

# **Towards the Biologics of Cultural Production: The Literary Politics of Thomas Mofolo**

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## **Politics and Literary Production: A Paradigmatic Reappraisal**

As the twentieth century draws to a close, literary theory appears to be in the grip of a profound crisis of identity. Arguably one of the outstanding achievements of human thought in the century, contemporary literary theory owes its existence to breakthroughs or what has been rather portentously described as epistemological ruptures in disciplines as seemingly diverse as Structural Linguistics, Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, Historiography, Economics, Psychology, Anthropology and Political Science<sup>1</sup>. The coupling of advances in these various fields led to startling insights into literature and the arts, particularly the crucial interrelationship between cultural production and its enabling environment<sup>2</sup>. But historical developments, particularly the end of the cold war and the collapse of actually existing socialist states, the contradictions of emergent post-colonial states, the ascendancy of monetarist ideology in economic affairs, and the creation of a multi-national class of migrant intelligentsia as a result of deepening global inequality, have rendered the operating procedures of contemporary literary theory extremely problematic.

There is a sense, then, in which this development mirrors the dialectic of history. The triumph of theory, the attempts to objectivise literature and subject its parameters to rigorous quasi-scientific evaluation, were all an ideological reaction to an older mode of criticism and literary scholarship. It was hardly surprising, given the ideologically charged Oxbridge milieu of the seventies, that a youthful Terry Eagleton (1978:29-40) dismissed such criticism—and its academic relics—as being typified by the gentleman of letters who ‘wears his hat and opinion lightly’. In the epoch of agonistic contention, criticism is not about self-effacement and effete

<sup>1</sup> The concept of epistemological rupture, ‘coupure épistémologique’, owes its recent popularisation to the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser who in turn owes his inspiration to his former teacher, the mathematician, Bachelard. For an elaboration see Althusser (1970).

<sup>2</sup> For an early theorisation of this interconnection see Macherey (1977).

gentlemanliness but of sturdy views stubbornly held and vigorously declaimed. Yet this shifting perception was also part of the working out of certain historical contradictions both in the discipline and the society at large. As the intensification of capitalist relations of production led to increasing specialisation and differentiation of vocation, criticism moved from the saloon to the campus, the professional superseded the amateur; the *belles lettres* transformed into the modern literary critic.

It is an intriguing irony, therefore, that in the drive to objectivise the evaluative criteria of literature, the author himself became the most profound casualty. Coinciding with oracular declamations about the death of the novel, the consequent phenomenon of the anti-novel and the epochal events or '*les evenements*' of 1968 in France, the death of the author was proclaimed from the highest altar of *avant garde* literary theorising. Led by Structuralist theorists such as Roland Barthes and the early Derrida, the depersonalisation of the author or the 'de-authorisation' of literature followed closely the developments in two diverse disciplines. First, the Lacanian revisionism of Freudian psychoanalytical categories which decentred the subject and canonised the fragmented self. For Lacan (1977:27), human society would be better off without what he called the 'narcissistic tyranny' in which the 'promotion of the ego today culminates'. Second, the Althusserian assault on Hegelian dialectic and Marxian humanism which proclaimed 'the effectivity of an absent cause' and the heretic notion that 'history is a process without a subject' (Althusser 1970). It is indeed a long and winding road from these theoretical subversions to postcolonial doctrine and the denial of the categories of race, class, nation and origins by its leading exemplar<sup>3</sup>. The fate of the author, however, appears to have been firmly sealed in the heady momentum.

The ironic complicity of these innovations with the phenomenon of globalisation in its forcible occupation of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist spaces, its creation of 'a borderless world' and abolition of the old subject-object dialectic has been noted by several perceptive scholars<sup>4</sup>. What began as a radical epistemological revolt eventually naturalised as a doctrine of the status quo. Yet in the supersonic boom of theory, amidst the heavy artillery of contending theoretical fads, the concrete existential plight of the writer, the tormenting and tortured personal drama of creativity tended to be dismissed as one more example of an unwarranted fixation on the subject. Whatever the excesses of the old antiquarian scholarship and its voyeuristic preoccupation with mundanities and minutiae about the life of the artist, the grim anti-humanism of the paradigm that supplanted it appears to have bent the stick too far in the other direction.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent penetrating critique that focuses on the theoretical lacunae in Bhabha's epistemology, see Easthope (1998).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Miyoshi (1992).

It is clear then that a recuperation of the personal dimension to cultural production is an epistemological as well as historical necessity. In the particular case of contemporary research into Third World literatures, there is an ideological as well as political imperative for this. In the so called post-colonial societies which had barely emerged from the throes of imperialist subjugation before being thrown into the crucible of globalisation, a revaluation of their immediate cultural resources is important if they are not to travel the road of ruin with other post-industrial societies without first achieving their self-awareness. Indeed, the exploration of the tension between the private world of the artist and the public domain often throws their cultural and political realities into sharper relief. This is so because the work of art even at its most private and solipsistic is often seen as a resolution at the level of imagination of a concrete societal problem. However depoliticised a work of art may seem, however apolitical the writer himself may appear, neither can wish away the realities of political society. As Macherey famously demonstrated, a work of art often reveals the conditions of its possibility irrespective of the wishes of the author.

The stratagems and subterfuges that a writer employs to contain or outflank the pervasive encroachments of political society vary from epoch to epoch, and from society to society. In a particular conjuncture, certain political developments may block off existing possibilities for the writer while triggering off other possibilities. In some societies there may be certain safety mechanisms which give the writer an illusion of freedom, while in other societies the mechanics of an authoritarian state frees him of such illusions. At certain historical moments, owing to some unique circumstances, there is a convergence of public and private destiny in which a particular artist becomes the bearer of the national burden, a vehicle for inarticulate societal aspirations or disaffections. Under such circumstances, the artist becomes public property, an epic hero, the bearer of a new ideology who carries within his breasts the authentic national genius<sup>5</sup>.

It is, however, also the case that a writer's engagement with the political reality of his society may vary from text to text, depending on the state of the society and the logic of the writer's insertion in such. This usually introduces a genetic instability to the writer's *oeuvre*. This instability in turn becomes an emblematic mirror for the writer's own contradictory personality. In the same writer mutually antagonistic tendencies may co-exist, often turning the artist into a seething confluence of conflicts: royalist and republican, revolutionary and reactionary, fascist and freedom fighter, heretic and fanatic. Nowhere are the writer's contradictions more evident and more overdetermined than in societies that have undergone revolutionary rupture or radical restructuring. In these chaotic communities in which the old order had disappeared and the labour traumas of a new are self-evident, all

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<sup>5</sup> For the classic formulation of this phenomenon see Lukács (1968).

manner of strange species crawl out of the twilight zone of uncertain existence. None of these creatures of anomie can be more bizarre or more fascinating than the figure of the committed artist. Disdained and disdainful, contemptuous of the powers that be but at the same time a figure of contempt and pity himself, overtly supportive of the new establishment while covertly subverting its credo, his heart belonging to the old order while his head is seeking uneasy accommodation with the new, the artist in a society in a state in transition is a perplexing figure.

No society could possibly have been in a greater flux than South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. Having succumbed to the internal pacification of Chaka, the great Zulu warrior, it was to see the remnants of Chaka's army decisively routed by the British forces. As if these epics of bloodletting were not traumatic enough, the twentieth century opened with the Anglo-Boer war which first drew global attention to the savagery of modern warfare. Thus, some of the autochthonous communities in South Africa had three layers of colonisation superimposed on them with Zulu, British and Afrikaner political cultures in hegemonic contention. Thomas Mofolo, the pre-eminent indigenous South African artist at the turn of the century and arguably the father of the African novel, struggled valiantly with the complexities of this turbulent society, and they in turn left a permanent imprint on the man and his work. In the light of the theoretical motifs pursued in the forgoing, the rest of this article has three main objectives. First, it seeks to reposition Mofolo within the context of cultural politics in what can only be described as a pan-colonial society<sup>6</sup>. Second, it attempts to re-examine his literary strategy in terms of societal constraints. Finally, in carrying out the first two objectives, it tries to reappraise the legacy of a misunderstood patriot and indisputable moral genius.

## Social Contradictions and the Man of Letters

Contrary to the old myth, *Chaka* is not Mofolo's only novel. It was in fact his fourth and last. The chronology of publication and most probably of actual writing is as follows: *Traveller to the East* (1905-1906); *Pitseng* (1909); and *Chaka* (1925). Another manuscript, the unpublished *The Fallen Angel*, was reputed to have been written around 1907. Technically speaking, then, and contrary to received notion,

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<sup>6</sup> A pan-colonial society is a society which exhibits features of precolonial, colonial and post-colonial conditions all at once. The closest society to this is the continent-country of Australia. But while Australia was formally colonised and decolonised, at least politically, South Africa was never. For analogous reflections see Ahmad (1995) and Goss (1996).

*Chaka* is not the first African novel. Yet it is undeniably Mofolo's greatest achievement. Indeed, viewed against the background in which it was produced, it is certainly the first outstanding work of fiction in Africa.

The stress and strain of Mofolo's society are reflected in the eloquent silences and absences which determined the conception of *Chaka* and the polyphonic voices which dominated its execution<sup>7</sup>. Despite the phenomenon of a domiciled European community in South Africa long before the first serious wave of missionaries in other parts of the continent, members of the indigenous communities were actively discouraged from infiltrating the cultural ambience of the white community. With this situation, the 'education' of the few lucky ones never proceeded beyond the elementary. There was also the mandatory stuffing with biblical injunctions with which they were supposed to go and convert their 'savage' kins. This sociological ceiling could lead to severe cultural dislocations, and to the degree that Mofolo was its product it should be expected that the strategy and tactics of his art should revolve around its inauspicious matrix<sup>8</sup>.

Thus for an 'educated' aspiring native artist like Mofolo, the only contact with western literature is limited to the bible and a few proselytising tracts of which John Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress* is arguably the most celebrated. This denial of western intellectual nourishment prevented Mofolo's imagination from developing outsize foreign wings and drove it back to essentially improvise on its oral resources. Ironically enough, this could have been a blessing in disguise since in ordinary circumstances he could not expect to gain enough fluency and proficiency in the master's language, he invariably reverted to his native tongue. Yet as far as the concrete execution of literary designs are concerned, the problems have just begun. A harshly oppressive climate naturally tolerates no criticism from any quarters, and certainly not from a barely reconstructed 'savage'. Thus closes the door of contemporaneous realism, for in the conjuncture before globalisation and a transnational world space, the likes of Mofolo could not benefit from the tactics of 'silence, exile and cunning' which would give his successors the mobility and creative evasion needed to confront the intolerable hostility of apartheid.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Russian Formalist theorist, the concept of polyphony involves 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness'. See Bakhtin (1984:84). Because he was working in severe isolation and sustained institutional vacuum, Bakhtin's theories have given rise to great scholarly controversies. For a recent reassessment, see Frick (1998:57-80).

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars have contended that apartheid was no less repressive than other modes of colonial subjugation on the continent but was part and parcel of the 'generic form of colonial state in Africa'. See Mamdani (1996).

Yet matters are hardly so clear cut, or easily given. For many aspiring South African artists at the end of the nineteenth century, the glancing contact with western civilisation must have left them genuinely shaken in their faith in the efficacy or even desirability of certain aspects of the indigenous tradition. This led to a certain political awkwardness or ambivalence of feeling. Thus the writer, the arch priest of political subversion, is himself internally subverted by a creeping cultural disorientation. Mofolo's personal situation could not have been helped by the fact that he went to work for Morija Press, the very organisation responsible for the dissemination of religious propaganda, and with which his only hope of publishing lay. It is in the light of these social and existential particularities that the peculiar sensibility of Mofolo's oeuvre must be viewed.

*Traveller to the East*, Mofolo's first fictional outing, is a purely imaginative working out of the hero quest motif. Fekesi, Mofolo's Bunyanesque hero, in his quest for a new order of salvation has to alienate himself from the 'black darkness' of his society and hence from its natural order. Symbolically enough, he is rescued by three Europeans and brought back to health. Yet this rescue operation only manages to postpone a grim and forlorn end. This must be seen as Mofolo's appraisal of the agonising dilemma of the 'redeemed' blackman. By the time Mofolo finished *Pitseng*, his third novel but the second to be published, these contradictions must have led to a profound spiritual and moral crisis. Early commentators, including Jahn (1968:101), tended to dismiss this work as pure missionary stuff. Dathorne (1974:126) appears more sympathetically perceptive. According to him:

All his life Mofolo had to choose between the amiable offerings of christian camaraderie and the set diet of an uncompromising art. The difficulties of the situation were made even more emphatic, especially since he was an employee of Morija. Only by taking this into consideration can one accept the second novel (i.e. *Pitseng*) at all; it was an attempt to pacify his teachers, employers, and publishers.

With the publication of *Pitseng*, Mofolo reached an artistic and ideological *cul de sac*. This was to force upon him a radical review of literary strategy. It might not be purely coincidental that he left Morija Press around this time. It is arguable that Mofolo might have been mulling over the Chaka theme for sometime and could in fact have written a draft; yet no one could deny that physical distancing from unbearable events often crystallises the problem in its stark enormity. For the artist, it is both a conscious and unconscious process and probably one of the irretrievable secrets of creative endeavour. Since the artist himself could hardly be trusted in such matters, it would be pointless debating which one had ascendancy concerning

Mofolo<sup>9</sup>. What is indisputable, however, is the fact that *Chaka* represents a radical departure from the point of view of Mofolo's earlier works. While the others were pure imaginative evocations, with *Chaka* Mofolo switches to imaginative biography.

By writing a fictionalised biography of Chaka, Mofolo could claim to be history's secretary and nothing more—a sort of Balzacian scribe of the society. Indeed this is precisely what Mofolo seemed to have claimed. Newbolt's preface has it that Mofolo was known to have been vigorously researching for the book and 'has made more than one journey into Natal to ascertain mores'<sup>10</sup>. Whether this was a clever feint to evade the hostile surveillance of Morija or a case of imaginative self-delusion remains to be seen. But the situation reminds one of the equally paradoxical parallel in Daniel Defoe, another founding father of the novel, who equally had to devise devious strategies of containment. While making important contributions to the development of fiction, Defoe was also professing his contempt for art and urging that his works be read as pure facts and not fiction. If this is also the case with Mofolo, then Gildon's (1979:149) savage swipe at Defoe: 'unless you would have us think that the Manner of your telling a lie will make it a Truth', is equally applies to him.

It is not purely coincidental, then, that it is on page 182, precisely sixteen pages on—when the reader's allegiance is firmly secure—that the wily narrator of *Chaka* finally lowers his mask:

Chaka's whole life was filled with important happenings, with marvels and mysteries that the ordinary person cannot understand. We have chosen out

<sup>9</sup> There is no controversy as to the time of Mofolo's leaving Morija Press. Sir Newbolt in his preface to the Oxford Press edition of *Chaka* follows Mangoela's account that it was 'soon after the publication of his second book'. However, Daniel P. Kunene in the Heinemann translation states what we know that 'the 'Chaka' manuscript was in existence by the time he left because it is mentioned in the *Lwre dor de la Mission du Lessouto*, a commemorative volume published by the PEMS to cover the first seventy-five years of mission work in Lesotho, that is 1833 to 1908'. Indeed, Mofolo's radical switch of strategy and departure must have been hastened by the rejection of the manuscript of the still unpublished *The Fallen Angel* by the missionaries. The first draft of *Chaka* must have been rejected out of hand and Mofolo, in no mood for compromises, must have shelved his literary career entirely. Continues Kunene: 'There is further evidence that the first time Mofolo gave any further attention to the 'Chaka' manuscript since 1909 or 1910 was in the early 1920s .... This revision of the manuscript was finished some time before July 1922, the time when Mofolo told Zurcher that he (Mofolo) 'had just finished writing the book 'Chaka''. See Mofolo (1981:xii-xlii).

<sup>10</sup> See Mofolo (1931:xi). All further page references are to this edition.

one side of his life only which suited best our purpose, for it has not been our intention to tell everything (Mofolo 1931:182).

This is the author-narrator confessing that an ambiguity of design has been foisted on the reader; yet such is the seductive charm of Mofolo's prose and the chilling nature of the Pandora's box of intrigues, mayhem and bloodlust it has opened that not many readers at this point would have bothered about the plea of caution. Napoleon Bonaparte with whom Chaka has been infrequently compared once openly mused about a great novel his charmed life with its glamour and breathtaking daring would have made. Like Chaka's, such stories only beg to be told, and they need no artist of extraordinary merit to come alive. Yet this is what Mofolo appears to have been. Mofolo had a further advantage: he was a Sotho recreating a Zulu legend and he could therefore relate to the Chaka mystique with irreverence and aplomb. He could then fill the inevitable gaps, silences and absences in the Chaka story with the ideological colourings of his fertile imagination.

It is precisely the nature of such fictional ballast that has got Mofolo into trouble with South African nationalists and later day commentators. Obumselu, for example, charged him with perfidy and tribalism<sup>11</sup>. Yet it does seem that to argue thus is to miss the artistic nature of Mofolo's work and to ignore the highly complex and contradictory pressures operating within and outside the novel. But then it is also inevitable that Chaka himself as a historical personage should remain a subject of explosive controversy in death as well as in life. Chaka is arguably one of the greatest personalities ever thrown up by history. There can be no doubt that he represents the summit of black achievement before the military incursion of colonialists. He was a colossus in everything: in brains, in physique, in ambition, in aspiration and appetite. Anything he touched, be it local fighting or hunting, war, the intrigues of statescraft or philandering is magically transformed by the sheer force of genius. So forbidding was his legend as a warrior, so daunting was the memory of his generalship that even the normally unsuperstitious British after defeating the rump of his army under Cetewayo several decades after his death, went as far as to burn the inkata (juju) of the Zulu chieftains so that the 'evil genius' might rest forever. As Ayi Kwei Armah (1975:251) observes:

There is therefore something uncannily satisfying, even perfect, in the logic which brought a mind like this to focus on the birth, growth, rise to power, decline, then death of the great Zulu emperor, Chaka.

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<sup>11</sup> See Obumselu (1976:34). According to Obumselu: 'Mofolo's imperfect sympathy and extra-tribal perspective prevented him from writing the great black epic of which the Zulu conqueror was such an apt subject'.



In such circumstances, it is also perfectly logical that the missionaries, Mofolo's great ideological adversaries, saw through the hoax and refuse to touch Mofolo's manuscript with a long pole. It was not just a question of the ostensible reason they gave that *Chaka* 'could do nothing but harm to its readers because of its defence of pagan superstitions'<sup>12</sup>.

*Chaka* the book, was a threat because *Chaka* the man represents an implied critique of one of the great tropes colonialism: the myth of the under-achieving black savage who deserves to be dragged to civilisation screaming and yelling. Mofolo's work, then, is a subtle, hence profoundly subversive, attempt at the resuscitation of the heroic heritage of a people at the very nadir of their history. Yet it is significant that the missionaries failed to see the transformations Mofolo's own contradictory insertion in the colonial space had brought to bear on the story. For them that was hardly the matter, it was the very legacy, that was unacceptable.

In the light of this, to see the moral preachments in the novel as being inserted to please the missionaries is not only to damage the dialectical unity of the work but to impugn Mofolo's personal integrity, and to ignore the heroic circumstances of his subsequent life. Indeed, such is the organic tension in the work that its ideological underpinning resists and submits to pagan heroism, traditional humanism and christian moralism all at the same time. There is more than a hint of mesmerisation in the heady realism Mofolo often succumbs to in the portrait of Chaka's heroic splendour; yet Mofolo is unequivocal in his condemnation of the tragic excesses that this leads to. It can be advanced that Mofolo's lurid and lush painting of Chaka's career is designed to give weight and balance to his occasionally severe indictment. Yet the cumulative picture of Chaka that emerges is of a man more sinned against than sinning, a man whose genius appears to exempt him from the realm of mundane morality.

It would appear that this is precisely the basis of Mofolo's struggle with the great Zulu warrior. Secretly, he admires Chaka's political and military genius; yet he recoils in horror at the great destruction, the tremendous human cost attendant upon this. Indeed, the question goes beyond the tenets of Mofolo's new faith to the worldview of the magisterial traditional moralist cohabiting in him, for Chaka was a revolutionary despot whose passage led to a drastic overhauling and reorganisation of the society. Thus the change-loving, progressive artist in Mofolo could identify with Chaka's reforms, but the other half of him, the tradition-minded savant now allied to the conservative Christian moralist could not but inveigh against the destruction of the old ethos and the wanton disregard of human life.

The case of cowardice in the Zulu society is particularly instructive of Mofolo's moral dilemma and great ambivalence toward Chaka. Given his own

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<sup>12</sup> This is attributed to Rene Ellenberger; see Gérard (1971:129).

personal circumstances and the quiet daring and defiance with which he confronted his adversaries, this is a failing that Mofolo would have been contemptuous of. After Chaka sought a radical but terrifyingly effective 'final' solution to this weakness, the narrator observes:

On this day the men that were killed could be counted by tens of thousands. Thus was cowardice brought to an end among the Zulus and from that time the Zulu warriors when they went to war understood clearly the meaning of the saying: 'a man child is an ox for vultures .... From that time one Zulu was equal to ten of the enemy and could put them to flight (see Mofolo 1931:158f).

But despite this hint of approval, the old traditionalist and born-again Christian reassert themselves and the passage ends on a note of elegiac regrets:

This is only the beginning of the many slaughters of Chaka. Those who saw what happened on that day were delirious all night and wasted away, for it was the first time that men had seen such things.

The issue of sexual relations in the society is also illustrative of Mofolo's impasse. Obviously, Mofolo the traditionalist has more than an axe to grind with Chaka's family since he claims that Chaka himself was an illegitimate son, a product of an act of desecration of tradition by Senzangakona. In a passage brimming with disgust, the narrator observes:

In this chapter we have seen that the fruit of sin is wondrously bitter .... The great crime which started everything was the sin of Nandi and Senzangakona .... But if Senzangakona had not committed this shameful act in his youth, Chaka would have lived in his home in Nobamba, the beloved darling of his father (Mofolo 1931:159).

It is obvious that the author-narrator's palpable revulsion has led to an intellectual slippage. For indeed, Chaka could not have been born in the first instance without the illicit act. And, of course, not only does it escape the narrator that Nandi was raped, he is also apparently untroubled by the fact that there must be something remiss about a society that exacts such a disproportionate penalty for so human an infringement. Yet, when Chaka, later in life, decides—in a turn of barbarous brilliance—to stand the logic on its head and become a mass-violator of women thereby cunningly legitimising his own illegitimacy, the narrator was up in arms and bears quoting at some length:

But Chaka had no wife, and indeed never married. However, he chose out for himself the most beautiful of the young girls of the tribe, those that were tall and of fine, light brown colour, that had beautiful figures and a pleasing appearance, and he used to take them to those huts and call them 'his sisters', that is to say people with whom he could not unite. But it was into the huts of those same girls that he went to visit them, and despoiled the maiden-hood of those unhappy girls, and plucked the flower of their youth, so that when the time came when their bloom had passed he might hand them on to his councillors, if indeed they were still alive<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, the issue of name for the new tribe provides an equal illumination as far as Mofolo's tortured relationship with Chaka is concerned. There is indeed something to a nation's name since it symbolises status and aspirations. In this respect, Chaka also proves himself to be an early genius of national mythopoesis. His choice of name for the new nation was not only an exhortation to greatness, it was also an utopian ideal demanding permanent vigilance and ceaseless self-surpassing:

Amazulu. Because I am great, I am even as this cloud that has thundered, that is irresistible. I, too look upon the tribes and they tremble (Mofolo 1931:132).

Expectedly, the narrator is not amused. Not only was Chaka demystifying the traditional seat of terror and mystery, he was also, so to say, thumping disdainfully at the seat of the new deity:

And they all laughed again in astonishment, and we, too, must wonder at the arrogance and ambition of this kafir who could compare his greatness to that of the Gods (Mofolo 1931:125).

In the light of the foregoing, the question, then, is not whether there is a double or even multiple vision in *Chaka* but whether this ambiguity of vision and of execution is not part of its secret, its complexity and beauty. Indeed, by enticing and

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<sup>13</sup> See Mofolo (1931:40). Indeed, as in many other instances, Mofolo's historical accuracy is gravely suspect. According to Kunene (1981xvi): 'While the above (i.e. the seduction and rape of Nandi) makes for an excellent plot which is full of potential dynamite, the historical Senzangakhona did not have the problem of lacking an heir, and did not engage in the actions narrated by Mofolo'. In view of such controversies about its veracity, the best approach to Mofolo's work might be to critique it on its own terms.

resisting moralist, humanist, nationalist, tribalist and racist interpretations at the same time, Mofolo's masterpiece ensures its own permanent survival as a work of art. Having evaluated and analysed Mofolo's political and ideological predilections, it is imperative to isolate some of the artistic devices which, given the hostile circumstances and the meagre resources available to the African novelist at the time, Mofolo deploys to execute his haunting parable of power and its dementia.

## Politics of Sources and Resources

As every aspiring fiction writer knows, the major battle for a novel is often won and lost in the opening pages. At the beginning of his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil announces 'that no serious attempt will be made to ... enter into competition with reality'<sup>14</sup>. Nothing could be more completely antithetical to the overriding concern of the author of *Chaka*. In fact Mofolo appears overanxious to deploy 'reality' to his course lest he be caught offguard. Yet when allowances have been made for individual genius, even the literary resources available to the novelist are often determined and constrained by the sociocultural dialectic of the larger society. Musil by his repudiation was in fact taking up arms against the ugly reality of his society, romantically seeking to negate what had itself become a negation. Mofolo, on the other hand, was seeking to understand the new reality of his society through an artistic dissection of its old realities. Musil, given an ancient tradition to fall back upon and the vast armada of artistic and intellectual weapons available to him, could well succeed in his uphill task. On the contrary, *Chaka* was conceived on the apparent ruins of the author's tradition, and in comparison with the learning and intellectual gifts of a Robert Musil Mofolo could well have been a hewer of wood.

Yet despite the fact that the society presents the artist with finite combinations, despite the fact that its sociocultural dialectic dictates the terms, it is precisely in the tricky negotiating with the resources made available by the society that lesser artists fumble and falter. Of the many ways in which Mofolo could begin his tale of *Chaka*, it is intriguing that he chooses the approach of the apparently neutral observer. Thus opens *Chaka*:

The country of South Africa is a large peninsula lying between two oceans, one to the east and one to the west of it. Its inhabitants belong to the many and various tribes speaking different languages, yet they all fall easily into three main divisions .... Our story is concerned with the eastern tribes, the kaffirs, and before we begin it we must describe the state of these tribes in the early days, so that the reader may be able to follow the narrative in the succeeding chapters (Mofolo 1931:1).

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<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Frank Kermode (1967:127).

By beginning with this kind of dry, academic historian detachment, Mofolo invests his story not only with an aura of objectivity and authority but the mantra of overwhelming factuality. This clinical stamp is further reinforced by the staggering mass of sociological details Mofolo places at the reader's disposal. This indeed is arguably the humble beginning of that technique of sociological familiarisation for which an Achebe would later become justly celebrated. By placing the geographical landscape, the customs and norms of the people before the reader with such impressive clarity, Mofolo secures his unspoken oath of allegiance. The stage is thus set for his manipulation.

It can be argued that it is the oral bias of conceptual means of the story that forces on Mofolo the linearity and chronological rigidity of *Chaka*; yet the minutely discriminated procedure is entirely his inspiration. Again, if it is evident that it is the oral mines that furnish Mofolo with many of the gems of psychological insights, the honing and brilliant, epigrammatic summations bear the private stamp of an often cynical, often deeply religious and often morosely sober philosophy of the human condition. The untoward nature of the events leading to the birth of Chaka and the crisis attendant upon this are all assiduously chronicled. The formative stages of a predatory psychology are delineated with a masterly flourish. Indeed, Chaka presents a gold mine for Freudian investigators. The influence of childhood on an adult's character is usually decisive, and by detailing the most terrifying aspects of the injustice meted out to Chaka, Mofolo provides him with a strong alibi against which even he (Mofolo) himself would later struggle in vain. Mofolo makes use of certain characters as strategic placements which reflect their technical functions and as psychological tropes which are reflected in their air of mystery and ambiguity. Thus to be unjustly attacked by one's siblings may be terrible enough, but to hear one's own father order the assault is an experience from which even the most fortified of psyches is unlikely to make a speedy recovery. It is precisely at this point of spiritual and moral crisis, when Chaka was at the very nadir of his fortunes, that Mofolo infiltrates Isanusi, Chaka's hatchet man and evil genius, into the canvas. The description of the infamous medicine-man reveals a classic case-history of split personality:

When sleep first left Chaka and his eyes lighted on the man he saw a mocking look on his face: his mouth was drawn in a grimace, and in the depths of his eyes he could see unbounded malice and cruelty. He seemed to see a man far more evil than any sorcerer, more cruel by far than any murderer—the very father of malice, wickedness, and treachery. Chaka's body shuddered and his eyes quivered. When he looked again he found the man's face full of compassion and very sorrowful. And when he looked into the depths of his eyes he saw there perfect kindness, a sympathetic heart,

and the surest love. The expression on his face which he had seen before had vanished entirely (Mofolo 1931:43f).

It is not only Chaka's atrocities that are attenuated by the ominous presence of this evil personage, but the atrocities of the ordinary witchdoctor in this very character who, apparently not inhuman, is nevertheless trapped by greater evil powers that be. It would thus seem that Isanusi himself is deserving of amnesty and the case for this reprieve as a result of diminished responsibility is reinforced by Mofolo's (1931:53) deliberate and ingenuous conflation of personal name and public designation:

But Isanusi is not thy name: it tells me only what thou art (diviner), but I ask thy name: It's true, but 'Isanusi' is my name, even as my acts are the acts of an Isanusi.

The paradoxical anonymity, while effacing the man, also heightens his demonic essence and reinforces his terror. But such is Mofolo's ingenuity that it is after this psychological 'rebirth' during which Isanusi lends his authority and spiritual legitimacy to *Chaka's* conclusion about the predatory nature of human society that the latter was made to encounter Dingiswayo. Dingiswayo in his exemplary humaneness, kindness, generosity of spirit, patience and gentlemanliness has to be brought in both as a temporary foil and permanent contrast to Chaka's megalomaniac destructiveness. Yet such is the grand irony, the elusive multi-dimensional nature of the novel that it precisely these virtues that would ultimately destroy Dingiswayo. But, of course, not until Chaka himself has been implicated by vicarious responsibility through the deliberate stalling and cold-bloodedness of the evil duo of Ndlebe and Malunga:

We hindered thy messengers from going and it was we who spread the report that Dingiswayo had been killed, although he was still living.... Thou must not forget that we are here because of thee. We came to win for thee the chieftaincy, and our desire is that thou mayest find it soon that we may receive our cattle, our reward, and return home. If thy messengers had gone to Zwile, perchance Dingiswayo would not have been killed, and then thou wouldst not yet have been chief (Mofolo 1931:118f).

In the cloak and dagger world of political intrigues and infighting this one elevates perfidy into a state art. Thus Dingiswayo's death is directly linked to the savage trajectory of Chaka's ascendancy. It is here that the precise nature of the duo becomes problematic. The critical orthodoxy is to regard them as inhabitants of

Chaka's own mind, as projections of his tortured personality, or as 'facets' of his evil genius<sup>15</sup>. Yet the obverse is equally plausible, and it is in fact more in tune with the overall scheme of Mofolo's designs. Indeed they serve both as symbolic totems and as fully fleshed characters at the same time. In one breath, we are tempted to see them as symbolic manifestations of the warrior and dissembler of genius that Chaka undeniably was, yet in another we are apt to remind ourselves that they are characters in their own right, not only consistently drawn but also serving as strategic links and *deus ex machina* when the narrative stumbles into a tricky patch. Thus it was the 'idiot' Ndlebe who saves Chaka when his life was in great danger in battle:

Ndlebe was blazing with anger, he was no more the idiot he had appeared before, and his body was greater: he was like a wounded lion in agony, ready to avenge the blood that it has poured out .... Ndlebe hacked at their head incessantly with his axe and where they stood crowded together (Mofolo 1931:77).

And later after the battle:

Ndlebe was lying on the ground like a tired dog that has run far: there was no trace of the daring he had shown in the battle, he seemed once more as stupid as ever (Mofolo 1931:78).

For good measure, it is this 'stupid' man that acted as Chaka's liaison and confessor in the latter's hesitant and insecure wooing of Noliwe. Yet such is the riot of possibilities engendered by this constant mixing and exchanging of attributes that the two characters resist consistent symbolic designation and encourage a dialectic reintegration at the same time. It is only in the light of this that one can view the psychic intensity and haunting premonition of Dingiswayo's instantaneous recoiling from Malunga:

.... One is an idiot without doubt, and is not fit to even carry thy blanket. The second I do not like, for his eyes are deceitful, full of guile and treachery. Take him hence, I fear him, he is indeed evil (Mofolo 1931:73).

As we have seen if Dingiswayo is wrong at all in his assessment, it is in its underestimation of Ndlebe. Yet the chief is clairvoyant enough to have perceived in Malunga a re permutation of Chaka himself: the brave warrior and no-holds-barred plotter. Indeed, Chaka himself is not unaware of the immensity of Dingiswayo's intuitive powers. As he observes to Malunga:

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<sup>15</sup> For example, see Ikonne (1976:54-65).

Dingiswayo is a prudent man, and his eyes can see what is hidden from the eyes of other men; they do not look upon the outside only, but pierce right into the heart of a man. He saw clearly that I too was prudent, and he fears that perchance I may turn his people against him and take from him the chieftainship (Mofolo 1931:93).

Mofolo's classic swims in this swirling pool of possibilities to the relentless end. When Chaka is assassinated by his siblings, his body, left in the plains, was not only untouched by wild animals but was, symbolically enough, 'green like seaweed'. It is as if while secretly wishing the turbulent sovereign away, Mofolo is suddenly confronted by the *fait accompli* of his immortality. The king is dead, long live the king! It is an ambiguous denouement perfectly commensurate with Mofolo's political contradictions. The reader who has been compelled to trudge through the rocky terrain of convolutions, tongue in cheek assertions, daring somersaults and sheer distortions of history can only take solace in the fact that in the final analysis not even a great artist is exempt from the seductive and manipulative powers of his own art. What the manipulations confirm, however, is the immensity of Mofolo's native genius, his position as the true pioneer of the African novel and his place as an exemplary South African patriot.

## **Towards the Biologics of Cultural Production**

This essay attempts to reintegrate a new paradigm of antiquarian criticism into the discipline of Cultural Production<sup>16</sup>. As we have demonstrated, antiquarian criticism, at the beginning of the century, went into voluntary liquidation as a result of its fixation on the life of the author as well as its unsystematic and dilettante nature. T.S. Eliot's celebrated assertion that the artist that creates should be separated from the man that suffers seemed to have sounded the death knell of this amateurish voyeurism. It also heralded the parameters of practical criticism as later codified by I.A. Richards, the Cambridge critic, and new criticism with their objectivising rigour and aspiration to scientific exactitude in the business of criticism. These in turn spawned several schools of criticism which are often distinguished by their technical brilliance as well as their gross political absurdities.

Yet as several commentators would later observe, the romantic anticapitalism which drove Eliot and Richards to their canonical assault on old criticism is itself ultimately complicit with the capitalist status quo (Fekete 1977). As it were, the rise of new criticism and its professionalisation could itself be linked to certain developments in the rapidly industrialising metropole: increasing

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<sup>16</sup> For an early staking of territory, see Williams (1991:5-20).



specialisation concomitant with new found prosperity. As the industries boomed and huge cities grew on their wings, there was a dramatic expansion of educational facilities and further liberalisation of culture. There was an explosion of literary talent which in turn demanded a new type of intellectual critic with specialised or directing knowledge for its nourishment and nurturing. To the degree that practical criticism was the brainchild of an outstanding intellectual trained in psychology and aesthetics, it is an amusing misnomer.

The suppression of the life of the author in the work of art led to some interesting developments. The individualism of the author was gradually replaced by the individualism of the critic. Life itself was drained out of the work of art and in the more extreme mutations of the new type of criticism an aimless technical virtuosity or formalist chicanery became the order of the day. The critic became a poet *manque* or a novelist minus opportunity and talent. In the critic's struggle with the work of art - or probably with the artist—it was inevitable that a serious attempt would be made on the life of the author. Hence the purported death of the author. Between 1929 when Richards published his groundbreaking work and the phenomenon of structuralism and poststructuralism, the author has suffered irreversible damage, and criticism itself had been overtaken by what Jameson (1972:209) has described as 'an unhappy consciousness at the stylistic level'.

There were developments in the larger society which facilitated the rise of this depersonalisation of literature. The crisis of capitalist relations of production and distribution, the two global wars and their horrific butchery, the rise of Soviet communism and the attempt to create a 'new' man and by extension a new type of art and artist in a procrustean milieu, the brief ascendancy of fascism and its ethnocidal malice hauntingly foreshadowed in the work of Franz Kafka, and the eventual commodification of art within the logic of cultural capital<sup>17</sup>. All these have led to new relations of cultural production. With the globalisation of capital and the empiricist fetishization of 'readings' within the totality of cultural production, the author has lost much of his 'authority'. The advent of a coterie of professional 'readers' often based in the hallowed sanctuaries of learning has led to an anarchic individualism in which the act of reading is elevated over and above the act of writing itself. This relativist rot, or 'my reading is better than yours triumphalism', with its fragmented and fragmenting insights obscures the fundamentals of literary production and is in paradoxical complicity with the ravages of globalisation.

Thus the phenomenon of globalisation which is the unstructured response of late capitalism to its crisis has in fact led to a further erosion of the status of the author. With its 'borderless' world, its forcible occupation of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist space, its abolition of the old subject-object dialectic, its relentless

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<sup>17</sup> The classic theorisation of this phenomenon remains Jameson (1984:53-92).

homogenisation of old class distinctions, globalisation has turned the author into a perishable commodity. So it is then that the doctrine of postcolonialism which began as a stout recuperation of the Gramscian notion of the subaltern has ended 'hybridising'—and in effect denying—the very notion of race, class, nation and origin<sup>18</sup>. In effect, the author has become 'globalised', robbed of his distinct identity and like unfortunate humanity itself in the hands of postcolonial doctrine, has ceased to be 'a fixed, phenomenological entity' (Bhabha 1991:x). The 'death' of the author has become synonymous with the death of a differentiated world in the epoch of 'the end of history'<sup>19</sup>. It is the contention of this essay that it is impossible to grasp the totality or the underlying dynamics of this phenomenon without an interrogation of its subtext, its artefacts, its personalities and its ideological producers. In the light of the foregoing, it is imperative for Cultural Production to bend the epistemological stick in the other direction by reinserting the author—and humanity—into the centrepiece of its theoretical labours.

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<sup>18</sup> For a recent influential critique of the categories of postcolonial theory, see Dirlik (1994).

<sup>19</sup> For a recent critical discourse on the 'end of history' intellectual industry, see Derrida (1994). For a critical endorsement of this, see Ahmad (1994).

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