

Word Bomber Supreme!

Textual Strategies of Nihilism in the Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng

Ayub Sheik

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8633-3740>

Abstract

When Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer wanted to drag Rampolokeng off to her personal analyst, he questioned, ‘is it me or the things I write about that are sick?’ Indeed, Rampolokeng’s acerbic poetry, a mongrelized, polyglot invective against hegemonic Western discourses, social injustice, tyranny and corruption is striking for its grotesque and surreal imagery, scatological diction and the eschewing of conventional forms of poetry. The nihilistic impulse to destroy oppression, racism and its attendant ideologies is mostly situated in post-apartheid South Africa and is scripted in a macabre litany of activism and indignation. The narratorial voices of subversion/inversion of social and political hierarchies satirize, parody and decry inhumanity: ‘I look out on vultures pecking their souls fleshless’ (Rampolokeng 1990:1). His subjectivity deftly manipulates African oral stylistics, Jamaican dub poetry, American ghetto rap, jazz and contemporary popular music in irreverent, intertextual abandon. This study will critique Ramolokeng’s textual strategies of subversion that undermine hegemonic discourses and privilege the downtrodden masses. In doing so, it will reflect upon the nihilistic impulse to eradicate injustice, elitism and dogma and validate a thesis that the passion for destruction is paradoxically a creative impulse for a more humane, compassionate and just world order.

Keywords: subversion, oppression, nihilism, hegemonic discourses, social injustice

Introduction

When Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer wanted to drag Rampolokeng off to her personal analyst, he questioned, ‘is it me or the things I write about that are sick?’ Raised by his mother in a Catholic working class home in Soweto, his poetry was shaped by the degradation, oppression, poverty, violence and collective despair that characterized so much of township life. His multi-valent influences are rooted in his involvement in the seventies in the Black Consciousness movement and the protest mélange of rap, Jamaican dub poetry and the *dithoko* talking songs of SeSotho amongst others. Rampolokeng, reflecting on his formative years explained why he began writing at an early age:

I was brought up to celebrate my own slavery. To me, “what people call poetry became the means of explaining the world to myself” (Meyer 2017: 80).

This artistic writing therapy was a means of exercising control when he, like the black majority, were denied control of much of their lives under apartheid. The cathartic act of writing poetry gave him a sense of empowerment and manifest as a paradox (the central thesis of this study), of the nihilistic will to destroy all semblance of an oppressive past and like Nietzsche’s ‘child’ in *The Three Metamorphoses* (see *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 1933) – contemplate the possibilities of creating a new system of values, to recreate a humane and equitable social order from the ashes of destruction.

Rampolokeng drew much of his inspiration from Black Conscious ideology, and his poetic style, diction and register coincided with Chris Hani’s description of black consciousness as ‘an illustration of black anger and frustration’ (MacMillan 2021: 1). Defining black consciousness, Steve Biko (1978:92) explains:

Its essence is the realization by the black man of the need to rally with his brothers around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and emulate the white man, they are

insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black.

Moodley (1991:152) points out that that black consciousness helped the black masses to shed an internalised colonial mentality and it laid the ground for the self-confident challenge to the apartheid state:

This self-empowering, vibrant, reconstructionist worldview emphasized the potential role of black initiative in its responsibility for articulating the power of the powerless (Moodley 1991: 143).

Rampolokeng's acerbic poetic diction, scatological imagery and motifs of protest was one such cry giving voice to the voiceless.

Rampolokeng's performance poetry has seen him grace the stage with musicians such as Gunther Sommer, Julian Bahula, Louis Mhlanga and Soulimane Toure amongst others. In 2005, he performed with the poet, Lefifi Tladi in a documentary, 'Giant Steps' directed by Geoff Mphakati and Aaron Kaganof. His collections of poetry are *Horns for Hondo* (1990); *End Beginnings* (Shifty CD with The Kalahari Surfers 1993); *Talking Rain* (1993); *Rap Master Supreme: Word Bomber in the Extreme* (1997); *End Beginnings* (1998); *Blue V's* (1998); *The Bavino Sermons* (1999); and *The h.a.l.f. Mythology* (CD with various musicians 1992). He also published a play, *Fanon's Children* and two novels, *Blackheart: Prologue to Hysteria* (2004) and *Whiteheart: Epilogue to Insanity* (2005).

The racial, economic and psychological oppression of apartheid in tandem with the new, corrupt political elite of post-apartheid South Africa as well as neoliberal global colonialism and capitalism were the focus of much of his satire and verbal assaults. These preoccupations were scripted in acerbic poetry, best describes as a mongrelized, polyglot invective against hegemonic Western discourses, social injustice, tyranny and corruption. The diction is striking for its grotesque and surreal imagery, scatological allusion and the eschewing of conventional forms of poetry. His radical poetics fuses high culture with low culture, vacillates irreverently between the stage and the page and borrows the frenetic pace and rhythm associated with rap and dub poetry. Rampolokeng's poetry explodes in performance with effervescence and zest, compelling attention to the acoustic dimension of poetry as well as to its dense, inventive and macabre imagery and mongrelized diction of creolized English, Afrikaans and SeSotho. Yet this modern poet, by his own admission, defies artistic categorization and labelling:

I'm part of no group or school or cult. I'm here to shave the beards of these little gurus (Berold 2003:140). I do not represent anybody. I do not speak for anyone else. I speak and write about what I see, what I feel and in the way that I feel it should be written (Bruckner 1996:268).

Joanna Wright argues that this conception of self allows Rampolokeng the alchemic ability to evade categorization and to situate himself at the interstices of culture (2003:90). Writing from a pro-poor perspective provided a license to satirize, parody and to invert social hierarchies in a Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Rampolokeng was also opposed to totalising hegemonies that conceal their contradictions and promote congenial images of the state and powerful institutions. It was for this reason he refused to be co-opted into the euphoria of 'the rainbow nation' at the dawn of South Africa's liberation from apartheid and choose instead to shine a spotlight on the avaricious shenanigans of the new political elite. Rampolokeng remains a conscience of a nation mired in corruption, self-enrichment and endemic social injustice, a post-apartheid state plagued by looting and the hypocrisy of self-serving politicians robbing the public purse in the name of democracy and a new nationalism. Writing against a backdrop of rising inequality and increased levels of already widespread poverty, he particularly disavowed the rhetoric and sloganeering of liberation that concealed the graft, hypocrisy and power-mongering of the new political elite.

Diction

His diction constitutes an interesting poetic ensemble of witty wordplay, experiments with topography and the use of neologisms. This practice amounts to reinventing the English language into a new signifying relationship stripped of racist and colonial subjectivities, a language free of derogatory encoding of the other, a scatological assault on colonial binaries cloaked in satire, puns and the reversal of established social hierarchies. In an interview in *New Coin* in 1993, Rampolokeng, writing at a time when he felt that 'half my land in jail half out on bail' (1990: 33) explained his artistic outlook as follows:

My entire existence is itself an assault upon the senses. We're a nation in the grip of psychosis and mass hysteria. I don't think I

could come to terms with it by writing poetry fit for lounges and studies (Wolpe 1995:74).

Rhyme

Of particular interest are the internal rhymes and metrical patterns that derive from Jamaican dub poetry and rap. These features accentuate the quality of his performance poetry in which rhythm, rhyme and diction compliment each another in provocative and imaginative ways. The SeSotho Dithoko song style in which a ‘singer talk-sings’ the lyrics accompanied by instrumental music was also hugely influential for Rampolokeng and ideal for performance on stage. Rampolokeng blended the old with the new, skilfully blending the Dithoko with modern genres of rap into a new intertext. Consequently, his work is most effective as a performance genre. Oliphant accordingly notes:

Like all oral work his poetry is centred around the concrete inter-human and social struggles and it is at its most forceful in a performative setting (1990:iv).

In an interview with critic, Robert Berold, Rampolokeng gave some inkling as to where his poetry is situated in the Southern African literary landscape:

People killed off their art because they were busy fighting a cause, which was the thing to do. They were fighting a cause and it killed off whatever was within them, as the essence of their art (Berold 1999:40).

As a consequence, in 1994, Rampolokeng, and other young poets like him, sought to chart new poetic territory and possibilities of literary articulation. In a lecture ‘Writing the Ungovernable’, which he delivered on the 12th of June 2012 while a Mellon writer in residence at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, Rampolokeng provides some insight into his evolving poetics. In this seminar, Rampolokeng works through the ‘thinking, scribbles, scrawling, pencil-scratches, paint-dabs & sound-notes’ that inspired him to overcome the ‘soul-deadening and mind-poisoning’ education he received under apartheid:

As part of the Pavlovian experiment that was Bantu Education, I was force-fed the soul-deadening and mind-poisoning literature and art of debasement, inhumanity and colonialism that sought to reduce me to sub-human status from an early age. I kicked out against it and reached out to the life-affirming side of things, where I found the art and literature of social conscience that lifted me to another plane. From Fela Kuti and Frantz Fanon to Ingoapele Madingoane, Dumile Feni, Lefifi Tladi, the dub poetry of LKJ, Jean Binta Breeze and Mutabaruka to the proto-rap of Gil Scott-Heron. I am part of that unfortunate generation called ungovernable, who were never debriefed. Having started from mere existence, I am trying to ‘write myself to a life’ (Ramoplokeng 2012).

Nihilism

Writing himself into a life entailed a nihilistic assault on established hierarchies of capitalism, contemporary hegemonies and political structures that perpetuate the oppression of the poor and disenfranchised. Ramoplokeng avers:

I was caught in the political environment in this country, and there was no way in which I could lift myself above it. I was born into a particular situation and particular circumstances that were themselves influenced by the political factors in the country. The way I looked at it then was that I couldn’t really draw a line between my political and my artistic activities—until it became a fusion of the two: my artistic expression had to be a form of political activity and the other way around (Berold 1993:27).

Rampolokeng found artistic expression in destroying established hegemonies, colonial and racist binaries and the hypocrisy of the new black political elite. This study inquires into this penchant by an analysis of nihilism in Rampolokeng’s poetry, with a particular focus on *Horns for Hondo* (1990) and *Talking Rain* (1993). It is premised on the question Rampolokeng raises in *Talking Rain*:

what form now does the storm take

after drinking from the blood lake? (1993:9)

The ‘blood lake’ (1993:9) metaphorizes a history of racial and economic oppression, a crushed self-esteem characterised by a loss of hope and prolonged immiseration. These pathologies manifest in numbness, disassociation, sorrow and a radical politics of destruction associated with nihilism, or what Rampolokeng describes as ‘a generalised collapse of humanity’ (cited in Mkhize 2011:84). Nihilism is commonly defined as a philosophy of negation, rejection, or denial of some or all aspects of thought or life (Crosby 1998). Its semantic root appears in the verb, ‘annihilate’, meaning to bring to nothing, to destroy completely. A central feature of nihilism is also the assumption that life is meaningless, as is implied by the prefix, the Latin *nihi* which translates to nothingness, meaninglessness (Pratt 2010).

Having said that, it is also a concept that has transformed over time. Over the years, nihilism has come to represent a variety of philosophical and aesthetic stances. Nihilism is most often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche who argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. Nietzsche’s philosophy arises from rejection, from outrage at the world and from the pain that the world causes. Nihilism is an attempt at altering our sensibilities, of revaluating all values and to free the potential Nietzsche believes is innate in each individual. Rampolokeng’s conception of nihilism also finds synergy with the thinking of Prince Peter Kropotkin, the leading Russian anarchist, who defined nihilism as the symbol of struggle against all forms of tyranny, hypocrisy, and artificiality and for individual freedom (Kropotkin 1998) Consequently, this study is more aligned with political nihilism, which is associated with the thesis that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement. Yet paradoxically, as cited in the early writing of anarchist leader, Mikhael Bakunin (1814 - 1876):

Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life—the passion for destruction is also a creative passion! (*Reaction in Germany* 1842).

For Rampolokeng, the world needs to be reinvented anew, with a new moral,

social, economic and political order. I contend that nihilism in Rampolokeng's poetry is predicated on the will to destroy existing institutions, social hierarchies as well as capitalistic and colonial practices that manifest in post-apartheid South Africa. This impulse to destroy is best exemplified by assuming the guise of a 'word bomber' striving to change existing social and economic relations of oppression and marginalization by textual strategies using searing invectives, parody, scatological reference, puns and satire. This agenda is also manifest in the linguistic domain in experiments with topography, creolization of language, the use of neologisms and experimental word play.

In *Talking Rain* (1993), the personification of the title is noteworthy. When understood in context, the binary of destruction and regeneration of the power of rain becomes apparent. It attests to the power of signification and the ambiguity of interpretation. I argue that this is consonant with Rampolokeng's nihilistic postures in his poetry.

The poem 'RAP CENTURY' in *Talking Rain* (1993) situates his poetic craft as political polemic in a post-apartheid era. The poet cannot be a pastoralist, regaling in the beauty of nature and innocence when he is a product of oppression and privation that have shaped his *oeuvre*:

I want to give you beautiful lines
poems deeper richer than South Africa's mines
but those mines have broken many bones
made mourns groans moans
left skeletons shining brighter than diamond & gold
so I'll put my beautiful poems on hold...
some say my poetry has a sick soul
it belongs in a deep hole (1993:1).

These lines anticipate the dark, nihilist brooding that pervades much of Rampolokeng's poetry and is a far cry from Wordsworth's idyll of 'emotions recollected in tranquility' (Khan 1993). Figuring his poetry in metaphors such as a 'sick soul' (ibid) that 'belongs in a deep hole' (ibid) is suggestive of a dislocated self scarred by memories of trauma and psychic agony. This precipitates a refusal to integrate into the social world, to sit askance and unleash a withering, critical diatribe of invectives from which nothing is spared.

These verbal assaults are figured in prosody that is heavily indebted

to rap, with tight rhymes and assonance foregrounding the aural. The lexical choice of ‘mourns groans moans’ (1993: 1) without punctuation mimics a primal immiseration, a long incessant wail of agony borne of exploitation and suffering. The reader is being prepared for a pathology arising from the deep recesses of a tormented psyche. The legacy of brutal, unremitting exploitation shines ‘brighter than diamonds & gold’ (1993: 1), precious minerals associated with the wealth of the land. The fact that his long ordeal has left him and his ilk as ‘skeletons’ (1993: 1) paints a dire image of economic exploitation in the mines. It also suggests that much of his humanity has been stripped away from him, leaving at his core an unrecognizable self, both alienated and alienating in its constitution:

I open my mind’s tap
& acid words corrode repression’s ear-flap
unleashed like a bomber’s missile
marching with the returning exile (1993:1).

Exile (which is both literal and emotional) as well as the psychological ravages of apartheid and traumatic memory has suppressed his innate warmth and humanity, instead there are ‘acid words’ (1993:1) on a ‘bomber’s missile’ (1993:1) that figure his sense of self. What is one to make of this persona? Here, pathogenic experiences have coalesced in the internalization of acute anxiety, overwhelming trauma has produced psychic numbing. The super-ego reigns and a destructive, domineering alter ego has gained control of the self. This is also manifest in the militarization of the speaker’s discourse, a repetitive feature in the diction peppered with words such as ‘warrior’, ‘guerilla’, ‘exploding bombs’, and ‘march’ (1993: 1) amongst others. This is also experienced in the prosody, in which ‘rhythm explodes’ in ‘firing words’ (1993:1). The nihilist proclivity is foregrounded in the lines:

my rap is of rank
there where humanity sank
I can be repression’s hero
making poems that amount to zero (1993:1).

The speaker claims that the valuation of his rap poetry is best appreciated in the maelstrom where ‘humanity sank’ (1992:1). This alludes to apartheid racism, political domination of others, wanton corruption, lies and hypocrisy

of the political elite as well as capitalistic maleficence. Should he repress these truths, he would succumb to the ideologically distorting effects of the rich, powerful and politically connected, becoming that which he hates most, in his valuation, a 'hero' of social injustice, hypocrisy and grand corruption. It is this rationale that sees him:

Firing words hotter than shots from an army tank
Piercing burning razing your memory bank (1993:2).

The desire to annihilate memory is predicated on multiple aspirations, chief of which is a nihilistic wish to obliterate the images, artefacts, haunting histories of shame and oppression that engulf his persona. However, this destruction must paradoxically anticipate a new beginning, be replaced by new memories, the making of new histories, but destruction comes before regeneration, nihilism before cultural renaissance. This indeed is an evolutionary phase of forging a new identity in a cultural revolution that necessitates the recognition that, for now:

This is a warrior rap century
Giving guerrilla war sanctuary
In my words hear exploding bombs
Bursting man's enslaving tombs
I'm no william shakespeare
I write in the flight of the nation's spear (1993: 2).

The 'enslaving tombs' (ibid) of super exploitation, political disenfranchisement and colonial and apartheid othering must first be destroyed by a 'word bomber in the extreme' (1990: 53), targeting those in 'the flight of the nation's spear' (1993: 2). Between the page and the stage, there is war still to be waged.

Rampolokeng's poetry is also a conduit for extreme pessimism, one of the defining characteristics of nihilism. This is evident in the poem, Johannesburg (1993: 10):

johannesburg my city
paved with judas gold
deception and lies
dreams come here to die

traffic flows in the sick
vein of life as we tick
with the eternal time-bomb
of our own extinction (1993:10).

These lines express the weariness and loss of faith in the social world. Like Nietzsche, Rampolokeng is of the view that humanity is 'sick' (ibid), the world in which we live is 'sick' (ibid) and requires liberation from its man-made shackles. For Rampolokeng, this requires the obliteration of the existing power relations in society, that the existing values that govern our lives be devalued. Hypocrisy and deception do not have an obligation of passive acquiescence and must be confronted. Referencing Judas signals betrayal of the denizens of the city and the poem is framed in apocalyptic images of destruction.

Nihilistic hopelessness and uncertainty is foregrounded in the following lines as well:

the green pastures of wealth
are vaults of death
nothing is secure
neither politics or prayer
can guarantee the future (1993:10).

It is also indicative of an oft used rhetorical trope used by Rampolokeng, the oxymoron. Here 'green pastures' (1993: 10) is contradicted by the image of 'vaults of death' (1993: 10) The conjoining of contrary elements suggests internal disquiet and deep, unresolved conflict. The oxymoronic quality is explicit in 'After Bra W's flowers':

inside prison gullets
frozen in hot shells
fries in cold cells (1993: 9).

The final stanza of 'johannesburg' reifies an apocalyptic vision steeped in pessimism and nihilistic despair:

jo'burg my city
here our birth is a lie

we just rush to die
without living
just existing
to keep the money belt spinning
only the wise come out winning
& the rest
feet first
as pawn
of evil hand or ogre eye
or else
on the fringe
of insanity (1993:10).

Existence is figured as purposeless and without meaning. These are central traits of nihilism and brings into sharp focus the real conditions of human existence, of chaos upon which we futilely impose our subjectivities and artificial semblances of order and meaning. Existential angst is centered on mindless capital accumulation. Life is bleak and bereft of hope and is reduced ‘to keeping the money belt spinning’ (1993:10) and succumbing ‘feet first’ (ibid) into the machinations of perceived evil.

Rompolokeng also assails religion in an acerbic diatribe:

blood in the chalice
human flesh is sacrament
in the temple of excrement
searching for meaning in deranged scriptures
the world shuttles to insanity
in cruci-fiction the angel of death comes down...
bible thumping, rifle humping
the search for the eternal is fatal
the triple seven grave digger emblem
ties supremacist to eternity
religion fucks politics in an orgy of righteousness
human anger erupts hotter than volcanic hunger (1993:12).

The metaphorical ‘blood’ in the chalice is a reference to The Last Supper in which Jesus served wine to the disciples in a vessel stating:

Drink this, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom (New International Version, Matthew 26 vss 27 - 29).

However, the nihilistic and atheistic framing of this poem supposes that this is real blood and not a metaphorical reference. This is the blood of the common man, manipulated by 'blind faith' (1993:12) into the rituals and dictates of religion in which 'human flesh is sacrament' (1993:12), common fodder for capitalistic relations of exploitation and alienation.

Scatological references disavow and ridicule religious claims 'in the temple of excrement/searching for meaning in its deranged scriptures' (1993: 12). The biblical narrative is lambasted as a 'cruci-fiction' (ibid) and the juxtaposition of 'bible thumping rifle humping' (ibid) bring evangelisation and violence into a new signifying relationship by discordant association.

Vitriol is extended to an ambiguous reading of the 'triple seven' emblem. In the *Orthodox Study Bible* (1985), 777 represents the threefold perfection of the Holy Trinity and can be contrasted against 666, the number of the beast. The political significance of the triple seven emblem also lies in its appropriation by the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (*Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging*, AWB), Boer-nationalist, neo-Nazi, para-military and white supremacist movement in South Africa. The AWB campaigned for a secessionist Afrikaner state and is known for terrorising and killing Black South Africans in the early nineties. The hypocritical self-righteousness of racist religious practices is decried:

what fruit does the seed of witness bear
when the truth of ruthlessness
shatters the cobwebs of blind faith
beyond the barricades of broederbondage (1993:12).

The Afrikaner Broederbond was a secret all male, Calvinist society that was the driving force behind the conservative, moralistic tenor of apartheid rule and were hugely influential in the social engineering of apartheid rule. The poem repudiates the apartheid faith driven policies of the Broederbond, in particular, the belief that they were ordained by God to establish a racist state in South Africa. The 'barricades' (ibid) allude to the racist and exclusionary

politics of Afrikaner nationalism that subjugated the black majority. The thesis in this poem is that appraising ones true conditions of existence objectively is required to shatter the mysticism and illusionary narratives of 'blind faith' (ibid). These are also nihilistic assertions, extremely pessimistic in its crisis of faith and commensurate with Nietzsche's renowned polemic that God is dead. (This is not to be confused with the death of a supernatural deity but the failure of hegemonic, totalizing ideas to bring the world into an all-encompassing totality, the death of God is not an event but a process.)

Rampolokeng's poetry is also a desperate cry for the recognition of his humanity. This has become necessary as blacks have been pathologized and caricatured in grotesque and dehumanising ways under apartheid (Sheik 2020). 'Rap 40' is illustrative of this:

I refuse to be meek
They call me a freak
I refuse to be a tool
They call me a fool ...
I become silent
They deem me potentially violent ...
I smile
They run from me a mile
I scowl
Like dogs in the night they howl ...
I ask for more
Get shown the door ...
I plead for reason
& get prison (1993: 66 - 67).

This plea for recognition is also manifest in a strikingly similar poem by South African poet and graphic artist, Wopko Jensma:

i toss my head off
i cry with agony
to make them laugh
but they only stare
i show them by bum
they still stare

i tell the joke
they stare
i get it -
i must be their judge (1973: 23).

Intense isolation has accentuated his alienation. His desperate please for recognition are met by the implacable gaze of his observers. Acute frustration and estrangement have driven him to introject the role of his observers (Sheik 2002: 115). Both personas are alienated figures, their dissident protests and appeals for understanding interpreted as perverse acts by the oppressor.

I argue that Rampolokeng poetry is not simply steeped in despair, futility and scatological fury against oppression and totalizing hegemonies. Rampolokeng's nihilism also has a positive dimension to it, that out of the ashes the will to power will necessitate a new dawn. This is exemplified in 'rap 17' in *Horns for Hondo* (1990):

it's said that power corrupts
the power in me erupts
for when man's anger lies dormant
usurpers make him a doormat
tread him not lightly
trample him unjustly
to stay alive
he becomes a monkey
a source of circus owner money
in exploitation's factory
humans are inventory
but humanity has its ovulation
in the form of revolution
to make bad seed go away
to the dawn of a new day (1990:28).

The 'dawn of a new day' (1990:28) must be viewed in very personal terms, in contextual relevance that mediates what matters to Ramopolokeng. Others indeed might aspire to different desires, as is their right. Moreover, from a philosophical perspective, it is critical to understand the egotistical nature of all truth claims, claims that disavow other ways of knowing and alternate

ways of being. Having said that, what matters for Rampolokeng is social justice, resisting the machinations of capitalistic exploitation and the perpetuation of inequality. Rampolokeng is particularly resistant to the idea of the commodification of labour, that a worker's intrinsic human value is substituted by a monetary value, that he ceases to be a person and becomes an inconsequential thing in the cog of capitalistic exploitation:

thus the worker's charter
a nation's liberating matter
slaves to self interest
shall bow to humanity's covenant
when the arisen worker
becomes a wrecker
of feudal lords
who feast in hordes
rendering the land skeleton
stealing its riches by the ton (1990: 28).

The nihilistic reach also extends to the new political elite, well known now for industrial scale corruption and perpetuating self-interest at the expense of the electorate:

When leaders speak in the peoples mode
Society gives them abode
When people are the law
There's no sign of war
But when rule is boosted by tyrannic philosophy
It obliterates injustices precipitating man into catastrophe
Justice is poisoned
Humanity is imprisoned ...
The end product is anarchy
as man seizes his monarchy
the rulers resort to foxy plots and ploys
as man searches and destroys
in order to build afresh
away from the ruins of the crash (1990:30 - 31).

The contention here is that corruption by deceitful rulers will be found out and destroyed. The poem invites critique in its depiction of a homogenous

‘man’ with common, good intent. Politics is highly partisan and subjective and people are easily manipulated by lies and false promises, supporting the very leaders that oppress them in many instances.

Positive or active nihilism is characterised by a strong will. This constructive nihilism goes beyond simple judgement and moves on to action, specifically, the destruction of the remaining, meaningless status quo and the rebuilding of values and ethics through thought and reason:

i’m the risen mamba
out of the sun like a fire-bomber
moving beyond the skin’s shade
to make moonlit oppression fade
moving into the light of free days
i’m warm in humanity’s sunrays (1990: 72).

The speaker configures himself as a mamba, one of Africa’s most deadly and venomous snakes. Its ‘risen’ (1990:72) stance signifies its state of alertness and that it is ready to strike its target. ‘[M]oving beyond the skin’s shade’ (1990: 72) is suggestive of another major preoccupation in Rampolokeng’s work, that of racism and the subsequent alienation of people of color from economic, political and social life. The celestial objects of sun and moon symbolize contrary states of good and evil and the ‘light of free days’ (1990: 72) is suggestive of emancipation from apartheid tyranny, of light over-coming darkness.

Conclusion

Rampolokeng’s acerbic poetry uses nihilism to artistically recreate his revulsion of racism, totalizing hegemonies, capitalistic exploitation and the political disenfranchisement of black South Africans. However, in a parallel to Nietzsche’s understanding, nihilism is seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself. Active nihilism invites a revaluation of existing power dynamics and more importantly, precipitates the construction of a new value system. In Ramopolokeng’s battle cry, racism, exploitation and disenfranchisement must be destroyed and substituted by democracy, humanism and social justice premised on an equitable and humane world order. His rejection of oppression and disenfranchisement by nihilistic textual strategies

is paradoxically a destructive act that anticipates the creation of a new set of values, a new beginning along a path we choose. His innovative and militant call for social justice, in visionary and radical thinking, into the evolution from the old into the new, into the will to be creative and be able to choose one's own destiny, bears striking synergy with the song of Zarathustra:

Among these people I am my own forerunner, my own cock-crow through dark lanes (Nietzsche 1933).

References and Bibliography

- Arnold, M., K. Allott, K. Allott, M.F. Allott & M.F. Allott 1979. *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*. 2nd Edition. (Longmans Annotated English Poets Series.) London: Longman.
- Bakunin, M.A. [1842] Reactions in Germany. In Lehning, A. (ed.): *Selected Writings [of] Michael Bakunin*. Ann Arbor, USA: Cape, University of Michigan.
- Barker, K.L., K. Barker & D.W. Burdick 1985. *The NIV Study Bible, New International Version*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible.
- Berold, R. 2003. Lesego Rampolokeng, December 1993: South African Poets on Poetry. Interviews from *New Coin* 1992 - 2001. Scottsville: Gecko Poetry.
- Berold, R. 1999. Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng. Interviews from *New Coin* 1992 - 2001. Scottsville: Gecko Poetry.
- Berold, R. 1999. Interview: Oral Poetry, Lesego Rampolokeng and Ike Mboneni Mulla. *New Coin* 35: 36 - 45.
- Biko, S. 1978. White Racism and Black Consciousness. In Stubbs, A. (ed.): *I write what I like*. London: The Bowerdean Press.
- Brückner, T. 1996. EVERYTHING IS RAP: An Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng, *Matatu* 15-16,1: 261 - 273.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/18757421-90000191>
- Crosby, D.A. 1998. 'Nihilism'. *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Jensma, W.P. 1973. *Sing for our Execution: Poems and Woodcuts*. OPHIR/RAVAN. Distributed by Spro-cas Publications.
- Khan, S.F. 2013. Emotions Recollected in Tranquility: Wordsworth's Concept of Poetic Creation. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3,3: 248 - 252.

- Kropotkin, P. 1899. *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Company.
- Macmillan, H. 2021. *Chris Hani*. (Ohio Short Histories of Africa Series.) Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. Available at: <https://www.ohioswallow.com/book/Chris+Hani> (Accessed on 26 June 2022.)
- Meyer, A.P., C. Warnes & University of Cambridge 2017. *Poetry and Politics in Post-apartheid South Africa*. Dissertation, University of Cambridge. <https://api.repository.cam.ac.uk/server/api/core/bitstreams/7a22f849-f616-4832-9427-628a0c878f23/content>
- Mkhize, K. 2011. Neither History nor Freedom will Absolve Us: On the Ethical Dimensions of the Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng. *Safundi* 12,2: 179 - 202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2011.557192>
- Moodley, K. 1991. The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness. In Pityana, N.B. & M. Ramphela (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*. Cape town: David Philip.
- Nietzsche, F.W. 1933. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. (Tille, A. & M.M. Bozman trans.). (Everyman's Library Series.) Rhys, E. (ed.). (Theology & Philosophy 892.) London: J.M. Dent & Sons.
- Oliphant, A. 1990. The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng. In Rampolokeng, L. *Horns for Hondo*. Fordsburg, Johannesburg: COSAW.
- Pratt, A. Nihilism. Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>
- Rampolokeng, L. 2012. Writing the Ungovernable. (Poster.) Grahamstown: University of Rhodes.
- Rampolokeng, L. 1990. *Horns for Hondo*. Fordsburg, Johannesburg: COSAW.
- Rampolokeng, L. 1993. *Talking Rain*. Fordsburg, Johannesburg: COSAW.
- Saarinen, S.A. 2019. *Nietzsche, Religion, and Mood*. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110621075>
- Shakespeare, W. 2008. *Romeo and Juliet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511704369>
- Sheik, A. 2020. A Man is a Tale that is Told: Decolonization and the Afrocentric Curriculum. *Alternation*. Special Edition 36 (2020) 399 – 417. <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2020/sp36a16>

- Sheik, A. 2002. *Wopko Jensma: A Monograph: The Interface between Poetry and Schizophrenia*. Dissertation at University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.
- Wolpe, H. 1995. Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa. From Segregation to Apartheid. In Beinhart, W. & S. Dubow (eds.): *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wright, J. 2003. *The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng: Syncreticity and Resistance*. Dissertation, Centre for African Literary Studies, University of Kwazulu-Natal.

Professor Ayub Sheik
Language Department
University of the Western Cape
Bellville
Cape Town
asheik@uwc.ac.za