanted the federation of all republics under the British flag. Msimang's words in the preface are a testimony to this:

Kwahlaluka ukuthi empeleni uCetshwayo wayengenaphutha lokuba aze ahlaselwe kuphela kwabe kuyinto ka Sir Bartle Frere ukuba ahlanganise zonke izifunda ezikwelomzansi neAfrika zibe ngaphansi kombuso weNdllovukazi.

(It became clear that in actual fact Cetshwayo was not that guilty such he deserved to be attacked but it was Sir Bartle Frere's plan to

unify all South Africa regions under the Queen of England.) (Msimang 1976: Preface).

On the other hand Shepstone wanted to win popular support. He had initially allied himself with Cetshwayo in opposition to the Transvaal Boers, but soon switched his support to the Boers' cause. Shepstone had hoped that the crowning and some flag-waving acts would merely subdue the Zulus and persuade Cetshwayo to accept his terms. When the diplomatic Sir Theophilus Shepstone's self-proclaimed crowning achievement failed to accomplish the desired outcome, Cetshwayo's cheap tinsel crown proved to be a farce (Edgerton 1988:13). When Shepstone's diplomatic trickery miscarried, he decided to resort to force.

Cetshwayo had mistakenly agreed to be crowned, thinking that British troops would protect his interest in future. But as soon as he realised that it was not to be so, he backed down. The king had miscalculated and flawed but he could not be easily made to cede his country's autonomy. Cetshwayo was alarmed by the influx of British troops on the disputed Zungeni area while his own were ordered to retire. That was when it dawned on him that he had trusted the wrong man.

Mpande's (Cetshwayo's father) subservience to the white men had brought this sorry pass to his heirs. Cetshwayo had to battle to restore Zulu independence in its fullness. The nation is aware of the king's loss of influence and that the main cause was his shortsightedness on the day of his installation. Two warriors reflect on Cetshwayo's limited powers resulting from his acceptance of Shepstone's so called 'coronation laws'. They say (Magemfu's words):

Inkonyama isiyinyama ngegama, eqinisweni lonke iboshwe izandla nezinyawo.

(The king is still a king in name, but in fact he is hands and feet bound) (Msimang 1976:6).

Msimang is part of the community that is affected by this tragic event. The author does not approve the taking of land without any justification—the use of the word '*phangwa*' (Preface) by the author shows his attitude towards the new dispensation, that divides the king's land amongst his *indunas*,

making them equal to him. Even Cetshwayo did not approve of the division. The word '*Isikhundlwana*' used in relation to Dinuzulu in *Insumansumane*, could also be used for Cetshwayo with regard to his loss of power. It would seem he was considered unfit and unable to shoulder the kind of responsibility that kings used to carry in terms of the tradition. Msimang is committed to expressing the feelings of the people about Cetshwayo's treatment by the Natal government. He seems to have absorbed the need to give vent to their feelings.

It is also a struggle for control of land and its economic resources. The economy of the black people was based on cultivating crops of maize, sorghum, pumpkins, beans, etc. Cattle farming provided meat and milk for sour milk (*amasi*). Socio-culturally and socio-politically the importance of the cattle was on its being the medium of exchange or appeasement to fathers-in-law and sealing political alliances through kinship ties. The loss of land means the loss of source of all the above-mentioned. That is why for Cetshwayo land means everything.

A writer's work implicitly reflects his political leanings as his writing is coloured by his culture and philosophy. There is no neutrality. The point of neutrality is challenged here when we consider the meaning behind Lindenberger's (1975:6) words:

The dramatist could seek out areas whose essential conflicts seemed to point forward, in fact to anticipate those later stages of the historical process with which the audience might experience some emotional identification.

Msimang, for instance, has chosen the events leading to the battle of Sandlwana as a base for his drama, and ends up by telling of the important victory of Sandlwana. He never touches on the other skirmishes of the war for fear of denting the image that he has so skilfully built. He has avoided telling about the defeat in order to make it acceptable to his audience. The mood during the time of writing was so volatile that dampening it by talking of defeat would have been an act of cowardice. He had to be engulfed in the popular feeling of the period. He only briefly mentions the plan that miscarried, the plan not to cross the Tugela River. But before the British could claim a victory in their insatiable thirst for power, they learned a bitter

lesson at the hands of the Zulu army.

Critical assessment of sources objectively written together with artistic interpretation of characters and events implies historical commitment on the part of Msimang. Cele (1997:13) says history grants a work of art acceptance as a possible interpretation of a period in the world of history. The use of historical characters, events, settings could possibly convince the readers that what they are shown is the truth of history. Msimang has selected and manipulated the historical material to his own end. He has used it as a metaphor of the political situation at the time of writing. The past is considered as exemplary to the present in order to throw light on present day developments.

A dramatic performance unites the audience, the actors and the playwright into a unity of intent and ideals, especially in Africa where theatre is open to the participation of the audience. Rhythm, music, dance, gestures, are imitative and invite people to take part, and so to be transformed into the atmosphere of celebration that pervades everything and everybody.

When the play is a historical drama, the spectators become proud of belonging to the nation that has produced such heroes, and are stimulated to imitate their glorious deeds. Simply reading Msimang's play one can feel the exaltation of feelings, the rage of the king, the courage of the people, and nearly the sounds of the battle at Sandlwana. But since the play has never reached the stage, the message of resistance launched by proud King Cetshwayo only reaches us through the pages of a book and radio (play was once broadcast by Radio Zulu).

The reasons of Cetshwayo's war, however, were still felt by the people of 1976, especially by the students of Soweto that marched and died to protest against Afrikaans cultural hegemony, against the injustices of land reforms that stole from the blacks to give to the wealthy whites, against destruction of African cultural and historical heritage.

Conclusion

Msimang's play should be seen as the desperate cry of a people oppressed and at the end of its tether, a people that can look back on a very glorious past to draw strength for coping with the present. It seems to say: yes we are

under a very oppressive government (in the 1970s), but we shall overcome it, as we did in 1879 when our oppressors drove us to despair. The land on which we live is ours, not that of the white people. We draw strength from it: it is worth dying for its independence. Physical independence is meaningless without a cultural, religious, social and economic independence. We must work for the preservation of what is good in our culture, customs and traditions. Cetshwayo won the day because he was a thoroughly upright person, trusted by his people who stood united behind him. Our moral fibre will eventually lead us to victory, the fibre shown by the Robben Island prisoners. The acquisition of such moral superiority is the task of every individual, be it in a leadership role or not. And we do not need tremendous exterior incentives to achieve this: the strength must come from within.

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