

Speaking Out: In Conversation with Niq Mhlongo

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Niq Mhlongo was born in Soweto in 1973 as the eighth of ten children. His mother is from the northeast Limpopo province. His father, who was a sweeper in a post office, died when he was a teenager. After his father's death, Mhlongo's older brothers supported the family. He lived in Soweto as a child but was sent to Limpopo for his primary and secondary education by his parents, who wanted to safeguard him from the rising tensions in Soweto. After his matric, which he failed at the first attempt partly due to the political unrests in 1990 and the subsequent closure of the schools, Mhlongo started his studies at Wits University. In 1996, he graduated with a degree in Political Studies and African Literature. The following year, he started a postgraduate degree in law at the same university. He transferred to the University of Cape Town in 1998, but dropped out of UCT in his final year, deciding instead to become a writer. He currently works for the Film and Publication Board.

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He is the author of three novels – *Dog Eat Dog* (2003), *After Tears* (2007), and *Way Back Home* (2013) – and a collection of short stories – *Affluenza* (2015)². *Dog Eat Dog*, his first novel, has been translated into Italian and Spanish. The Spanish translation won the Mar de Letras Internationale Prize in 2006. *After Tears*, his second novel, was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 2008 and has been translated into French. The German translation of *Way Back Home* by Verlag Das Wunderhorn is due out in the second half of 2015.

This interview was conducted in Durban on 22 March 2014. Mhlongo was in Durban as part of the Time of the Writer Festival hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) where he featured on a panel entitled ‘Chronicling the Contemporary South African Story’ together with Kgebetli Moele.³ His finger-on-the-pulse reports of South Africa’s post-apartheid social complexities and challenges have rightly established him as part of a young generation of black South African writers. While his earlier writing is characterised by its frank style and humorous dialogues, *Way Back Home*, which sternly criticises the corruption among South Africa’s elite, shows a more earnest and post-modern side of the author. It will be interesting to see where Mhlongo’s future projects take him. In the following interview, Mhlongo talks about the extent to which South Africa’s past permeates the present, the importance of ‘home’ and tradition in his writing as well as the contribution of *Way Back Home* to the ongoing political discourse.

² The collection, schedule to appear in April 2015, covers a wide range of significant socio-political topics of the first two decades of South Africa’s democracy such as the 1994-euphoria, the HIV/Aids pandemic, xenophobia, the Marikana massacre, and the Zuma presidency. While many of the stories have been published to critical acclaim both in Europe as well as in the US, they are mostly unknown amongst the South African reading public.

³ Kgebetli Moele is another award-winning South African author who belongs to the cohort of the country’s established young black writers. His debut novel *Room 207* (2006) won the 2007 Herman Charles Bosman Debut Novel Award and the University of Johannesburg Debut Novel Award. His second novel *The Book of the Dead* (2009) was awarded the 2010 South African Literary Award. *Untitled* (2014) is his latest novel.

Could you briefly tell us what your third novel, *Way Back Home*, is about?

Way Back Home is set both in 2010 post-apartheid South Africa and in Angola during the height of apartheid around 1987. Angola was one of the places where the anti-apartheid movement sent people to be trained as guerrilla or freedom fighters. From there they would infiltrate South Africa and fight for freedom. But while South Africans are told that everything was smooth in these camps⁴ and that everybody in these camps wanted to fight for freedom, lots of horrible things actually happened there. My book says that not everybody left South Africa because they wanted to fight for freedom. Some of them were real thugs. They were thieves, rapists, and murderers who went into exile to escape prosecution and only pretended to be freedom fighters.

Way Back Home tells the story of Kimathi, the son of a disreputable high-ranking freedom fighter, who is born in exile and joins the Movement as a student. In one of the camps, Kimathi falls in love with a female comrade of his. However, she refuses him, a refusal that has far-reaching consequences. After the fall of apartheid, Kimathi goes to South Africa and becomes a successful businessman, when suddenly the past catches up with him. So *Way Back Home* is about the implications of the past on the present.

⁴ The ANC established the first training camps for its armed wing in Angola in 1976 and had established various further camps by 1978. Particularly the camp at Quatro, which was used as a detention centre, was notorious for its beatings and torture in order to obtain coerced confessions of alleged traitors of the anti-apartheid movement. The camp received its name Quatro, the Portuguese word for ‘four’, with reference to Johannesburg’s infamous political prison known as ‘Number Four’ (for further information see e.g. Cleveland 2005, Trewhela 2009 or Cherry 2012). In research, the ANC’s armed struggle has long been tabooed due to moral reasons and the anti-apartheid movement has instead usually been described as an act of mass mobilization and civil rights struggle (see e.g. Seidman 2001 for an overview of the problem). The ANC’s reaction to several testimonies of abuses at Quatro during the TRC hearings was equally noncommittal with their dismissal as beyond the scope of the hearings (see Cleveland 2005 for a more detailed discussion).

But the novel also talks about the process of healing. If someone passes away, the process of healing and mourning doesn't end with burying the person. There are certain rituals that have to be performed. We slaughter an animal to appease our ancestors and to celebrate the deceased's life and his or her transition into the land of the spirits. This healing process involves many different things to different people, but the most important thing is to collect the deceased person's body. If I died today, somebody would have to come and collect my spirit here in Durban, before they could bury me in Johannesburg. They couldn't bury me without getting my spirit first. So *Way Back Home* is also about tradition and in that sense it is also a book about oppositions. It is about connecting the traditional and the modern, the rich and the poor, the African and the Western.

What different aspects of home and/or coming home does the novel deal with?

One aspect of home the book talks about is linked to African tradition. Home is where a spirit rests forever. Home is where your ancestors are buried. So the book deals with home in that sense. But the novel also talks about the fact that many South Africans don't have a sense of belonging at the moment. There's a sense of displacement. Many black South Africans have lost their ancestral home. That's where we bury our dead. According to African tradition, I have to be buried where all other Mhlongos are buried. But because of the land distribution problems in South Africa, people have been displaced from the land which they owned, including what is called the ancestral place. So home is where land is. Home is where the ancestors come from. We don't point up when we talk about our ancestors. Our ancestors are down here. That's why we have to brew traditional *umqombothi* beer and pour it down on the ground, so that the ancestors get merry and then do us favours. That's why we slaughter animals to appease our ancestors before asking them for a favour.

Would you say then that *Way Back Home* is about coming home and dealing with having lost what once used to be your home?

Yes, exactly. And losing part of tradition. What I was trying to say is that this

is also a problem of colonialism. Many Africans lost their home because their land was given to colonialists. To them, land meant a lot in terms of agriculture. To us, however, land was and is more than agriculture. Land is who we are.

How important is place in *Way Back Home*?

It is very important, actually. The novel talks quite a lot about displacement. Many people don't understand how rooted African culture is. I've realized that within the Indian tradition, for instance – well maybe I'm just making a superfluous kind of comparison – people also live a very communal life. When people marry, they don't go far away from where they come from. Like I live in Jo'burg and my mother comes from Limpopo, which is in the north-eastern part of South Africa. Every time she calls me – I've never stayed in that place – she'll ask me when I'm coming home. And the most important thing that makes a place home is that your ancestors are buried there.

Colonialism didn't care about this. Families were divided. Ancestral places were divided. I was in Mozambique at some point where I went to the Samora Machel⁵ Museum. Samora Machel died in a plane crash in Mbuzini – that's on the border between Mozambique, Swaziland, and South Africa – in 1986. People thought the wrath of the ancestors was the reason for the plane crash. They believed that the ancestors were worried that Samora Machel was never going to do anything about what had happened in the past, that he was not going to use the power he had been given to right the wrongs of colonialism, i.e. the separation of people from the same tribe to three different countries. We have to have one place, because ancestors don't want to be divided according to the areas of colonial interest. That's what people thought. That's what people believe in. But it really tells you how important land is within African tradition.

⁵ Military commander, revolutionary leader and first president of Mozambique, Samora Machel was a popular figure in South Africa in general as much as a thorn in the flesh of South Africa's apartheid state. Because of his sympathies towards the ANC's armed wing, he was the target of several assassination attempts (see e.g. Christie 1989 or Funada-Classen 2013).

The novel opens with a betrayal. To what degree is *Way Back Home* a novel about betrayal and what kind of betrayal(s) does it portray?

Yeah, *Way Back Home* is about betrayal. The book talks both about how the ANC government has betrayed the people in post-apartheid South Africa, but also about betrayal within the anti-apartheid movement during the height of the apartheid regime.

The ANC government has promised people things that it never fulfilled, not because it didn't have the capacity, but because many politicians are corrupt and want to enrich themselves. The new government has created a big gap between the rich and the poor and this gap is growing even wider apart. In 1994, people voted for the ANC in large numbers because they thought they would get housing. They thought they would get land. They thought they would get better education. They thought they would get a job. They thought it would be the end of inequality. You know, all those kind of things that people were worried about. But only few are benefitting from the revolution, mainly people from the ruling party itself. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There is too much inequality. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There are still too many poor people. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There is too much unemployment. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There isn't enough housing. That's a betrayal of the struggle. And HIV is a serious problem in South Africa. That's a betrayal of the struggle. We have to prevent HIV by educating people and by providing the necessary medical measures. The previous government under Mbeki said AIDS didn't exist. And how many people have died since? ANC policies. Zuma? He doesn't give a damn about what's happening in the country anyway. He built himself a massive house at Nkandla, a house whose costs could have provided thousands of RDP houses. That's a betrayal of the struggle.

However, the book also talks about betrayal within the anti-apartheid movement. Kimathi, the novel's main character, wants to have sex with that beautiful female comrade of his. She refuses, gets accused of being a spy, and is killed for supposedly having betrayed the Movement. That's a betrayal of the Movement's principles. It's an allegory for what is happening in the present. The ruling party is betraying what we fought for because it is corrupt.

So there is a kind of legacy of betrayal in South African history?

Yes. What is happening now is the recurrence of what happened before. There was a lot of betrayal during the height of apartheid and there is a lot of betrayal now in post-apartheid, the layers of betrayal are just different. What I mean is that during the era of apartheid, people could be easily labelled as *impimpi* (informer of the apartheid government/spy) and then you could face mob justice (what we called necklacing in the township). So, as long as you are labelled an informer, the mob could just put a car tyre around your neck and burn you alive. There was no need to prove that you were an informer. Someone who was jealous of you could just out of the blue label you as an informer. So in *Way Back Home* you have a lady that is accused of being an apartheid spy and she is wrongly imprisoned and killed. There is no doubt today that the ruling party has done a lot to alleviate the issues of poverty. South Africa is a developing country. We have one of the best constitutions in the world with the rights of people protected. But people still feel betrayed by the issue of landlessness. In *Way Back Home* there is a scene where one of the characters' land is taken away from him. That is the serious issue in South Africa today. The land has not been returned and most people are blaming the ruling party of compromising on this issue.

Both female main characters, Senami and Anele, are portrayed as strong women and throughout the novel there are no corrupt women. What function do the female characters have in *Way Back Home*?

Normally, the struggle and literature against apartheid is portrayed as a male affair. Women are backgrounded and not foregrounded like their male counterparts. In *Way Back Home* I wanted to acknowledge the roles played by the women towards the liberation of this country. I wanted to show their sacrifices, selflessness, and that the road to our liberation can never be complete without the women. Women played the same role as men. They were also great thinkers. Whatever Senami is portrayed to be doing in the book is motivated by the real life events.

To what extent is the book a contribution to the ongoing political discourse?

The book is definitely a contribution to the ongoing political discourse. It talks about so many things that happened in the past and are still happening now. It is an attempt at understanding the origins of current happenings. The origins of our politicians' corrupt behaviour root way back in the height of the apartheid regime. They have been corrupt since they went into exile to be so-called freedom fighters. People who went into exile are people who think they fought for freedom in South Africa. However, it was the people that were within the country who lead to the demise of apartheid. No political party can claim to have dismantled apartheid from outside the country. It is the people on the ground, it is the youth of 1976, it is the people of Sharpeville that bent things. They were all here.

What has led to the fall of apartheid is exactly what will lead to the fall of the ANC. Mandela once said: 'If the ANC does what the apartheid government did to you, you must do to it what you did to apartheid'. Fortunately, this war against the ANC will never be a war of guns. It will be a war of votes. It will be a war of politically-minded people having a choice to decide against what's happening in the government. It will be a war for which we use our constitution to fight the injustices. So there is a recurrence there. The people on the ground led to the demise of apartheid. It will also be the people on the ground that will lead to the demise of the ruling party, which is enjoying its power so much. Trade unions are moving away from the ANC more and more. That really shows how big the disillusionment within the country is. People are fed up with what is happening within the government.

So the book is trying to build on that awareness that is starting to build up at the moment?

Yeah, definitely. When I was writing the book, I was closely following current affairs in South Africa. I was watching the people on the ground. The book is pointing a finger at the way tenders are assigned. Many deals are sealed under the counter and it is the new elite that profits from them. The deals I'm talking about in the book is what is happening in Gauteng. I have a feeling at this point that the ANC will not win Gauteng. Even if they win

Gauteng, they will only have a small lead, just over fifty per cent of the votes, meaning that in the coming years they might not even win it. So it is the disillusionment of the people on the ground that I'm talking about. I never thought that the ANC would be able to disillusion people to such an extent. The ruling elite is enriching itself. And we are at the height of it at this present moment.

Oral tradition plays an important role in the novel. 'Vera the ghost', for example, is one of the popular stories you use.

What were your reasons to use oral tradition?

In African tradition we don't tell a story just to entertain. It's both education and entertainment. It's edutainment, actually. If we don't want you to go out at night, for instance, we'll tell you a story about a lion that lurks under the trees in the dark. Or we'll tell you a ghost story, so you will be afraid to go out at night. 'Vera the ghost' is a traditional urban story that is well-known to most Sowetans.

'Vera the ghost' is the story about a beautiful girl who was killed in the 1950's. There are different views on how she died. Some say that she was killed in a car accident. Others say she was raped and killed. The important thing is that she came back as a ghost to terrorise the Soweto community and avenge her death. Rumour has it that she used to target and seduce male hunks at parties. The next thing those males would be found naked and dead at the Avalon Cemetery.

So 'Vera the Ghost' deterred us from doing something that we would have regretted later on. But it also emphasises the concept of death within the African tradition. As I have told you earlier, death does not end with the burial of the dead. In most African traditions, a ritual has to be performed to complete death so that the dead person's spirit is formally introduced to the ancestors. Our ancestors are the ones that are watching over the living and if the rituals are not observed, it brings bad luck to the living. This is our belief. So Vera came back to terrorise the township because her death was not complete. Some rituals should have been performed where her death took place. In *Way Back Home*, Senami comes back to terrorise her killer.

My telling of 'Vera the ghost' is to tell people – and I'm not offering any solutions – to look at what is happening in our country at the moment.

We have voted for this government to come into power. We were the ones who have basically made it possible for these people to accumulate vast amounts of wealth and we are the only ones who are able to take them off the political radar again. So do we want to continue the way things are at the moment or do we want to change something? We have to become politically aware. When I voted for the first democratic South Africa in 1994, I just wanted to see a black face. I didn't care about what the new government was going to do. I wanted to see Mandela rule. I was just fed up with the minority rule. I didn't use my brain. I didn't even look into the ANC's manifesto. But now, because now I'm politically mature, I'm asking myself if it was the right thing to do and if it is the right thing to continue voting for the ANC. The answer is no. We have to become more critical and have to stop following people blindly.

Very often tradition is associated with conservative thinking.

Do you see tradition as necessarily conservative?

Not really. I think the danger is to take tradition as an aesthetic thing. Tradition is not aesthetic. Tradition is moving with times. It takes into consideration things that are happening. It is adaptable. I'll give you an example. Polygamy used to be and still is practiced – President Zuma, for example, has more than one wife – as part of African tradition. A man's wives and children, who would look after the fields, meant financial provision. But at the moment, there is no land for black people to practice this tradition. We live in a complex, industrialised world in which polygamy is not practical.

Other traditional aspects such as *ubuntu*⁶ – that means humanity – still work. If a child's parents die, for example, it can easily be raised by

⁶ It can be argued that *ubuntu* was one of the underlying principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (for an extensive discussion of the term and its (ambivalent) meaning within the context of the TRC see Hanneke 2010). The TRC operated from 1996 to 1998 and consisted of three committees: the Human Rights Violation Committee, the Amnesty Committee, and the Reparation Committee. Based on the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (19 July 1995), the TRC had the task

somebody in the family and call them mother or father. Actually, anyone of your mother's or your father's age could fill in for them. You don't call adults by their first name. If a person has for example my brother's age I call him brother. If the person has my sister's age I call her sister. If the person has my mother's age I call her mother. And so on. That's tradition. That's respect. Or you wouldn't turn down somebody from the community who comes to your house and asks for food. That's *ubuntu*. It really shows how communal life is within African culture. The family concept is much more fluid. You'll find that in most cases everyone within a community is related and you wouldn't let anything bad happen to your relatives.

The problem is that, presently, we are lacking *ubuntu*. People are no longer living as communally as before. In the past, for example, you could visit a relative without telling them you're visiting. In fact I could go visit my grandmother or aunt without having to call them before my visit and I would be welcomed. Now you cannot do that anymore. It is almost not practical, maybe due to the fact that things have changed. Also the economic logistics have shifted.

Besides, Africans are pushing Western culture at the expense of African traditions. That's the trend at the moment. It's an abuse of the principle of African culture to prevent your children from speaking your own language, for example. Instead, people brag with their children's intelligence, which is measured by how fluent they are in English. Intelligence becomes a matter of assimilation and knowledge of a foreign language rather than about the question how well you understand things and how well you can juggle them around. People are confusing intelligence with the knowledge of and the

(1) to provide an overview of severe violations of human rights for the period from March 1960 to 10 March 1994, (2) to grant amnesty to perpetrators who provided full disclosure of their politically motivated crimes, (3) to investigate the fate or whereabouts of victims and restore their dignity in hearings or through repartitions, and (4) to write a report including recommendations to prevent future violations of human rights (for further information see e.g. <http://sabctrc.saha.org.za> which commemorates the tenth anniversary of the TRC Final Report and contains all episodes of SABC's weekly TRC Special Report series that aired from 21 April 1996 to 29 March 1998 as well as numerous official TRC transcripts and the TRC Final Report; Nuttall and Coetzee (eds.) 1998; Wilmot and van de Vijver (eds.) 2008).

ability to speak a particular language. This is an aspect that we should definitely look into. We should ask ourselves if we are heading into the right direction. The point is not to generally reject African culture, but to look into our own culture and uphold those traditions which are worth preserving.

In one of the panels at the English Studies Department of UKZN during the Time of the Writer Festival⁷ you mentioned that the story of your third book had been in your head for a long time before you actually wrote it. What were the reasons for waiting this long? Why the other two novels before?

I am one of the people, and I have realised that I am not the only one, who writes several books at a time. They take shape simultaneously and then suddenly one of the stories gains the upper hand. The story for *Way Back Home* had been in my head for quite some time because I grew up with ‘Vera the ghost’. The story was told to me as a child. It’s a story I constantly told other people later on. It’s a story everybody knew. It was always at the back of my head, even when I was busy writing my first novel, *Dog Eat Dog*. Actually, some of the chapters in *Dog Eat Dog* allude to ‘Vera the ghost’. There was originally a big chapter on ‘Vera the ghost’. But it was cut out of the novel when I sat down with my editor around 2004. I remember I was so angry when he cut the ‘Vera the ghost’ story. So I decided to use it somewhere else. But when I started working on it, *After Tears* took over all of a sudden. But ‘Vera the ghost’ was still in my mind, you know, like a disease of some sort. And you know how to heal that disease, but you have to wait for the right time. So I finished *After Tears* that had surfaced, before I could turn to ‘Vera the ghost’.

⁷ ‘Writers Speak Out: Niq Mhlongo and Prajwal Parajuly’, 19 March 2014, English Studies Department, Howard College Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

While your first two novels had a first person narrator, you wrote your third novel from a third person perspective. Why this shift?

You know, the shift was just a choice. My first and second books were mostly based on things I had experienced. Not that I have done all those things. I had people telling me things and I observed people experiencing such things. So I fused other people's experiences with my own experiences and dreams. It was easier for those stories to be told in the first person. The story in *Way Back Home* is more removed from me. The story has a political resonance. It's more political than ever. It talks about things that I haven't experienced personally. That's part of the reason for this choice. Furthermore, I thought that I had written quite a lot in the first person and that I had to experiment with other narrative perspectives.

As a reader, I went on an emotional roller coaster with regard to my opinion towards Kimathi. How do you, as the author, perceive Kimathi and what did you expect to achieve with him as a character?

Kimathi is the true reflection of South Africa today where most people's wealth is gained through questionable means – either through a government tender by the back door or struggle credentials because they have been into exile or know someone who was in exile. So, Kimathi is the epitome, all the social ills that have come to characterise our country today. He is corrupt to the bone and he is in denial of the evil things that he has done in the past. He thinks he is more deserving than most South Africans because he feels he has suffered the most under apartheid while he was in exile. He doesn't think that people who remained inside the country to fight apartheid actually suffered like those that went into exile. That is why he and his comrades mention words like 'I didn't join the struggle to be poor'. To him, it is like the people that went into exile deserve more than those that remained behind.

Most torture and murder scenes in the book, at least at the beginning and towards the end, are represented as dream sequences. Could you comment on this choice?

The book has two settings: apartheid and post-apartheid. The large chunk of the book is set in the post-apartheid South Africa. The dream sequence represents the things that happened in the past, during apartheid. Lots of what happened during apartheid informs what is happening today. All the killings that happened in the past are haunting the main character Kimathi. In a nutshell, a lot that happened during apartheid is haunting post-apartheid South Africa. Issues like the arbitrary land evictions, racism, unemployment, inequality, and so forth. So the dream sequence symbolises the past, and the future challenges.

What are you doing next?

I'm working on a novel. It is in a far advanced stage. The book is set in the rural area and is about a person who commutes between the rural and the urban area. But it is set during the apartheid. One of the major themes of the book is displacement, i.e. how people were moved from their homes to make way for the white farmers. So they were forcefully removed from their rightful land by the apartheid government. My interest is to look into the things that happened on the farms, to look at how the workers were treated. The book also talks about education. Some people were studying under trees in those times and that is still continuing under the present government. They are not building enough schools. So it talks about the present in a subtle way. Our ANC government is not interested in changing these things.

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