

# Cross-cultural Translation in South African Autobiographical Writing: The Case of Sindiwe Magona

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## Introduction: Cultural Translation

Translation takes place at the border crossings between cultures. Etymologically (from *transfere*, *translatio*), J. Hillis Miller (1996:207) reminds us, it means to be carried from one place to another, to be 'transported across the borders between one language and another, one country and another, one culture and another'. Translation is a way of negotiating, for various and often conflicting reasons, the frontiers that demarcate distinct cultural zones—in the words of Sanford Budick (1996:11), translation 'necessarily marks the border crossing where, if anywhere, one culture passes over to the other, whether to inform it, to further its development, to capture or enslave it, or merely to open a space between the other and itself'.

One of the most frequently performed acts of cross-cultural translation in South Africa today is to be found in the shortened version of the national anthem, which is officially encouraged by the Government, and which comprises four different languages. It begins with the opening verse of '*Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*', the Xhosa hymn with which black South Africans identified themselves in their struggle for liberation. The second verse continues the hymn in its Southern Sotho version with the refrain, '*Morena boloka/ Setjhaba saheso*'. The third section consists of the opening four lines of '*Die Stem*', the anthem whose cadences lie at the heart of Afrikaner culture, its linguistic identity and its attachment to the land:

Uit die blou van onse hemel  
Uit die diepte van ons see  
Oor ons ewige gebergtes  
Waar die kranse antwoord gee

The new national anthem then concludes with a quatrain from '*Die Stem*' in the English translation.

The hierarchy of languages in South Africa is rearranged in this medley of Nguni, Sotho and Germanic tongues with which the Rainbow Nation sings of itself. After IsiZulu (approximately 22%), IsiXhosa represents the second largest number of mother-tongue speakers in the country (approximately 18%), Sesotho (Southern Sotho) the seventh (approximately 7%), Afrikaans the third (approximately 16%), and English the sixth (9%) (See Webb 1992:28). The other seven of the eleven official languages in South Africa—IsiZulu, IsiNdebele, SiSwati, Sepedi, Setswana, Tshivenda and Xitsonga—are represented in the national anthem only through their language-group association. Each linguistic threshold in this new anthem marks a moment of both inclusion and exclusion, of continuity as well as discontinuity. The Xhosa refrain to '*Nkosi sikelel' i-Afrika*' is shadowed by its Sotho equivalent in the second section. The adoption and repetition of the English name for the country, '*South Afrika/ South Afrika*', at the end of the Sotho refrain prepares for the more abrupt code-switch to '*Die Stem*'. The evocative Afrikaans text with its unhappy legacy of an exclusionary nationalism is, in turn, shadowed by and subsumed into the more stilted English refrain, which has perhaps only ever expressed a carpetbagging nationalism. It is ironically appropriate that English, which is effectively the lingua franca, should finally convey the cultural and linguistic reality of the new South Africa in two lines that acquire a new meaning in this context: 'Sounds the call to come together/ And united we shall stand ...'

The national anthem exemplifies the larger question that I wish to examine in this article: whether Edward Said's thesis about the post-imperial world might be no less true of post-apartheid South Africa: that 'all [its] cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic' (Said 1994:xxix). I do not wish to suggest a facile equation of apartheid and imperialism (although Breyten Breytenbach 1986:53ff has said that in apartheid can be seen the ultimate disfigurement of the colonial mind). In the new democratic South Africa, however, as in postcolonial cultural analysis, the term 'identity' is probably too static and centripetal a concept to accommodate the merging of various cultures during and after apartheid. Ethnic essentialism was the myth on which apartheid based its belief. Paradoxically, apartheid produced the very counter-discourse to its separatist ideology; South Africans have from the beginning translated themselves across its divisions.

The multiple translations enacted by the text of the new national anthem symbolise not only the co-presence of different cultural worlds in this country, but also the spirit of dialogue that characterises the post-apartheid state. If there is one thing that permits us to interpret the present South African rebirth in terms of the Renaissance in Europe five centuries ago, it is precisely this celebration of mental plurality that enables cross-cultural dialogue to take place. In this connection, the

theorist Karlheinz Stierle has developed a general thesis about the development of translation that is particularly suggestive for South Africa today. Initially, he argues, translation signified a relation between subject and object, and not between subject and subject (see also Budick 1996:12f). In the ancient and medieval worlds, *translation* (of imperial discourse, of religious instruction) took place within a hierarchical structure, along a vertical axis. With the Renaissance—and especially the figure of Petrarch—Stierle maintains, came modern man and his capacity to live in different worlds and to enjoy the complex ‘copresence of cultures’ (Stierle 1996:64). ‘It is the fundamental plurality of Renaissance that is the condition of the new dimension of dialogue’, he says. In the Renaissance translation began to take place horizontally, and no longer vertically and hierarchically. Translation now came to mean a relationship between subjects:

Renaissance is at the same time the discovery of plurality, perspective, dialogue, polyphony. Culture now means, as Leonid Batkin puts it, the culture of the communication of cultures (Stierle 1996:65).

It is to this, Stierle (1996:66) concludes, that in the modern world we owe our condition of living ‘in multiple cultural contexts’ and of having ‘the daily experience of the mutual translation of cultures within ourselves’. Through its polyphony, the South African national anthem provides those who are singing it with a moment of special awareness of this contemporary truth of the constant cross-over between cultures.

Precisely how the shift from a medieval, hierarchical and unidirectional translation paradigm to a reciprocal, more egalitarian one occurred, and the cultural implications of this for the change in South Africa from apartheid state to democratic state, may be more clearly understood in terms of the three earliest types of religious and cultural translation distinguished by Jan Assmann in his essay, ‘Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability’ (1996). The first is *syncretism*, which, however, is not to be mistaken for simple fusion or merging of cultures. Syncretism, Assmann (1996:34) says,

describes a kind of merging which coexists with the original distinct entities. The local identities are not altogether abolished; they are only made transparent, as it were. They retain their native semiotic practices and preserve their original meaning.

Syncretism is not direct translation into another culture; what happens is that local identities are translated into a third set of cultural and linguistic practices (Assmann takes Hellenism as his example) where

they assume a new kind of transparency which smoothes down idiosyncratic differences, allows for interpenetration and opens up a common background ... (Assmann 1996:34).

Syncretism does not imply cultural effacement; rather, it

requires or offers double membership: one in a native culture and one in a general culture. It does not mean one at the expense of the other. The general culture depends (or even 'feeds') on the local cultures (Assmann 1996:34).

The second type of cultural translation that Assman identifies is *assimilatory* translation which is translation into a dominating language or culture, and ultimately conversion and absorption into its avowedly superior terms of reference and epistemology. The only way in which a dominated culture can compete with what is generally perceived to be an elite culture is by means of its self-effacement and translatability into the cultural language of the hegemonic other.

The third type is what Assmann calls '*mutual* translation' within a network of economic or cultural exchanges which

leads us back to the very roots both of translation and of mutuality or reciprocity, namely to the exchange of gifts as the primal form of intergroup communication (Assmann 1996:35).

The basic function of such exchange, he says, is not economic but cultural: 'the establishment of community by communication, mutuality, and reciprocity'. Mutual translation may therefore be regarded as 'the earliest type and something like the "primal scene" of cultural translatability'. Such translation was essential for early cultures to overcome seclusion and 'to enter into larger networks of communication' (Assmann 1996:35f).

In their encounters with Western culture and their embrace and appropriation by and of it, from earliest colonisation to subjection under apartheid, indigenous South African cultures have experienced the whole spectrum of cultural translation. Black South Africans have responded to Western culture, including its apartheid manifestation, with a complex interplay of syncretism, assimilation and mutual translation that has effectively negated an ideology which professed a regard for cultural uniqueness together with equality but practised cultural segregation together with social oppression.

## **Assimilation, Syncretism and Mutual Translation in Early South African Autobiographical Writing**

To investigate the actual interpenetration of cultures in South Africa during the past forty years that gave the lie to state ideology, I propose to consider some of the major oppositional narratives through which the true history of the country was told, often from exile: the autobiographies of black South Africans. I take as my premise John Sturrock's reminder in *The Language of Autobiography* (1993:49) that autobiography can be seen as a forensic genre, 'an expedient by which the writer can reply to the injuries that have been done to him .... a kind of writing by which to win redress'. For it is in the stories of their lives under apartheid that black South African autobiographers have—again to use Sturrock's formulation—'repossessed and revised in their own favour' the images of them held by other people (Sturrock 1993:136). Or, as Peter Abrahams expresses it at the end of *Cry Freedom* ([1954]1990:310): 'All my life had been dominated by a sign, often invisible but no less real for that, which said: RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY'. His motive for wanting to escape from South Africa to England, he says, was 'to write books and tell them about life in this country' (Abrahams 1990:299).

Sturrock employs the term 'conversion' (with reference to the *Confessions* of Augustine) for the process by which the autobiographer creates significance for himself as a historical being by turning—or 'converting'—his past into a narrative. This past, Sturrock (1993:24) argues, is otherwise a hypothesis, or hypotext, which the reader of autobiography brings with him:

the pre-textual, wordless reality from which an autobiography has arisen, a potential nebula of thoughts and sensations which both underlies and brings pathos to the stable order of the narrative which we are given to read

The only feasible medium for such an act of narrative 'conversion', Sturrock (1993:25) continues, is that of language:

All that we can share of the past, even with ourselves, is what we are capable of saying or writing about it .... The autobiographical 'conversion' of a life can but be a textualization of that pre-textual 'life', as well as the conversion of a unique lived experience into the symbolic, shared order of a language. For the sharing of our lived experience verbally with others entails loss as well as gain, when the autobiographer must shape his past to the constraints of language equally with shaping his language to the constraints of his past.

According to Paul John Eakin (1985:226), the autobiographical act repre-

sents a final stage in the coming together of self and language: its 'act of composition', he argues, reaches 'back into the past not merely to recapture but to repeat the psychological rhythms of identity formation, and [reaches] forward into the future to fix the structure of this identity in a permanent self-made existence as literary text'. The developmental model on which Eakin (1985:219) bases his theory of autobiography begins with the acquisition of language, then leads to the origin of self-awareness (which he calls the 'I-am-me' experience), and culminates in the 'self-conscious self-consciousness' of autobiography. All three of these moments of self-definition yield 'a constitution of self' in which language 'is not merely a conduit for such self-knowledge but a determination and constituent of it'.

I am obviously not concerned here with the initial acquisition of language which, as Steven Pinker (1994) shows, is less of a cultural artifact than a function of the brain's neural circuitry: the biological adaptation to communicate information—a faculty that Pinker prefers to regard as an instinct. Language, he maintains,

is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is more distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently (Pinker 1994:18).

Or, as he also puts it on the same page: 'people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs'. What is relevant for my purpose here is the way South African autobiographical writers recapture and emphasise in their 'process of self-discovery and self-creation' (Eakin 1985:3) the linguistic thresholds in their lives: those culturally significant moments in their early identity formation when, already self-aware and grammatically competent in their mother tongues, they first have to define themselves in relation to an/other language. To take a recent example: towards the beginning of her autobiography, *To My Children's Children* (1990) Sindiwe Magona describes how, as a Xhosa child in a rural village in the Eastern Cape, she first encountered white people—*abelungu*—with their strange appearance and language. Her recollection of the meeting both recreates the linguistic moment and converts it into a significant stage in the larger design of her life story:

That whatever they said was nothing I understood simplified our transaction for me. By taking away the need for comprehension, I was left unhindered and unhampered by having to strive for coherence. Since what they said was incomprehensible to me, it followed that if, in reply, I said some incomprehensible nonsense, they would understand it perfectly, that being their way of talking.

The logic of a child facilitated what now, as an adult, I find excruciatingly difficult; communication:

'Shwe-shwehn-shwehn shwehn', we heard them say.

'Shwen, shwe-shwen', we replied.

We addressed them in the gibberish they spoke (Magona 1990:11f).

Early on in *Down Second Avenue* ([1959]1971:12) Ezekiel Mphahlele records a similar liminal moment on his first day at school when, as a Sotho-speaking child in the rural Northern Transvaal, he was introduced to the English alphabet:

There we were, a mighty crowd in a large hall, and the old teacher in front of us; an elderly, tired-looking gentleman. I still wonder how he managed us, if he did at all. There we were, chanting away the multiplication tables and word spelling: M-A-T, indicating each letter by clapping of hands. The teacher bellowed out: 'F-O-X, *fokos*; B-O-X, *bokos*; F-I-X, *fikis*', which we echoed while we marveled at the look of the words on the board and the miraculous sound of them.

Like Magona's life story, Mphahlele's traces his crossing of a language threshold into a knowledge of English that will culminate in the award of a Masters degree. And in one of the most memorable incidents in *Tell Freedom* ([1954]1990:154) Peter Abrahams describes how, as an Afrikaans-speaking 'Coloured' child from the Vrededorp slums, he was moved to go to school for the first time at the age of eleven by a young Jewish woman's reading to him from *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare* and introducing him to the world of storytelling. In a fragmented, subjective narrative he tells of his entry into literacy, into narrative in the standard code, English, and, ultimately, into self-narration. He recites the alphabet in full, rehearsing the rhyme through which he was taught to read:

C is letter in the alphabet  
A is a letter in the alphabet  
T is a letter in the alphabet  
Put them together and you have a cat.

—and then asks his teacher: 'Please, miss .... Are all the books in the world made from the alphabet?' She replies: 'Yes, all the books in the world are made from the alphabet', and he can only respond: 'Jee-zus!' The retrospective autobiographer, Peter Abrahams (1990:161, e.a.), recognises that with,

Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a

*new self-consciousness*, was born. I desired to know myself in terms of the new standards set by these books.

From this moment on, he will live in two, equally real and potent worlds, that of Vrededorp and that of books. And the world into which he has crossed will eventually enable him to give significance to his life in the other one.

Abrahams's (1990:311) statement at the end of *Tell Freedom*, 'Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa', is to some extent belied by his text itself. Like those of Mphahlele and Magona, the story of his life is shaped by the constraints of his language, just as his language is determined by the constraints of his past. The reader is made aware of how, from time to time, Abrahams is brought to the threshold of unfamiliar languages: the Zulu of a childhood friend; the English spoken by an Indian in Vrededorp, as incomprehensible to him as the Indian vernacular he hears from the mouth of a young friend, the 'clicking Hottentot language' of the woman he knows only as *Hotnot Annie* (Abrahams 1990:65), or the African language he hears spoken by an old black vendor. Each encounter with a new language, we are told, contributes a different discourse to the moulding of Abrahams as autobiographical subject. On the one hand, a sympathetic teacher makes him appreciate the 'rich body of Afrikaner literature and the beauty of the language itself', and, on the other, he is won over to black American culture by Robeson's 'Old Man River', Negro spirituals and the writings of the Harlem writers, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer.

Abrahams describes the ethnic mixture of his street in Vrededorp as consisting of Zulu, Basotho, Bechuana, Barolong, Coloured and Indian. Although there are no extensive insertions of any of these vernaculars and dialects into the appropriated English of Abrahams's narrative (he was guided by a teacher to model his English on the Bible), his polyglossic society is nonetheless evident in the tags that mark the English text as non-native: food-names in Sotho (*moeroga*, 28) and in Afrikaans (*mielie pap*, 29, and its poorer African version, *magou*, 100); animal names (*springhaas*, 44); colloquial Afrikaans epithets (*klipkop*, 36), forms of address (*kêrel*, 138), and expletives (*jou moer*, 82); the apartheid language of deference (*baas/basie*, 39); urban African institutions such as the savings club, *stokveld* (118); African borrowings from Afrikaans (*doek*, 59)—all contribute to dialogising the narrative together with the words of Stephen Spender, Bing Crosby and the Hail Mary.

Five years later, however, in what can still be regarded as an early-apartheid narrative, Mphahlele in *Down Second Avenue* (1971) is more consciously a linguistic and cultural broker. At home, he says, they spoke Northern Sotho, but outside it was 'a mixture of Afrikaans and Sotho' (89). The text includes and translates in context the Sotho names of country foods such as '*lengana*—wild herb' and '*serokolo*' (59);

bird-names such as the 'long-tailed *monope*' and '*tsemedi* the hang-bird'; customary sayings such as '*Mantlalela, Mantlalela*—the river is full, the river is full' (7); respectful forms of greeting such as *Thulare!* (66), and the lament of a woman over the death of a child, '*Jo, Jo-we! Me-weh!*' (60). The township idiolect is equally represented, from satirical Afrikaans nicknames for whites such as '*môre kom*—come tomorrow' (57) to the Sotho term for thugs, *malaita*, and the names coined for lethal home brews such as '*skokiaan ... fermented yeast ... sebakale-masenske*—one-that-leans-against-the-fence'; *bophelo-bontenne*—I-am-tired-of-living' (68). Other tags are more elaborately glossed by means of footnotes: Afrikaans pejoratives such as *outa* and *aia* (78), Sotho terms for relations such as '*makoti*—Daughter-in-law' (107); assimilations from Afrikaans into township argot, such as *skelm* (79) and the Afrikaans colloquialism '*outjies*—Boys' (100); and coinages which combine African and Afrikaans words, such as the name of a black member of the police liquor squad, '*Makulu-Skop*—Big Skull' (109).

More so than Abrahams, Mphahlele crosses and re-crosses linguistic thresholds deliberately to mediate discourses. It is as a university-qualified non-native teacher of Afrikaans that he criticises the racist bias of the language in school text books (155), and parodies the sentimental idiom of working-class Afrikaners (91). It is as a Sotho that he comments on the more heavily accented English of Zulu speakers, and reproduces the South African Indian dialect (96). It is as an English graduate that he mimics Fanakalo, the pidgin which he calls 'a stupid mixture of all the Bantu languages with English and Afrikaans', in a satirical episode to expose the ignorance of a mine compound manager at a classical concert by blacks (170). In his final exchange with the Nationalist bureaucracy about obtaining a passport, Mphahlele leaves the reader with an example of its oppressive discourse: he is made to wait, and told that '*Die groot baas is nog besig*—the big boss is still busy' (198).

In the 'Epilogue' to *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele (1971:205) speaks of the development his writing has undergone since the publication of his first short story collection, *Man Must Live*, in 1947:

In ten years my perspective has changed enormously from escapist writing to protest writing and, I hope, to something of a higher order, which is the ironic meeting between protest and acceptance in their widest terms.

His autobiographical text belongs to this 'higher order' of South African writing which combines, in the widest sense, protest against injustice with a culturally complex definition and acceptance of self. Despite their history of segregation, the black South African subjects of these autobiographies are effectively the discursive products of what Françoise Lionnet (1995:8ff, e.a.), following the Cuban poet, Nancy Morejón, prefers to call '*transculturation*'. Preferring this reciprocal concept to the

unidirectional notions of 'assimilation' or 'acculturation', Lionnet (1995:11) defines transculturation as

a process of cultural intercourse and exchange, a circulation of practices which creates a constant interweaving of symbolic forms and empirical activities among the different interacting cultures.

### **Transculturation: The Case of Sindiwe Magona**

Like Abrahams's and Mphahlele's earlier works, Sindiwe Magona's late-apartheid, two-volume autobiography, *To My Children's Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992), makes it clear from the outset that the subject has been shaped in a cultural 'border zone' where, Lionnet (1995:8) says, 'a complex syncretic cultural system comes to replace two or more ostensibly simpler cultures'. Double-consciousness, bilingualism and biculturality are the characteristics that Lionnet (1995:27) attributes to the postcolonial 'writer who lives and writes across the margins of different traditions and cultural universes'. Magona, even more explicitly than Abrahams or Mphahlele, foregrounds in *To My Children's Children* her South African split subjectivity in the story of her rural Xhosa childhood in the Eastern Cape, the family's move to the townships of Blaauwlei and Guguletu, her education as a teacher, her pregnancy, struggle for survival as a domestic worker in Cape Town, marriage and subsequent desertion by her husband before the birth of their third child. In a self-conscious fusion of Western autobiographical and Xhosa oral conventions, the narrative recounts the urbanisation of Magona's family and her experience of the discriminatory educational and economic system. It also documents for her grandchildren their Xhosa cultural heritage: its religious beliefs and practices, ritual incision of children, other coming of age ceremonies, and conventions of birth, courtship, marriage and mourning. Sindiwe/Cynthia Magona (1990:71) repeatedly presents herself as straddling two cultural systems:

I had come to accept the existence of two far from compatible worlds, the one my world of traditions, rites, and ancestor worship and the other, the world of 'civilization' that included school.

It is particularly in the linguistic construction of its subject that Magona's text can be seen to resemble in some respects what Lionnet (1995:39) has called *auto-ethnography*:

a new genre of contemporary autobiographical texts by writers whose interest and focus are not so much the retrieval of a repressed dimension of

the *private* self but the rewriting of their ethnic history, the re-creation of a *collective* identity through the performance of language.

Magona's cultural division is reinforced by her deliberate strategy of including numerous Xhosa 'interferences' (again to use Lionnet's term) in her English-language narrative. These are all translated in the text itself, either in parenthesis or else in parallel, so that the precedence given to her mother tongue may provide access to her Xhosa cultural matrix: Xhosa names for relatives by blood or by marriage (4,154); the *uintsomi* or fairy tales by means of which children were socialised among amaXhosa (6); children's play chants (8); the formulas of storytelling and riddles (13); tongue-twisters (35); the names for traditional healers (57); the praises of her clan by which she was ceremonially inducted into womanhood (69); customs of renaming and terms of respect for members of families joined through marriage; onomatopoeic words, such as '*Nkqo! Ngqo!*' for knocking; and a whole range of Xhosa proverbs.

The cultural binarism suggested by this parallel text is not, however, absolute. Magona's South African world is a polyglossic one, multi- rather than bicultural, its discourses not simply conflicting but often supplementary, and sometimes complicitous. Magona's text finally presents a subject not only in translation from one cultural context to another, but also in retranslation. Traditional Xhosa proverbs are applied to changing circumstances: by her father when he loses his job ('I return with it', 43), and by Magona to describe black teachers' salaries ('There is a penny short', 97), or what passes for black education ('going with those going', 98), or the husband who has deserted her ('he is dead wearing a hat', 167) or her destitution ('The cat took to the hearth', 169). On the other hand, the text also includes the figurative language coined from the experience of Africans in the cities: such as the township women's cry of warning about an imminent police raid ('It is red! It is red!'), the terms for contrasting township gangsters ('spoilers' or *oomanwaza*, 95) and country yokels ('*iimurhu*'), or for a parent's achievement in having put a child through school ('*Ndifundisilie*', 93). One of few instances where Magona's text comes close to presenting what Chantal Zabus (1991:102) has called 'relexification ... the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon', is when she presents in dialogue form the bus journey conversations of Cape domestic workers whose often transliterated accounts of their 'madams' reveal the Xhosa or Afrikaans source language. Margaret Daymond (1995) has persuasively shown how Magona's development of this subject position in her fictional writing provides her with a more complete self-understanding.

Magona's education in English, which begins informally with mimicry, continues more formally at primary school under Bantu Education and at Lourdes Secondary School in the Eastern Cape where she also becomes familiar with the

Latin Liturgy. The story of her education in the wider sense, however, often finds her ambiguously positioned discursively. The first time she hears her mother referred to as a 'kaffir' is in Xhosa by a young coloured man. She learns by working for Greek and British immigrant families that exploitation of domestic workers is not the sole preserve of white South Africans. She realises that the 'emerging poor-white' Afrikaans family she works for in the suburb of Ottery are, caught in their 'twilight zone' between country and city, 'neither here nor there' (157), paradoxically as close to her own situation as the colour of their skin has removed them from it. From her domestic employers she also discovers the incongruous language of confidentiality and distance, the third-person subjectivity of these women who refer to themselves as 'The Madam'. One of the most significant discursive choices Magona makes is when at the beginning of *Forced to Grow* she rejects the harsh Xhosa term for a husbandless woman, 'idikazi' in favour of the cold comfort of what she perceives as the kinder English epithet, a 'has-been'.

Whereas in the first volume of her autobiography Magona largely presents herself as someone straddling incompatible cultures, in the second volume, with its bilingual dedication to her mother, all the ambivalences and paradoxes in her story enable her to be seen more clearly in terms of what Said (1994:170), following the anthropologist, Victor Turner, regards as a *liminal* figure: a threshold entity or mediating character. In South African terms this may be seen as a black person who through her marginalisation has come to a particular understanding of her society in all its contradictions and, containing them in herself, is able to knit its cultures together. Magona learns not only about African chauvinism when the father of her three children walks out on her, but also about its collusion with white chauvinism when she is professionally discriminated against as a woman teacher. The fundamental ambivalence of her position becomes painfully evident as she has to battle for survival on the borderline between independence and charity, realising that in order also to be a father to her three children she has to neglect being a mother to them. The second part of the autobiography tells of the way she absorbs the multiple contradictions in her life story. She learns to bear the skeptical perception that other Xhosa women have of her in the dual roles of mother and scholar. She comes to value her mother's final initiation as a Xhosa witchdoctor while she herself is improving her qualifications as a teacher and becoming reinstated as a member of the Church. The opportunity of a better job in Bantu Administration also gives her access to her husband's file, which reveals to her how apartheid legislation had destroyed her own family life, like that of countless others. In the ethnic spectrum represented by her fellow students at the South African Committee of Higher Education, Magona has a vision of 'the wealth of human diversity that is South Africa's' (Magona 1992:102), of the 'brilliant rainbow' of 'people whose cultures and ancestors were poles apart'. Ironically, it is through her love of English literature that she comes to

appreciate Xhosa writing, just as it is her mastery of English and Afrikaans that enables her eventually to learn—and teach—the grammar of her mother tongue. All the contradictions in terms of which she comes to define herself climax during the students' revolution and schools boycott after Soweto. As she herself puts it: 'I became part of the problem' (Magona 1992:161). 1976, Magona says, was the year in which the centre shifted. Her disgust with the inferior education system for blacks could not entirely outweigh her dismay at the large-scale cowardice, corruption and coercion underlying much so-called 'reform'. The fury and confusion of this period brought into dramatic relief her own equivocal position:

I had seen it coming, and yet when it came, it did not have one face, it did not have one mind and it certainly did not speak one language. Indeed, it spoke no known language at all (Magona 1992:163).

On the one hand, despite her concern, she is dismissed by certain whites as not being representative of suffering blacks because of her standard of education; on the other, because of her regard for education she is held by some blacks to be a counter-revolutionary and an informer. During this bewildering period of complex allegiances, she is torn apart with the country.

The self that has been revised and repossessed at the end of Magona's narrative, however, is one that is able to accommodate overlapping identities and to reconcile different epistemologies. It is as the outcome of the process of cultural creolisation recorded in her life story that she describes how she had to hurry home to South Africa from her graduation at Columbia University, where she obtained a Masters degree in Social Work, because her youngest brother was coming out of the Xhosa traditional circumcision school and she had to be there for the coming-out ceremony. Sindiwe Magona's autobiography is both a 'transformative and performative' text in Lionnet's sense of the term: it subverts the conventional apartheid conceptual paradigms of oppressor and victim, and it does so in a work 'of self-invention through and in language' (Lionnet 1995:34).

### **Cross-cultural Discourse in *Mother to Mother***

Despite the general thrust of cross-cultural translation to overcome difference, it must persist, of course, since difference is what defines a culture. Wolfgang Iser explains this conundrum, for example, with reference to history as a discourse that is essentially cross-cultural, having grown by telling the story of the differences between cultures. As a 'form of cross-cultural interrelationship' (Iser 1996:246) history is doubly encoded: on the one hand, it articulates the various translations that have taken place across the dividing line between cultures into a developing narrative

of the overcoming of difference, while on the other, difference has to be maintained precisely as a measure of cultural progress and superiority. Furthermore, he argues, difference also persists *within* a culture. Traditions survive in a culture as an inheritance that is received or a heritage that is recast, 'either reinterpreted or appropriated in accordance with prevailing standards or needs' (Iser 1996:245), and thereby becoming subsumed into the particular cultural narrative. At certain historic junctures, however, Iser argues, the experience of crisis splits a culture apart, and a rift develops which divides the culture 'into an inaccessible past and a helplessly stricken present' (Iser 1996:247). The present becomes alienated from the past, the past can no longer serve as a mirror to refract the present, and to compensate for the loss of such a mutual mirroring a discourse has to be construed to allow for mutual interpenetration between present and past. The implication of these attempts at mutuality, between a culture and its traditions as well as cross-culturally, is that

the difference between past and present or between cultures can never be eliminated, for the past can never become a present again and one culture can never be totally encompassed by another (Iser 1996:248).

Experience of crisis at such a historic juncture leads therefore to cultural self-critique. A cross-cultural discourse begins to emerge, Iser says, which is not simply the assimilation, appropriation and communication which constitute translation. Operating at the interface between different cultures, such a discourse 'establishes a network of interpenetrating relationships' (Iser 1996:248) which both allows for a 'mutual impacting of cultures upon one another' and functions as 'a clearing station in which cultural differences are juxtaposed and sorted out' rather than smoothed over.

The effective civil war in South Africa during the period leading up to the first democratic election in 1994 may be seen to represent the kind of critical, historic juncture that Iser speaks of. A discourse was required in the late 80s and early 90s that could go beyond the language of cultural translation, one that was prepared to recognise the divisions within cultures and to engage with the differences between them, and one that was overt in its cultural self-critique. Sindiwe Magona's first novel, *Mother to Mother* (1998), makes an important contribution to the emerging cross-cultural discourse from this period in South African history. The self-reflexive text, with its very title symbolising a relationship between subjects, not only engages directly with the mutual interpenetration of white and black culture in South Africa, and of indigenous and foreign cultures, but it also attempts to understand an afflicted black South African culture in relation to its past traditions. In a recent interview, Magona has spoken of the 'therapeutic' function of writing both in recording and providing an engagement with the past and in freeing the writer to move on into the

future (in Meyer 1999:87). Her narrative enacts, furthermore, a number of important generic cross-overs: from autobiography to biography, from biography to the novel, and from history to fiction.

The incident at the heart of the narrative, as Magona explains in a preface, is an actual historical event: the killing of the American Fulbright scholar, Amy Biehl, by a mob of young blacks in Guguletu in August 1993. The killing was made all the more senseless and ironic by the American student's voluntary work to help black people in this country prepare for their first truly democratic elections and her sympathetic involvement in their social customs and problems. Magona explicitly sets out to juxtapose two worlds: that of the victim, whose appalling death was received with universal grief and outrage, and that of the killer. Magona's text does not presume—is finally unable—to imagine the former, and can only tentatively speculate about it; of the latter, however, she asks:

... are there no lessons to be had from knowing something of the other world? The reverse of such benevolent and nurturing entities as those that throw up the Amy Biehls, the Andrew Goodmans, and other young people of that quality? What was the world of this young woman's killers, the world of those, young as she was young, whose environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity and who, instead, became lost creatures of malice and destruction? (Magona 1998:v)

Of this world Magona *is* partly qualified to speak—albeit from her present situation in the United States—and she does so in the voice of the narrator, Mandisa, the mother of one of the killers, who tries to explain, without excusing his actions, to the victim's mother the South African world of intra- and inter-racial violence that her son has inherited. In her narrative the stricken Mandisa contemplates the gulf between the South African background of her son, Mxolisi, and the unimaginable one, to her, of the young American woman by positioning herself as narrator in terms of the unbridgeable divide between white and black South Africa. Consequently, Mandisa's narrative, in which the events leading immediately up to the killing are imbricated with episodes from her own and Mxolisi's past, confirms for her black South African readers the experiences they have lived through; it informs white readers of a history of oppression in which they have participated with varying degrees of complicity; and its account of lives overdetermined by cultural and racial difference conveys to a foreign readership something of the crises of late-apartheid South Africa. Mxolisi's story cannot, however, simply be subsumed into his mother's story of her own life, any more than her autobiography can simply be assimilated into the larger fictional narrative, or, for that matter, Magona's novel can simply be translated from the particular historical situation in which it has its context. Just as

the different cultural worlds are juxtaposed in the text, so are the various biographical, autobiographical, fictional and historical narratives, discursively differentiated in a complex dialogue between cultures and genres. Some measure of understanding, the text suggests, may come from presenting and thematising difference, and not eliding it.

The cross-cultural discourse in *Mother to Mother* is conducted largely in terms of the life stories of Mandisa and Mxolisi. Their narratives, paired and yet separate, record lives that are in many ways typical of those of the majority of urban black South Africans. Mandisa's account of her early youth in the tin-shack location of Blouvillei, and her family's forced relocation, together with thousands of others, to the soulless township of Guguletu, resembles in its larger contours many of the autobiographies written by other black South Africans. In certain—although of course not all—respects Mandisa's descriptions of her schooling under Bantu Education, and of the beginnings of her own sexual awareness and of the pregnancies of her young friends, resemble Magona's own autobiography. Mandisa's mother's obsession about her daughter's virginity and the humiliating examinations to which she regularly subjects her may be a distinctive feature of the fictional character's youth, but there is some correspondence to Magona's own early life in Mandisa's being sent to rural Gungululu to live with her grandmother, and in her unexpected pregnancy, her customary marriage to China, the father of her child, the breakdown of the relationship between herself and China, his abandonment of her, her having to find work as a domestic employee, and her subsequent relationship with Lungile, the working man who is the father of her other two children. Magona's autobiography sits suggestively alongside Mandisa's story.

Mandisa's story is also similarly told as a form of 'auto-ethnography' (to return to Lionnet's term), documenting a world of Xhosa traditional beliefs and social customs stemming from 'the times of our grandmothers and their grandmothers before them, [when] African people lived to see their great-great-grandchildren' (Magona 1998:32). And like Magona's own story, Mandisa's evokes this traditional world to record its contact with new circumstances that either distort its values and practices or negate them completely. The traditional Xhosa forms of politeness that Mandisa recollects belong to the past of the rural village, Gungululu, 'where children were named according to the spaces between the years of rain' (Magona 1998:99). The world of the urban African under apartheid is presented in terms of severance from these values. For example, the diasporic eviction from Blouvillei is unthinkable to one old inhabitant since, as he says, "The afterbirths of our children are deep in this ground. So are the foreskins of our boys and the bleached bones of our long dead' (Magona 1998:55). For Mandisa, patriarchal customs become oppressive when, after the birth of her child, her father and uncles go ahead with the arrangements for her marriage to China, despite the fact that they have already

rejected and denounced each other. 'Asikokuzibophelela nenj'enkangeni oko? Is that not tying oneself to a dog in a patch of nettles?' (Magona 1998:13) she asks, resorting to the Xhosa idiom to express her predicament. The payment of the *lobola*, her reception into her husband's family home, the custom of bringing wedding gifts to the members of his household, the ceremony of renaming the young wife and naming her child, the duties expected of the new wife, or *umakoti*, her period of *ukuhota*, or initiation, which, ironically, is usually supposed to end with the arrival of the first child—all these are voided of meaning by the enforced partnership of Mandisa and China.

The discourse of Xhosa cultural tradition is tested throughout Mandisa's narrative. When the four-year-old Mxolisi innocently reveals the hiding place of two young student activists to the pursuing police, only to witness the consequences of his deed when they are shot dead before his eyes, he withdraws into total silence, so that Mandisa finally appeals to the healing powers of a traditional *sangoma*. Mandisa interprets the descent of the young into murderous gangsterism after the general breakdown in education in 1976 as a disregard for *ubuntu*, or traditional humaneness. The barbarous execution by 'necklacing' represents to her a grotesque violation of language and of the very being of these children who refer to themselves as 'students' or 'comrades'. The juxtaposition of cultural worlds is highlighted at the very beginning of the narrative when, reflecting on the Congress of South African Students having ordered the school children to join Operation Barcelona, a campaign in support of their striking teachers, Mandisa questions her own wisdom in having sent Mxolisi 'to the bush' (10) for the traditional Xhosa initiation ceremony six months earlier.

Like her autobiography, Magona's novel is (again to use one of Lionnet's terms) a performative text in the way it conducts its cross-cultural discourse through language. The conflicting cultural worlds are articulated in Mandisa's narrative; her translations and glosses constitute a virtual parallel text that gestures toward the overcoming of difference, but finally testifies to difference and a rupture with the past. The polyglossic text conveys something of the cross-cultural assimilations that have occurred in the multi-lingual South African society, but the italicised non-English words and culturally idiosyncratic expressions also signify unbridgeable differences. Xhosa words and expressions constantly remind the reader that Mandisa's linguistic world is not an English one. The names of foods, such as *umngqusho*, or 'broken-corn-with-bean meal' (21), berries from the wild *intlokotshane* bushes and *ibhosisi* vines (56), and *mphokoqo* (150), evoke an African world of rural resourcefulness and urban poverty. Mandisa's own childhood and that of her son are recalled through the names of their games: *ikula*, or jump-rope (33), hide-and-peek, *infumba* and *qashi-qashi* (146). Her heritage is also evident in the Xhosa modes of greeting and forms of address recorded in the narrative, such as

*Bajita* (11) and *Kwedini* (62) for comrades and for young boys; *Mntan'omntan'am* ('Child of My Child', 102) for a grandchild; *Mntuwenkosi* ('Man of the Lord', 116); *Mfundisi* for the minister of church (186); and 'Middle Father' (*Tatophakathi*) and 'Little Father' for paternal uncles (124). Some of the Afrikaans borrowings that she uses, such as *hokkie* (6), *lawaa* (164), the game *poppie huis* (33) and the foods *vetkoekies* and *skaapkop* (49), are innocent; others, like the naturalised epithet *boesmans* (34) for Coloured people, are as racist in Xhosa as in their source language. The rupture between the cultural past and its present state of crisis is most pointedly symbolised in the Xhosa naming customs that Mandisa describes: whereas she had decided to call her son Hlumelo ('Sprig'), her husband's people bestow on the child the name *Mxolisi* ('He, who would bring peace'—136) as a token of the healed rift between their families.

Mandisa also pays tribute to the collective wisdom of her culture through her use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Traditional formulations are brought to bear on contemporary conditions, and as these proverbs and idioms are reactivated, the truths that they contain are—often ironically—validated. Mandisa quotes her mother as not wanting 'anyone to say she had raised a rotten potato' (94) to justify her regular inspections of her daughter's virginity, and she also recalls her mother's prophetic admonition, '*Isala kutyelwa sibona ngolophu!*—She who refuses advice will learn through burn marks!' (98). To tell of her subsequent pregnancy, Mandisa quotes her grandmother's comment about her obvious condition: 'With time, you know that if you have kneaded, the dough will certainly rise' (112). To convey something of her confused sense of losing control over her children, especially *Mxolisi*, Mandisa, like her mother and grandmother before her, also resorts to a Xhosa proverb, '*ukulunga kwenye, kukonakala kwenye*, the righting of one, is the undoing of another' (9). She disapproves, she says, of *Mxolisi*'s 'gallivanting up and down the township like a sow that's littered during a drought' (71), and when he denies any implication in the necklacing carried out by certain of his student comrades in the township, Mandisa can only retort: 'As amaXhosa say, *ityal' alingomafutha, alithanjiswa*, guilt is no cream with which one anoints oneself' (159). It is in the dialogue in particular that Magona draws attention to the source language by providing parallel translations in the narrative at precisely those moments of heightened cross-cultural drama, from the disbelieving responses of the inhabitants of Blouville to their forced removal, to the hapless *Mxolisi*'s betrayal of the Comrades, and the police raid on Mandisa's dwelling-place after the killing of the American girl.

Most importantly and most dramatically, it is in the political slogans and songs that Mandisa's narrative signals and enacts the gulf between cultures as well as within her own culture. Out of the call-and-response patterns of Xhosa tradition come the contemporary freedom chants such as *Siyanqoba! We overcome!* (14); the toyi-

toyi, Ngubani lo? NguMandela! Ngubani lo? NguSobukhwe! Baziintoni? Ziinkokheli!' (17); various other utterances that have become part of the liberation discourse, including the militant chant of the youth, 'AmaBhulu, azizinja! ... Whites are dogs!' (74f); and the mass slogans, 'ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET!' (206) and 'AMANDLA! NGAWETHU!' (209).

As in her autobiographical writing, it is finally to her own orally mediated past that Magona turns in her fiction to try and understand how Mandisa's son has come to kill another mother's son. She chooses a tragic, visionary moment in African history to mediate the incomprehensible present. Recalling her grandfather, Tatomkhulu's, teaching about the history of her people and their resistance to colonial oppression, Mandisa rehearses the story of Nongqawuse's dream and the Xhosa nation's slaughter of all their cattle and burning of their fields in 1857 in the hope of driving the *abelungu* into the sea, and the catastrophic consequences of this collective action. Strangely, this part of Magona's text is essentially rendered in English with only some Xhosa tags to signal the source culture. The story of Nongqawuse provides a rhetorical rather than a fictionally realised conclusion to Mandisa's narrative. She asks the American mother, her sister in sorrow and now sister in comfort, to consider the possibility of her daughter being the 'perfect atonement of her race' for centuries of injustice, and of Mxolisi being the 'perfect host of the demons of his' (201)—in effect, to blame on history what happened in Guguletu on that fateful afternoon. As Mandisa—and her author's voice is barely concealed beneath hers—explains:

Nongqawuse had but voiced the unconscious collective wish of the nation:  
rid ourselves of the scourge ....

One boy. Lost. Hopelessly lost.

One girl, far away from home.

The enactment of the deep, dark, private yearnings of a subjugated race. The consummation of inevitable senseless catastrophe.

I do not pretend to know why your daughter died ... died in the manner in which she did. Died when the time and place and hands were all in perfect congruence; cruel confluence of time, place and agent (Magona 1998:210).

Purely as a novel about the killing of Amy Biehl *Mother to Mother* may be unsatisfactory: the individual life stories may not be able adequately to contain the manifold historical circumstances that led up to the event, nor may the mythologised history be sufficiently integrated into the fictional construct. What Magona has, however, succeeded in creating is a complex discursive zone in which different

cultures interact and interpenetrate across the borders between orality and writing, autobiography and biography, and history and fiction.

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