

Desperation and Anger: The Effect of Environment in Black South African and African-American Literature¹

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An interesting relationship exists between the South African literature and its African-American counterpart. The preposterous nature of the societies, the illogicality of their moral imperatives and the consequences of these for fictional depiction are major issue in both South African and African American literature. The fictional form in the two societies is both thematically and stylistically interfered with and in deed circumscribed by the dictates of the sociopolitical environment. The blacks in South Africa suffer in the hands of a white minority, the blacks in America suffer in the hands of a white majority. In South Africa, segregation assumes a human face and appears as a legitimate weapon of oppression in the name of 'apartheid', in America, segregation started with slavery and when slavery was abolished, the relationship between the two races had the image of a partnership between a horse and its rider. In South Africa, the apartheid regime introduced the Bantu Education Act in order to stamp apartheid on the education of the blacks, in America a law enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives sitting in the General Assembly tried to stifle the intellectual capacity of the blacks. In both societies, the black was considered three-fifths of a man, and sometimes treated less than that. To kill him was not considered murder, to rape his wife or daughter was not seen as a crime, and to confiscate his property was no robbery. It is, therefore, not surprising that the black writers in South Africa and America were forced by the demands of the environment to surrender to the social and political situations in their countries and see these situations represented in works of art. Literature from these societies cannot

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be viewed in isolation of the heterodox sociopolitical matrix, since literature is recognised universally as a social phenomenon. The implication of this is that in the two societies, History, Politics, Philosophy, Ideology, Reportage, Reminiscence, and Biography (and autobiography) commingle in one manner or another to form the woof of literature.

This paper will attempt to examine some of the peculiarities inherent in African American and black South African literature. These two areas have produced a great deal of literature, and there is no pretence that the paper will attempt to cover them. What it sets out to do, therefore, is to posit valid general relationships between the literatures, without assuming the existence of uniformity over the entire area of discussion. Rather, pertinent references will be made to particular texts either to exemplify a point, or to place it in comparison with other artistic works under discussion.

The two words that keep both the African-American apart from their white counterparts are *segregation* and *apartheid*. They may seem different words but they mean the same thing and attempted to achieve the same purpose. They both maintain that keeping races apart would assure the purity of races. But ironically the proponents of both traced their authority from the Holy Writ. In South Africa, apartheid was supported by the Dutch Reformed Church which preached that staying apart was an act of God, that Afrikaners were the chosen people of God, while the Blacks were merely a subservient species. In 1950, two acts were passed—The Population Registration Act, and The Group Act—and both were designed to give impetus to this obnoxious racial classification.

In the United States where segregation was practised, some of the proponents of this act maintain that racial segregation is an act of God which was bound to ensure purity of the races. Even when the fight was directed against desegregation of public schools and other public facilities in the American South, segregation was given impetus by the assertion that purity of races would be destroyed by racial integration. Hence when the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, Kansas, Representative John Bell Williams referred to the day as Black Monday. And Thomas Brady proceeded to write a book by that title. As F. James Davis (1991:17) states in his monumental work, *Who is Black?*:

He [Brady] wrote fiercely that he and the South would fight and die for the principles of racial purity and white womanhood rather than follow the Supreme Court's decision. He maintained that God opposes racial mixing and that Southern whites had a God-given right to keep their 'blood' white and pure.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the literature that eventually emerged from the two communities wore the garb of commitment. The emergent artist did not see literary writing merely as a means of entertainment, or a system of communicating personal feelings to the reader. He did not believe in arts for arts sake. He saw writing as a compulsion, as a means of advancing certain ideas for the liberation of society, or the de-colonisation of the Black mind. He saw literary writing as an art that informs, recreates, educates and affirms. To him literature should be judged on its relevance, on its humanistic orientation, on its service to the people, on its commitment to social change. George Thomson (1946:65) emphasises this idea of commitment in his book, *Marxism and Poetry*:

The poet speaks not for himself only but for his fellowmen. His cry is their cry, which only he can utter. That is what gives it its depth. But if he is to speak for them, he must suffer with them, rejoice with them, work with them, fight with them.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1982:iv) further stresses the importance of commitment and its meaning to the African writer:

Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral.

Though some critics erroneously describe the literature that emerged as propaganda literature, this is tantamount to the confusion of propaganda with the concept of commitment. Propaganda involves the spreading of information, even rumours, in support of an idea or a cause. Veracity is not necessarily pertinent to the task of the propagandist. To these writers, the reality of survival and existence, and the determination to survive in a society fraught with inhumanity and devoid of freedom of expression creates a compulsion to commitment. Like Femi Ojo-Ade (1996:121) has pointed out,

Commitment emanates from a positive but pained state of mind—suffering, sacrifice, selflessness, determination to defy misery and triumph over travails—given life through action. The Self coalesces with the Other into a macrocosmic Self that is society.

In a society where repression, oppression, racism and victimisation are legal tools with which to destroy and incapacitate the innocent victim, commitment arises from the decision of the oppressed to raise dust against the oppressor through the medium of art. Literature, to the committed artist, becomes a tool for the expression of total reality, a valid means of expressing the voice of the oppressed majority. They provide information that serve as a mirror through which the ugliness of the society can be seen. Commitment to the problems of the environment does not mean sacrificing manner for matter or emphasising fact at the expense of craft.

In order to harness the social problems in their environments and comment on them both African-American and black South African writer started with autobiographical writings. It is necessary to point out, at this juncture, that this epithet will be used in its denotative sense in this study to refer to writing having the characteristics of autobiography conceptually, formally, and stylistically. As Kole Omotoso (1970:5) has pointed out, autobiographical writing occurs when,

the story and the story teller merge so well that we get first person narratives where the story and the teller are directly involved.

To the African-American writer, the road to creativity was not a rosy one. The writers lacked both freedom of movement and freedom of voice. To them freedom of voice was more fundamental. They had to contend with a law that does not only prohibit them from beaming, but a law that equally indicts anyone who attempts to give them a voice. As Michael G. Cooke (1984:82) has rightly pointed out,

Either directly or in projection through a central character, black writer after black writer, generation upon generation, from Frederick Douglas to Alice Walker, evinces the problem of voice. And it is appropriate to regard the most outspoken black writers of the protest movement as bearers of the burden in another guise. Theirs is not so much a free voice as the forced voice of reaction and resentment.

In America, the writers had to educate themselves under very strenuous circumstances. George Moses Horton (1779-1884) is a typical example. He was 'rented' out by his master to serve the Principal of Chapel Hill University in North Carolina for fifty cents per day. He used this opportunity to learn how to read and write, later becoming a notable poet. It should be remembered that there was a law enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives, sitting in the General Assembly which prohibited teaching slaves to read or write. The penalty was a fine not exceeding one hundred dollars and imprisonment not exceeding six months for a free white person. The same law prescribed additional fifty lashes of the cane if the

person is a 'free person of color'. Despite all these restraints, Horton educated himself in the arts and was so proficient in this genre that the undergraduates of the University paid him twenty-five cents per poem to compose love verses for them. Hence, some of his poems that survive are fraught with a plethora of witty expressions and sentimental images, as exemplified in the following stanza from a poem, 'Eliza', which celebrates a lost love:

Eliza, still thou art my song,
Although by ... I may forsake thee;
Fare thee well, for I was wrong
To woo thee while another take thee

Though probably meant for a love gone sour, there is a strong note of nostalgia in the poem, giving impetus to the fact that the poet has latently recreated his position in the piece. The voice of lamentation is clear. So also are the images of heartlessness and a note of resignation to fate. In another guise, the poem may be an inverted lamentation of a slave master who has lost his slave through emancipation, and his sudden realisation of his guilt.

Expression of their voices through autobiographical writing gave the writers the opportunity of recollecting past events to feed the armpit of the present. Even when the novels are not pure autobiography in the right sense of the word, the authors clearly portrayed themselves in the narrative. A few examples will suffice. When William Brown's *Clotel* was published in 1853, the author clearly projects himself into the protagonist. This bond between the writer and the protagonist is manifested in the depiction of characters. In his prophetic novel that foreshadows some of the issues that later sprang up in the American society, Sutton E. Grigg's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) also chronicles the degradation blacks in the American society. But significantly, his novel differs from *Clotel* in the sense that it attacks the society from a political vantage point.

Autobiography, therefore, is a representation of life that is formally fluid and committed strictly to no definite form. Structurally, there are certain themes that recur in African American and black South African literature. They are crime and punishment, violence and racial-love tragedies, poverty and squalor, police brutality, and the social effects of segregation. Many of the novels, because they are constructed out of the same autobiographical impulses, follow similar structural patterns of childhood reminiscences, adulthood alienation leading to desperation, anger and self-exile as the climactic point in the narrative. Evidently, the autobiographical literature is the work of the imagination, but it is closely rooted in the author's personal experiences, which are made to acquire universality due to collective ethos.

Autobiographical writing is more prominent in South Africa than in other areas of the continent. From Ezekiel Mphahlele through Peter Abrahams to Albert Luthuli, the archetypal pattern created in Black South African autobiographical writing is to describe the problems of the blacks, but from a personal vintage point. What is being described is the same, the characters and incidents described are seemingly different but fundamentally and thematically similar. Because the laws of exclusion are directed at color not personality, the authors try to show that the author may be different, but the situations being described are familiar. Albert Luthuli, in his book, *Let My People Go*, recaptures the main reason for this archetypal characterisation:

A non-committed African is the same black as a committed Native There was no choice, during riots the police shot their rifles and sten guns at anything which was black (140).

Hence, the life of a black man in South Africa is that of desperation that leads to anger. When he is forced to submit to the authorities, he does so with desperation and anger. He does so only to escape the frustration of the moment. As Peter Abrahams states in *Tell Freedom*,

A man can submit today in order to resist tomorrow. My submission had been such. And because I had not been free to show my real feeling, to voice my true thoughts, my submission had bred bitterness and anger. And there were nearly ten million others who had submitted with equal anger and bitterness (369f).

This desperation and anger leads the African-American into what W.E.B. Du Bois (1989:204) describes as double consciousness which, he maintains, operates at two levels:

At one level, there is the double-consciousness that comes from the difficulty of being both a Negro and an American, of having two identities forced on oneself by virtue of one's exclusion from the mainstream of American society. One is expected to conform to American values but is prevented from enjoying the fruits of doing so. At the other level is the double-consciousness that comes from the lack of communication between white and black Americans, leading to two separate spheres of existence for black people

The oppression, harassment and their concomitant alienating effects are bound to af-

fect both the writer and his character and create in him a sense of solitude and desperation to be a part of the environment. And it is necessary to define, at this juncture, what constitutes environment. Environment does not simply mean the geographical habitat of a person, or the physical setting of his creative work. It includes the social, political, and economic conditions as well as the mental conditions of the inhabitants. All the external factors that condition man in his society constitute his environment. To the African American and black South African writer, the environment excludes the individual from formal participation in the affairs of the community. He feels a sense of alienation and expresses a desire to tear himself from the clutches of oppression and segregation and live the life of a normal human being. Richard Wright (1966:226) recaptures this frustration and anger in *Native Son* through the voice of Bigger Thomas who serves as historical witness:

It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, or went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black.

This feeling of solitude is also apparent in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, a story that recreates the misery of black and coloured South Africans who are unable to participate in governmental affairs. La Guma's Willie Boy, resembles Wright's Bigger Thomas, especially in his feeling of desperation and anger with the environment. He represents the oppressed black South Africans who are constantly harassed by the Police and forced, sometimes, to admit to crimes they did not commit. When he is arrested by the apartheid police, Raalt, Willie Boy retorts: 'What did I do? I never did nothing' (La Guma 1967:79). Actually, Willie Boy knows that he had not committed any offence, except that he born coloured and must be used and abused at will by the oppressive system.

It is necessary to point out one major difference in the segregation practised in the two environments. In the American environment the main distinctions are white and black. There was no need of engaging in unnecessary distinctions regarding the extent of blackness, or other trivial manifestations. In the South African environment, fine distinctions were considered a part of the system, and the extent of one's persecution depends on one's classification. As Nelson Mandela (1995:140) points out:

The arbitrary and meaningless tests to decide black from Colored or Colored from white often resulted in tragic cases where members of the same family were classified differently, all depending on whether one child

had a lighter or darker complexion. Where one was allowed to live and work could rest on such absurd distinctions as the curl of one's hair or the size of one's lips.

Because he is coloured, Willie Boy and other helpless characters in the novel are persecuted, blamed, abused and disregarded by foreigners who have taken over their society. He is rendered powerless by the system and pursued by the law. He regards the law, represented by the oppressive Boer police, as a fearsome monster, and spends all his time avoiding it, to no avail. He masks his alienation in drink so much that he has little time left to reflect fruitfully upon reasonable issues of life.

The same image of powerlessness and alienation is apparent in Mari Evans's poem, 'Vive Noir!' (1968). Like La Guma's Willie Boy, the persona in Evans's poem longs for that period when there will be inversion of roles in the environment, when the black will not only overcome his persecution and oppression but posses the power to make rules:

I'm
Gonna wear the robes and
Sit on the benches
Make the rules and make
The arrests say
Who can and who
Can't ...

Gonna make it a
Crime
To be anything BUT black (Cook & Henderson 1984:123).

There is a note of desperation and anger in these lines. Apart from giving us glimpses into what constitutes the major problem for black people in the poet's environment, there is a wish of a shift from the forte of power, a wish that is more of a fantasy than reality, but which shows the feelings of the oppressed people in their efforts to extract, not merely vengeance, but an inversion of roles. The poem also shows a demythification of the concept of crime. The poet merely says that the meaning of crime has been significantly reduced by the oppressor for his own benefits.

This wish of inversion of roles is seen in La Guma's characters—Michael Adonis and Willie Boy. They are coloured men, trying to live a successful life in a hostile environment without resorting to crime. But the force of the environment weighs heavily on them. Michael loses his job for merely going to the bathroom, and Willie Boy fails to get a job despite his efforts. They have no other alternative than to

succumb to the force of the environment.

La Guma creates characters that come down to us as human beings, as can be discerned from the situation in which he places them. These characters have human hearts, feelings of love and compassion and, sometimes, fantastic dreams of a rosy future, but they are compelled to live their lives in desperation, bitterness, anger, and random acts of crime. Hence, his characters cannot be seen merely as criminals and lawbreakers, but a collective representation of the victims of the environment. They may be forced to commit crimes but his condition is deemed blameable for the crime so committed. In desperation and anger, he drowns himself in drinks, drugs, women, and anything that is capable of quelling the pain of an unhopeful, unchangeable existence.

The same note of desperation and stifled hope is apparent in Don Lee's (1968) poem, 'In the Interest of Black Salvation'.

When I was 17
I didn't have time to dream
Dreams didn't exist-
Prayers did, as dreams
I am now 17 and 8
I still don't dream
Father forgive us for we know what we do.

The persona, like Michael Adonis and Willie Boy, is devoid of dreams because, like he says, dreams did not exist either in the past or in the present. Even prayer has eluded the persona and he/she now performs acts which he knows are wrong, but which he does because he has no alternative.

Furthermore, the concept of dream is a prominent feature in African American literary writing. It is a note of procrastination and hope in the midst of desperation and anger. It is a personification of the future, if not for the protagonist but for posterity. Langston Hughes recaptures this image of 'Dream deferred' in his immortal poem, where he philosophically reasons that a deferred dream moves from desperation and anger to eventual explosion. It is this concept of dream that forms the subject of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Furthermore, this concept of dream is the meeting point of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's play. Both plays are set in the same black neighbourhood, populated with people desperate for the realisation of their dreams, angry that the environment seems to make their hope of realisation impossible. In the final analysis, the dream deferred leads to eventual and expected explosion. Though the explosion of Bigger Thomas is more fatal than that of Walter Younger, they both depict the desperation, anger and frustration of the black man in a hostile and oppressive environment.

As the face of society changes, so changes the face of literature too. Literature is an aspect of society and reflects the characteristics of the age when it was written. As Malcolm Bradbury (1971:xiii) has rightly pointed out, literature,

is an institution of society, an inheritance of artistic practices and values, a point of formal interaction where writers and audiences meet, a means of social communication and involvement.

Consequently, while South Africa is yet to produce literature celebrating the conquest of apartheid and the establishment of a new order, African American literature has, for long, wallowed in this celebration. In her book, *Black Women Writers at Work*, Claudia Tate (1985:xxiv) makes the following observation:

While many black writers, male and female, fit into the general tradition in Afro-American literature of celebrating black survival by overcoming racial obstacles, other writers give their attention to those who fall in battle, insisting that their fight, though unsuccessful, is valiant and therefore merits artistic attention.

Examples of characters that exemplify the image of fallen heroes abound in contemporary African-American literature and are too innumerable to recount. Such characters are Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; De Witt Williams in Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville*, Beau Willie in Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*, and a host of others.

In conclusion, we have established that any artistic realisation is the coming together of the power of man and the power of the environment. Though art has the capacity to transcend the environment it inhabits, it can never be independent of it. But one question that needs to be addressed is the effect of literature on the environment that created it. Has literature contributed, in any way, to social change in South African and African American environments? Maya Angelou (1985:4), in her conversation with Claudia Tate, tends to suggest an answer to this question, when she comments on the role of literature in shaping human thought and action:

Learning the craft, understanding what language can do, gaining control of the language, enables one to make people weep, make them laugh, even make them go to war.

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