

INSIDE THE HOUSE OF TRUTH: THE CONSTRUCTION, DESTRUCTION  
AND RECONSTRUCTION OF CAN THEMBA

SIPHIWO MAHALA

submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

in the subject

ENGLISH LITERATURE

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR:

PROF. MICHAEL KGOMOTSO MASEMOLA

NOVEMBER 2017

## DECLARATION

Student number: 55739458

I, Siphwo McGlory Mahala, declare that this this thesis – *Inside the House of Truth: The Construction, Destruction and Reconstruction of Can Themba*, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

November 2017

---

Signature

## ABSTRACT

This study is, by its intention at any rate, an attempt at assembling the scattered fragments of Can Themba's life to make a composite being out of the various existing phenomena that shaped the contours of his life in both literary and literal senses.

Given the disjunctive manner in which Can Themba and his work have been represented thus far, a combination of Historical and Biographical research methods will underpin the approach of this study. The resultant approach is the Historical-Biographical method of research. According to Guerin *et al* (2005, 22) the Historical-Biographical approach "sees the work chiefly, if not exclusively, as the reflection of author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work."

This research is premised on the conviction that an individual is a constellation of multiple factors that play a pivotal role in the construction of their persona. These factors will be traced from his family background, early schooling, tertiary education, socio-economic conditions as well as his contribution to various newspapers and journals.

While so much has been written about Themba and his work, there is no comprehensive biography of Can Themba as a person. Most importantly, the factors that contributed to his making as well as his breaking, or destruction, have not been interrogated in a form of comprehensive academic research.

Rightly or wrongly, Themba's meteoric rise into the South African literary canon is often traced from the moment he won the inaugural *Drum* Magazine short story competition. Themba became one of the most popular journalists and rose within the ranks of *Drum* to become the Assistant Editor. However, my research demonstrates that winning the *Drum* short story competition was the culmination of a literary talent that was developed and had been simmering for a number of years. Themba studied at the University of Fort Hare between 1945 and 1951 alongside the likes of Dennis Brutus, Ntsu Mokhehle, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and many other prominent individuals. He was a regular contributor to *The Fortharian*, a university publication that published opinion pieces, poems and short stories.

This is a vital component of Themba's intellectual growth and it remains the least explored aspect of his life. As a result, what has been discursively documented by various scholars, writers and journalists, thus far, is a very parochial representation of Can Themba's oeuvre.

## **DEDICATION**

In memory of Prof. Mbulelo Mzamane  
whose light still shines my path.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the generous financial assistance that I received from the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), which carried me throughout the period of three years.

I would like to acknowledge individuals who either inspired me in my scholastic endeavours or contributed directly to this study. I was fortunate to work closely with the late Keorapetse Kgositsile and interact with Es'kia Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi, Themba's contemporaries who shared invaluable insights about him in our casual conversations. It was only after the passing of Nkosi in 2010, that I took the decision to document the life story of Themba for posterity.

I unreservedly acknowledge legendary writer-turned-filmmaker, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, who assisted with the recording of my conversations with some of the people who knew Themba. Matshoba brought on board a distinguished film crew including Wiseman Mabusela, Lawrence Lerato Lichaba, Mpho Ramathuthu, Michael Moagi Matsie and Paul Zisiwe.

It was in June 2013, after the Can Themba Memorial lecture, that my mentor and former Vice Chancellor at the University of Fort Hare, Mbulelo Mzamane, advised that I register for a doctoral degree and take Can Themba as my subject. Mzamane had consistently been reminding me about the importance of pursuing doctoral studies for about ten years.

When I finally registered for my doctoral studies in 2014, I had already interviewed a number of prominent people, and altogether, I interviewed the following people: Njabulo S, Ndebele, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Nadine Gordimer, Don Mattera, Mthobi Mutloatse, Joe Thloloe, Anne Themba, Juby Mayet, Lucas Ledwaba, Mbulelo Mzamane, Peter Magubane, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Sol Rachilo, Ahmed Kathrada, Parks Mangena and Simon Maziya.

All these interviews contributed enormously to the project. Some of the interviewees including Mbulelo Mzamane, Nadine Gordimer, Anne Themba and Ahmed Kathrada, have since passed on. We have made an effort to transcribe the majority of interviews conducted and the transcripts are attached herewith as Appendix A. Unfortunately in some cases, parts of the footage were damaged, or as in the case of the interview with Lucas Ledwaba, the entire footage got lost and could not be retrieved.

This research would not have been possible without the support of Can Themba's daughters, Morongwa and Yvonne Themba, who graciously gave me access to family documents. These include granting me permission to peruse their father's student records at the University of Fort Hare. On the same note, I must thank the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Fort

Hare, Dr Mvuyo Tom, and his successor, Prof Sakhela Buhlungu, as well as their staff for their cooperation and assistance during my research. Here I would like to make specific mention of Ms Zintle Mzayiya from the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS), who went beyond the call of duty to ensure that I had access to archival material. Can Themba's trials and tribulations over his teaching qualifications is a matter that was unknown in the public domain until I got access to his student records as kept in the archives of the University.

I would like to extend a special word of gratitude to the National English Literary Museum (NELM), especially their Research Curator, Andrew Martin, who has been there for me from the beginning of my research.

I am indebted to the Department of English Studies at UNISA, for accepting my proposal and affording me an opportunity to pursue doctoral studies on the life of Can Themba. I am particularly grateful to Prof Michael Kgomotso Masemola, who guided me through the process. Thank you Prof Masemola for reminding me that academic writing is a scientific endeavour.

I thank my family for their unyielding support and patience while I was pursuing my doctoral studies. I could not be the husband that I wanted to be to my wife, Miliswa, nor was I able to be the father that I ought to be to our three daughters, Mihlali, Qhama and Kuhle, but they remained supportive of my academic endeavours throughout this period. Thank you for supporting my ambitions. And thank you for loving me.

The completion of this degree is the manifestation of my parent's most fervent ambition. My mother, Nomsokolo Reginah Clay, who passed away in 1986, wanted her children to obtain the level of education that she could not achieve. Conversely, my father, Norton Mahala, who passed away in March 1997, valued education especially because he never got the opportunity to study. His last words to me, "ufunde, ungabinaxhala" (study, have no fear), have been a source of inspiration throughout my studies.

Lastly, I am grateful for the phenomenal life of Can Themba, which inspired this study. Although he died fifty years ago, he continues to inspire more writers and readers with the timelessness of his works. This study will hopefully make significant contribution to the long journey of rediscovering and immortalising Can Themba.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### **Chapter One: Dominant Themes and Perspectives on Can Themba**

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Retracing the Contours of Can Themba's Trail	4
1.3 Literature Review	12
1.4 Theoretical Framework	17
1.5 Rationale	20
1.6 Methodology	22
1.7 Chapter Breakdown	22

### **Chapter Two: Intertextuality and the Evocations of Shakespeare in Can Themba's Works**

2.2 Introduction	27
2.3 Themes and Idioms in Can Themba's Early Writings	34
2.3 Can Themba's Exploration of Shakespeare's Politics of Difference	37
2.4 Intertextual Resonances and Allusions to other Seminal Texts	43
2.5 Domesticating Shakespearean Imagery	48

### **Chapter Three: A Politico in a Poet: The paradox of Politics and Poetics in can Themba's Writings**

3.1 Introduction	55
3.2 Navigating the Political Landscape	60
3.3 <i>Drum</i> Magazine and Black Writers' Revolution	65
3.4 Reflections on Can Themba's Political Imagery	76

### **Chapter Four: Can Themba's Identity Ethos: A Black Englishman or Detribalised Africa?**

4.1 Introduction	89
4.2 The Discursive Paradigms of Tribal Discourse	96
4.3 The Quest for Shared Identities	104

**Chapter Five: The Supreme Intellectual Tsotsi: The Complexity of Can Themba’s Social and Intellectual Disposition**

5.1 Introduction	118
5.2 The Dynamics of the Cult of a Tsotsi	124
5.3 The Shebeen as a Point of Convergence	130
5.4 The Construction of Can Themba’s Intellectual Architecture	138
5.5 Conclusion	146

**Chapter Six: The Will to Die: An Exploration of the Contributing Factors to the Destruction and the Demise of Can Themba**

6.1 Introduction	150
6.2 The Dilemma of a Teacher in the Newsroom	154
6.3 Systemised Deprivation of Occasions for Loving	160
6.4 The Destruction of <i>Drum</i> and its Personalities	167
6.5 Sinking to the Bottom of the Bottle: Themba’s Alcoholism and its Effects	172
6.6 The Road to Swaziland: A Kind of Suicide	180

**Chapter Seven: Re-Membering and Reconstructing the Fragments: An Exposition of Can Themba’s Social and Intellectual Legacy**

7.1 Introduction	187
7.2 Retrospective Cognisance and Consolidation of Memory	194
7.3 Consolidating Discursive Narrative: A Teacher in the Newsroom	197
7.4 Retrospective Restoration of Memory	206
7.5 “The Suit” for all Season: Re-imagining Can Themba’s Transcendent Narrative	210
7.6 The Significance of Can Themba’s Epochal Narratives	213

**Chapter Eight: The Can Themba Phenomenon: An Infinite Journey** 221

**References** 238

**Appendix A: Interviews** 243

**Appendix B: Letters** 294

## CHAPTER ONE

### DOMINANT THEMES AND PERSPECTIVES ON CAN THEMBA

Much more has been written about [Can] Themba than he has written about himself. All who knew him testify to the brilliance of his intellect and to a potential creativity which was never realised. His remaining writings are indeed a meagre sum. Yet more than any other individual, in his weaknesses as in his strengths, Themba epitomised and expressed the urban culture of the black Johannesburg. **Rabkin, 1975**

#### 1.1 Introduction

Can Themba died in September 1967 at the tender age of 43. At the time of his death, he neither had an autobiography nor a single book under his authorship, yet he remains one of the most revered South African scribes from the 1950s generation. He is featured in almost every study that interrogates the history of writing in South Africa and the contribution of *Drum Magazine* in particular. Many critics regard him as the liveliest and most talented writer of his generation.

To date, there is no comprehensive study that traces Themba's development as a journalist, a writer, teacher or public intellectual in the round—despite his glowing profile and perennial presence in almost every study that concerns the Sophiatown of the 1950s. This especially holds true for the history of journalism in South Africa, the art of short story writing and other relevant subjects. Extant references that often surface about him only relate to an established writer, and do not necessarily trace his development. This study attempts to close this void, tracing Themba's development from the early stages of his career prior to his much written about tenure at *Drum Magazine*. Further, it follows through to his exile days in Swaziland. While reference is often made to different aspects of Themba's life and legacy, there is no published text that consolidates all these pertinent aspects.

David Rabkin in his 1975 unpublished thesis, *Drum Magazine: (1951 – 1961) and the Works of Black South African Writers Associated with it*—quoted in the epigraph above—alludes to the fact that a lot has been written about Can Themba, probably more than he has written about himself. This sentiment is echoed by Themba’s friend and colleague at *Drum*, Lewis Nkosi, in his tribute to Themba published in Themba’s *The Will to Die* (1972), where he says:

It is almost certain that should Can Themba had chosen to write a book on South Africa, it would not only have been an interesting and to use an American word ‘insightful’ book, but it might have revealed a complex and refined talent for verbalizing the African mood. And no doubt, such a book would have been a valuable addition to the literature of South Africa. (Themba, 1972: x-xi)

Nkosi concludes his argument with an assertion that we mourn what would have been. Indeed, Themba’s potential as a writer was never fully realised and currently there is no public record that captures his life story, his writing and legacy comprehensively in a single volume. This study attempts to juxtapose Themba’s life story with his writing as a way of presenting a balanced critical analysis of his writing. It will draw parallels between some of his stories and the circumstances surrounding the incidents that occurred in his life. It is my contention that to understand the significance and the full meaning of Can Themba’s creative genius one needs to understand the contextual environment within which he wrote.

Since Themba did not have a published book at the time of his death, it may be necessary to trace a brief history of the circumstances that led to the posthumous publication of his books. The first collection of his works, *The Will to Die*, edited by Donald Stuart and Roy Holland, was published in London as part of the Heinemann African Writers’ Series in 1972, five years after his death. Since 1966, Themba had been banned as a statutory communist under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965, which meant that his works could neither be quoted nor referenced inside South Africa. When the ban was later lifted after his demise, David Phillip issued a local edition as part of their Africasouth series in 1982. In 1985, Ravan Press published *The World of Can Themba*, a collection of his stories edited by Essop Patel. Most recently, Penguin Books released another collection of his stories, *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006), which includes previously unpublished material, as part of their Modern Classics series.

The material entailed in the various collections of Can Themba's works includes short stories, journalistic pieces and essays, which were mainly published between 1953, when his works started appearing in *Drum Magazine*, and the time of his passing in 1967. Each of these collected works have done much to project the capabilities of Can Themba as a creative genius, and in their totality provide appropriate justification for Ursula A. Barnett's claim in *A Vision of Order*, that Themba was "the most interesting personality and perhaps the most talented of the writers of the late fifties and early sixties" (1983:185). However, they do not adequately represent his creative oeuvre in its entirety. This study addresses this hiatus, with a view to providing a much fuller understanding and do justice to the magnitude of Can Themba's stature.

Can Themba actively contributed to the world of letters for a period of about twenty years. Over the two decades, he wrote under different pennames, including Doce, D.C. Themba, D. Canadoce Themba, D. Can Themba, Can Themba, Parks Mangena and Morongwa Sereto, amongst others. In some of the instances there are publicly known reasons why he had to use a particular penname instead of the other. The first available records of his publications date as far back as 1945, when he published a poem entitled "Thirst in the Hearts of Men", in the *South African Native College (SANC)*, a publication of the University of Fort Hare. Later on, we see more publications by him in 1947, including a poem with the title "Dedication", and a short story entitled "Revelation", both of which were published in different editions of *The Fort Harian*, a student journal that published short stories, poems and essays. Themba was also a constant contributor to *Zonk* way before his more famous publications in *Drum Magazine*. Themba's works published in the 1940s have not been included in any of his collections mentioned above and therefore received no scholarly attention. This leaves a gaping hole in his oeuvre and this is one of the critical voids that this study intends to fill.

Themba's unique image is probably best represented by his abode in Sophiatown. It served as a synecdoche, not merely a mise-en-scène for his writing. He turned his own dwelling place into a site of debate and discussion called "The House of Truth". This was a single room bachelor flat located at 111 Ray Street in Sophiatown of the 1950s. According to Peter Magubane, the House of Truth is where everything concerning human experience in Sophiatown was told with candour, largely articulated through liquor-inspired debate.<sup>1</sup> There

---

<sup>1</sup> Magubane shared this in an exclusive interview with the author. This was part of a series of interviews for the purposes of this study and the list of other interviewees will be shared later in this chapter.

were no secrets. The House of Truth is reputed to have been the host to candid intellectual debates that shaped many of the thinkers that came out of Sophiatown. Stan Motjuwadi, Can Themba's former student and colleague at *Drum* and at the *Golden City Post* newspaper, interprets the House of Truth as "Can's way of cocking a snook at snobbery, officialdom and anything that smacked of the formal. Everybody but a snob was welcome at The House of Truth" (Patel 1985:6). The House of Truth has come to epitomise the life and legacy of Can Themba. It stands as a metaphor that represents his philosophy and lifestyle.

As a writer Can Themba was a man in search of truth and the House of Truth is the world that he inhabited, its verisimilitude oftentimes standing in equal proportion to his vicissitudes as a journalist. His ban under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act in 1966 demonstrates the desperation and determination of the apartheid regime to muffle his freedom of speech and suppress the truth. Themba's interests included a wide range of issues, from literature to politics, alcohol to women, teaching to journalism, and these formed some of the conversations that took place in the House of Truth as much as they are captured in his stories. It is in this context that this study makes use of various research methods to find out the truth about the life history of Can Themba. To understand Themba's contextual environment, one needs to get into his world, "The House of Truth"—where it all unfolded.

## **1.2 Retracing the Contours of Can Themba's Trail**

One of the constant challenges in writing the life history of someone so long after they passed is that there are often hidden stories, contradicting facts, contending narratives about the lives and perspectives of those individuals and at times information gets embellished beyond recognition. This is the major challenge with Can Themba's life history, which is fraught with inaccuracies and sketchy details especially in the period prior to him joining the *Drum* stable as well as his exile days in Swaziland. This compels us to trace the contours of Themba's trail, taking stock of each and every mound and mountain in which he left his footprint.

Can Themba passed away more than years ago, and even this has remained a contentious matter for a very long time as different publications—including some of the most authoritative texts on South African literary history—have different records of his passing, ranging from 1967 to 1969. This study will present empirical evidence that Can Themba passed away on 8 September

1967. The recent unveiling of his tombstone is further proof that this is indeed the correct date as it is now inscribed on his tombstone, which was unveiled by the Minister of Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa, at the West Park cemetery in Johannesburg, on 30 September 2017.

While it is not the primary objective of this study to correct certain misrepresentations, it may be necessary to highlight some of the substantive factual inaccuracies. This study will also indicate when and where such inaccuracies were recorded, in order to have a clear understanding of where some misconceptions emanate from.

This study concurs with Rabkin's assertion that a lot more was written about Themba than he has written himself; yet the converse is also true that he has written a lot more albeit that some of his works were not compiled into collections therefore, they have received very little critical attention. In the first instance, there is the archival material that this study has utilised dating as far back as the 1940s, but there is also room for a scholarly approach where a critical analysis of his works would reveal some of the information that is currently not available in the public domain. The mosaic details of Can Themba's biography are embedded in his own writing; but this needs a close interrogation of both his works and his life history in order to fathom that he has constant presence in his own works. To lay the ground for a thorough analysis of Themba's legacy, it is prudent that we provide his biographical background as a launchpad for such a study. In its most prosaic sense, the biography of Can Themba can be captured in a single paragraph, highlighting his place of birth, tertiary education, the publications that he worked for and the books that he penned.

Daniel Canodoce "Can" Themba was born in Marabastad outside Pretoria, on 21 June 1924 and completed high school at Khaiso High School in Seshego outside Pietersburg (now Polokwane) in 1944. He won the inaugural Mendi Memorial Scholarship and went on to study at Fort Hare University College in Alice, Eastern Cape province, where he graduated with a BA degree in English with a distinction.

He taught at various schools across Johannesburg while he continued writing. In 1952, he entered the inaugural *Drum* Magazine Short Story Competition, of which he was announced as the winner in 1953. This led to his recruitment into the staff of *Drum* Magazine the same year. In 1962, he went into exile in Swaziland where he worked as a teacher and also contributed articles to local newspapers. He lived in Swaziland until his death in September 1967. The *Routledge Encyclopaedia on Modernity* has it on record that:

[Can Themba] taught for brief spells at the Western Native High School and the Central Indian High School on the outskirts of Johannesburg, but was always more interested in writing than teaching. He won the first *Drum* Magazine short story competition for his work 'Mob Passion' in 1953, competing with a thousand entries from home and abroad, including works by Cyprian Ekwensi and Bloke Modisane. Peter Abrahams, one of the judges of this competition, was highly impressed with his writing. Later, Langston Hughes was to be similarly impressed. Soon Themba was catapulted from his erstwhile teaching career into full-time journalism on both *Drum* and *Africa!* magazines. (Masemola, 2016)<sup>2</sup>

While the life of Can Themba as a prominent writer and a well-known journalist remains a subject of interest to many scholars, the question of how he became what he became remains unanswered. This study sets out to address the said hiatus. In terms of the information gathered from qualitative research and related data that was collected for the purposes of this study, which includes extensive interviews with Themba's wife and children, it became apparent that the community played a very important role in constructing the Can Themba persona. He was the third of five siblings, named: George, Baby, Can, Maide, and Peter. The last of Can Themba's siblings to perish was Peter, who passed away in 2006, on the same evening that the then President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, honoured Can Themba with the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver. At the time of doing the interviews, Can Themba's widow, Anne Themba, was the most reliable source to speak from family perspective in spite of her frailness at the mature age of 85.<sup>3</sup>

Themba's father passed away when he was still very young and coincidentally, his maternal aunt from the Phahlwa family, also lost her husband at about the same time. Themba's mother, Angelina Mgole, worked as a seamstress at the Pretoria General Hospital. The two widows joined their families and the children from the Themba and Phahlwa families grew up as a single unit. The young Can showed signs of brilliance, and this came to the attention of a certain Reverend Thuntsi, who supplied him with books and encouraged him to "never part with a book." This invocation was to have a long-lasting impact on Themba.

---

<sup>2</sup> Masemola, K. 2016, 'Themba, Daniel Canadoise D'Orsay (Can) (1924–1967)' in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, Taylor and Francis, viewed 17 November 2017, <<https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/themba-daniel-canadoise-dorsay-can-1924-1967>>. doi:10.4324/9781135000356-REM1488-1

<sup>3</sup> Mrs Anne Themba (nee Sereto) passed away on 19 July 2014.

Themba's obsession with books and scholarly aptitude saw him dispatched to a boarding school called Khaiso Secondary School, in Seshego, near Petersburg, where he became the first student to win the Mendi Memorial Scholarship to study at the prestigious Fort Hare University College. At Fort Hare he was in the same class as Dennis Brutus, later well-known as a poet and social activist, and stayed in the same hostel with Ntsu Mokhehle, former Prime Minister of Lesotho. Notable contemporaries during his Fort Hare studies include Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who later became the leader of the KwaZulu homeland and cabinet minister in a democratic South Africa; Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, former ANC Youth League activist and founding President of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC); Duma Nokwe, former Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC); and Robert Gabriel Mugabe, the erstwhile President of Zimbabwe and the longest serving President in the whole of Africa.

It was during his time as a student at Fort Hare that Themba published stories and poems in several magazines. Articles published in *The Fortharian* and *Zonk*, during the period between 1945 and 1951, demonstrate a great talent yet to be discovered in popular media. After the completion of his degree in 1947, he went to Johannesburg where he taught at various schools, including Madibane High School in Western Native Township and the Central Indian High School in Fordsburg. Even though he had a university degree, which included a distinction in English, Themba was not fully paid as a teacher because he was not admitted as a fully-fledged teacher by the Transvaal Education Department owing to his lack of a teacher's diploma. As a result, between 1950 and 1951 he went back to the Eastern Cape to study for the University Education Diploma at Rhodes University through Fort Hare.

After the completion of his University Education Diploma (UED) he went back to teaching fulltime. However, as his constant<sup>4</sup> correspondence with the University College of Fort Hare, Rhodes University and the University of South Africa (with which he had done an additional course by correspondence) over a period of two years would show, he was far from being a contented man. The Transvaal Education Department still did not recognise him as a fully-fledged teacher until he submitted the diploma. After a series of missives to the respective universities, he received a letter from the registrar of the University College of Fort Hare dated 27 March 1953, promising that a provisional diploma will be issued. It is clear that this did not happen at the time that Themba thought it would. In one letter, dated 29 June 1953, he asks for the university to provide details of his diploma and the status thereof, and vents his frustration

---

<sup>4</sup> The letters exchanged between Themba and the institutions are attached as an appendix to this thesis.

as thus: “This information is required in connection with the adjustment of my salary, hence it would be a kindness if it were to be considered urgent.”

Much as Themba seems to have loved teaching and had gone to extraordinary lengths to obtain the necessary qualifications, his lack of recognition by the Transvaal Department of Education must have pushed him away from the teaching profession. He left teaching and joined *Drum* as a reporter in 1953 and his name would soon become synonymous with *Drum Magazine*, which became legendary in its own right. The establishment of *Drum Magazine* gave rise to a whole new generation of journalists who became household names like Themba himself, Todd Matshikiza, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, and many others. The *African Drum*, as *Drum Magazine* was initially called, was founded as a quarterly by Jim Bailey in 1951, under the editorship of Bob Crisp. It had the black urban community as its target market, but they had only one black journalist, Henry Nxumalo, who initially worked as a sports reporter.

This was the post-world war recovery period and there were very high rates of urbanisation as it was also the height of industrial revolution in South Africa. With the establishment of *Drum* in the midst of massive industrial movement and the uncertainties that it brought about, the magazine initially did not show any signs of growth. In November 1951, Robert Crisp resigned as the editor and was replaced by Anthony Sampson. Even though Sampson did not have much editorial experience, he was wise enough to survey the opinions of their target market. It turned out that the urban black did not relate to the publication that was purported to be theirs, as the content seemed to be agitating the return to tribal lifestyles, something that contradicted their current condition and circumstance as they were eking out life in the urban space.

Following these observations, and as an attempt at bridging the gap between the magazine and its target market, an advisory board comprised of individuals from the target communities was established. As part of the ongoing transformation, in 1952 *Drum Magazine* initiated a short story competition and over a thousand entries were received from across the African continent and the Diaspora. The judging panel was chaired by the distinguished South African novelist, Peter Abrahams. In concluding the judging process, Abrahams’s remarks about the winning story, republished in Nichol’s *A Good-Looking Corpse*, partly noted:

I should say that we have in this story notice of unusual literary promise and I can think of nothing more encouraging than that such promise should be rewarded with the *Drum* prize.” (Nicol, 1991:159)

The winning story was “Mob Passion” penned by one D. Can Themba, a 28 year old teacher living in Sophiatown. This was Can Themba’s major breakthrough into the South African literary and journalism landscapes.

Henry Nxumalo, accompanied by photographer Jurgen Schadeberg, visited Can Themba at his place in Sophiatown to handover the award and do an extensive interview. In the interview that ensued, Themba talks about his teaching profession, and his struggle to write at early hours when his roommates are sleeping. He also made two poignant declarations that are crucial to observe as we unpack his life story in this study. The first is with regard to his lifestyle, wherein he argues, “As for hobbies, I have none other than my reading and writing. I don’t drink, but smoke heavily.” He goes further to say, “And now winning the *Drum* contest, I feel inspired to go on writing and writing until one day, perhaps I’ll be a really famous author.” (Nicol 1991:160-161). These two statements would hold a greater bearing later in his life. They also establish the basis for a critical discussion for the purposes of this research.

The above interview was published in *Drum Magazine* alongside Can Themba’s new popular story, “Passionate Stranger”, in March 1953, followed by his *Drum* competition-winning short story, “Mob Passion” in the May 1953 edition. Themba was soon to be a regular at *Drum* as this catapulted him into superstardom. Shortly after the appearance of his first work at *Drum* he was recruited into the magazine stable as a reporter. He also worked for *Drum Magazine*’s sister newspaper, the *Golden City Post*, for which he was a columnist and also served as the acting editor a number of times. He was appointed as the editor of *Africa*, a small publication established by the owners of *Drum Magazine*. He rose to become a columnist and the associate editor of *Drum Magazine* before being dismissed in 1959. While his competence as a journalist might be a contentious issue, what is indisputable is that Themba and his peers drastically changed the South African literary and journalism landscapes in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was also during this period that he established the infamous “House of Truth.” The “House of Truth” was in another sense Can Themba’s eponymous abode. Themba was known as a people’s person who cherished good debate over bottles of some spirits. During the inaugural<sup>5</sup> Can Themba Memorial lecture in 2013, a message from the Minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Mashatile, partly reads as follows: “He [Can Themba] is remembered as an eloquent debater,

---

<sup>5</sup> The Inaugural Can Themba memorial lecture was held at the State Theatre, Pretoria, on 21 June 2013. The objective was to pay tribute to Can Themba, coinciding with what would have been his ninetieth birthday as well as marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since his classic short story, “The Suit”, first published in *The Classic*.

immensely talented writer and a daring journalist.” While these are profound words from a prominent political figure and they touch on vital aspects of Can Themba’s personality traits, it is also true that there are many other things that Themba is remembered for. Apart from his journalistic and literary works, as well as the historical position that his generation occupies in South Africa, the most documented trait about Can Themba is his mastery of the English language.

In 1959, Can Themba married his long-time girlfriend, Anne (or Anna) Sereto, who was a nurse. It remains unclear whether she is the same nurse that he refers to in the first interview he conducted with Henry Nxumalo, which was then published in March 1953. After the Sophiatown forced removals, which began in February 1955, Themba lived in different places, including Dube township in Soweto. He resided with his in-laws at 479 Ngwenya Street, and the likelihood is that the stories that he wrote about the township, including “Terror in the Trains”, “Inside Dube Hostel” and “The Dube Train”, all published in his collection, *The World of Can Themba* (1985), were influenced by his experience of living in Dube.

The late fifties and the early 1960s saw a major political turbulence in South Africa as the apartheid state security was becoming more vicious and the liberation movement more determined to challenge the status quo. Many political activists, writers and journalists started streaming out of the country and there was a major exodus particularly after the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960. Themba decided to leave South Africa in 1962, and got himself exiled in Swaziland. He found himself a teaching job at the Swaziland Trade School, a tertiary institution where he was an English lecturer. Through the help of Father Ciccone, a Catholic Priest, he later found himself another job as a teacher at the St. Josephs Catholic Missionary School in Umzimpofo, just outside Manzini. He remained there until his demise in September 1967, when he succumbed to coronary thrombosis. The period of his life in Swaziland in particular is very sketchy, as he did not write as prolifically as he did in earlier years, which gave the basis for the interpretation of his own life.

Although Themba passed away exactly fifty years ago, he still dominates the public discourse through his works and this is testament to his literary genius and the resilience of his influence. It is probably through short story writing that the influence of Can Themba is most visible. Mbulelo Mzamane was the first writer to pen a creative re-imagination of Can Themba’s literary output. His story, “The Dube Train Revisited”, published in his collection, *My Cousin*

*Comes to Jo'burg* (1981), is a direct re-imagination of Can Themba's "The Dube Train", published in his collection of short stories, *The Will To Die* (1972).

In 2002, the current author penned a short story titled, "The Suit Continued," which is an extension of Themba's most famous short story "The Suit", first published in the inaugural issue of Nat Nakasa's literary journal, *The Classic*. "The Suit Continued" has been published multiple times locally and internationally. The last official publication was in *Twenty in 20: The Best Short Stories of 20 Years of Democracy* (2014). After reading the version published in *Words Gone Too Soon: A tribute to Phaswane Mpe and K. Sello Duiker* (Umgangatho Media, 2005), novelist Zukiswa Wanner decided to write her own response. Wanner's story entitled, "The Dress that Fed The Suit", which presents the perspective of a prominent but previously muted female character, was first published in *Baobab* literary journal in 2006 and is now included in the current author's *African Delights* (2011) and *Twenty in 20*. The current author completed the trilogy of "The Suit Stories" with a story called "The Lost Suit", also featured as part of a trio in African delights.

As Creative Writing is gradually finding its way into the syllabus of the institutions of higher learning in South Africa, the short story form, as opposed to the novel, seems to be the most viable option for classroom instruction purposes. This also situates Can Themba's work at the epicentre of creative writing instruction. While teaching writing at the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA) in 2009, Wanner approached her lessons using Can Themba's "The Suit", instructing her students to reimagine it. Furthermore, Stellenbosch University is applying a similar teaching method in their English third year class. Makhosazana experimented with Themba's work while doing her Master's degree in Creative Writing at the University of the Witwatersrand. This work resulted in the publication of her latest collection of short Stories, *Running and Other Stories* (Modjaji Press; 2013), which features two stories that are further re-imaginings of Can Themba's "The Suit."

The transcendent nature of Themba's work requires the critic to strike a balance between the narrator's life story and the circumstantial narrative. It is significant that Guerin *et al* (2005) argue for the importance of creating this equilibrium in the following terms:

In the biographical analysis of life stories, sequential analysis is carried out at two levels: genetic analysis, i.e. the analysis of the reproduction and transformation

processes in the narrator's life history, and thematic field analysis, which is the analysis of the biographer's biographical overall construction in the narration present.

They go further to argue that the important question that a critic or biographer must ask is that: "What kind of historical or biographical information do we need in order to feel the full impact of this story, aesthetically and intellectually?" (Guerin 2005:66)

To answer the questions raised above, it is necessary to go beyond the conventional areas of literature and journalism, both of which were Can Themba's stomping ground. It behoves me to broaden the scope and cast the net wide to include aspects that either have not received adequate attention or have been overlooked on previous occasions. Can Themba's trail takes very divergent turns that have not been thoroughly explored in high-level scholarly research. In an attempt to trace Can Themba's literary and journalistic trail, it becomes evident that his path is a multifaceted construct. It branches through the education path, romance, politics and other complex life matters. To do justice to depicting and reflecting on Themba's oeuvre, it would be essential to grapple with his legacy in a variety of areas in which he operated. What is indisputable, however, is the epochal nature of Can Themba's works, which are largely reflective of the society that he was part of and wrote about. To illustrate the perspectives taken on Themba over the years, the following literary review explores the prominent themes and perspectives on Can Themba scholarship.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

It is the aim of this literature review to take a close look at the dominant themes and perspectives in the majority of critical works on Can Themba. The dominant themes and perspectives on Themba cover mainly his journalistic and literary oeuvre. Where his biographical background surfaces, it is only with regard to the period in which he joined *Drum* Magazine up until his death in 1967. On the subject of his passing, there is hardly any substantive information other than that he died of coronary thrombosis in Manzini, Swaziland, where he worked as a teacher. The point of departure in this study is that it does not only focus on the pinnacle of his journalistic and writing careers, instead it pays particular attention to his construction prior to joining *Drum* Magazine. To neglect this aspect of Themba's development is to overlook a vital component of his being.

The most comprehensive autobiographical texts from the *Drum* generation of writers include *Down Second Avenue* by Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Blame Me on History* by Bloke Modisane and *Chocolates for My Wife* by Todd Matshikiza. The recently published biography of Nat Nakasa, *A Native of Nowhere: The Life of Nat Nakasa* (Jacana Media, 2013), penned by the American Fulbright scholar, Ryan Brown, offers yet another perspective on the life of one of the potent forces of this generation of writers and also sheds some light on Themba as a central figure in this generation. Fresh off the press is *Drum* photographer Jurgen Schadeberg's memoirs, *The Way I See It* (2017), which also gives formidable insights on this generation of writers. It is quite significant that these biographies take an historical perspective of telling individual stories. As is the nature of biographies, these books are focused on the authors or individuals who are their subject matter even though they do offer some perspective on the lives of those surrounding them. It should be noted that the focus of these biographies is the reflection of experiences of fully fledged scribes, and do not necessarily trace their coming into being.

Can Themba worked under three editors at *Drum* Magazine, and each one of them have written their memoirs about the period. He had been appointed as the Associate Editor (used interchangeably with Assistant Editor) on only his second year at *Drum*, in 1954, under the editorship of Sylvester Stein. He continued working as the Associate Editor under the two subsequent editors—Anthony Sampson and Tom Hopkinson. At some point in 1958, he was stripped of both his “Assistant Editor” title and salary owing to a drinking incident that got him and Bob Gosani arrested while driving in a company vehicle, and in 1959 he was dismissed by Hopkinson for absenteeism. Each of the editors reflect quite extensively on the period, and Can Themba features in cameo roles in their musings. Starting with the last editor, Tom Hopkinson wrote his memoir, *In the Fiery Continent*, published in 1962 in London; Anthony Sampson wrote *Drum: A Venture into the New Africa*, which was published in 1956, also in London, and; Sylvester Stein, published his memoirs *Who Killed Mr Drum?* Only in 1999, also in London. Although Themba does appear in many other texts from his editors to his fellow scribes, these memoirs stand out as the most important instruments in reflecting on the personality and conduct of Can Themba while he was working for *Drum* Magazine.

One of the most vital instruments in the recording of history is through interviews especially with the people who were part of an historic landmark. Mike Nicol had the privilege of interviewing many people who were part of the *Drum* decade and who had interacted with Themba amongst others. These interviews published in his book, *A Good-Looking Corpse*

(Secker & Warburg; 1991), provide great insight and biographical information about the personalities and the circumstances around which they lived. The book is now one of the primary texts that provide empirical investigation of the *Drum* generation of writers. For the title of his book, Nicol expropriates the *Drum* writers' popular adage, "Live Fast, Die Young and Have A Good-Looking Corpse." This is a line that was popularized largely by Can Themba and became the mantra of *Drum* writers. He had appropriated this line from Willard Motley's novel, *Knock on My Door* (1947), and popularised by its 1949 film adaptation, which stars John Derek and Humphrey Bogart.

In this text, Nicol elects to focus his study on the lives of a generation of journalists and the lifestyle that they lived. The book chronicles the discursive trajectory of the development of a generation of journalists and the important landmark that they inscribed in the annals of the literary and journalism landscapes, especially the so-called "black journalism" in South Africa. It is my contention that Nicol's book does not offer a dialectical juxtaposition of the vital factors that construct some human phenomena as influenced by the surrounding environment. This is not an indictment against Nicol, as the objective of his text was not to write a biography or present a comprehensive life history of any of the personalities involved. It deals with the story of a particular period.

There are a number of scholarly studies conducted specifically on Themba, and probably the text that comes close to drawing parallels between his life and work is Mari Snyman's unpublished Masters dissertation titled "Can Themba: The Life and Work of a Shebeen Intellectual." This particular study, which was submitted in fulfilment of a Master of Arts degree at the University of Johannesburg in 2007, sheds some great insights on the works of Can Themba, particularly his short stories and some journalistic articles. The dissertation also quotes some common sources like tributes by Lewis Nkosi, Michael Chapman's 1989 article entitled "Can Themba, Storyteller and Journalist of the 1950s", published in *English in Africa* Volume 16 No.2, as well as a 1975 doctoral thesis entitled "*Drum* Magazine 1951— 1961, and the Works of Black South African Writers Associated with it" by David Rabkin, etc.

The established pattern in all the critical works mentioned above, with the exception of Snyman's thesis and Chapman's paper, Themba is discussed as part of a discursive analysis of a generation. Perhaps the most intensive of the texts in grappling with Themba as a person is Lewis Nkosi's tribute, which pays homage to two of his contemporaries, Can Themba and Nat

Nakasa. The others often focus on his works without drawing parallels with his personality and reference only glibly to his personal traits. This is quite prevalent not only to Themba in particular, but to the entire generation of “*Drum* Boys” who are often treated like a homogeneous group. This is the generation of writers who belong to what Nkosi refers to as the “Fabulous Decade”(Nkosi 2016:26). In many ways Can Themba is the primary victim of this wholesale packaging of this generation of writers. He is largely projected as a representative of a generation, the reflection of the much-romanticised African urban world, the epitome of black writing in the 1950s and 1960s in all its glory and defects.

The very consciousness of the importance of the contextual setting in the interpretation of his writings also presents some perennial challenges. One of these is the apparent obligatory mandate for anyone writing about Can Themba to also make reference to the whole gamut of the *Drum* Magazine writers of his generation, including Henry Nxumalo, Lewis Nkosi, and Bloke Modisane, among others. There is no doubt that *Drum* Magazine played a pivotal role in chronicling the 1950s emergent black urban culture and providing a regular publishing platform for authentic black voices and thus speaking directly to black audiences about their own life experiences and perspectives. However, the treatment of these writers as a homogenous group could be at the expense of their individual traits and potentially present distorted images of their individual characters and capabilities.

Three collections of Themba’s works: *The Will to Die*, *The World of Can Themba* and *Requiem for Sophiatown*, are immediate texts that depict his authentic voice. The information in these texts is duplicative in nature even though there are unique elements with each publication. There are a number of academic and journalistic texts that have been published critiquing Themba on the basis of these writings. These texts are crucial in forming the baseline for the investigation of the Construction, Destruction and Reconstruction of the man from The House of Truth. There is a plethora of work by Themba that hardly received much attention from critics. This is primarily material that was never published in his collections either because it was published in some rare and obscure publications, or it was published under a different penname and therefore many readers are not aware of who the author is.

The image of Can Themba has been recreated repeatedly as a result there are divergent representations of his persona. In June 2013 *Drum* Magazine ran feature articles as part of celebrating the life and times of Can Themba ahead of what would have been his eighty-ninth

birthday, also marking the fiftieth anniversary of his most famous short story, “The Suit.” In an article published in *Drum Magazine* of 13 June 2013 (p.91), Sthembiso Hlongwane, who traced Themba’s footsteps back to Swaziland, states that Themba was a “Catholic Writer.” Hlongwane makes this assertion after conducting an intensive interview with Father Angelo Ciccone, a Catholic Priest who recruited Can Themba and spent a lot of time with him during his last days in Manzini, Swaziland. Ciccone had offered Themba a job as a teacher at St Josephs Missionary School on his arrival in Manzini, Swaziland. They struck a strong friendship that would last until Themba’s demise. Ciccone describes Themba as a man who was “extremely logical in his thinking and had a deep love for human kind.”

In a related context, Rosenthal implores readers to ask pertinent questions such as “To what extent is one receiving an account of an ‘actual’ life history and to what extent is one being presented with the [biographer’s] present construction of his or her past, present and future life?” In this case, we have a third party reconstructing a life story that is not his, but one that he had the privilege of becoming entangled with. This is one of the major challenges of writing a life story of someone who passed on several decades ago. A lot of what is written is dependent on the willingness and capability of the subject to recollect and share precise information about the subject matter. While published and/or written records are often helpful in some circumstances, they are just that—records with no feeling. Individuals, on the other hand, give a feeling in their narrative.

It is clear from the paragraphs above that while there is reasonably substantive research done on Can Themba, a lot more still needs to be investigated about the construction, destruction and reconstruction of his persona. That kind of information cannot be obtained from published texts alone; neither can it be acquired exclusively from interviews. The deliberate pursuit of various expressions of qualitative research, in a form of wide readership of his work and work about him, as well as the collection of archival material and extensive interviews with relevant people, is the best way in which we can come to understanding the proprietor of The House of Truth. The research that has been done thus far lays the foundation for a more substantive scholarly research on Can Themba’s life story.

The decision to select Can Themba as the subject of research is obviously premised on the recognition and appreciation of his work, and is therefore subjective. The interviews conducted are also done largely with those who had particular interest in him or in his work. The subjective

nature of the study is therefore inevitable. The researcher has to consciously suppress the temptation to write a hagiography as opposed to grappling with biographical elements as they relate to his work. The juxtaposition of the construction and destruction of Themba is premised on the view that an honest account of his life history would entail both the positive and negative elements. It is also a fact that since his passing, the image of Can Themba has been in a process of reconstruction, involving three burials and culminating with the unveiling of his tombstone in September 2017, to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of his passing. This study endeavours to grapple with these divergent elements in the chapters that are to follow.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

This research is premised on the view that an individual is a constellation of multiple factors that play a pivotal role in the construction of their persona. It is in this regard that this study traces the construction of Can Themba, employing various instruments including his writings, writings by others about him, archival material as well as interviews. The critical analysis of the ontological relationship between the author and the text would help enhance the understanding of both. The founding principle of this study is that we need to go beyond the text and consider the life experiences the author was exposed to.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study comprise primarily two critical theories – the biographical and the historical theories. According to Gealy in the paper “Biographical and Historical Criticism” (2009:1-2), “Historical criticism emphasizes the social and cultural environment that surrounds a work,” whereas biographical criticism focuses on how “the individual author’s life influence a work.” These two critical theories are not mutually exclusive as they often overlap and are most effective if used in combination. The resultant critical method adopted for the purposes of this study is a combination of these two theories, something that gives us the Biographical-Historical approach or vice versa. In this method, a reader manages to draw parallels between the content of the writing, the author and the historical perspective of the story.

This is the approach that Mphoto Johannes Mogoboya adopts in his unpublished thesis titled, “African Identity in Es’kia Mphahlele’s Autobiographical and Fictional Novels: A Literary Investigation,” submitted for the fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the

University of Limpopo in 2011. Mogoboya's description of the Historical-Biographical theory befits our theoretical approach to this study:

The Historical-Biographical approach argues that factors outside the text have a direct influence on it. In other words, writers mirror their lives and times in the context of their texts. (Mogoboya 2011:33)

Mogoboya's thesis is not only relevant to this study because of its theoretical approach, it is also germane because of its subject matter as it grapples with the life and works of Can Themba's contemporary and former colleague at *Drum* Magazine, Es'kia Mphahlele. There was mutual respect between Mphahlele and Themba, and they each write fondly and earnestly about each other in various texts that are to be discussed at a later stage in this study. Much as there are commonalities, there are also differences between the two studies. In the case of Mphahlele, there are existing biographical texts that were written about him and that he has penned himself, and these form the basis for Mogoboya's research. With Themba, on the other hand, there is no published biography and the onus is on the researcher to decipher if there are any biographical elements in the existing texts and to further harmonise biographical information through the use of existing texts, archival material and interviews.

It is in this context that the Biographical-Historical investigation of Can Themba encapsulates the entire realm of human behaviour, socio-economic circumstances as well as public perception. The bedrock of this study is constituted by existing published material, including Themba's writings, writings about him, as well as anecdotal musings gathered through research and captured largely on audio-visual format. The uniqueness of this study lies in the nature of the qualitative and quantitative research conducted as well as the dual nature of the study in combining his writings and life history.

The collection of private information, including Can Themba's student records from the University of Fort Hare, supplemented by the willingness of the family to share details and anecdotes about the early life of Can Themba and his family background, give the study credence as an authoritative text on the subject. This includes an extensive interview with Themba's wife who shared intimate details about their personal lives. I have conducted interviews with individuals who may have intimately known, interacted or been influenced by

Can Themba<sup>6</sup>. These interviews offer unique experiences and reveal information that is not yet captured in any scholarly research currently. The visits to Swaziland, where I conducted interviews with people whose lives were touched by Themba during his years of exile there, also offer a unique perspective to this study.

One is acutely aware of the subjectivity of qualitative information obtained through interviews and the dangers of absorbing it without verification. It is in this context that this research pays heed to the questions raised by Gabrielle Rosenthal in the book, *Qualitative Research Practice* (2004:3). One of the pertinent questions in this research method includes “how can one set about re-constructing a social structure that is constantly being reaffirmed and transformed in the interaction between biographical experience and socially defined schemata?” In terms of the information received, she implores us to ask questions so we can decipher the authenticity of the information supplied as it is prone to fabrication. She asks the following question:

To what extent is one receiving an account of an ‘actual’ life history and to what extent is one being presented with the autobiographer’s present construction of his or her past, present and future life?” (Rosenthal 2004:3)

Conscious of these troubling questions, such as they apply to the coterminous practice of biography, one has had to use a variety of sources to verify and substantiate some views and perspectives. While some of the information that the interviewees provide may not be accurate, it has been helpful to compare information from different sources, and contrasting this with some available records to ensure consistency and develop substantive evidence. The retrieval of archival material, including poems, short stories and articles that Can Themba published as far back as the 1940s, give a unique perspective in his development as a writer and creative intellectual.

While it would be easier to write a simple biography of the author or a critical analysis of his works as separate studies, I chose to merge the two aspects for the purposes of this study. This research is premised on the persuasion that a critical analysis of the author’s biographical background and surrounding environment would enhance in-depth understanding and substantiate the meaning and significance of his works. This is in line with Rosenthal’s

---

<sup>6</sup> Video recorded interviews have been conducted with the following people: Mrs Anne Themba, Don Mattera, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Mothobi Mutloatse, Joe Thloloe, Nadine Gordimer, Mbulelo Mzamane, Peter Magubane, Lucas Ledwaba, Parks Mangena, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Sol Rachilo, Sello Maake kaNcube and Morongwa Themba. However, for a number of reasons, only a few of these interviews will be referenced.

persuasion, that “the relationship between the overall construct and the relevant experiences must be conceived of as reciprocal: the construct determines the relevancy of an experience and the cumulative relevant experiences form the construct.” (Rosenthal 2004:4)

In light of Rosenthal’s argument above, this study is underpinned in the combination of the two perspectives (i.e. historical and biographical) in order to investigate their impact in making, breaking and remaking the human phenomena with special reference to Can Themba. Drawing parallels between his works and his biographical background presents new and divergent perspectives to Can Themba’s body of work. This approach imbues this research with very unique elements as it is a major departure from the dominant themes and perspectives on the work previously done on Can Themba.

## **1.5 Rationale**

The story of Can Themba has never been told in its entirety. There are glaring omissions in the studies that are currently in existence as they never give account of how he was constructed as a writer, journalist, teacher and public intellectual. In fact, the two dominant aspects in the current literature in the public domain are his exploits as a writer and a journalist. What is indisputable is that he was part of an historic generation of journalists and writers whose legacy has both been venerated and ridiculed over the years.

The legacy of Can Themba is a matter that remains contentious and unless there is a comprehensive study of his life and writings, there will always be conspicuous grey areas in his biography. Given the fact that he had no book to his name at the time of his passing, some might be justified to believe that he has received undue honour and attention as a literary practitioner. A lot more exposure to his work and influence is necessary in order to justify Ursula A. Barnett’s claim in his critically acclaimed book, *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914 – 1980)* that Can Themba was “the most interesting personality and perhaps the most talented of the writers of the late fifties and early sixties” (1983:185). This study will bring to the fore some of Themba’s less known work and legacy as reflected by individuals whose lives he touched.

A lot has been written about the so-called Sophiatown or the *Drum* generation of writers, which Can Themba was an integral part of, but no comprehensive study encapsulating a combination of Can Themba's life and works has been published as of now. The material that is available largely talks about the already established individuals or, at the very least, their achievements as journalists and writers. To date, there is no concrete information on Can Themba's development, deterioration, and re-emergence. This study will trace Can Themba's development as a thinker, a teacher and a creative intellectual from an early age. The available published material by and about Can Themba and a horde of scribes belonging to the 1950's generation, will form a substantial part of this research. It is, however, the qualitative method of this study in the form of interviews that will reveal aspects of Can Themba that have not received any significant attention in previous writings.

While some of the information that these individuals provide may not be accurate, it has been helpful to compare information from different interviewees, and contrasting this with some available records. This is in line with Gabrielle Rosenthal's argument about the importance of verifying the reliability of the sources, as conceiving of biography as a social construct comprises both social reality and the subject's experiential world. It would also be of interest to investigate the influence of Can Themba in the South African literary landscape. He has been immortalised through a continuous process of reconstruction, which includes republication and adaptation of his stories, as well as the intergenerational dialogue that is ensuing between him and other writers. The current author is part of a cadre of writers who have reimagined some of Can Themba's works. The architecture of the Can Themba phenomenon remains an elusive subject in the academia.

Can Themba is described by many, including his wife as well as former colleague at the *Golden City Post*, Juby Mayet, as a "people's person," something evidenced by the name he gave to his home—"The House of Truth". It is perhaps Lewis Nkosi who best captures Themba's assertion and the significance of his convictions. In the foreword to *The Will to Die*, Nkosi argues, "For Can Themba, the African township represented the strength and the will to survive by ordinary masses of the African people. In its own quiet way the township represented a dogged defiance against official persecution, for in the township the moments of splendour were very splendid indeed, surpassing anything white Johannesburg could offer." (Themba 1972: viii).

There are also instances where Themba's biographical and personal details have either been misrepresented or incorrectly recorded. In an attempt to ensure a nuanced discussion and consistency in the interpretation of the subject matter, this study will endeavour to provide accurate and balanced biographical information about Can Themba who for a long time remained an enigmatic figure. In doing so, I am conscious of the subjectivity that could lead to revisionist perspectives. This study is aimed at presenting an honest and accurate portrayal of the subject, without turning it into a hagiographic endeavour.

## **1.6 Methodology**

The uniqueness of this study lies in the nature of the research conducted as well as the scope of its thematic focus. The interviews that have been conducted offer unique experiences and reveal information that is not captured in any scholarly research at the moment.

The retrieval of archival material, including poems, short stories and articles that Can Themba published as far back as the 1940s, give a unique perspective in his development as a writer and creative intellectual.

The collection of this information, supplemented by the willingness of the family to share private information about the early life of Can Themba and his family background, give the study credence as an authoritative text on the subject. The access to Themba's student records led to the discovery of rare archival material that has never been shared in the public domain before. There are documented records available in the public domain where the current author is often referenced in studies that seek to interrogate the works of Can Themba. This connection is obviously created by the bond that exists in the author's creative re-imagination of Can Themba's work. It also evinces the important aspect of intertextuality and intersecting narratives, as well as the epochal resonance of his works. This inspired further research on the part of the author and unwittingly places him in position of authority.

## **1.7. Chapter Breakdown**

This section presents the overview of the thesis and offers a sneak peek into the coming chapters. This thesis is comprised of a total of eight chapters, each with headings and

subheadings. Each chapter opens with an epigraph relevant to that particular topic as a way of foregrounding ideas and teasing out a framework for a nuanced discussion.

The current chapter is simply entitled “Dominant Themes and Perspectives on Can Themba.” This is the introductory chapter presenting the overview of the thesis and its objective is to highlight the work that has been done on Can Themba and provide the rationale for this study and its approach. The chapter also provides the theoretical underpinnings of the research and a cursory view of the chapters that are to follow. In this manner, it attempts to illustrate the scholarly intervention of the research while at the same time providing a sneak preview of the study. It is not meant to be elaborate as the rest of the chapters will get into greater analytical detail. Its purpose is only to introduce us to the study and define basic concepts.

Chapter two of the study carries the title “Intertextuality and the Evocations of Shakespeare in Can Themba’s Writing.” It traces the evolution of his authorial voice from near mimicry to developing a distinctly Can Themba idiom. This chapter is premised on the view that a writer is a product of what he reads and their literary influences are usually palpable in their own writings. It endeavours to grapple with intertextuality and the evocations of William Shakespeare in Can Themba’s works throughout his writing career. In particular, this chapter identifies a number of texts where there are intertextual resonances and the ramifications of Shakespeare and other prominent writers’ influence on Themba’s writing. These will be highlighted and interrogated extensively.

Chapter three is titled “A Politico in a Poet: The Paradox of Politics and Poetics in Can Themba’s Writings.” The politics of Can Themba remain enigmatic and a matter of interest to many critics but none have interrogated this aspect of his life history comprehensively in a focused scholarly work. The politics of an individual, for the purposes of this discussion, are that which is expressed through both his journalistic and literary outputs (essentially reflecting the social values that he espoused). Can Themba’s political viewpoint encapsulates the discourses in which they employ their poetics to advance a particular ideology or set of values. This is viewed against the contextual environment in which they existed, including a historical moment and circumstances under which Themba wrote in Sophiatown of the 1950s and early 1960s. The relevance of historical context is fundamental in determining his attitude towards the prevailing social conditions as well as the extent to which he could potentially engage on a

political discourse. Although his published texts do not possess any known monolithic political views, he certainly was not politically naïve and, no matter how shallow or intense, he did have opinions.

Chapter four interrogates Can Themba's multiple identities. It is simply entitled, "Can Themba's Identity Ethos: A Black Englishman or Detribalised African?" The argument here is premised on the view that the identity ethos of an individual is a complex phenomenon informed by numerous factors that shape their impulses to historical and social forces. This manifests clearly when such impulses are mingled with the conundrums central to their present environment. This is even more so in the case of Can Themba, whose cosmopolitan background, nonconformist social attitude and liberal outlook to life in a racially and tribally stratified society makes for an unconventional identity ethos. This chapter grapples with the identities that Can Themba was born into, and juxtaposes them with those that he acquired over the years. Although the complexity of a person's identity is a subject that can never be addressed exhaustively, nor is there a particular doctrine under which individual identities can be boxed into, understanding the forces that inform an individual's present attitudes and convictions provides substantive reasoning to account for their views and perspectives on various issues in life.

Chapter five is titled "The Supreme Intellectual Tsotsi: The Complexity of Can Themba's Social and Intellectual Dispositions." The title is adopted from Lewis Nkosi's description of Can Themba, where he uses the paradoxes of intellectual and the *tsotsi* to describe him. Can Themba is revered as a great mind in South African cultural history, having distinguished himself as a teacher, journalist, writer and a fierce debater in his short but meteoric life. He is also referred to as the "shebeen intellectual," owing to his love for intellectual debates while consuming copious amounts of alcohol in the shebeens. Without a comprehensive analysis of his life, the combination of intellectualism, shebeen culture and the cult of a *tsotsi* is a complex relationship that cannot be fully understood.

The central theme of this chapter grapples with perceptive notions of intellectualism and its relation to seemingly incompatible social factors of the shebeen culture and the *tsotsi*. As the topic suggests, Themba's intellectual architecture is viewed against the social factors that have been interweaved in his persona including the shebeen culture and the cult of a *tsotsi*.

Chapter six of this study is titled “The Will to Die: An Exploration of the Contributing Factors to the Destruction and the Demise of Can Themba.” This chapter deals with the second element in the title of the thesis, the “destruction” of Can Themba. It can be justifiably argued that the 8<sup>th</sup> of September was the culmination of a downward spiral in the destructive journey that Themba had embarked upon since joining *Drum* in 1953. Themba’s own writings, reflections by his friends and colleagues from this period, as well as the anecdotes shared by some of his contemporaries in the interviews conducted for the purposes of this study, reveal many destructive elements that could have contributed towards a deterioration of some sort. There is a gradual trend in Themba’s writing, where he writes as an observer, raising sharply his opinions, like he does in his journalistic piece, “Let the people Drink” to pieces of writing where he becomes the subject of the narrative, where he openly describes his own relationship with alcohol. In these stories, like in “The Bottom of the Bottle” as well as “The Will to Die”, we see a Can Themba who is deeply entrenched in the drinking culture, and who seems conscious of the corroding effects of alcoholism.

Chapter seven attempts to consolidate Can Themba’s legacy through a reconstruction process titled “Re-Membering and Reconstructing the Fragments: An Exposition of Can Themba’s Social and Intellectual Legacy.” Fifty years after his passing, Themba’s works exude enormous potential to remain part of the literary discourse for the foreseeable future. This lends a different paradigm to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, which put emphasis on the consideration of the lives and times of the persons written about.

At the time of his passing in 1967, Can Themba had been banned for about a year by the South African government. This effectively meant that he was an illegal writer. In this manner the government hit him where it hurt the most—emasculating him and making it impossible for him to practice his innate vocation—as one of the primary reasons he decided to migrate to Swaziland was to write a book. He could neither be published nor quoted inside South Africa, a factor that probably discouraged him from writing as hopes of getting published diminished. It should be noted also that Themba was not the first to be banned under this law, as many of his peers suffered the same fate. The Biographical-Historical approach that we have adopted in this study takes due consideration of these factors which hold a great bearing in the construction of public perceptions.

The final chapter of this study, Chapter eight, is simply titled “The Can Themba Phenomenon: An Infinite Journey.” This chapter highlights the continued resilience of Can Themba’s works

and influence. It shows that the life history of Can Themba is as indefinite as many of his writings, mostly of which are imperceptible in terms of the conventional literary genres. Both in his writing and in his lived experience, Themba challenges established conventions and orthodoxies regarding intellectual behaviour, reading, writing, life and living. This chapter presents the major findings of the research.

In an attempt to capture the essence and have a deeper understanding of Themba's work, this study tries to investigate how Themba became what he became. In its most prosaic sense, this study endeavours to answer the basic question: "who was Can Themba?" It consolidates Can Themba's biodata and links it with what he has written and what has been written about him and his work. It also highlights the key elements in the making and the breaking of Can Themba, and how he has been remade over the years. These tenets, some of which are salient and others nebulous, are succinctly captured in the subtitle, *The Construction, Destruction and Reconstruction of Can Themba*. This discursive theme allows this study to go beyond the caricature of a venerated writer and journalist, and trace his development into the iconoclastic figure that he became and the factors that contribute to his resilience as a subject of both public and academic discourse.

We also learn from Themba's corpus of literary output that while the prescripts of the historical-biographical approach are aligned with a writer's lifetime, it is necessary to go beyond the lived experience and trace the writer's legacy, which often outlives their lifetime. This academic project is part of the journey of rediscovery as the Can Themba phenomenon refuses the imposition of any kind of limitation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE EVOCATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE IN CAN THEMBA'S WORKS

Themba's use of Shakespeare to describe aspects of South Africa is different in quality from [Anthony] Sampson's. Despite drawing on the Englishman's analogy, Themba writes a Shakespeare who enters into his service rather than using a "Shakespearean world to denote a position of an audience member."

**Natasha Distiller, 2005**

#### 2.1 Introduction

A writer is a product of what he reads and their literary influences are usually palpable in their own writings, especially in the beginning of their careers. Can Themba is no exception. His literary production is the embodiment of his consumption. Intertextual resonances can be both implicit and explicit, and this chapter is an attempt at tracing their manifestation as part of the construction of Can Themba's authorial voice. In light of this hypothesis, I endeavour to grapple with intertextual manifestations and evocations of William Shakespeare in his works.

I am of the persuasion that writers consciously or subconsciously model their writing on their literary influences, thus developing their own voices out of a hybrid of texts that form part of their literary architecture. Intertextuality is a crucial element in literary apprenticeship and is therefore essential for discerning the full meaning of a literary text. My conception of intertextuality is succinctly captured by Ode Ogede in the paper, "Contemporary African Literature: Looking Ahead", published in *Research in African Literature* (Vol. 43, No. 3):

Writers gather ideas and styles from their predecessors and reconceptualise texts from which they borrow. Intertextuality is a creative process fundamental to the way that African literature reproduces itself over time and requires greater critical attention than it has received to date. (2011: 140)

Ogede makes this postulation in the context of grappling with intertextuality specifically in African literature, but the concept of intertextuality is applicable to other literatures beyond the African continent. The fundamental factor here is the ability of literary texts to crossover the epistemic borders and interweave narratives from divergent texts. Intertextual reimagining as orchestrated by Can Themba, where he replicates himself through successive generations of South African writers, will receive a focused attention in Chapter seven of this study.

The preoccupation of this chapter is simply on tracing the texts that had a significant influence in shaping Themba's voice as an author. According to Dan Izevbaye, the relevance of intertextuality lies in its capacity to "establish a relationship among a variety of writers and literatures, and help enhance...understanding of literature as a human activity with similar aesthetic and social functions in different cultures" (1982: 1).<sup>7</sup> This pervasive interweaving of divergent texts bears testament to the author's wide readership and literary erudition. I will illustrate this by identifying a number of texts where intertextuality and the manifestations or ramifications of Shakespeare's influence in Themba's writing will be highlighted and interrogated extensively.

Intertextuality essentially refers to the relationship between texts, especially those of a literary nature. It is about the level of influence or connection that different texts have on each other. My examination of Can Themba's construction intercedes from the vintage point that allusions of one author's writings in a text is subsequent to reading and literary influences of that particular author. What is intriguing about the influence of Shakespeare in the evolution of Themba's writing is that it is not in a linear format — it fluctuates with time. In this chapter, I will reflect on Themba's introduction to the works of Shakespeare through formal education, point out some traces of this influence particularly in his early writings, and present an in-depth analysis of Shakespeare's and other writers' influence at various stages of Themba's development as a writer. This is what we refer to as the "anxiety of influence" as described by Harold Bloom in his critical text, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973).

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Izevbaye, Dan. The African experience of Comparative Literature. In: *Comparative Approaches to Modern African Literature*, S. O. Asein (ed.), pp. 1–15. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press. 1982

T.S. Eliot is a modernist writer who weighed in on the purpose and impact of intertextuality in literary texts. He believes that alluding to other texts helps to gauge the relevance of the current text and use others as crucibles for its strength. In an essay titled “Tradition and the Individual Talent” published in the *Sacred Wood (1921): Essays of Poetry and Criticism*, he opines:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this is a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (1921)

While comparison often helps in verifying historical accuracies and chronological order, according to Eliot this is only part of the advantages that are derived from intertextual allusion. Paramount to him is the ability to compare aesthetically, so that we are able to benchmark the artistic merit of any literary output. My submission is that all these functions help to enhance the worth of a work of literature. The artistic field within which Themba developed as a reader of English literature and started his literary apprenticeship was a fertile ground for Shakespearean influence. In fact, any reader or writer practising in the English language in early to mid-twentieth century South Africa was more likely to encounter the works of Shakespeare and other writers as a gateway to English literary classics.

Language lessons in the schooling system, the most accessible literary texts in the public domain, as well as theatrical performances in South Africa were all designed around the works of Shakespeare and the generation of Romantic poets as far back as the nineteenth century. William Shakespeare is obviously the single most influential writer to Can Themba’s writing and he is probably one writer who epitomises the Shakespearean influence the most in the early to mid-nineteenth century South Africa. Can Themba’s early exposure to the works of Shakespeare happened when he was a student at Khaiso Secondary School, but he further acquainted himself with the works of Shakespeare and other English literary classics as an English major student at the University of Fort Hare.

The syllabus for arts students majoring in English included the History of English Literature, the Poems of Milton, Pope, Goldsmith, Coleridge, Keats and Tennyson, as well as works by Charles Dickens and Wordsworth, amongst others. William Shakespeare was the most dominant literary figure in the syllabus, with works such as *Henry IV*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *The Tempest*, *The Book of Job*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear*, *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream*, featured throughout the three years of the Bachelor of Arts degree. Exercises for students included essay writing and literary criticism. This syllabus established a solid foundation for Themba's literary appetite and this was later to be discernible in his opus as a writer. This aspect of Themba's construction will receive attention later in this chapter.

It is worth noting that this environmental influence was not limited to South Africa and other British colonial subjects alone, but stretched to all English-speaking countries. The subjects of the British Empire and all other English-speaking countries in the Commonwealth became part of the extended English tradition that went beyond the practice of reading and writing. In his book, *Influence in Art and Literature (1975)*, Goran Hermeren argues that a work of art is not produced in a vacuum, as there are a number of surrounding factors, which he calls the "artistic field," that influence the appreciation of art. He posits that when we want to accurately measure the power of influence in arts and literature, we must cast our net wide to include different activities across the artistic value chain, to encapsulate the entire realm of "buyers, sellers, critics, artistic traditions, literary movements, current philosophical ideas, political and social structures, and many other things." (Hermeren, 1975:3)

In her book, *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture*, Natasha Distiller traces the spread of the Shakespearean influences throughout the English colonial belt around the globe in an effort to contextualise the prominence of the Shakespearean influence in South Africa. She draws parallels between South Africa and India, both of which were under British colonial rule and to whom the English language was transmitted. In her dialectical hypothesis, she attributes the universality of Shakespeare's work to the postcolonial condition that affected various societies across the world. She draws from different schools of thought that connect language and literary development with colonial domination. She thus argues:

These theories agree that the present has been shaped by the different manifestations of European colonialism which culminated in the Empires of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such critical approaches seek to expose what colonial discursive practices constructed as "common sense", or as justifications for colonial political, economic, social, education practices. (Distiller, 2005:6)

It goes without saying that South Africa, having been a subject of the British Empire, adopted the English language as a medium of instruction in official structures, and this extended to the

schooling system and other strategic platforms of public influence. This also placed Shakespeare at the pinnacle of this British cultural manifestation as one of the primary architects for the growth of English literature in South Africa.

The education system and the artistic space, particularly theatre, were the most efficient vehicles used in transmitting the English culture to the local populace and entrenching it on the descendants of Britain living in South Africa. According to David Johnson, in *Shakespeare and South Africa* (1996), the first civilian theatre company was formed in Cape Town as early as 1829. He further opines that one of the basic purposes of the company was to provide the “homesick settler populace several Shakespeare productions in its first year of opening, including *Othello* (twice), *Richard III* (twice) and *Romeo and Juliet*.” (1996:36). This view is further enunciated by Chris Thurman in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* Vol 24, 2012. In his introduction as the editor of the volume, Thurman writes:

For over three centuries, actors, directors, writers and teachers have been using Shakespeare’s work to shed light on, explain, subvert or add nuance to their own particular social or political context. (Thurman, 2002:iii)

Parallel to the artistic space within which Shakespeare’s plays thrived, there was the education system that entrenched the works of Shakespeare in all those who desired formal education. The works of Shakespeare were prescribed in the school syllabus as early as the nineteenth century, and, according to Johnson (1996:68), in the education sector, “The matriculation syllabus for the South African college for 1895, for example, includes similar components for Shakespeare and English grammar to those of London.” What this suggests is that the public space in South Africa was completely anglicised — from the policies in education, arts, and politics, down to the nature of the examination of their literary studies.

The Shakespeare “tradition” continued unabated in South Africa and even assimilated black writers. The early pioneers of black South African writing in English like RRR Dhlomo, Peter Abrahams and Sol T. Plaatje, the latter having written the very first English novel by a black South African in 1919, though only published in 1930, was highly influenced by the works of Shakespeare. Plaatje translated some of Shakespeare’s works into Setswana, including *Diphosho-phosho* (1930), based on Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, as well as *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara* (1937), a translation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Plaatje and other

early African intellectuals who had received Western education, had the dual influence of an African background and Western culture. This was often reflected in their worldview.

Can Themba and other writers from the *Drum* generation of the 1950s follow in this pattern. Although we are unable to trace specific sources of English literature prescribed in the lower levels of his schooling, it is clear that he gained exposure to English literature when he was still in high school, hence he took it as a major when he got to University. This was before the formal introduction of apartheid in 1948, and before the passing of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which effectively legislated granting of inferior education to black people. In view of the effects of Bantu Education, Distiller argues:

Before the passing of the Bantu Education Act in 1953, it was at least possible to acquire a “Christian-Humanist” education, which included comprehensive training in English Literature, in the missionary schools...The Act transferred control of schools from provincial to national government, under the Department of Native Affairs rather than the Education Department. (Distiller, 2005:156-7)

It is prudent to observe that Can Themba was part of the last batch of the much-glorified generation of “Royal Readers,” reputed to have imbibed the English language from the original source of Britishness. It is in this context that Themba was known not only as an eloquent English speaker and prolific writer, but for his overt Shakespearean influence which, in some form of a vicious cycle, filtered down to some of his students, mentees and readers. In fact, one of his most prominent protégés, Casey Motsisi, whom he taught at Madibane high school and later recruited into *Drum* as one of the reporters, was known as the “Shakespeare of the Shebeens” owing to his love of Shakespeare. Motsisi is known to have often gotten on top of the table in shebeens to recite the works of Shakespeare, earning himself the infamous moniker.

The evocation of Shakespeare’s influence in Themba’s writings manifests itself in various forms. In some instances, it seems to happen unwittingly, almost situated in the subconscious of the writer. It is revealed in the language, the idiom, the rhythms and the dramatic plots that are often perpetrated by the politics of difference, wherein a lover falls for someone who is supposedly from an enemy camp. This kind of evocation can be easily deciphered in Themba’s works, particularly his earliest publications including poetry and stories that he published as

far back as the 1940s, as well as his early short stories like “Mob Passion”, “Passionate Stranger” and “Forbidden love”.

In his later works like “The Dube Train”, “The Suit”, and “The Urchin”, for instance, we see Can Themba developing new imagery and a different kind of intertextual intersection. While it is clear that in these latter stories Themba assumes his own voice, develops a new idiom deeply rooted in his contextual environment reflecting the nuances of his immediate and familiar African environment, the foundations of Shakespearean drama are still discernible. The influence is easily deciphered from the literary devices that he borrows from Shakespeare and utilises to fit his own environment. In other words, he develops narratives that are evocative of the Elizabethan era but localises them to ensure that they fit within the African setting. This, however, does not account for all Themba’s works.

In a story like his widely celebrated “The Suit”, (Themba, 1972:36) Themba somewhat diverts from the gory Shakespearean melodramatic plots and settles for a deeply psychological drama, which is a clear demonstration of his maturity as a storyteller. “The Suit” is undoubtedly Themba’s most famous story and arguably the most successful South African authored short story of all time. Much as the story is not confined to the most palpable Shakespearean drama, the literary devices that Themba employs are reflective of his own development as a writer. Furthermore, in a story like “Through Shakespeare’s Africa,” published in *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006:131), Themba is unapologetic about employing Shakespeare as a literary antecedent for his exposition of the South African situation. Here, Themba is more comfortable in invoking Shakespeare, and this is an almost consistent practice in his later works, including “Crepuscule”, (1972:2) where he actually uses Shakespeare and other Elizabethan writers and poets as reference points in analysing the South African situation.

In exploring the various ramifications of the evocations and invocations of Shakespeare in Themba’s works, this chapter pays particular focus to the use of language, the plots, as well as the thematic content. This subject is interrogated as part of tracing the epistemology behind the construction of Can Themba as a literary enthusiast, a journalist and a teacher. The following paragraphs will reflect on intertextuality and the evocations of Shakespeare at different stages of Can Themba’s writing.

## 2.2 Themes and Idioms in Can Themba's Early Writings

The most glaring influence of Shakespeare in Can Themba's writing can be easily traced to both his thematic content as well as his phraseology. I have had the privilege of gaining access to some of Themba's early works which were written when he was still a student at the University College of Fort Hare, initially between 1945-1947 and 1950-1951. This is the period before he joined *Drum Magazine* and became a well-known writer and journalist.

It is also worth noting that Themba wrote largely poetry during this period, even though he would publish the odd short story or essay here and there. In fact, in the by-line that goes with his poem, "Recollection," which was published in *Zonk* magazine in December 1949, Themba who at the time went by the name of "Doce," is described as "The writer used to be known as the Poet Laureate of Fort Hare. He now lives in Sophiatown" (1949:30). In his early days as a budding writer, Themba contributed poetry mostly to student journals, *SANC* and *The Fort Harian*, as well as to *Zonk Magazine*. *Drum Magazine* was to be established a few years later, in 1951 to be exact, and soon dominated the media fraternity. Can Themba's choice of literary genre in the early years of his career can once again be associated with his major literary influence — Shakespeare. One can argue, for instance, that further to Shakespeare's poetry, even his plays contained a lot of Shakespearean poetic diction in the characters' dialogue.

Even though Themba started writing in South Africa well over three hundred years after Shakespeare's time in England, there are strong thematic and linguistic resonances in his writing. This influence is starkly perceptible in a poem published as early as 1945, when Themba was doing first year at the University of Fort Hare. The poem entitled "Thirst in the Hearts of Men" published in the *South African Native College* (*SANC*) in the summer of 1945 (*SANC*:37). Whilst the poem may not contain specific phrases that are directly derived from any of Shakespeare's poems, the rhyme and rhythm in the poem betray a strong Shakespearean influence. The following excerpt illustrates this observation:

What see we all over the land  
Burning thirst, throats are dry;  
'Tis thirst, thirst in the hearts of men

The metrical feet and rhyme evince the linguistic nuances and the quintessential Shakespearean rhythms that are conspicuous in Themba's early writings, particularly those that he produced

while he was still a student at the University of Fort Hare as well as those he published when he entered the literary scene shortly before his major breakthrough in 1953. This is applicable particularly to his early poems as published mainly in the *Forteharian* and *Zonk* magazine. Let us take two stanzas from Themba's poem, "Ciskeian Maid," published in the *Forteharian* in 1951, as an illustration of the Shakespearean influence in him:

Wordlessly we appointed our secret tryst/  
To meet at Ramona at dead of night/  
There to calm the soul that piteously cry'st/  
So against his wicked world's law of blight/  
And, true, at dead of night thee I met thee/  
Waiting, wondering, "Would he fail at the last?"/  
And looking around, making sure to be free/  
I clasped thee in my arms and held thee fast

The evocations of Shakespeare can be readily deciphered from the somewhat archaic English lexicon that is used in the poem above. In the above paragraphs we alluded to the margin between Themba's time and that of Shakespeare in terms of writing eras, which is over three centuries, yet the influence is evident in almost every aspect, including the register, thematic content as well as the plot. The constant use of pronouns such as "thee," "thy" and "thou," in the poem above, presents the transposition of the language from the Elizabethan era. The entire poem is awash with such formalised and perhaps esoteric vocabulary that is not common even with the works of English writers who wrote at the same time as Can Themba. The diction of the Elizabethan era is visible in the poem, and several other writings by Themba at the time.

If we can take the line, "And, true, at dead of night thee I met thee" for an example, Shakespeare's imagery and voice echoes in just about every phrase used in the line. The use of the phrase "dead of night" is reminiscent of a similar arrangement made between Romeo and Juliet. After their chance meeting at the Capulets, in which they were interrupted by Juliet's nurse, they arranged to meet in the dead of the night for their romantic tryst. The two lovers were able to overcome the "law of blight", as demonstrated by the historic rivalry between the Capulets and the Montagues, and managed to meet in their lovers nest. Here we also witness similar oral reasoning as in some of Shakespeare's writings.

While this section focuses on the linguistic resonances of Shakespeare in Themba's early writings, this does not suggest that the Shakespearean influence dissipated from Themba's writing in later years. A closer look demonstrates that Shakespeare has got an almost permanent presence in Themba's writing. Even in later years, when he was more confident in his voice and perspective as a writer, Themba kept invoking Shakespeare both in his writing and in his teachings. In a story like "Through Shakespeare's Africa", published in *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006:131), where he deliberately experiments with Shakespeare's narratives, the Shakespearean phraseology can be easily detected in the following excerpt:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world  
Like a Colossus; and we petty men  
Walk under his legs, and peep about  
To find dishonourable graves

In the above excerpt, Themba is experimenting with Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. This section of the story can be viewed as an African adaptation of Shakespeare's classic, which is put in the context of the Xhosa people of the Transkei. Later in this chapter, we will elaborate on the technique and perspective that Themba takes in this particular story, which was first published in 1963, the same year "The Suit" was published.

The dominant themes in Themba's early writings hinge on the politics of difference. This aspect is particularly enunciated in "The Ceskeian Maid" as quoted above. Although this is only a poem, it bears strong similarities with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which is a longer narrative. The differences between the two prominent families in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Capulets and the Montagues, could be associated with Themba's own biographical background as an Afrikaans speaking Zulu man from Marabastad in Pretoria, who fell in love with the Xhosa woman, whose language he could not even speak. In this instance, Themba selected a single aspect from Shakespeare's narrative and developed a poem around it.

Themba seems to be fascinated by the politics of difference and the drama that they present, a true Shakespearean influence. This is also demonstrated in stories such as "Forbidden Love", "Passionate Stranger" and "Mob Passion", which are all published in Themba's latest collection, *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006). These dynamics will be further interrogated in the paragraphs below.

### 2.3 Can Themba's Exploration of Shakespeare's Politics of Difference

Politics of difference as expounded in the works of Shakespeare are quite common in Themba's early works. Many of these stories are family or clan centred dramas, and often involve members of the feuding groups being attracted to each other.

The first story whose thematic content warrants an interrogation is "Passionate Stranger" (Themba, 2006:1), Can Themba's very first story to be published in *Drum Magazine*. The story was published in March 1953, ahead of his award-winning short story "Mob Passion", which was published soon afterwards. "Passionate Stranger" follows the common motif of sensationalist drama fuelled by rivalry or differences between families.

In this story, Osbourne Ledwaba is visiting his family in Chebeng with his friend, Reginald Tshayi (aka Reggie), who is from Johannesburg. Reggie's eye is immediately caught by Osbourne's pretty sister, Ellen, he thus expresses his feelings in the following manner:

If my declaration sounds premature and impetuous to you, forgive me. Love is on the wing and, whether I will it or not, I must join its flight. Whether I will it or not, I must love you. Destiny itself has guided my wanderings to this far place that I may lay my troubles in your bosom. (Themba, 2006:2)

What is peculiar about Reggie's declarations is not so much the act of falling in love, but the manner in which his feelings are expressed. The influence of Shakespearean sonnets is conspicuous in the lyrical expression used in this passage. The phrases used have no evident rootedness in African idiom. This is in line with the discussion above, wherein we discussed the influence of Shakespeare in Themba's imagery as expressed through his characters. This becomes all the more clearer in the following lines as Reggie continues to convince Ellen about his love for her:

Now I know what true love can mean. Nevermore can the stars whirl and wheel the same, if you do not love me too, Ellen. No more would the moon shed soft silver on the earth, no more would the flowers gladden the heart, the birds untune the sky. Oh nevermore! I reach for your lips, knowing I reach for the sun! (Themba, 2006:2)

Following Reggie's declarations as quoted above, it turns out that Ellen had been stung by the same bug in a similar way, and the two inevitably fall in love. They take their relationship to a

higher level, as they spend their “first storm of passion” in the living room of the Ledwaba’s while Osbourne and his father are away. Under the cover of darkness, Ledwaba the senior catches the two lovers in their tryst under the “big tree opposite the cattle kraal.”

References like the “cattle kraal” imbue the text with a flavour of a local setting and these are sights very familiar to the South African audiences. This forms part of Themba’s stylistics to imbue his narrative with a unique imagery that depicts a truly South African context. In a true *Romeo and Juliet* style, it turns out that Ellen’s father has already promised to marry his daughter to Dikgang, who is from the royal family. Ledwaba’s earlier meeting was about negotiating the bride price, and the Chief’s council comes to the Ledwaba family, to inform them that the chief did not want to wrangle over the number of cattle as he was willing to pay any price for their bride. All he wanted was for his son to marry Ellen.

As is the case in *Romeo and Juliet*, the love interests of the families are not always those of the individuals concerned. Furthermore, the prestige of the family, especially the royal house, usually complicates the choices that are being made. Dikgang, just like Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, has been promised marriage and as a child of the royal family, matters of this nature are discussed and arranged amongst the elders in the respective families.

The drama in Can Themba’s “Passionate Stranger” does not develop into the proportions of the *Romeo and Juliet* tragedy, wherein the lovers end up losing their lives. It is the wisdom of Osbourne to bring his sister to the negotiations, and the courage of Ellen to confront the elders and reveal the truth about her love interests. That turns the plot around. Reminiscent of Desdemona’s petitioning monologue in Act I Scene iii line 201 of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where she says “My noble father, I do perceive here a double duty,” with the intention to profess her due (love) to the Moor, Ellen presents her case in front of the elders thus:

My fathers, I know the woman should be silent and suffer her betters and elders to determine her fate. Still, believe me, this way is the best. You are here to make me a wife to Dikgang. What I think of him is entirely irrelevant. But you must know that I belong to another, not so much from the wilfulness of my rebel heart, but because by the law of man and of God. I cannot go to any man as a virgin, but to the man I love. (Themba, 2006: 6)

This revelation about Ellen's affection with Reggie obviously came as a shock to both the father and the Chief's council. In an almost stereotypical portrayal of fathers in a period when having daughters was seen as an investment that would come with the bride price in the form of cattle when she has to marry, Ledwaba senior is more concerned about his gains than the interests of his daughter. It is the grey-haired elder, who is apparently the leader of the Chief's council, who receives the news and takes due consideration of the matters raised:

“My brothers,” he said, “let us not chatter like apes. Let us rather retire to deliberate on how to convince the Chief that we do not encourage this marriage and how to avert a crisis in the tribe. Ledwaba, we shall try to suppress the insult to the Royal House. We say no more, for we know how you suffer. Do you hear? (Themba, 2006:6)

What we find in “Passionate Stranger” is not only the diction or imagery that is influenced by Shakespeare, but the very plot that is driven by the politics of difference is reminiscent of Shakespeare's literary opus. In this instance, Themba decides to lessen the level of sensationalist drama and foreground the politics of difference. This is quite a significant departure from the initial Shakespearean elements in Themba's writing, wherein even the vocabulary used belonged to the Elizabethan era of over three hundred years before.

The Shakespearean influence is once again easily deciphered in Themba's “Mob Passion”, a story that follows “Passionate Stranger” in what would be Themba's growing stature as a writer with a series of publications in *Drum Magazine*. This story was the winner of *Drum*'s “Great International Short Story Contest”, which catapulted Can Themba into both the literary and journalistic canons of the 1950s South Africa. Can Themba was announced as the ultimate winner, beating hordes of talented writers from across the continent, including those who would soon form part of the distinguished African canon like Nigerian writer, Cyprian Ekwensi and South Africa's Bloke Modisane, who would later work for *Drum Magazine*.

“Mob Passion” is a tragic love story told in the background of the tribal violence that erupted during the early 1950s in Newclare, a township outside Johannesburg. The fighting was largely between Basothos working on the Rand mines, who were known as the Russians, and the Civil Guards. The Russians had been terrorising the people of that district, and the Civil Guards comprising members of other tribes, initially with the purpose of protecting township residents who fell victim of the violence. This turned into gang warfare and Can Themba explores this

historic incident using the characters of Linga, a Xhosa man who is fluent in Sesotho language, and who is also in love with Mapula, a Mosotho woman.

Themba is obviously against the violence, and through his protagonist, Linga, and in an overtly didactic narrative, he bemoans the situation in the following extract:

They butcher one another, and they seem to like it. Where there should be brotherhood and love, there are bitter animosities. Where there should be cooperation and common adversity, there are barriers of hostility, stealing a brother's heart against a brother's misery. (Themba, 2006:9)

Themba's exploration of the ironies and absurdities of family or tribally rooted feuds in the above extract is once again evocative of the Shakespearean sense of drama. Among others, this is the kind of moral reasoning behind a story like *Romeo and Juliet*. This narrative prepares us for the imminent tragedy that is about to unfold, in whose portrayal Themba bares no limits. In this instance, we witness the brutal murder of Linga by a mob of "Russians" led by Alpheus, who is his girlfriend's uncle.

The murder in cold blood of one character seems not to be enough, as is common of Shakespearean tragedy, where the blood of one character is often washed away with another. In Shakespearean drama the assassination of Julius Caesar, for instance, was never the end of the tragedy; instead, it led to several other murders. The elimination of the conspirators culminates with the ironic twist of Brutus's suicide, which he commits by running into his own sword. Although not killed directly by Mark Antony, who stood for Caesar's interests and avenged his killing, Brutus' death by his own sword was probably a more powerful literary device to fulfil a tragic scene in the drama. On the other hand, when Romeo took his own life in *Romeo and Juliet*, under the impression that Juliet had died, his death was followed by the actual death of Juliet, on account that Romeo had died.

Can Themba's high drama and sense of tragedy follows this tradition of complemented deaths in "Mob Passion." The death of Linga could not be a lesson on its own, for in a didactic sense it could have been interpreted as perpetrating the triumph of the belligerent mob. Instead, it is avenged and "compensated" by another death—the death of Alpheus. This is the climax of the story and in terms of evocative power of its literary presentation it almost undermines the drama

in the killing of Linga in front of his girlfriend. In fact, the death of Linga seems more of a catalyst that leads us to the climax of the story, which is captured in the following extract:

With the axe in her hand, Mapula pressed through them until she reached the inner, sparser group. She saw Alpheus spiting upon Linga's battered body. He turned with a guttural cackle – He-he-he! He-he-he! – into the descending axe. It sank into his neck and down he went. She stepped on his chest and pulled out the axe. The blood gushed out all over her face and clothing. (Themba, 2006:16)

In this excerpt from the climax of “Mob Passion”, Themba’s portrayal of a tragic drama probably surpasses that of Shakespeare in its evocative power and vividness. The contrast between Mapula’s quiet rage and Alpheus’s triumphant laughter creates an atmosphere of anxious anticipation and stark paradoxes. The fact that Mapula, a woman character, has an axe in her hand in the midst of a male dominated mob is a remarkable departure from the Shakespearean tragedy where women are often victims or influential characters without necessarily being the executioners in tragic scenes. In Can Themba’s narrative, we find a woman character being the executioner, avenging the murder of her lover and by so doing taking the life of her own bloodline.

Mapula’s strength of character can probably be compared to Lady Macbeth, in Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth is one of the most powerful woman characters in all of Shakespeare’s dramas. While she excels in conniving, getting her husband to do the dirty job by killing Duncan, she also gets her hands dirty when the situation demands. She is not only the murder mastermind, she kills the King’s guards and plans to plant the murder weapon. Here, we have two women with murder weapons in their hands, but their objectives and their characters are not necessarily the same. While Mapula is driven by the desire to avenge her lover’s murder, Lady Macbeth is driven by her lust for power and her gluttonous ambition to become the queen. She manipulates her husband into murdering the King, and then takes it upon herself to kill the two guards. Although the two characters, Mapula and Lady Macbeth are not the same, their strength and will is the common trait that they share. In both instances, the two women characters display bravery and determination.

Another story by Can Themba where the politics of difference are explored using romantic relations between characters is “Forbidden Love”, which, as the title suggests, is about two people falling in love in an environment that forbids them from doing so. In this story, published in *Drum Magazine* in 1955, Michael Chabakeng, an African male, is in love with

Dora Randolph, who is of the so-called coloured background in South Africa. Dora comes from a highly conservative family that is almost hostile to *black Africans* (a concept difficult to explain since black people are the majority and indigenous in the African continent and do not need qualification).

In this story, Themba also explores the complexity of blackness, where even black people seem to undermine and abhor the colour of their own skin. The so-called coloured South Africans seem to resent their very own image and, instead of focusing on the segregationist regime that imposed apartheid, they seem more concerned about their different shades of blackness. The story is made complex not only by the fact that these two characters from different backgrounds are in love, but by the fact that Dora's sister, Louisa, who is even darker than Michael but is kept away from black Africans as she is part of the Randolph family that does not want to be associated with the Africans.

The family had already suffered the humiliation of having David (also known as Davie), Dora's brother, classified as an African. This scenario does not only highlight the challenges brought about by racial degradation in apartheid South Africa, it also pokes fun at the ridiculous nature of the system that divided families on the basis that one looked more African than the other. At the centre of this is Dora, who finds herself caught up in a situation that she did not cause and her emotions are captured thus:

I feel trapped by a doubly guilty shame. I am ashamed that it is my people who are in the forefront of every move against your people – ashamed of my father whom I love, but who is violent in his hatred of Africans... I am ashamed, in a queer way that I hate, of this secret love of ours. (Themba, 2006:24)

Given the circumstances that surround them, Michael and Dora have to be discreet about their affair to the extent of walking and sitting separately when they watch the same film in the cinema. It so happens that Michael cannot even watch the film, because it has been banned to "Children under Twelve and Natives." In the midst of arguing over the exclusion of "natives" from the film, David discovers that Michael is "Dora's native," and calls on his fellow coloured friends to attack him. In a motif similar to "Mob Passion", a mob attacks a man on the basis of courting the affections of a woman from another race.

Michael is beaten to a pulp, and he takes several days to recover, under the care of his sister, Salome, and his lover, Dora. It is during the course of Michael's recovery that Salome finds out that Dora is Davie's sister. The story climaxes with the revelation that David Randolph is the unknown father of Salome's child. Salome had been hiding the identity of the father of her child from her family, including Michael, in an effort to protect Davie's and the Randolph family's reputation. In a sense, Themba reveals to the Randolphs that their obsession with racial differences is nothing more than self-hatred. He proves it in more than one way, including from the skin colour of Louisa, the classification of Davie by the government administrators as black, as well as Salome's child, who bears the blood of the two families.

It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that the politics of difference are part of Can Themba's preoccupations in exploring human tragedies in his early works. The three stories that have been used for reference purposes in this section were all written in the first three years of Can Themba's apprenticeship as a writer and journalist for *Drum Magazine*. As illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, there is a remarkable shift between the way he wrote or presented his stories in the earlier works, where even the idioms were evocative of Shakespeare and other Western writers, and his crafting of stories as he wrote for *Drum Magazine*. However, the traces of Shakespearean influence are still there in his exploration of human tragedies.

In his creative output of the early *Drum* days, Can Themba employs the basic tenets of Shakespeare's tragedy in order to explore African lives. He borrows Shakespeare's literary devices in order to craft and present an authentically African story with nuanced plots and characters that are not dissimilar to those that roam our streets on a daily basis.

#### **2.4 Intertextual Resonances and Allusions to other Seminal Texts**

Can Themba's writing exposes his own reading habits. Throughout his writing career, the texts that he consumed in as a reader often consciously or subconsciously show in his writing. While we acknowledge that Shakespeare clearly had the greatest influence by any single writer in Can Themba's literary appreciation, there are many other texts that he evokes in his writing. He alludes to the Bible, Shakespeare, English classical poets, African history, and several others as a way of enunciating a point or commenting on the present condition.

In a single story, in fact a single paragraph, in the piece simply entitled, "Quoth He", Themba makes a roll call of a number of topics, philosophers and writers who clearly shaped his

thinking and were part of the public discourse at the time. The piece was sent with a note that Nat Nakasa should just call it, “Quoth He,” and is one of the last published stories that Themba wrote while in Swaziland. He sent it to Nakasa for publication in his *The Classic* magazine in 1964, but it never saw print until the publication of Themba’s stories in *Requiem for Sophiatown* in 2006. Reasons for its nonpublication are not clear, but round about the same time Nakasa left South Africa on an exit permit to take up a Niemann Fellowship at Harvard University in the United States of America, and died a year later in New York. Themba was to receive a banning order under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965 a mere two years later. In this particular story, Themba invokes a cross section of influential figures:

But too much frivolous moods have caught me these days. French Revolution, St Bartholomew Massacres, a Borgia here, a Nero there, a Medici or a Shaka or a Machiavel, those are peripheries of my imagination. Other ones are Schweitzers, Curries, Socrates, Christs. (Themba, 2006:127)

This paragraph demonstrates, among other things, the versatility and broadness of Themba’s reading appetite, which stretches from the French Revolution, to religion and down to the local stories of Shaka and many other areas. Themba’s vast knowledge of world politics is evidenced by his reading habits reflected through his own writing and others’ commentary about him. The multitudes of texts and philosophers that Themba alludes to in this single paragraph, illustrate both his varied reading and his intellectual depth. These two subjects will receive further interrogation in later chapters of this thesis. One of his students, the late Mbulelo Mzamane, with whom I conducted an extensive interview in 2013, which is enclosed as an appendix to this thesis, alluded to how Themba made him understand the French Revolution by teaching him Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Mzamane says Themba made the story of a *Tale of Two Cities* so vivid “So much so that I thought it was a history book.”

The invocation of different texts is an element that is discernible in Themba’s writing from when he was still a student at the University of Fort Hare. One of the poems he published in the *Fortharian* in 1951, and titled “They Counsel,” has echoes of Biblical expression. To demonstrate his awareness of intertextuality, Themba puts the last line of the poem in inverted commas. The poem closes thus:

They counsel smugly from pulpits  
Joy to seek after my last breath.  
Hell, they ought to counsel themselves

“In the midst of life we’re in death.”

The closing line is taken from the Biblical Book of Common Prayer and reveals another aspect of both his intellectual and spiritual growth. While Themba may have styled himself as an atheist, as expressed by his wife in a note she wrote ahead of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “The Suit” in 2013, there is constant reference to the Bible in his writings. The dominant allusion to the Bible may be the betrayal, amongst other things, of his Catholic Education. As indicated in Chapter one, Themba did his High School at Khaiso Secondary School, a boarding school situated outside Pietersburg, in what is today known as Limpopo Province.

It should be noted that Themba employs Biblical verses in a variety of ways, and most of the time he uses them mockingly as a commentary on current situations. In one of his most quoted pieces of investigative journalism under the *Drum* stable, “Brothers in Christ,” reproduced in his first collection of stories, *The Will to Die* (1972), he once again cites the Bible. In this particular story, Themba juxtaposes Christian beliefs and racism in South Africa as he visited the predominantly white churches and was chased away from many because of the colour of his skin. He writes quite extensively about his experience during weeks of investigation and ends the piece with the following quotation from the Corinthians 12:13.

“For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

The mocking manner in which he makes the Biblical reference is similar to his quirky comment in “Bottom of the Bottle” (Themba, 2006:62), where he says, “Funny, the idea with which they impressed us most is not Justice or Love Thy neighbour or Liberty.” In these two instances, the Bible is used as a critique against the racist regime, which presents itself as the proponents of both Christianity and racism, the two phenomena that are seen as morally contradictory.

Other than Shakespeare and the Bible, there are numerous other popular texts, especially the English classics, to which Themba often makes regular references. In the same vein, cases of intertextuality are often featured as a way of commenting on the present society. One of the texts in which there is elaborate intertextuality is “Crepuscule”, which features the entire opening paragraph of Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had

nothing before us; we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far unlike the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Themba, 2006:69)

After this laborious citation, Themba goes on to give an analysis, arguing that “Sometimes I think, for his sense of contrast and his sharp awareness of the pungent flavours of life, only Charles Dickens – or, perhaps, Victor Hugo – could have understood Sophiatown.” It is easy to draw parallels between Dickens’ England during the French Revolution, and Johannesburg in South Africa, which was undergoing its own industrial revolution. This was a period marked by social unrest and turmoil particularly in Sophiatown, and Themba had a penchant for drawing from literature to illustrate the happenings in his immediate environment. Life in South Africa was fast changing, and in retrospect, Sophiatown was going through a renaissance.

These extracts once again demonstrate the versatility and the vastness of the sources from which Themba quoted. What is common among them is that they are the texts that were commonly available among those who read books in South Africa. Shakespearean dramas and sonnets, as well as works by the Elizabethan era poets were part of the school syllabus and Themba himself taught them to his students. It is also quite peculiar that in any kind of narrative, Themba is always able to infuse an element of literature by drawing parallels between the incidents of the present moment and what has been chronicled in literary texts.

Mzamane also makes reference to *A Tale of Two Cities* as a text that Themba was particularly fond of and one to which he made constant references. He infers that Themba so loved the text that he entrenched it in them as students, subsequently, even in his old age he could still recite the entire first chapter of the book, a paragraph of which is already cited above. Themba’s obsession with literary texts is revealed in different ways, including his own writings as well as writings about him. In an interview conducted with Keorapetse Kgositsile, which is corroborated by the late Anne Themba, we learn that Themba used to walk around with a book in his pockets, something that led to the perception that he had a bottle of alcohol in his pockets. This is further revealed by Lewis Nkosi in his essay, “The Fabulous Decade,” which is one of the texts that reveal glimpses of Themba’s life as he interacted with his friends and colleagues. Nkosi, who worked with Themba at *Drum* and *The Golden City Post*, shares anecdotes of how Themba “In one hand carried a huge volume consisting of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*” (2016:32). It would appear that Themba himself did not only express his appreciation

of literature by carrying books around, he used to memorise long passages of literary works and recite them publicly. In his essay, Nkosi further elucidates:

Can Themba was leaning against the jamb of the door, a glass of brandy in one hand and a volume of *Oscar Wilde* in the other; but the book was closed since Can was quoting from memory lines from the ‘Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.’ (Nkosi, 2016:41)

Nkosi in this text regards Can Themba’s recital as a demonstration of Themba’s vociferous reading and that literature was an integral part of his lifestyle. This kind of recital manifests itself through intertextuality that marks Themba’s writing. Intertextuality and the evocations of a horde of writers, particularly Shakespeare, is a fundamental ingredient in the construction of Can Themba’s work. For his work is a reflection of his own intellectual development and the kind of literature he treasured.

The dominance of literary texts in Themba’s worldview is reflected even when he writes about subjects that do not have a direct bearing to literature. In a story he co-wrote with Todd Matshikiza for *Drum Magazine* in 1957, George Orwell makes his appearance at the end of the article. The story entitled “A Country Marching into Trouble” gives an analysis of the impact of the Treason Trial and the Bus Boycotts, political matters that attracted world attention to South Africa. Although given the nature of the article the reference might be viewed as being not of immediate relevance, the authors parachute Orwell to illustrate their point and it is no doubt that between the two, Themba is the one to most likely insisted on the inclusion of the following phrase to close the article:

“Be careful now. Big Brother’s watching you.” Prophesied George Orwell in his book “1984.” It’s 1957 in South Africa, but already the big brotherly watchers are on the job. Non-white organisations, political, semi-political and non-political, are being carefully watched by the paternalistic authorities. There are special detectives, spies and secret agents everywhere. (Themba, 1957:21)

The presence of literary references is a dominant style in Themba’s writing, as illustrated in a number of examples above. Themba’s analysis of daily happenings often found resonance in the literature that he read and he was able to draw parallels both in speech as well as in his writings. This is a common element in the genesis of Can Themba’s literary oeuvre. This approach is best explained by Wright et al, in their compilation of essays, *Approaches to Teaching Coetzee’s Disgrace and Other Texts*:

A lack of familiarity with Coetzee's intertexts can impede understanding of the complexities of his writing. Allusion to the Romantics in *Disgrace* is a case in point. Knowledge of its Romantic intertexts, as one survey respondent put it, is imperative for an understanding of the ethical ambition of the novel. (Write, 2014: 19)

At this point it is clear that intertextuality is an integral part of the construction of Can Themba as a creative intellectual, journalist and a teacher. Quite glaring, though, is the dominance of Shakespeare in most of the cases that involve intertextual allusions in Can Themba's works. To overlook this aspect is to omit a fundamental part of Themba's construction and worldview. Most important is to understand his genesis, how he immersed himself in the kind of literature that he read, and how he later imparted knowledge through his writing and teaching to develop a new generation of thinkers.

## **2.5 Domesticating Shakespearean Imagery**

In an exclusive interview we conducted in 2013, legendary poet Don Mattera, who was a resident of Sophiatown before the forced removals, argues that Can Themba "conquered Shakespeare." It is clear from this extensive interview that Mattera is not referring to a conquest in the sense of adversaries, but alludes to Themba's capabilities in deconstructing Shakespeare's imagery and making it edible for domestic audiences.

There are a variety of ways in which he explores the imagery and the influences of Shakespeare in his writing. Whereas in earlier works he may not be conscious of the Shakespearean resonances in his work, where he unwittingly adopts even the unsuitable Elizabethan language. In his later works, Can Themba is more comfortable in deliberately invoking Shakespeare. He domesticates the Shakespearean motifs and uses them as devices to explore the present condition of his society. In the stories published in late 1950s onwards, we see a Can Themba who has assumed his own authorial voice but is comfortable to invoke Shakespearean drama in his analysis of an African situation.

At this stage, he draws Shakespeare into an African discourse as opposed to Shakespeare dictating the nuances, rhythms and imagery of African narratives. In her book *South Africa, Shakespeare and Post-colonial Culture* (2005), Natasha Distiller observes that "Themba draws Shakespeare into South Africa, makes the dramas speak of Sophiatown and other South African spaces, in contrast to [Anthony] Sampson's descriptions which utilise a Shakespearean sense

of the absurd to amuse a delighted spectator” (2009:171). The quote from Natasha Distiller used as the epigraph to this chapter is expressed in this context. This is a remarkable departure from the initial influence as discussed earlier in this chapter, where Themba seems to be conforming to the Shakespearean rhythms including the nomenclature and idioms of the time.

In his piece, “Through Shakespeare’s Africa,” which was first published in *The New African* in September 1963, when he was already exiled in Swaziland, Themba purposely employs the methodology of the Shakespearean drama to provide an analysis of the political situation in the Transkei, a Xhosa homeland located in the eastern part of South Africa. Here he narrates an unfolding political drama in this African tribal society, and likens it to one of Shakespeare’s most famous tragedies, *Julius Caesar*. He introduces a prelude to his analogy with the following argument:

“This Shakespeare would have understood without the interpolations of the scholars, and in this wise way the world of Shakespeare reaches out a fraternal hand to the throbbing heart of Africa...Thus it comes with little surprise that the starting point in the Shakespearean odyssey for many an African who has staggered through literacy is *Julius Caesar*.” (Themba, 2006: 132)

He goes on to narrate the story of the rise of Chief Kaiser Msi, who apparently had ascended to the throne amidst stiff competition from other chiefs who rivalled his suitability for this prestigious portfolio. Chief Msi is obviously modelled on Chief Kaiser Matanzima, a Thembu traditional leader who became the Chairman of the Transkei Traditional Authority in 1961 and elected as the Prime Minister of the Transkei when it gained nominal independence in 1976. The visionary that is Can Themba could foresee the imminent political drama that was to unfold in the Transkei, when he wrote this piece as far back as 1963. His predictions were brought into reality when the real political drama later unfolded, culminating with the retirement, under a dark cloud of corruption, of Chief Matanzima in 1986.

In a typical Shakespearean drama, and particularly *Julius Caesar* as the primary text from which the story is modelled, the adversaries, who were formerly allies, start converging and plotting an uprising against their new leader. As an effort to give their revolt substance, they had to solicit the support of a prominent chief to lead their campaign, and in the case of Themba’s Transkei narrative, such a figure is Dilizintaba Sakwe, an equivalent of Brutus in the Shakespearean drama. Given the closeness of Chief Sakwe to Chief Msi, the strategy is to fashion themselves as putting public interest ahead of his relation with the current Chief. In

this sense, Chief Sakwe is convinced that he is not an adversary to Msi, but his revolution is an act of patriotism and innate allegiance for his beloved Transkei. This is a similar plot to that of *Julius Caesar*, where as a way of winning his support, Brutus is lured into a conspiracy by Cassius, who is claiming that Caesar's assassination will be in the interests of Rome.

The drama culminating with the assassination of Julius Caesar is captured succinctly in Themba's narrative. In *Julius Caesar*, the protagonist's wife, Calphurnia, sees a vision of her husband's death in her dreams, something that Caesar initially dismisses. After some impassioned pleas from his worried wife, he agrees not to go out of his house that day. When he confides about this matter to Decius Brutus, whom he was obviously unaware was one of the conspirators, Caesar's reasoning seems laughable. Decius deliberately misinterprets the dream and entices Caesar into venturing out of his house. Convinced by Decius' arguments, Caesar decides to leave the house, and even the earlier warnings from the Soothsayer to "Beware the ides of March" do not seem to bear any significance.

In a direct imitation of this plot, albeit in an African context, Themba writes:

On the night before Ntsikana's Day Kaiser's wife, Nombulelo, dreamed of savage happenings. Worse still, the witchdoctor, Makana the left-handed, warned Kaiser: "Beware the Day of Ntsikana's!" But Kaiser brushed these ominous prognostications aside and went to the Ntsikana celebrations."  
(Themba, 2006:133)

The above African interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedy involves apportioning African names to the characters and events, including Ntsikana's Day, named after the famous Xhosa prophet, Ntsikana, and in this case the day represents the "Ides of March," a concept that would have been of no significance to the Xhosa people among whom Themba's story is set. Themba's choice of "Ntsikana's Day" domesticates the story and gives it an historic resonance with the people he writes about in this text. As found in Shakespeare's drama, our protagonist in Themba's story stubbornly walks straight into his own death and, after the vital wound is inflicted upon him by one of his most trusted lieutenants, as Brutus did to Caesar, the last words of the paramount Chief are: "Tixo, nawe, mntwanenkosi?". The latter is a Xhosa phrase that could be loosely translated "You too, my brother," clearly evocative of Caesar's last words, "Et tu, Brute?" after being stabbed by Brutus.

In this piece, Themba goes on to make reference to other Shakespearean texts, including *King Henry V* and *Othello*, which he transposes and contrasts with the South African situation. He asks, in a rhetorical sense, “But it is more than odd how many Shakespearean situations find echo in African life” (2006:134)? The narrative of Themba’s “Through Shakespeare’s Africa” is far more complex than the title, and in fact takes ownership of Shakespeare as opposed to Shakespeare taking charge of Africa. If there is anything that Themba achieves with this narrative, it is to illustrate that the human story is universal and affirms the viewpoint that Africa is part of the global village and is not immune to developments around the world. Most importantly, it speaks of Shakespeare’s universal influence.

Themba’s classic short story, “The Suit”, which was first published in 1963 and remains the pinnacle of his writing career, also bears some resonances of Shakespearean influence. “The Suit” can mostly be associated with Shakespeare’s *Othello* for its thematic focus, plot and intense psychological engagement. In “The Suit”, there is Maphikela, who informs Philemon about his wife’s adulterous relationship with an unidentified young man. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, this role is played by Iago who informs Othello about his wife’s supposed adultery with Cassio. It is worth noting that there is neither resemblance in character nor in the intent of the two characters who both alert the two husbands of their wives’ cheating ways.

This is the moment of conflict in the story and the moment it happens, a deeply psychological tale unfolds, as both the reader and the characters engage in a tumultuous journey. The story is remarkably captivating, creating feelings of anticipation, suspense and anxiety right until the end. These are psychological elements that are prevalent in both *Othello* and “The Suit”, which the respective authors executed spectacularly to keep the readers intimately involved. In *Othello*, we see the protagonist transitioning from the point of loving and trusting his wife wholeheartedly, to the point where he begins to question her faithfulness. He wonders how on earth Desdemona, whom he knew loved him and he loved her equally, could cheat on him with Cassio whom he also trusted. In Themba’s story, we see a similar transition, where Philemon is loving and trusting, and then after catching his wife cheating with another man, he asks questions like: “What makes a woman like this experiment with adultery?” (2006:21). We also learn that while he executed the punishment against his wife, Matilda, whom he forced to carry the suit around and dish out food for it, he was also suffering in the process. The third person narrator allows us to get into the mind of the executioner and reveals details such as:

Of course, she knew nothing of the strain he himself suffered from his mode of castigation. (Themba, 2006:124)

Perhaps the most striking resemblance between the two stories is the use of a piece of cloth, which is then employed as a tool to develop the plot of the story. Shakespeare's *Othello* revolves around a piece of cloth — the handkerchief, and Can Themba's "The Suit" also revolves around a piece of cloth — the suit, which is also the title of the story. In *Othello* Iago carelessly places the handkerchief in Cassio's house in order to create an impression that it was mistakenly left by Desdemona after one of her secret trysts with her supposed lover. This is used as further evidence following a story concocted by Iago, suggesting that Desdemona had an affair with Cassio. In the following excerpt, Iago plots his conspiracy:

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin

And let him find it. Trifles light as air

Are to the jealous confirmations strong

As proofs of holy writ. This may do something. (2003:156)

After discovering the handkerchief, which he finds attractive, Cassio requests Bianca, with whom he had an affair, to duplicate the patterns for him. In a moment of fury, Bianca returns the handkerchief to Cassio and Othello hears that it was discovered in his bedroom. To Othello this stands as evidence that his wife was cheating on him with Cassio and after a psychological marathon, he kills Desdemona. It is only after killing his wife and hearing corroborating evidence both from Cassio and Emelia, Iago's wife, that Desdemona had no affair. Emelia reveals that she had stolen the handkerchief and gave it to her husband, Iago, whom she was not aware had such evil intentions. Conversely, in Themba's narrative, Philemon uses the suit to castigate his wife. The climax of the two stories is the dramatic deaths of the leading characters. In the end, Matilda dies after an apparent suicide, a case similar to *Othello*, where the protagonist dies at his own hand.

The intertextuality that we see in "The Suit" is a common element throughout Themba's stories. Even though most of the time the instances may not be as direct as we have illustrated in the case of *Othello* and "The Suit", such resonances are fathomable in other stories such as "The Urchin" and "The Dube Train", where Themba experiments with the dramatic plots as inspired by Shakespeare. In a number of instances, Themba invokes specific phrases from Shakespeare

to illustrate a point or describe a scene. This demonstrates that, for Themba, literature was not far removed from his daily existence. It was his life.

In his tribute to his friend and colleague at *Drum Magazine*, Henry Nxumalo, who was brutally murdered in December 1957, Themba once again invokes Shakespeare, repeating the words of the ghost in *Hamlet*. In the scene where *Hamlet* gets a visitation from a ghost, informing him of the murder of his father and apportioning it to his uncle, the killing is described as being a murder most foul. Similarly, in this tribute, Themba echoes exactly the same words:

It was ‘Murder most foul, as in the best it is, But this most foul, strange and unnatural.’ (Themba, 2006: 41)

As it can be seen in the above excerpt, Themba makes use of inverted comas to acknowledge that he is citing from another text. It should be noted that Themba is neither the first nor the only South African writer to have experimented with the bard’s work in this manner. There were writers like Sol Plaatje and RRR Dhlomo ahead of him, but also the subsequent generations continued with this kind of experimentation. Legendary playwright, Welcome Msoni, who had interactions with Can Themba during his exile days in Swaziland, is known for his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as *UMabatha*. In an extensive interview with Scott L. Newstock, published in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, Col 21 of 2009, Msoni gives background to the play. In this interview, he talks extensively about the influence of Shakespeare, the genesis of the play and the impact it has had in his life. One of the most remarkable observations concerns the durability of Shakespeare, where he says:

Shakespeare’s stories are ever-green – you can take *King Lear* and set it in an African country. The same with *Merchant of Venice*. *Romeo and Juliet* has also been adapted many times. (Thurman, 2009:77)

This is the view expressed by Themba through his own experimentation of Shakespeare and in his own narrative particularly in “Through Shakespeare’s Africa”, where he explicitly states that Shakespeare’s plays are acted out in the lives of South Africans. Most paramount, however, is the adaptability of Shakespeare and the versatility to be adapted to different situations. Msoni, just like Themba and Plaatje before him, is able to domesticate Shakespeare and speak through African voices. In *UMabatha*, which is expressed in Zulu language and reflects Zulu cultural dynamics, Msoni draws parallels between the Elizabethan stage of *Macbeth* and the

incidents that occurred in the nineteenth century Zulu history. While there is a dance of witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Msomi's play opens with the music and dances of the diviners.

The universality of the Shakespearean influence is a factor that is well documented in the public domain especially in academia. Almost every issue of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* journal carries an article that acknowledges this fact, if the very existence of the journal is not sufficient as the acknowledgement of his influence. The interest of this section, however, is the domestication or "Africanisation" of Shakespeare's narrative in Themba's works. What we also learn from this study is that Shakespeare's influence permeated many other scribes. Distinguished Nigerian poet, novelist and essayist, Ben Okri, weighs in on the adaptability of Shakespeare to different cultural contexts. In his essay, "Leaping Out of Shakespeare's Terror", published in his collection of essays, *A Way of Being Free*, he goes as far as drawing parallels between Shakespeare and Frantz Fanon.

Frantz Fanon might have been thinking of the long nightmare at the end of Othello's sleep when he wrote in the closing sentences of *Black Masks, White Skins: Ó my body, make of me a man who questions.*' (Okri, 1997:69)

Fanon may have consciously or unconsciously invoked the Shakespearean narrative, as we have seen in the preceding chapters. Themba's work shows us that there are moments when a writer deliberately alludes to Shakespeare, and there are also moments when the Shakespearean influence reveals its presence by unwittingly rearing its head. While we may not be able to confirm Shakespeare's direct influence in this particular text by Fanon, what is obvious is that Shakespeare remains one of the most influential writers that ever lived.

In Themba's most successful literary works, especially the short stories, we see him fully retaining the Shakespearean influence or deliberate evocation and allusion to other influential texts but assuming his own unique voice. In other words, he keeps the basic tenets of storytelling and presentation of drama as popularised by Shakespeare, but gives his narrative more than just a domestic plot, but a unique South African flavour replete with the idioms, imagery and rhythms and familiar African setting. In a sense, he domesticated the English language by infusing into it African expressions and made it conform to the sounds and rhythms of African languages. In a similar way that Keats, though a great writer in his own right, remains the most Shakespearean writer in the world, Themba is probably the most Shakespearean South African writer of his generation. The influence of Shakespeare lurks somewhere in the background of the majority of his works.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A POLITICO IN A POET: THE PARADOX OF POLITICS AND POETICS IN CAN THEMBA'S WRITINGS

He [Can Themba] would talk about how the reality of being black and a white in South Africa tortured relationships. And because he was a poet and not a politico, I think it was constantly a great pain for him, but at the same time he had to recognise it and keep reminding me. So we had an affair and we lived together, as far as you can live together under those circumstances— **Jean Hart, 1991**<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.1 Introduction

The politics of Can Themba remain a matter of interest to many critics but none have interrogated this aspect of his life history comprehensively in a focused scholarly work. Inferences that have been made about his political inclination thus far are largely postulations that lack substantive interrogation and are not grounded on any empirical evidence.

The politics of an individual, for the purposes of this discussion, are that which is expressed through both his journalistic and literary outputs and which reflects the social values that he espouses. Can Themba's political viewpoint encapsulates the whole gamut of discourses in which they employ their poetics to advance a particular ideology or set of values. This is viewed against the contextual environment in which they existed, including a historical moment and circumstances under which Themba wrote in Sophiatown of the 1950s and early 1960s. The relevance of time is fundamental in determining his attitude towards the prevailing social conditions as well as the extent to which he could potentially engage on a political discourse.

---

<sup>8</sup> This epigraph is taken from Jean Hart's interview published in Mike Nichol's *A Good Looking Corpse*. Hart is the English woman that Themba fell in love with in their much publicised affair. He writes about the affair in "Crepuscule", even though he calls her Jane, and there are several other books that are believed to have been inspired by the relationship between Hart and Themba.

Our notion of “politics” in this context is best captured in James McAuley’s argument in his book, *An Introduction to Politics, State and Society*, where he avers:

A political culture is that system of attitudes, values and knowledge that is vividly shared within a society. It is learned and transmitted from generation to generation. (McAuley, 2003:4-5)

Politics are articulated in different ways and could mean different things in various areas of our social life. In literary art, this is usually not done in a crude manner, where we are presented with a blatantly prosaic manifesto of demands, but is usually expressed through subliminal themes in body of work. In journalism, however, there is usually more than enough room to confront matters directly, to interrogate them and present a nuanced argument on a particular subject, but this does not mean that it does not require as much acumen as literary art nor is the flair of the language of any lesser importance. Can Themba contributed to both these critical genres with laudable excellence. Straddling the two disciplines usually presents aesthetical challenges, but the focus of this chapter is the contextual analysis for juxtaposing the trajectory of Themba’s writing career with the historical contours of the relevant political culture.

It is not adequate to engage on polemics about one’s political consciousness, contribution or even indifference, without the benefit of a comprehensive assessment of the contextual environment within which they operated. An adequate investigation into Themba’s political positioning should hypothetically take due consideration of the key factors germane to the socio-political conditions of the time, encapsulating the entire atmosphere in that environment as influenced by the central human, political and economic questions of the time. The surrounding environment should include major revolutions in the socio-economic condition of Johannesburg, South Africa, Africa and the world over. Most importantly, as Themba was a writer it would be prudent to do critical analysis of some of his works, taking due consideration of the political dynamics affecting the publishing platforms available to him and other black scribes at the time.

The curious interest in Themba’s political perspective is founded on the presupposition that a writer has a role to play in society and that this role goes beyond the entertainment value of their writing. This view is eloquently expressed by Nadine Gordimer in her paper, “Writers and Responsibility,” delivered in 1984, where she says: “Ours is a period when few can claim absolute value of a writer without reference to a context of responsibilities.” I believe that the “context of responsibilities” is determined by the socio-economic condition of a particular

historical moment. Gordimer was Themba's contemporary and even though she presented the paper in a totally different era, and years after Themba had passed on, the principle of commitment to social values remains relevant. Themba's peculiar position here is confounded by his dabbling as a writer of imaginative literature as well as a reporter, cum columnist, cum assistant editor, of the biggest magazine in this part of the continent.

Central to Themba's vocation as a scribe was *Drum* Magazine as the regular publishing platform, which was also the major outlet for both his imaginative literature, in the form of short stories, and journalistic writing which was obviously the domain of the magazine. *Drum* was not only the biggest magazine that had the black masses as its primary target market in South Africa, but its reach spread out to other English speaking African countries and resonated with the black power movement in the United States of America. As the winner of the very first *Drum* short story competition, Themba later sat as one of the short story competition adjudicators alongside Langston Hughes, the famous African American writer and a leading figure in the historic and internationally acclaimed Harlem Renaissance. He was one of the writers from across the African continent who were included in the publication of *An African Treasury*, a landmark anthology of stories, poems, articles and essays selected by Hughes in 1960. In the introduction, Hughes describes this publication as "a personal treasury – a selection gathered from several thousands of pages of writing by Africans of color that I have tread during the past six years."

*Drum* Magazine was the window through which Hughes had a glimpse to the kaleidoscope of African writing. His "Mr Simple" articles were ran as regular columns in *Africa!* magazine, which was established as an imprint of *Drum* under the editorship of Can Themba. In 1954, *Drum* Magazine requested him to serve as one of the judges for their Short Story Competition. This experience is reflected in his introduction to *An African Treasury*:

My interest in native African writing began when I was asked by the editors of DRUM, a Johannesburg magazine for non-white readers, to become one of the judges for a short story contest for indigenous South African writers. Some of the work that came to me contained pages which moved, surprised, and quite delighted me. I determined to see how much more writing of interest was being produced by black Africans. (Hughes, 1960: ix)

What this means is that while many of South African writers, particularly those from the *Drum* Magazine stable, benefitted from their association with Hughes, the relationship was similarly

fruitful to him as it helped achieve some of his aspirations. *Drum* writers, many of whom would later be exiled, maintained strong relations with likeminded people and civil movements in Europe and the Americas in particular. It should never be a surprise that when the apartheid government later started banning its opponents, including the outspoken *Drum* writers, these countries became the destinations of choice for many South African exiles.

Themba's multiple roles at *Drum* put him in a privileged position, allowing him space to capture and report news directly while at the same time expressing his opinions in his columns, or so we would like to believe. In a paradoxical sense, writing for a South African magazine, especially during the tumultuous period of the 1950s, could also pose strident limitations in his level of exploration in both journalistic and imaginative writing. Magazines are established with certain founding principles, have their own target markets that require a particular approach to writing and there is always a bottom-line to be mindful of. Anything that ultimately gets published has to meet certain requirements as determined by the editors, who have to make certain considerations before accepting a story from any contributor.

The peculiar position of *Drum* Magazine is that in addition to the editors whose approach is usually peppered with a generous dose of ethical caution and conservative attitude towards political subjects, there was also the lurking figure of the proprietor who was more concerned about the financial viability of the magazine as it had direct implications for his own pocket. These factors, coupled with the hostile regulatory environment and general anxieties of being a black person in a racially stratified South Africa, effectively limited the independence of a writer. Furthermore, this was a turbulent period marked by drastic political changes, with nationalist government still new and determined to assert its authority by turning the grip on the stranglehold of power and thus throttling the already oppressed black populace.

The introduction of apartheid as an official government system to deliberately suppress the black population in 1948 saw the rapid promulgation of oppressive laws, subsequently squashing freedom of expression and other basic rights for the black majority. This inadvertently put the emergent black journalists at the coalface of the political discourse in South Africa and compelled them to confront the apartheid government apparatus head on. It can be argued also that whether a writer, or more specifically a journalist operating at the time, was averse or wilfully eschewed political subjects, it was inevitable that they would be affected one way or another considering that the effects of the political condition of the time stared them in the face. Writers, and especially journalists whose outlets reach the public on a

regular basis, reflect their perspectives on certain socio-political matters and as a result shape the thinking of the readers. There was rapid increase of urban black population in the Transvaal area due to post world war industrial revolution and the stories written by Can Themba and his contemporaries at *Drum* spoke directly to these urbanites.

The urban black, mostly with the experience of life in the reserves, gained exposure to cosmopolitan life through watching mostly American films, reading books and news articles about the histories and conditions of other places where the will of the people triumphed over institutionalised racism, and chance encounters of life in mixed race communities in freehold townships like Sophiatown. The urban black envisaged a life where there was a possibility of racial harmony, a society where there would be total eradication of oppression of one group by another, and where black and white could live side-by-side on equal footing. These obviously were some of the fantasies harboured by the educated elite among the black populace. Inexorably, such thoughts are bound to be reflected in their writings.

It is my persuasion that while journalism ethics maintain that the scribes ought to remain “objective” in their reportage, the converse is also true that their writing inadvertently, and albeit in a somewhat restrained manner, reflects their own personal prejudices, preferences or viewpoints. One’s writing consciously or subconsciously reveals their preoccupations, their perspectives and their worldviews, and these play a far more significant role in influencing the public perception than the politicians. This assertion is in line with the argument advanced by South Africa’s National Poet Laureate and stalwart of the liberation struggle, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile. He opines in his “Culture as a Site of Struggle” article “when you write you oppose, propose or affirm certain values and thereby you define yourself and your national, group or class values, essential interests and allegiance.”

The set of values proffered in your writing determines your relationship with your audience and the *Drum* writers seem to have hit the right chord during the fifties. The keen receptiveness or, one can boldly venture to say affinity of the public to the views and perspectives of the emergent black journalists, as opposed to those of the oppressive state, was in many ways the expression of the values that they espoused as a society. This places the role of the writer squarely in service of the people, where they serve as the agents of the public in advancing their collective views, concerns and aspirations. In his critically acclaimed essay, “The Fabulous Decade” published in his book, *Home and Exile*, Lewis Nkosi discusses the meaning of this period in great detail and concludes by stating:

Writers, therefore, ought to be the eyes and ears of the revolution. Because of its peculiar relations to ideology, literature at its best is able to provide us with unique insights into historical conditions. (Nkosi, 1965: 164)

*Drum* journalists, as supposedly objective and impartial witnesses who serve as the eyes and the ears of the public, were closer to the public than the directly affected politician whose hands were dripping with blood. Bernard Crick, in his book *Essays on Politics and Literature* (1989; 6), elaborates on this view, arguing, “Columnists, for instance, may often know more about politics and have better political judgement than the politicians.” To illustrate his point, Crick goes further to make the vivid analogy of sport, wherein he argues that spectators see more of the play than the players do. Can Themba, in particular, was known as a writer who not only understood, but also epitomised the African urban world. His popularity may have been spawned by the reality that he was in sync with the heartbeat of the community that he wrote about.

Given this background then, the logical question to ask is that: if Can Themba was so close to the people, and, as Michael Chapman opines, typified the new urban culture, how is it possible that he would turn a blind eye to the suffering of the people? Is it even permissible that any writing, whether it is reportage or imaginative, chronicling the lived experience of the oppressed majority during this period, would be totally devoid of political content, regardless of the perspective adopted by the author? As an attempt to address these pertinent questions above, the following paragraphs serve as an environment scan of the socio-political situation of the historical moment, the emergent black journalism as well as Themba’s own writings.

### **3.2 Navigating the Political Landscape**

This study is underpinned by the Historical-Biographical approach as a theoretical framework to grapple with Can Themba’s architecture. As a way of laying the ground for a nuanced discussion and putting it in the appropriate historical context, it is imperative that we present an abridged biography with elements germane to his own socio-political consciousness. His education would be an appropriate platform to start with.

In 1940 Can Themba left his Pretoria home and went to do high school education at Khaiso Secondary School in Seshego, outside Pietersburg, Northern Transvaal, now called Limpopo Province. He remained there until the completion of his matric in 1944, and got awarded the

inaugural Mendi Memorial Scholarship to study at the University College of Fort Hare. The scholarship is named after an historic incident where about 646 (of which 607 were black) South Africans fighting on the side of Britain during the First World War died after their ship, the S.S. Mendi, sank on 21 February 1917.

In 1945 he registered at Fort Hare as a first year student, and graduated his degree in 1948. His courses included History, Politics and Native Administration, among others. In Chapter two of this study, we listed some of the texts that Themba studied as part of the English syllabus at the University of Fort Hare, and therefore we shall not interrogate those in this chapter. In his story, "Bottom of the Bottle," it is implied that Themba's reasoning for including Native Administration as one of his courses is that he took it as a safety device because "you never know which government department is going to expel you and pitchfork you into which other government department," (Themba, 2006:58).

It is worth noting that some of his fellow students, including the late Dennis Brutus, who was a poet of note and human rights activist; Joe Matthews, an activist who was in the leadership of the now ruling African National Congress (ANC) and later joined the rival Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP); Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, the founding President of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC); Ntsu Mokhehle, former Prime Minister of Lesotho; Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, former leader of the KwaZulu Bantustan, cabinet minister in a democratic South Africa and current leader of the IFP; Duma Nokwe, former Secretary General of the ANC; as well as A.P. Mda, former ANC Youth League activist and the founding spirit of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), all became prominent politicians and activists in their own right. It is worth mentioning also that when Themba was doing postgraduate studies in 1951, among his fellow students was one Robert Gabriel Mugabe, currently the besieged President of Zimbabwe and the longest serving President in an African state.

Themba began his high school in 1940, a year after the start of the Second World War, and the war continued throughout his high school until he did his first year at Fort Hare. In 1948, the year of his graduation, the nationalist government came into power and apartheid was introduced as a government system. He was to go on and live in Sophiatown, the melting pot of South African politics at the time, where the likes of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo lived. Sophiatown was to be demolished in 1955, amidst protests by its dwellers and political activists alike. In his account of this period, Lewis Nkosi gives a brief overview of the political condition:

My generation came to maturity just before or soon after the Second World War, at about the same time that Dr Malan was taking over the country on a mandate to apply more rigidly apartheid than the Smuts Government before him had seemed prepared to do. (Nkosi, 1965:3)

These drastic changes in the national political landscape surely affected the young Themba as the youth are traditionally in the coalface of unfolding political dramas. In this politically volatile period, the student activists at Fort Hare were fortunate to have the support of some progressive lecturers (even though they were a minority), some of whom were active members of the ANC. One of those members was Godfrey Pitje, who was also a graduate of Fort Hare.

The man at the forefront of student activism at Fort Hare was Mda, who was determined to ensure that the university boasted one of the most politically vibrant campuses in the country. Mda wrote a letter to Pitje, suggesting that Fort Hare was a fertile ground for future leaders of the national liberation struggle and that it was the best place to start an ANC youth league branch. This was a vital step in the politicisation of the student movement and it also planted the seeds for grooming future political leaders. American historian and journalist, Daniel Massey, whom the current author had a privilege of working with during the research stages for his book, *Under Protest: The Rise of Student Resistance at the University of Fort Hare*, describes the formation of the Fort Hare branch of the ANC Youth League as follows:

In 1948, the YL [Youth League] began to grow under the direction of A.P. Mda. Because Fort Hare was home to the leading members of South Africa's black intelligentsia, and because teachers trained at Fort Hare went on to educate people around the country, the university was strategically important for Mda, who grew determined to establish a branch on campus. (Massey, 2010: 42)

In my interview with one of prominent University of Fort Hare alumnus, Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who was also Themba's contemporary, attributes a fundamental part of his own political activism to this time as a student at this university. At the time, Buthelezi, just like his fellow IFP party man, Joe Matthews, as well as Sobukwe and Mda, who later formed the PAC, was a member of the ANC Youth League. He feels that in the politicised environment on campus, it was inevitable that one would be political, as politics was central in their discussions as much as it was a permanent feature in their daily existence:

I mean it was inevitable of course, that political issues would be talked about at that time as well, because at Fort Hare I was a member of the ANC Youth League and therefore my interest in politics actually was ignited. In fact as a member of the ANC Youth League, at the Fort Hare branch and one of our lecturers, Advocate Pityi, Godfrey Pityi was our chairman then he left then Mr Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe was our chairman too.

A powerful student movement always poses threats to university authorities, even more so at the height of apartheid. As a counter-measure against student revolution, the Fort Hare branch of the ANC Youth League was not allowed to operate on university campus and, while this might have limited the extent of political activism on campus, it had a paradoxical effect in strengthening the branch as it extended to the surrounding villages of Alice and nearby communities. Themba navigated his way through this tumultuous period which marked both the growth in viciousness of the government regulations as well as steadfast opposition against government of the time. Most importantly, there is sufficient evidence that he was part of what was by far the most politically active university campus that stood opposed to the policies of the oppressive government in South Africa.

The year 1948, in which Themba graduated from Fort Hare and started working as a teacher, saw the introduction of apartheid as an official government system premised on “separate development” designed to deliberately suppress the black population. The flurry of oppressive laws that were promulgated shortly after the nationalist government assumed the reins of power saw more concerted efforts to squash freedom of expression, freedom of association and other basic human rights for the black majority. All these events unfolded right in front of Themba’s eyes and, even though we have no evidence of him playing an active role in any political activities during this period, he surely witnessed and was fully aware of the unfolding political discourse. Furthermore, for a man who was as widely read as Can Themba was, and for a black man who probably had first-hand experience of racial prejudices, race-based violence and other injustices meted out against black people in a racially segregated society, his political consciousness must have been above average.

Themba was directly affected by the forced removals in Sophiatown in 1955, and he has written extensively about it in his piece, “Requiem for Sophiatown.” This community was targeted by the apartheid government because of its mixed race make up, it being one of very few areas

where Africans owned stands alongside their white counterparts. Sophiatown threatened to demonstrate what a free and democratic South Africa would be like, something that was contradictory to the new apartheid policies that were being implemented. The makeup of this community went against the newly enacted Group Areas Act, which classified South Africans according to race, and thus prohibited racial harmony. Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, elaborates on this view:

At the top of the list for removal was Sophiatown, a vibrant community of more than fifty thousand people, which was one of the oldest black settlements in Johannesburg. Despite its poverty, Sophiatown brimmed with a rich life and was an incubator of so much that was new and valuable in African life and culture. Even before the government's efforts to remove it, Sophiatown held a symbolic importance for Africans disproportionate to its small population. (Mandela, 1994:144-142)

Sophiatown holds a particular position in the history of urban townships in South Africa as a breeding ground for both cultural and political activists like Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, and others. Writers of this period, including Bloke Modisane, Es'kia Mphahlele, Don Mattera and Themba himself, have written quite extensively about the demolition of Sophiatown. They all offer authoritative voices from the point of view of both the residents and the observers. Themba and Modisane, in particular, write from the points of view of both the victims and observers, as they were residents who had to watch the houses crumbling down and observers as they worked as journalists and had to chronicle the story of Sophiatown forced removals. Their accounts, although they differ in experience, present a vivid picture of the situation and demonstrate astute awareness of the political condition of the time.

It may be safe at this stage to make a bold statement that, whatever his political allegiance may have been, it is inconceivable that a man of his background was totally naïve or ignorant of the political situation unfolding right in front of his eyes. While the extent of his active participation in the student movement and his navigation of the political situation in this tumultuous period remain inconclusive for lack of evidence, there is a fair chance that we can formulate an informed opinion about his role and perspective while working as a journalist.

### 3.3 *Drum* Magazine and Black Writers' Revolution

It is common knowledge that Themba was part of the pantheon of iconic *Drum* Magazine writers of the 1950s. This was a particularly turbulent decade, following the change of government and characterised by the enactment of a series of new draconian laws, uprisings by the oppressed, banishment, arrests, torture, persecution, massacres and industrial revolution which triggered urbanization at a very large scale.

*Drum* Magazine was arguably at its prime and it revolutionised the cultural, social and political space particularly from 1951 to 1961. Can Themba was part of this revolution, having worked for the magazine from 1953 until 1959. His departure from *Drum* was part of the exodus of this iconic group of scribes and marked the beginning of the end of the fabulous decade.

The intervention of *Drum* Magazine, its founding principles, its objectives—stated or unstated, as well as its ultimate impact on its readership and in shaping the consciousness of the black populace, are all critical factors that should be matters of interest in order to understand the politics and poetics of any of its scribes.

Notwithstanding that *Drum* writers were not a homogenous group, nor did they adopt a collective view, as their publicly declared stance on politics, understanding the dominant political discourses and the general attitude of this generation towards socio-political matters is vital. After all, if they were guided by any magazine principles or employment conditions, these affected all of them as a collective. The evolution of *Drum* Magazine in its first decade of existence spells out a complex world that was going through major revolutions. *Drum* was established with the clear objective of appealing to the cultural nostalgia of the black urban community whose exponential increase in the Transvaal region could not be ignored.

Since the discovery of gold in the 1880s, there was rapid growth of urban movement in the Transvaal area. After the colonial clashes over the control of the Transvaal, which was initially a Boer republic, in other words, was colonised as a farming land by the descendants of Dutch immigrants, the area fell into the hands of the British Empire and their interest was to capitalise on its mineral resources. The Transvaal was one of only two regions that were under Boer control in South Africa, the other being the Orange Free State. However, the discovery of gold drew the interest of the British, and this led to a major war in 1899, formerly known as the Anglo-Boer War, because it was believed to be a war between the Brits and the Boers exclusively. This war is today known as the South African War in recognition of the active

involvement of the black populace in support of either side. The British triumphed over the Boer, and took control of the area.

After the South African War, which ended in 1900, and followed by the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, there was an urgent need to rebuild the country and its economy. Gold mining was clearly becoming one of the major economic drivers in South Africa and there was a need for fixed labour force to work in the mines. There is an evident trend that after every moment of major strife in the world, especially where the country is directly affected, the natural course of things is that it is followed by an urgent need to rebuild, to reconstruct the country and revitalise its economy. This project of renewal, of essentially rebuilding the nation, cannot happen without the work force and much as it is often cheap labour. Through this process a lot of employment opportunities arise. Such undertakings inevitably lead to exponential growth in urbanisation and, in the case of South Africa, this led to major movements of black people from the various colonies around the country and in the region to the industrial area. This growth was evident in the Transvaal area after the First World War (1914-1919), but it was after the Second World War (1939-1945) that the Baileys realised the potential markets brought about by the burgeoning black middle class in Johannesburg.

*Drum* Magazine was established with this growing black urban population in mind. From the perspective of the proprietor, and given the perceived loyalty of Africans to their cultural values, the expectation was that they would habitually embrace a magazine that championed their traditional ways. The founding editor of this Africa centred magazine was Robert Crisp, a British journalist who had no previous experience of living amongst Africans in South Africa. The only African journalist in the original *Drum* stable was Henry Nxumalo. He had been a messenger for the *Bantu World* newspaper, and had read quite extensively while participating in the Second World War in England. On account of this profile, Nxumalo was thought to be a suitable candidate for the position of a sports editor for the magazine (probably because only he could go to the townships and watch soccer and boxing matches and report for the magazine). However, feeding the African with content about their traditional ways did not prove to have been a wise strategy to lure African readers. The first few issues of *Drum* Magazine proved to be a series of monumental failures with virtually no interest from the targeted urban African. Reflecting on the disappointing figures, David Rabkin says, “After the first four issues (March – June 1951) the circulation was only twenty thousand, and Bailey was losing £200 a month,” (Rabkin 1975: 51). These losses demanded urgent review of strategy otherwise the magazine was to die a natural death.

It was clear from the beginning that the magazine, though purported to be Africa focused, both in its location as well as in its content, was produced from a colonial prism. It was more about what the English thought the African needed and appreciated than what the Africans themselves longed to consume. This was discovered after Bailey instituted some market research, consulting the urban Africans themselves and trying to establish what would appeal to them. Schadeberg, reports that Bailey raised this matter with Henry Nxumalo:

“Well, Henry, what we need is to meet with black intellectuals to get a better idea of what our readers want to now. We’ve got to make *Drum* relevant to the black population. We’ve got to make *Drum* a vital part of their lives.” (Schadeberg, 2017:142)

Following Bailey’s intervention, a consultation process was instituted and it paid dividends to the proprietor. According to Rabkin, the research revealed the grim reality that there was major disconnect between the magazine and its target market:

Africans consulted about *Drum*, replied that it was a white man’s paper. It viewed black people through white eyes. This failing, labelled the ‘white hand’, became a guiding concept in *Drum*’s editorial policy. In November 1951 Crisp resigned and Anthony Sampson was appointed editor. (Rabkin, 1975:51)

Following Crisp’s departure, and the realisation that the magazine’s strategy was fundamentally flawed, an advisory board comprised of Africans with diverse backgrounds was established. The existence of this board instigated major strides in the reformation of the magazine, resulting in the introduction of new features and additional African staff.

What was clear is that the urban black wanted to see themselves in the magazine, they wanted to hear their own voices and feel the pulse of the urban world which they inhabited. Subsequent to the recommended new directions for the magazine, a new feature on crime was introduced and this yielded instant results as crime was something that they were familiar with. With the constant movement of people to new locations, Johannesburg was becoming an increasingly violent place. Crime was a real and visible part of the urban dwellers’ being. Crime stories are the kind that resonated with their livelihood. The stories essentially became about township news and the news about African Americans, many of whom urban Africans had admired and idolised from watching films and listening to their jazz music.

One of the most significant moves in *Drum*’s process of transformation was the introduction of the short story competition in 1952. The results of the competition were announced in 1953,

and, as indicated before, the winner was one Can Themba, a teacher who had graduated from the University College of Fort Hare with a distinction in English. Themba was subsequently brought into the fold, becoming one of the writers and also becoming a member of the adjudication panel for future short story competitions. Themba was one of the major contributors in the development of the short story genre, and in retrospect, the *Drum* decade produced some of the finest short stories and remains one of the most significant periods in the history of the written short story in South Africa.

Can Themba was first and foremost a writer and the magazine was central in creating a platform for his voice to be heard through the publishing of works of imaginative writing, journalistic reportage, columns and opinion pieces. He came to *Drum* not to change its ethical conduct, but to be a contributor to its growth in an already established path. What this means is that, like any other journalist or contributor to a newspaper or magazine, his approach to writing was informed by the principles and the strategic direction of the magazine. It is apparent that one of the founding principles of the magazine was that it would stay clear of politics. It remains a mystery as to how a magazine purported to be representing the interests of the black community, who were the majority but remained oppressed in their home country, could successfully avoid carrying political content. The following extract from *Drum: A Venture into the New Africa* by Anthony Sampson, former editor of *Drum* Magazine, is indicative of the general attitude of the newspaper towards the subject matter that was deemed political:

*Drum* originally announced that it would be non-political, and the first issues made no mention of politics... But however much we tried to ignore them, in South Africa all roads led to politics. Political theory affected every moment of our readers' lives: it could have them arrested, jailed, transplanted, even deported. (Sampson, 1956:127)

The declaration of non-partisanship or more specifically, the determination to keep clear of politics supposedly went along with a certain code of conduct for journalists writing for *Drum*. Even if some journalists were to try and delve into the political dynamics in their reportage without being sanctioned by the magazine, chances are that the editor would censor them or even worse, take disciplinary action against them for dereliction of duty. The lack of commitment on the part of the magazine, whose face were the young black journalists who had nothing to do with managerial decisions, is probably what led to Thabo Mbeki's frustration with the *Drum* writers. Mbeki believed they tried to put blinkers to the political upheavals of the time and lived in Nat Nakasa's illusionary "fringe country." In his biography, *The Dream*

*Deferred*, written by Mark Gevisser, Thabo Mbeki lashes out at this kind of thinking, saying this group of writers had forgotten “their duty to society” (Gevisser, 2007:139). These are some of the constraints that limited the scope that the scribes could cover. In our efforts to assess Can Themba’s political contribution to the magazine, it is important that we take these dynamics into consideration.

It was perhaps a fundamentally flawed hypothesis to seek one’s political sensibilities from a platform that actually censored them in the first place. We have now learned that even the editors of *Drum* were constrained, as a result the kind of political content that was publishable in the magazine was what was allowed first by the editor, and then the proprietor, Jim Bailey, who was wary of losing business because of careless scribes. The writers had to operate in an environment where they wrote material whose ultimate publication was dependent on somebody else. In this complex conundrum, it becomes very difficult to impose a fair judgement on the writers without a thorough understanding of the processes that went into the publication of the final copy.

In spite of the constraints imposed upon the writers by editorial policies and journalistic ethics which maintain that the scribes ought to remain “objective” in their reportage, the converse is also true that their subjective views, values and perspectives would be steered in one political direction or other. This assertion is in line with the argument advanced by Kgositsile who, in an article published as a tribute to Nat Nakasa, makes a poignant remark that may be applicable to Themba as well.

In a racist, oppressive and exploitative society, it is impossible for a writer not to be political. (Kgositsile, 2014:16)

The argument above dismisses any possibilities of Themba being apolitical or an ignorant “political virgin,” as Snyman’s thesis seems to infer. Such a polemic should never have arisen because Themba’s background clearly illustrates his political exposure even before one engages with his published texts. This assertion is further echoed by a fellow *Drum* writer, Es’kia Mphahlele, who in his 1985 reflections on Can Themba, simply titled “Themba – rebel par excellence,” wrote:

The rebel par excellence – he was apolitical if we think of institutional or organisational politics. He was cynical about the political being. But the cynic has to be first

hyperconscious of, hypersensitive to a reality before he can turn cynical as a protective device.

Mphahlele brings forth another dynamic, that to be political is not necessarily to hold a membership card of a particular political party. It is well known that among the 1950s generation of *Drum* writers, Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane were some of very few that actually became part of political organisations. Mphahlele was part of the African National Congress (ANC) during the drafting of the Freedom Charter in 1955. Modisane had been a member of the ANC Youth League, which he later denounced in favour of the more radical Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). In spite of this background, Mphahlele seems to be saying that even this did not qualify one as being political. Possessing a membership card of a political party does not make one politically conscious. The very idea that Themba chose not to align himself with any particular political doctrine was on its own a political stance.

According to Sylvester Stein, in his book, *Who Killed Mr Drum?* Themba engaged in debate with Nelson Mandela at the University of Fort Hare in Alice. This should not be surprising as Themba was well-known as the man of debate among the students at Fort Hare as testified by Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi in the interview. Furthermore, he named his own house at 111 Ray Street in Sophiatown, as the House of Truth, establishing it as a platform for candid intellectual debate on a range of topics including politics, literature, philosophy and women. Sylvester Stein (2003. 118) ruminates about the debates at the House of Truth as such: “It was here in Sophiatown that Can Themba had matured in intellectual strength, and it was there at his home base, the House of Truth, where blacks and honorary blacks gathered together to debate a thousand topics ranging from Sartre philosophy to the vintages of hooch.”

It may be prudent at this stage to make a bold statement that, whatever his political allegiance may have been, it is inconceivable that a man of his background was totally ignorant of the political situation unfolding right in front of his eyes. What is apparent also is that there is a perceived set of social responsibilities that a writer as a public opinion maker is expected to assume. These perceived social responsibilities include writers proffering their social values presumably located within the established ideologies. This is the elusive element in Can Themba as his political thinking could not be pigeonholed within any political orthodoxy. The nagging question for a researcher in the field therefore becomes whether there was any deliberate effort on his part to try and avoid interrogating the political situation in his writing.

As illustrated in the previous section, the magazine had to undergo certain changes in its approach, and it is important to note early on that even its attitude towards politics had evolved over time. There is no better candidate than Can Themba to utilise in the assessment of the evolution of his writing from what Mari Snyman refers to as “Wet Sentimental Sexy” stories to engaging on overtly political reportage and critical analysis. The criticism against Can Themba’s contribution, which in my assessment is based on his early contributions to the magazine, is captured in the following line by Mari Snyman:

It has been argued that Can Themba, instead of protesting the inhuman apartheid legislation, the absurd social situation, concentrated on lively, investigative journalism. (Snyman, 2003: 78)

In spite of plying his trade as a writer and journalist during such politically volatile period, Can Themba is not known to have joined any political organisation and he has been heavily criticised for his lack of political commitment at such an historical moment. Two notable criticisms about his politics in recent times have come from Sandile Memela and Mari Snyman. In an unpublished paper presented at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 2007, Memela, a former journalist turned government spokesperson, proffered that Themba was “apolitical.” His argument was based primarily on a single short story written by Themba, “The Bottom of the Bottle,” where two African National Congress (ANC) politicians try to recruit him and he shows no interest in joining the organisation. It is a fundamentally flawed hypothesis to construe one’s refusal to join an organisation as being apolitical. In fact, what is clear in Memela’s argument is that there is a semantic confusion or misinterpretation, where being nonpartisan is presumed to bear the same meaning as being impartial. No statement would be further from the truth, as an extensive reading of Themba’s writings as well as his general exposure to key political moments suggest otherwise.

Mari Snyman, on the other hand, presents a rigorous interrogation of Themba’s politics as reflected in a variety of texts. In her unpublished Masters’ thesis, “Can Themba: The Life and Work of a Shebeen Intellectual”, she grapples with Themba’s attitude towards politics and constructs a nuanced argument. The title of her fifth chapter asks pertinent questions such as whether Themba was “A political virgin.” What gives credence to Themba’s perceived apolitical posture is that, in his own words he dismisses the use of literature as a political vehicle. It takes an astute researcher to go beyond such utterances, and scratch the surface to see what lies underneath these convictions. In his review of *Darkness and Light*, published in

*Drum Magazine* in 1959, he remarks: “Much of the literature of protest has been trapped into sacrificing its sincerity for the cause.” (Themba, 2006: 78).

One would argue that the above statement does not in any way suggest political naivety. If anything, it catapults Themba into a new terrain of literary criticism, which he is not very well known for. The criticism made by Themba here is an assertion that has been repeated by many scholars. Lewis Nkosi has been one of the most brutal in criticising the obsession of South African writers with politics, where they compromise literary aesthetics on the altar of political expediency. A lot can be deciphered in as far as the perceived social responsibilities of the writer and the logic of using writing as a form of “protest” against those in power. The very notion of “protest writing” seems as problematic as the senseless strategy of using a magazine whose target market is purported to be the oppressed Africans, as a platform to register protest against someone who has got no vested interest in the chosen platform.

The best that such a magazine could do is to serve as a catalyst for resistance, raise the consciousness of the people, canvass for their support and propel them into taking action against the common enemy who is the oppressor. In a case where a protest has to be registered, then such a mandate will have to be presented in a platform whose immediate audience is the oppressor. Otherwise we are regressing to the polemics of the thematic content of African literature and its intended audience, which were topical during the transitional period of the early to mid-nineties in South Africa as articulated by Mbulelo Mzamane in the following excerpt from his article, “Cultivating a people’s Voice”, published in the *Staffrider* magazine, Volume 9 issue 13, in 1991: “The internal audience of protest literature is predominantly white, so that in describing African literature as protest the unspoken assumption is that each time an African writes the envisaged audience is non-African.” (Mzamane 1991:60)

A writer who sees his duty as that of lamenting the situation instead of enlightening the oppressed and appealing to their emotions to seek their unity of purpose, does nothing but causes more depression to society. As Mzamane eloquently puts it in the *Staffrider* article cited above, “The revolutionary writer articulates the dreams of a people for a better life and the liberation movement fights to make their dreams a reality.” (1991:60). There is a huge distinction between a protest writer and a revolutionary writer. A protest looks outside, at the oppressor, whereas a revolutionary undertaking looks within, seeks to exhort them into action.

Can Themba did not belong to neither. We know for sure that he was not a protest writer neither was he a “revolutionary writer.” He had the option, for instance, to voluntarily join political

organisations and play an active part, at least before they were banned in 1961. But Can Themba, as Mari Snyman (2003:101) notes, “Unlike Mphahlele and Modisane, it has repeatedly been claimed, he was not outspokenly political. He did not join any liberation movement and did not base his criticism of apartheid on an ideological system. In fact, in a sense his claim to be apolitical and his cynical wit became his ideology.”

It is no doubt that Themba has on numerous occasions shown disdain on the political condition in his writing. In fact, at one stage in “Bottom of the Bottle,” he declares that “To hell with politics, bottoms up to glasses.” The theme of politics and Can Themba seems to be a recurring one in the various texts. The epigraph for this chapter is taken from a statement uttered by Jean Hart, where she makes a stern assertion in an interview published in Nicol’s book, that Themba was “A Poet, not a politico.” This statement obviously inspired the title of this chapter, which attempts to grapple with the dialectics pertaining to Themba’s politics. Given Musi’s intimate relationship with Themba, his voice carries more credence than many critics and could be easy to endorse as an authoritative one.

While the idea of a poet finds resonance with my own perceptive understanding of Themba as evidenced by his writings, my submission is that being a poet does not mean he cannot at the same time become a politico. The concepts of politics and poetry should not be presented as binary opposites. It is possible to have a politico in a poet and Can Themba is the manifestation of this paradox. As a matter of fact, a certain level of political consciousness is an essential ingredient in one’s writing.

It is not adequate to engage in polemics about one’s political consciousness, contribution, lack of commitment or even indifference, without the benefit of a comprehensive assessment of the contextual environment within which they operated. A reasonable investigation into Themba’s political stance should hypothetically take due consideration of the key factors germane to the socio-political conditions of the time. Most importantly, as Themba was a writer it would be prudent to do a critical analysis of some of his works, taking due consideration of the political dynamics affecting the publishing platforms available to him and other black scribes at the time. In other words, the questions of time and space are vital in determining the extent to which they could grapple with pertinent political questions.

The period in which Can Themba worked for *Drum* was coincidentally the same period that witnessed unprecedented changes in the South African political landscape. The formal introduction of apartheid, the forced removals in Sophiatown, the adoption of the Freedom

Charter, the establishment of Umkhonto weSizwe—the military wing of the ANC, the Sharpeville Massacre, the banning of political organisations, The Rivonia Trial, are some of the landmark events ever known in the political history of South Africa and these unfolded right before Themba’s eyes. It would be desirable for a researcher to find space for their subject somewhere in this continuum.

It is against this backdrop that one reached a near desperate stage to try and establish Themba’s active involvement in politics as well as his views and perspectives on the same subject. In my efforts to establish this aspect of his life history, I was referred to veteran politician and former Robben Islander, Ahmed Kathrada, whom I was told was one of very few people alive who knew of my subject’s direct political involvement. I saw this as a turning point in my research as any word from the man who spent years on Robben Island with other liberation struggle heroes like Mandela was sure to carry weight in my research. Word had it that part of what Kathrada would share with me are the startling details of Themba serving as an underground operative of the ANC during the struggle days.

I finally secured an interview with Kathrada on Thursday, 8 October 2015. Even before the formal interview began, I indicated to the struggle stalwart that my interest was to hear about Themba’s political involvement, as he (Kathrada) knew things that many people were not aware of about Themba’s political activism. My intention was to jostle his mind, ignite the memories from his pearls of wisdom so that he could share anecdotes about the man whom it was already clear was a charismatic character and enviable personality even to a man as accomplished as <sup>9</sup>Kathrada was. Needless to say, I was dumbfounded when he indicated that he did not know anything about Themba’s politics. I consoled myself that perhaps the veteran politician did not want to divulge too much information ahead of the formal interview. In the course of the interview, which was video-recorded, I asked the same question about three times and the answer was a consistent affirmation of his initial standpoint that he did not know of any of Themba’s political involvement. I was shattered.

The repudiation by Kathrada also opened by eyes to another factor that could derail and compromise the credibility of a research project— concerted efforts at refining history for expediency or relevance purposes. This was another reminder to always verify sources, and try to create a balance between the views of the different interviewees and the existing records. There are tales of how Themba, while exiled in Swaziland, assisted political activists fleeing

---

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Kathrada passed away on 28 March 2017.

the political tensions and crossing the Swaziland boarder en route to neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. However, these are just stories and can only be treated as such because there is no sufficient information to substantiate them.

At this stage I turned to the man's writings, taking a closer scrutiny to establish if there were any traces of political content or specific mentions of him playing an active role in politics. In an indirect way, Themba confirms that he did not play active role in politics as implied by the following extract from Sampson's book:

“If I went for politics, I would be the most dangerous man in Africa,” said Can. “I would be cunning and ruthless and I would stop at nothing. The boys are always imploring me to go into politics. ‘We need you, Can,’ they say...” (Sampson, 1956:127)

Although Themba states categorically that he would be a cunning politician, should he have decided to be a career politician, this statement does not tell us much about his current views on contemporary politics. The ambiguity of this statement speaks of the potential of the man, what he thinks he could achieve, but does not reveal much of his proven capabilities. What is perhaps encouraging is the fact that Themba, though he might have had an overinflated ego given his awareness of his own genius, was not the only person who harboured these views. His former editor, Sylvester Stein, writes in his book, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*, about how much he respected Can Themba and his unwavering belief that he could have been a leader of some repute in Africa. Stein sums up his conviction in the following line:

“I have never abandoned the thought that certainly Can could have been that leader of Africa whose future greatness I had perceived in the auspices.” (Stein, 1999:274)

The exercise of detailing this background is done with the objective of laying a firm foundation for a fair and comprehensive assessment of Can Themba's background exposure and understanding of the political condition in the country. The historical facts in relation to the political upheavals and the happenings in Sophiatown, in particular, help to give insight to the kind of socio-political culture that Themba was exposed to as he came of age. These historical pointers are not just a series of dates and facts, but speak to accumulated knowledge through extensive exposure to socio-political dynamics and thus shaping his own political outlook.

While there is no one in any of the interviews that I have conducted testifying directly about Themba's involvement in the liberation struggle, there is sufficient documented information that reflects his views and perspectives on politics. A lot of these come out in his later years of

journalism, when *Drum* began loosening up and was more open to exploring the political landscape which was a major departure from their initial stance. A heightened level of political consciousness is also evident in both his journalistic and imaginative writing. The following paragraphs will explore Themba's contribution to political discourse.

### **3.4 Reflections on Can Themba's Political Imagery**

The discourse around Can Themba's political sensibilities cannot be complete without taking a critical look at his own imaginative reflections on socio-political themes and perspectives. In a similar way as the evolution of *Drum's* attitude towards political content, Themba's own engagement with political subjects has evolved over the years.

It would be sensible to distinguish between "politics," as with reference to activities that relate to the governance and policies of the country, and political consciousness, which refers to one's concern about politics and their ability to formulate opinions about a political condition. The latter is applicable to most individuals and does not necessarily require one to be actively involved in a political movement, pay allegiance to any political party or cause. As a baseline for this argument, it may be fair to start from the hypothesis that Themba was not a politician or political activist in the conventional sense of the word but remained a highly politically conscious individual. We have also noted, from the previous sections that although there is adequate evidence of his political consciousness, Themba was not a card-carrying member of any political party. It has been suggested that his refusal to be situated within the confines of an organised political movement or ideology was in itself a political ideology.

In an attempt to present a focused and nuanced discussion, this discussion will focus on three main aspects of Themba's political imagination. We will select a few of his journalistic articles covering highly political or politicised situations and incidents as a journalist. I will also take a closer look at some of his columns where he engages with political ideologies. Reference will also be made to his works of creative imagination where there are any traces of political content. The latter category, in particular, is important especially because it is largely a subjective process and poses a high risk of misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

Reference has previously been made in this thesis that the fifties and early sixties, the period in which Can Themba was most prominent as a writer, were a politically unstable period in the history of South Africa. Given Themba's indisputable voracious reading habits, it is

inconceivable that he would have remained ignorant or unaffected by the unfolding socio-political upheavals taking place around him. If these are not reflected or adequately represented in his writings, there must be a deliberate effort on his part to eschew politics. This chapter intends to grapple with these aspects and take a closer look at the political content in Themba's writing with special focus to his journalistic pieces.

The very nature of the urban world which Themba wrote so compassionately about is a racially polarised space and Themba, as one of the journalists who were discretely attending parties organised by white liberals and could only settle for clandestine romantic associations with women of a different race, should have first-hand knowledge of the political world of this period. He posits, for instance, in "Crepuscule", that "I do not necessarily want to bed a white woman; I merely insist on my right to want her" (Themba 1972, 3).

The very nature of the urban world which Themba wrote so compassionately about is a racially polarised space and Themba, as one of the journalists who were discretely attending parties organised by white liberals and could only settle for clandestine romantic associations with women of a different race, should have first-hand knowledge of the political world of this period. He posits, for instance, in "Crepuscule", that "I do not necessarily want to bed a white woman; I merely insist on my right to want her" (Themba 1972, 3).

At times, what he says may not necessarily present the objective reality, which is why it is essential to make reference to a variety of sources. One of those sources is Tom Hopkinson, the editor who fired Themba from Drum. In his book of memoirs, *In the Fiery Continent* (1962), Hopkinson writes extensively and earnestly about Themba. He spares no detail, as he reveals both their happy moments and a number of run-ins that they had. One of those is the confrontation over race relations in South Africa, and the position of liberal whites like Hopkinson in it. Hopkinson reports that Themba told him in no uncertain terms that:

"We don't want someone who supports us when he thinks we're okay, but withdraws his support when we do something un-Western or un-gentlemanly. We've had too much of this patronising liberal attitude— pat us on the head when you think we're going the right way, kick us in the pants when we take a different turning." (Hopkinson, 1962:110)

The fact that Themba had this conversation with Hopkinson, a white man who was his senior at work, and was not loath to tell him to his face, is a clear illustration that he had no inhibitions about his viewpoint. There are many instances, especially testimonies by Hart, where this aspect of Themba is brought to the fore. It carries more credence when such reflections come from Hopkinson, whom we know was not as intimately attached to Themba as Hart would be.

Part of Chapter two, in dealing with the evocations of Shakespeare in Can Themba's writings, we grappled with the "Politics of Difference" as explored in Can Themba's works of imaginative writing, and we will not delve deep into this subject in our current study. The central questions that this chapter is attempting to answer include whether it is possible to write anything devoid of politics during this period or can one deliberately tread carefully to stay clear of any political content.

The most definitive imaginative writing in as far as Themba's political engagement is concerned is probably his piece, "The Bottom of the Bottle," published in *The Will to Die* (Themba, 1972), in which he details the attempts of the ANC leadership to try and get him to be part of the liberation movement. Although he agrees to join them in the struggle against oppression, it is clear that he never became an active member of the organisation and that even the said ANC leaders were not convinced by his utterances, suspecting that his consent was fuelled more by alcohol than reason. Their interest in him was prompted by the fact that Themba was an influential figure in society and recruiting him to the movement was not only to get someone whose voice was heard by hordes of people through his writings, but also because there were some young people who looked up to him, and emulated his way of life. This encounter however seems to have had a lasting impact on him, as he recounts:

After that, perhaps largely because I paid more attention, I heard more and more *politics*: bitter, heady, virulent stuff. It expressed, in venomous terms, the wrath of a people who had come to the damn-it-all threshold. Also, the despair of a people tied helplessly to an ant-heap: it was savage swearing. What struck me more those days was the great number of ordinary folk who spoke politics. (Themba, 1972:112)

Although "The Bottom of the Bottle" was first published only in 1961, in the preceding years there is evident trend in Can Themba's writing where he demonstrates sharp political insight with great acumen. In the latter years of his career in South Africa, Themba wrote quite extensively on direct political happenings where he gave sharp analysis of developments in the

political scene, proactively giving insights on issues that later became dominant political questions and, in retrospect, historic landmarks in South Africa's long walk to freedom.

What is peculiar about Themba's interest in politics is his fascination with the political condition affecting ordinary citizens. He did not dwell on the dominant political questions and instead focused on their impact on the ordinary citizens especially the marginalised communities and those whose voices are often overlooked by the mainstream media. He sought to demonstrate, often in a discursive manner, how the government policies affected ordinary people and how the masses responded to these. The South African situation reached a point where it was inevitable to write on political matters, as the whole country, including some rural areas, had caught on the unfolding political ferment. This we see, for instance, even in his fiction, as found in "Bottom of the Bottle," continuing from the extract above, he says:

"For the machine that was ploughing up the country could not leave one square inch undisrupted. In Zeerust, Sekhukhuniland, Pondoland, official policies were driving the tribesman to resistance" (Themba 1972:113)

The concern for the condition of the ordinary citizens, and perhaps to the level of empathising with the victims, later became the forte of the *Drum* writers as Michael Chapman argues in his introduction to his *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s*:

Most of the writers were concerned with more than just telling a story. They were concerned with what was happening to their people and, in consequence, with moral and social questions. It is this which distinguishes the *Drum* writers from purveyors of pulp fiction. (Chapman, 1989:183)

Can Themba had a penchant for the mundane, the marginalised and the vulnerable as opposed to topical national politics. He was capable of taking a simple incident that could barely make the print under ordinary circumstances, and twist it around to develop a sensational story out of it. According to Pitika Ntuli, who was fortunate to sit in Can Themba's "House of Truth" and imbibe the wisdom directly from the source, says that Themba would even take a word that one uttered nonchalantly and unpack it to decipher profound meanings out of it:

Can Themba was absolutely one of a kind, the warmth of his spirit, the sharpness, the witticism that it is. You'd utter a statement and immediately you've uttered a statement he's going to pick one word out of that statement and turn it actually upside-down and make you realise what you've actually said, how profound the statement

you've made. You know sometimes he would probe you with questions and then when you are frustrated and fed up and you are searching for words and you are actually talking, you see a glint on his face, like a sadist you know, like a glint actually on his face then he says, "You've got it."

In his journalism work, Themba would go down to the "grassroots" level in the outlying communities to come up with an intriguing story of ordinary people. This we learn from as far back as 1956, on Lewis Nkosi's arrival at *Drum*, and even before the magazine was known for tackling political issues Can Themba was already deep into the subject. Nkosi's recollections of the day are marked by his observation of Themba, whom he says was wearing a suit covered with mud after his visit to the "interior of the country" where he was investigating a story. Nkosi goes further to explain:

From the conversations I gathered that Can Themba, then *Drum*'s associate editor, had recently come back from the interior of the country where he had investigated the plight of political leaders restricted to security camps by the South African Government on the grounds that they constituted a threat to peace and security. During the writing of the story, Can Themba, being in his melodramatic mood, dubbed the restriction areas 'South Africa's concentration camps'. From then on what had seemed a mildly interesting story assumed a scandal of international proportions. Top-notch Fleet Street correspondents flew into the country in search of what they supposed were Nazi-type 'concentration camps' and it can only be imagined how embarrassed and angry the South African government became. (Nkosi, 1965:10)

The place that Themba had just visited was Frenchdale, located in the outskirts of Mafeking, North West province. The story that he came up with deserves a dedicated chapter on its own but for purposes of space and in an attempt to keep the discussion focused, we shall look at the most vital aspects that are germane to our current topic. If this story were a work of fiction, the man called Alcott Gwentshe, who was one of the people interviewed by Themba, would be the protagonist. Gwentshe was born in Tsomo, a rural village in the Transkei region of the present day Eastern Cape Province. He went to Queenstown for schooling, and worked in different places in Cape Province including Cape Town, before opening a business in East London. Gwentshe was a colourful character, a politician, musician, a sports enthusiast and, I dare say, a socialite with lots of charisma. He had been the leader of the ANC Youth League in the Cape and it was for his political activism that the Native Commissioner in his part of the colony

instructed him to leave for Johannesburg the very next day. He was ultimately taken to Nelspruit en route to Bushbuckridge, an area that he had never been to before and where he did not know anybody.

This was the beginning of the fascinating story of Gwentshe. In every place that he went to, and in spite of the difficult circumstances, Gwentshe made friends, started a music band, joined a soccer club and became a popular figure in the community. The response of the apartheid government was to remove him from the community that he had just acquainted himself with and banish him to a different corner of the country where even the language spoken had very little resemblance with his native Xhosa language. Themba says about the Bushbuckridge episode of Gwentshe's banishment:

At Bushbuckridge he was taken to the Native Commissioner's office. The Native Commissioner allocated him a house near the forest and there he stayed for nine months. When he came there he was broke – “stone broke. I tell you, sir.” – worse still, he did not know Shangaan, the staple language of the people around there. (Themba, 1956: 22)

In Bushbuckridge, Gwentshe who had his own business in East London and was a high profile politician in the Cape, found himself a dormant villager who could not fend for himself. He wrote to the ANC to give him support and he was able to survive for a while and even joined a local soccer club. What made the major difference in his life was the arrival of his saxophone, which was sent to him by his wife from home in the Cape. With the arrival of the musical instrument, Gwentshe started playing and joined hands with some locals to start a band. They called the group the Bushbuckridge Band, and even this was proving problematic for the apartheid government. They went around searching for information, trying to establish what he talks about with the local people. They intimidated people who were known to have spoken to him to such an extent some would be terrified even to speak to him again. Were it up to the apartheid regime, he should not even speak to the local people, hence he was sent to an area so far away from his home. For his “friendliness” with the local people, Gwentshe was served with a further banishment order, which took him to another obscure corner of the country – Frenchdale in the Mafikeng district, North West province.

The conditions in Frenchdale were even more appalling and Gwentshe made it a point to register this with the authorities. The place was virtually a desert, and he was not allowed to visit Mafeking where he stood chances of getting a job and interacting with people. Never to

be discouraged, Gwentshe took to his horn again, formed a band and started playing at functions in Mafeking and other surrounding areas. They were hired to play at parties, dances and other similar functions. In February 1956, the band was playing at a reception of a new chief. The function was graced by the Native Commissioner and other apartheid government officials. Gwentshe was immediately arrested and kept in custody for violating his banishment conditions, which required him to stay in Frenchdale and never venture into the bigger city of Mafeking. This is the case that attracted the interest of Themba, who then travelled all the way to Frenchdale to listen to this character called Gwentshe. This is also how South Africa and the world got to know about this modern “concentration camp,” thanks to Themba’s sharp nose for stories.

What is fascinating is the manner in which Themba presented the story. As Lewis Nkosi notes, the title was quite sensationalist and enough to raise the concern of world human rights bodies. The headline screamed “Banned to the bush!” and the subtext says “At Frenchdale, Mafeking, the government has a Concentration Camp for its political offenders.” The introductory paragraph in the story starts in the following manner:

South Africa has a ‘concentration camp’ for political offenders and people whose presence in other places has been considered ‘inimical to peace and good order.’ The camp was discovered by *Drum* ace reporter Can Themba. (Themba, 1956: 22)

The choice of words raises the ire of the reader without distorting the facts. This is not a mistake for the part of the author, as his intention was to sensationalise the story and attract the attention of the rest of the country. According to Nkosi’s assertion above, the approach actually attracted the attention of the whole world because of the parallels that Themba draws between the situation in Frenchdale and the Holocaust in Germany. In the final analysis, these were not the concentration camps as one would imagine concentration camps using the Second World War Germany model. They were however, the violation of human rights like any act of that nature and Themba wanted them to be treated as such.

Gwentshe took the matter to court, and the ANC and SACP heavyweight advocate Joe Slovo, came all the way from Johannesburg to represent Gwentshe in a case that he ultimately won. However, winning a case against the apartheid government was just a temporary reprieve and did not mean you are exonerated from everything else. Gwentshe’s troubles never ended. During his visit, Themba interviewed a number of other “detainees” in the concentration camps, and they found a platform to express their bitterness as well as share their stories with

broader audiences. The Chief Journalist or what is discursively referred to as the spin doctor for the Department of Labour, Dr. T.S. van Rooyen, tried to dismiss Themba's assertions, arguing that it was technically incorrect to refer to Frenchdale as a "concentration camp." Although there was an element of truth in van Rooyen's argument, the fact of the matter is that the horse had already bolted out of the stable. The story had reached the public domain and because of its alarmist tone, it had opened the eyes of the global community to some of the atrocities of apartheid South Africa.

One of the most succinct critics of Themba's political perspective is captured in a recent piece by journalist Sam Mathe of *Jazz Life* online magazine. In his review of *The House of Truth*, a bio-play of Can Themba penned by the current author, Mathe comments on the scene where the unnamed characters from Themba's story, "Bottom of the Bottle," represented in the play as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, as follows:

Their attempts to recruit him as an ANC member failed, but their belief that he was politically non-committal are refuted by the sheer volume of his political reportage which exposed apartheid injustices including the hypocrisy of white churches, the humiliation of black men during nude parades and brutal prison conditions.

When he chose to focus on topical issues, Themba was equally ruthless in criticising the government. In April 1957, he co-wrote a story with Todd Matshikiza as "Dr *Drum*" about the Treason Trials and the Bus Boycott of that year. The story was written in a similarly alarmist fashion, dubbed, "A Country Marching into Trouble," as referred to in Chapter two, brings to the fore Themba's political insight. In this story, they tried to "psychoanalyse" the South African condition, suggesting remedial actions for the country before it plunged itself into further crises, which was referred to as "the biggest trouble she's ever seen." They made a plea that let us turn our focus to ordinary people affected by the situation, the "average boycotter of buses." They implore us to examine what the affected people were dreaming of, "a warm, happy, comfortable future for himself and his kids, where he doesn't get bullied around for passes, where schools are open to all, where jobs are open to all, you can be sure." This in many ways sounds like a manifesto of demands that any political movement that claims to be representing the people would adapt. In this case, the authors in their analysis, painted a gloomy picture, saying South Africa was becoming "madder and madder" something that was obviously provocative and was surely to raise the ire of the apartheid government. The introduction to the article was equally sensational:

In the last few months the Treason Trial arrests and the great bus boycott have helped to hop up political tempters in South Africa until we have suddenly arrived at a dangerous point on the road, with even more dangerous corners ahead. It's a time of crisis and a time to have a look around properly. (Themba and Matshikiza, 1957:21)

The closure of the article with this quote from Orwell's seminal novel, *1984*, as indicated in Chapter two, is probably the most profound part of the article even though not too many people may have realised its depth of meaning at the time. Here South Africa was becoming a police state, the "Big brother" was watching every move, and as we will learn later with the occurrence of the Sharpeville Massacre, the Rivonia Trial and the ban on political organisations, things were about to get really bad in our political landscape. In a different article, talking about the "Treason Arrests" (January 1957:17), Themba asks pertinent questions about the logic of putting behind bars leaders who agitate nonviolence and talk sense to the agitated communities. He wonders if arresting these "responsible leaders" will not leave a vacuum in society and allow "more reckless characters" to take over.

It must always be borne in mind that it was not always easy for *Drum* writers to delve into political themes. The transition of the magazine from being completely averse to genuine political subjects to tapping into this area, did not come organically. It was a gradual process, with one of the earliest pieces being Henry Nxumalo's investigative story in Bethal about the farm labourers and the abuse by the farmers. According to former *Drum* photographer Jurgen Schadeberg, in his memoirs, *The Way I See It* (2017), the story was hatched at the suggestion of Henry Nxumalo during their editorial meeting as the headline for the March 1952 issue, which would be celebrating their first anniversary:

About 200 kilometres east of Johannesburg was the district of Bethal, a potato and mealie farming area where, in 1947, the Reverend Michael Scott had conducted an investigation into and produced a report on slave conditions on farms. From what Henry said, it appeared that nothing had improved since the Reverend's report about beatings, killings and forced labour conditions. He wanted to investigate further and expose the truth of the current farm labour conditions there. (Schadeberg, 2016:168)

This story rattled the cage of the apartheid government, and a new niche market for *Drum* was discovered. The editors were still very cautious, and the proprietor in particular, was concerned about the imminent losses should the magazine be closed down or government taking any other

drastic steps against them. The following extract is taken from Sylvester Stein's account of this fear from *Drum*:

He's got the wind up, fearing we'd be closed down if we did this one, just as he'd been scared back in 1955, when Henry, Can and I had given the year's big Mr *Drum* special a different twist from the usual, going more directly political than in former years, with a provocative sports piece demanding that South Africa allow blacks into the Olympic team. (Stein, 1965: 66)

The above extract with reference to Bailey's fear, alludes to the complexities referred to in the beginning of this chapter, where it is indicated that writers themselves were not independent, neither were the editors. Fortunately for Stein and his team, the Olympics story gained so much support, and they continued to explore the aspect of politics in sport where they campaigned for the exclusion of South Africa from world football on the basis of its discriminatory policies. Stein reports that in the end the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) became one of the first world sports bodies to ban South Africa from international competition.

In addition to the overtly political reportage that Themba wrote for *Drum Magazine*, he wrote some equally stinging opinion pieces and columns for both *Drum* and the *Golden City Post*. He used his columns to express his political opinions more directly and unapologetically. In his "Can Says: This is Why I am Not a Communist" column in *The Golden City Post*, he challenges communists, unpacking communism and stating clearly why he does not believe in their ideology. He further goes to explain that:

What is perhaps even more serious is the apparently "Unhuman" attitude of communism to social problems. It is on the one hand a result of the philosophy that teaches us that the individual counts for little compared with the state. Your human emotion – some of them are the deepest experiences in your life- are said to be illusions – worse still, tricks that a designing upper class has devised to keep you down. (Themba, 1955:15)

Themba's criticism of communism demonstrates his intensive knowledge of the subject regardless of the position he takes in the discourse. He criticised communism as an ideology, and then unpacked what he thought were the problems with it in as far as the human relations in his immediate society. Here he spoke of the problem of being ruled by "a clique." Themba's assertions could be viewed as being highly offensive by the people who pay allegiance to the

philosophy of communism. Even if one were to differ with him, and many readers did and made it a point to write to the newspaper, some of them highly emotional and disgusted by Themba's point of view, but one thing they knew for sure is that he was clear about his ideas.

After a torrent of responses, many accusing him of despising communists and becoming a "fascist," Themba retorts, and in an article "I am not a Fascist either," published in the *Golden City Post* on 15 May 1955, he further unpacks his point of view.

Now it seems that just about every Leftist in town wants to prove that I am a Capitalist, an apostle of Apartheid, and every traitor imaginable since Judas Iscariot... I would like to say while I am not a communist, I am still less a fascist. I hate Fascism and Nazism much more than I hate Communism. (Themba, 1955: 16)

While many of the responses were in defence of communism, many more were actually endorsing his assertions and, according to him, these came from "ordinary folks" from various parts of South Africa who happen to think, as he did, that independence of thought was a fundamental and priceless trait to any human being. Themba was fully aware that politically he was choosing the risky path of becoming an armchair critic who would not pay allegiance to any particular ideology. He refused to be overzealously bound to a monolithic idea and, as alluded to earlier, this on its own demonstrated his knowledge of the political dynamics both in South Africa and the world over. In his *Golden City Post* column on 22 May 1955, he went as far as defending his apparently individualist approach, arguing that:

So I am individualist, I admit it. I realise fully no modern state can be run for 24 hours by letting individuals do whatever they like. The problem here is one of organisation, adjustment, evaluation of conflicting tastes, sometimes even curtailment. But not of the destruction of individuality. (Themba, 1955:22)

The above extract reveals a certain level of self-awareness as much as it illustrates Themba's political consciousness. Themba's engagement on this subject is a major departure from his perceived ambiguous stance on politics. Speaking of Themba's politics, Keorapetse Kgositsile, South Africa's National Poet Laureate and liberation struggle stalwart, argues that there was no way that any writer who creates any work of imagination that was devoid of politics. He further opines that if you were looking for the kind of the popular political rhetoric from Can Themba you would never find it. He was not the kind of person to regurgitate preconceived ideas. He was his own man.

It is perhaps a fundamentally flawed hypothesis to seek one's political sensibilities from a platform that actually curtail and censor them. We have now learned that even the editors of *Drum* were constrained, as a result the kind of political content that was ultimately published in the magazine was what was allowed first by the editor, and then the proprietor, Jim Bailey, who was wary of losing business. Having taken a closer look at Can Themba's works, it is fair to conclude that his politics are deeply embedded in his writings and form the bedrock of his narrative. When he had the liberty of writing his own columns in a relatively free platform, he was able to tackle political content as he desired.

This is best demonstrated in his *Golden City Post* columns, where he commented regularly on pertinent socio-political issues. The *Golden City Post* was the sister newspaper of *Drum* Magazine, which was issued on a weekly basis. Themba wrote for the newspaper while working on *Drum*. In 1960, following his expulsion from *Drum* in 1969, Themba started working on a fulltime basis for the *Golden City Post* where he was a columnist, a news editor and occasionally acting editor.

In 1960, there was a heightened global interest on South African politics, following the Sharpeville massacre in March, and other drastic political developments. It was one of those occasions that Hopkinson, as the editor of *Drum*, hosted international experts who wanted to engage on political matters. Even though he had fired Themba a year earlier, Hopkinson would call his former assistant editor to advise and give informed political commentary to the international experts. Themba, a man with insatiable appetite for debate, was never reluctant to participate on such forums. Such was the level of trust Hopkinson had in Themba, that even though he had to fire him from *Drum*, he could not deny his vast knowledge and expertise as a public intellectual (Hopkinson, 1962: 270).

Can Themba's views were not always the most popular but they were well informed and he could sustain his arguments. Most importantly, he was conscious of his own capabilities and wrote about them quite extensively without any fear. In the end, Themba wrote extensively on politics and it is no doubt that this was how he earned himself a place in the books of the Minister of Justice, B.J. Vorster. In 1966, Themba was listed by Vorster among 45 other individuals as "Statutory Communists" whose works could not be referenced or cited inside South Africa. Although he was already exiled in Swaziland by this time, this was a major blow to the soul of a writer as his works were banned in South Africa and none of the local newspapers could publish or quote him.

Themba saw himself as an intellectual giant who could engage on any topic and some of his friends and colleagues, like Sylvester Stein, as quoted before, believed as much. It is probably for this reason that he felt that he had to challenge the “Lion of the North,” as Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom was called at the time, into a verbal duel. We will close this chapter with such challenge as quoted by Lewis Nkosi in his famous essay, “The Fabulous Decade”

“All I want,’ Can challenged, ‘all I am suing Strijdom for is a chance to sit down with him over a glass of brandy and talk to him man to man. I reckon I have a few things to tell him. It may very well be that after the umpteenth drink, even with the lowest intelligence, a man may see reason.” (Nkosi 1965:15)

The above excerpt and other references used in this chapter thus far attempt to deconstruct certain dominant perceptions and notions about Themba’s political orientation. Although his published texts do not possess any known monolithic political views, he certainly was not politically naive. His politics are not separate from his life and his literary output. They are embedded in every piece of his writing. His loyalty to authentic literary output is probably one of the reasons why his works remain timeless and reverberates through the different epochs.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CAN THEMBA'S IDENTITY ETHOS: A BLACK ENGLISHMAN OR A DETRIBALISED AFRICAN?

“We spoke English and Afrikaans in the house because we were both from “de-tribalised” family backgrounds - Blacks whose first language was Afrikaans. We were not the stereotypical religious family, walking to church on Sundays together with their children. Can professed to be atheist and I am a hard-core Anglican. I still sing in the church choir to this date. We never clashed because we respected each other’s beliefs.” **Anne Themba, 2013**

#### 4.1. Introduction

The identity ethos of an individual is a complex phenomenon informed by numerous factors that shape their impulses to social and historical forces mingled with the conundrums central to their present environment. This is even more so in the case of Can Themba, whose cosmopolitan background, nonconformist social attitude and liberal outlook to life in a racially and tribally stratified society makes for an unconventional identity ethos.

Although the complexity of a person’s identity is a subject that can never be addressed exhaustively, nor is there a particular doctrine under which individual identities can be boxed into, understanding the forces that inform an individual’s present attitudes and convictions provides substantive reasoning to account for their views and perspectives on various issues in life. Having briefly illustrated Themba’s background in preceding chapters, it may be prudent to concede from the outset that his social and psychological makeup is a complex construct that to some extent eludes logical reasoning.

The identity of an individual evolves with the discovery of innovations, change of attitudes and exposure to new perspectives and life experiences. Subsequent to the dynamism of modern life, the diversity of behavioural patterns and the constant change of allegiances and attitudes,

various scholars differ in their views about what comprises the common basic tenets that are integral to one's identity. Although polemics about the critical elements of identity construction seem to vary widely, one of the dominant views is the recognition that each individual possesses multiple identities. It should therefore, be noted that we embark on the quest to deconstruct Themba's identity ethos conscious of the reality that each individual possesses multiple identities that are largely circumstantial and change over time. Pradeep Ajit Dhillon's definition of identity in his book, *Multiple Identities: A Phenomenology of Multicultural Communication* (1994), associates notions of identity with individual choices and exposure:

Identity can then be loosely defined as the way an individual situates himself or herself within his or her life-world at different periods within lived-experience. What has traditionally been called personal identity can now be seen as the phenomenon thrown up by the dialectic between the now-self and the then-self, expressed through the body in time, at any one temporal level.

For the purpose of this discussion, identity ethos refers to both the identity that one carves for themselves, in other words, their chosen identity, and the identity created by the environment within which they exist, including the influence of the cultures that surround them from birth and those that they are exposed to as they grow up. Broadening the scope of the notions of identity in this manner provides us with space to take into consideration various facets of identity constructs including imposed identities, established identities as well as the chosen identities. These facets of identity are integral in the determination of one's identity ethos, as the various identities that one is born into engage in a continuous tussle with his conscious refusal to conform to certain imposed social constructs as well as his wilful adoption of others. In this case, an "imposed" identity refers to those that the individual is born into or is bound to by virtue of genealogical, cultural, socio-economic or historical association. These are some of the factors that demystify identity as a static and single dimensional construct.

The central questions germane to Can Themba's identity ethos are the dichotomies of whether he had become what is disparagingly referred to as the "Black Englishman" or he fitted the conception of a "detrivalised African." Either of the two notions could mean different things under different circumstances as they are subject to interpretation and are largely contextual. It is also worth noting that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. The same individual can possess both or have elements of each aspect. While Mrs Themba in the above excerpt may

proudly proclaim that she and her husband were a detribalised family, citing the question of language and their divergent attitudes towards religion, a counter argument could be that in their process of detribalisation they lost their cultural doctrines including their language, which is an integral part of their identity. Conversely, the so-called “Black Englishmen” are usually ridiculed for aspiring to be something that they are not. This antagonistic attitude unfortunately extends to those Africans who may have received western education and excelled in aspects of foreign cultures but remain loyal to African values. It is worth noting that language is but one aspect of a person’s identity.

It is perhaps from the strong assertions expressed by Govan Mbeki, political activist and father of former President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki that we learn about the prevalent attitudes towards the so-called “Black Englishmen.” In Daniel Massey’s *Under Protest: The Rise of Student Resistance at the University of Fort Hare*, Mbeki is quoted speaking disparagingly about this group of people, saying:

“We were not happy about the fact that when we came there most students had majored in ethics, in English, in logic, things like that. We said it was wrong. Fort Hare was producing black Englishmen...” (Massey, 2010:32)

Mbeki and his cohorts were not particularly impressed with the idea of black graduates from Fort Hare becoming “black Englishmen.” It is also true that they had a special connection with their tribal backgrounds, as there was always a certain level of expectation from the communities that they came from. In some instances, a community would combine resources including selling livestock to raise funds in order to send a promising student to school. In return, the educated child will be expected to represent the community and serve as the link with the “white man” who was in charge.

The majority of early twentieth century African intellectuals who received higher education in South Africa and particularly at Fort Hare as the native college, had been through this processes and remained connected to their tribal backgrounds. When Can Themba went to Fort Hare in 1945, the institution had been in existence for almost three decades, and with the political situation across the country becoming more volatile, there was significant increase in student militancy and they started transforming its identity from the missionary institution into a political crucible. It was the conviction of the student revolutionaries that the association of the

new elite with the English language, for instance, was not just about a choice of a form of communication alone, but encapsulated the entire realm of attitudes towards African identity, culture and values. This disposition was later captured eloquently in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's seminal book of essays, *Decolonising the Mind*, where he says:

Language carries culture and culture carries (particularly through orature and literature) the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (Ngugi, 1986:12)

The concern over the expropriation of black intellectuals into western cultures became one of the central questions in their quest to revolt against the system. Another student activist who was Mbeki's contemporary is Henry Makgothi, who expressed similar sentiments and went further to demand that the young intellectuals must play an active role in raising the consciousness of their communities. Massey captures Makgothi's assertions in the following words:

“We are not just going to disappear and we thought that was the weakness of the intellectuals before us, left Fort Hare and got swallowed up. They didn't seem to make any impact on the lives of people. So we thought we had a mission.” (Massey, 2010: 57)

It seems like there was outright rejection of the conceptions of “Black Englishmen” as its very meaning had negative connotations. The discourse around the conversion of black intellectuals into what H.I.E. Dhlomo described as ‘Victorian colonial mentalities’ (Gevisser, 2007: 140), which were particularly rife in the generation of “New Africans” preceding Themba's time. This assertion was part of the reason why Mbeki senior did not send his son, Thabo, to the University of Fort Hare. Mbeki junior's biographer, Mark Gevisser elaborates on this view in his book, *The Dream Differed* (2007). He draws parallels between Govan Mbeki's assertions and how the same circumstances affected successive generations as well as how he handled the situation with regard to his own son. What is most germane to this discussion, however, is Gevisser's analogy of how Themba's generation of “New Africans” grappled with the assertions of “Black Englishmen,” real or imagined. The reading of Gevisser illustrates that they were conscious of these dynamics, and forged their own identity. The following excerpt elucidates this view:

But it would be a grave error to conclude on this evidence that men like Modisane and Nakasa had turned a full circle back to the ‘Black Englishman’ pathologies of their grandparents, or – as Thabo Mbeki does, via Duma Nokwe – that they had forgotten where they came from. For the very best among them were willing to look inside themselves as well; to acknowledge the damage that had been done to their souls and the very specific ways their personal needs and desires had intersected with South Africa’s historical reality. (Gevisser, 2007: 141)

While both Nakasa and Modisane were Themba’s close friends and colleagues, when looked at closely there is a distinct line in their respective approaches. Their commitment to resist tribal notions is indisputable, but there are noticeable inconsistencies with regard to what they identified with. In other words, it is easy to distinguish what they opposed than defining what they stood for. On the contrary, Themba’s commitment to formulating new identities or asserting his own identity is evident through both his lived experience as well as his writings. He did not seek acceptance in the “colonial world.” In fact, as we shall learn later in this chapter, instead of being converted, Themba carved a different image and even sought to convert a white woman into “blackness.” His stance was not just opposition to becoming a “Black Englishman,” but to forge a new identity, to define himself according to his own terms.

It should be noted, however, that opposition to the expropriation of black minds into the English culture, as exemplified by the “Black Englishmen” did not mean that they supported a tribally rooted society. They were equally opposed to tribalism (not to be confused with ethnicity) and refuted attempts by the government of the time to turn the University of Fort Hare into a tribal enclave for Xhosa people. The apartheid government relied on tribal differences as one of its primary tools to implement its divide-and-rule strategy. This manifested in the establishment of the Bantustan system, which gave nominal independence to specific tribes in certain reserves. Someone like K.D. Matanzima, for instance, went to Fort Hare fully aware that he was being groomed to lead the Thembu people of the Transkei in what can be regarded as tribally rooted nationalism. Many of these young intellectuals had to find a way of creating an equilibrium that would ensure the preservation of their cultural values while at the same time embracing the constructive aspects of western civilization.

This new thinking was fuelled by the emerging crop of African intellectuals who neither were the proponents of tribal divisions nor aspired to become “Black Englishmen.” In fact, it may be argued that the consciousness of the student community at Fort Hare showed early signals of their alignment to the crop of African thinkers that are often referred to as the New African. According to Vicki Briault Manus, in her book, *Emerging Traditions: Toward a Postcolonial Stylistics of Black South African Fiction in English*, the new African “consists mainly of ‘organised urban workers who are awakening to the issues at stake and to the power of organized... mass action of progressive thinking African intellectuals and leaders.’” His decision invokes “New African masses” with socialist aims and ideals coupled with anti-racist, pro-democratic aspirations specific to the South African context.” (Manus 1993, 42)

This is quite a broad definition of this emerging generation, and while various factors may be relevant, they are by no means cast in stone. Since there was never an organised movement with clearly defined principles and objectives, there is no single fitting definition of this generation of Africans. What is clear is that there was a new thinking among the educated elite including Themba and his peers.

This is the generation that followed in the footsteps of early African intellectuals like Pixley kaIsaka Seme, Sol T. Plaatje and Tiyo Soga, who had received missionary education but made it their business to refute cultural subjugation and dominance by the very same western powers. They resented and eventually took a principled stance to actively resist subjugation by western cultures while at the same time embracing some elements of it including religion and education among others. They did not, in a metaphorical sense, throw the baby with the bathwater. They were also not apologetic of the fact that they were the products of missionary education with western influence, as most of the early twentieth century intellectuals had either received their schooling from the missionary schools or studied in Europe and Americas, if not both. No matter how much they excelled in mastering the ways of the west, most of them identified and remained committed to African values.

These African intellectuals were generally held in high esteem and remained very influential figures in their communities. Conversely, they were great assets to the missionaries and colonial powers who had vested interests in their communities. These intellectuals served as intermediaries between the African communities and the missionaries, encouraging more Africans to embrace western civilisation, translating the Bible into indigenous African

languages and helping to convert African communities to Christianity. They believed that there were essential elements that were worth expropriating from western cultures with the intent of transforming them to fit the African context. In this regard, Ntongela Masilela argues:

Although profoundly appreciative of the education imparted by the missionaries, the New African intellectuals who had been educated under its auspices came to resent and eventually resisted their process of acculturation into Europeanism and Eurocentism, which in effect was white domination and hegemony, while embracing European modernity with the intent of transforming it into African modernity.

(<http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/general/Early%20Years-%20Movement.pdf>)

Can Themba came from the culturally mixed community of Marabastad and was therefore not a tribal man. He did not have a rural constituency that he was connected to and had no obligation to be a treasure trove of traditional African values. He built his audience mainly as the scribe at *Drum* and this is where he imparted his views and perspectives. The question remains as to whether he had any aspirations of being a “Black Englishman” and what kind of values he espoused and was able to impart to his readers. It is prudent to take into consideration the positioning of the generation from which he emerged and locate his thinking during this period. He was part of the 1950s generation, and according to Masilela, this was the fifth and the last generation of New Africans. The notion of the “New African” seems to be the middle ground that was favoured by most educated Africans. The extent to which each individual embraced some tenets of western culture and rejected aspects of their African identity is a matter that can only be determined when we consider each case on its own merits.

Our present task is to interrogate Themba’s allegiances in the midst of numerous emerging ideologies. We had in-depth discussion in Chapter two about how Themba managed to manipulate the English language and contextualise Shakespeare to be in tandem with the African world. There seems to have been a broader strategy to take some elements of European cultures, turn them around, and use them more constructively to build African societies. The following paragraphs will discuss how Themba featured in this continuum and take a broader view to juxtapose his identity ethos with some of his most prominent contemporaries who may have espoused similar or different values.

## 4.2 The Discursive Paradigms of Tribal Discourse

The complexity of Can Themba's background presents unconventional paradigms in the epistemology of notions of detribalisation. The discourse on detribalisation requires that we deconstruct its meaning and its relevance in as far as the identity of our subject is concerned.

The very word "detribalisation" presupposes the existence of a tribal discourse, or subscription to tribal convictions. It is often presumed, quite wrongly so, that all Africans belong to tribal structures. The apartheid government in its methods of divide-and-rule, which were used to destabilise and weaken the black community, strategically relied on tribal divisions in order to effectively pursue its mission. Part of the strategy was to glorify tribalism, wherein one tribe saw itself being the majestic and superior tribe compared to all others. They unwittingly accepted Europeans as innate rulers as they looked past them but considered the tribes that were closest to them as their competitors. In her book, *Emerging Traditions*, Vicki Briault seems to concur with the practice of presenting a distorted image of a tribal African:

The tribal African is a man who is strong, self-confident and an upholder of tradition, 'a dignified country squire,' in his own rural setting, but somewhat at a loss in the mining context, where he is docile and noncommittal, the 'unspoilt nigger' much appreciated by his employers. (Briault, 2011: 41)

The creation of this romantic picture of a tribal man is in line with the objectives of the government of the time, wherein blacks were encouraged to remain in the reserves. Only the workforce, those who would come to serve the white man, primarily in the mines, were welcome in the big cities. Even the literature of the time followed this motif. It is against the backdrop of these misconceptions that the founding of the *African Drum* was based. As discussed in Chapter one, the initial editions of *Drum Magazine* intended to promote tribal lives with the goal of cultivating rural nostalgia to encourage the black man to return to the reserves. The magazine was such a vehicle while they lived in the urban space.

Some of the early African intellectuals bought into this motif. One of the Dhlomo brothers, RRR Dhlomo, was one of the first black authors to publish a novel in English. His 1932 novel, *An African Image*, seems to be encouraging tribalism if not xenophobia, and blames all the social ills to life in Johannesburg. The issue of the venereal diseases that migrants in Johannesburg happen to encounter is essentially blamed on the Blantyre, the Malawian

immigrants who came to Johannesburg for jobs in the mines. In line with the recent spates of xenophobia in South Africa, Africans from across the Limpopo River are blamed for stealing jobs from the locals. This is one of the major departure points between the African intellectuals of Can Themba's time and some of their predecessors. Themba and his contemporaries, especially Bloke Modisane and Nat Nakasa, were unapologetic in rejecting tribalism and declaring their opposition to tribal doctrines. This is a recurring feature in their narrative, as demonstrated in the following extract from "Kwashiorkor," a piece by Themba:

He only knew that this feverish life had to be lived, and identity became so large that a man sounded ridiculous for boasting he was a Mopedi or a Mosotho or a Xhosa or a Zulu – nobody seemed to care. You were just an African here, and somewhere there was a white man: two different types of humans that impinged, now and then – indeed often – but painfully. (Themba, 2006: 77)

Themba was born in the city and this played a very important role in his orientation as reflected in both his literary and journalistic output. He and his contemporaries many of whom came from rural backgrounds, were more liberal and embraced the city as their home. Their love of Johannesburg and specifically Sophiatown as their residential area, bordered on romanticisation as they painted a rosy picture of the area. At times, they seem to celebrate Sophiatown, with all the ills that it came with. To some extent, this could be understood from the context of writing against the forces that wanted to destroy the area in the name of slum clearance, which we now know was not true. The main reason for the demolition of the place was the threat it posed to the segregationist policies of the apartheid government as it served as an example and the beacon of hope for a racially mixed society.

The majority of Sophiatown dwellers, or at least those whose voices reverberated through the ages, did not consider themselves as tribal subjects. They seemed to rebel against anything that sought to confine them into particular social boxes. They saw themselves as free men who were only confined by apartheid rules that they daily sought to break at any given moment. Themba preferred to look at the positive, ignoring what Africans were ridding themselves of, but focusing more on their efforts to carve a new image for themselves. In his short story, "Crepuscule", he argues that "detrribalisation, modernisation, adaptation, acculturation, call it what you like, has to tear its way into their psychological pattern, brute-like," (Themba 2006, 79). This aggressive charge against established patterns speaks of a people determined to thread

new paths and veer away from the well-beaten track. In fact, their thinking, as seen in “Crepuscle”, went beyond the tribe and they started building inter-racial bridges. Their approach was post-tribal, but government legislation tried to create tribal beings out of them, ensuring that tribalism is part of the public discourse in all official platforms.

According to Es’kia Mphahlele, the very idea of these tribal divisions in the cities was perpetuated by the government of the time. They came up with the concept of Bantu culture, to which the various tribes had to subscribe and interpret in a variety of ways. It is obvious that as soon as that happens, there will be a culture of dominance and revolt, which results in tribal feuds. Such a scenario feeds directly into the interests of the white-dominated government, which always thought of a united movement of Africans was a dangerous affair. It is in this context that Mphahlele disputes the so-called Bantu culture, arguing that:

They concocted the idea of ‘Bantu culture,’ by which the content of our education was to be determined. By ‘Bantu culture’ they really meant ‘tribal customs.’ We, on the other hand, never recognised tribal culture. We believe in African culture that cuts across artificial boundaries. African culture has roots going down several centuries deep. No one can wish it away, unless we ourselves deny it. At the deepest spiritual level African culture unifies the whole continent. (Mphahlele, 2002: 87)

The prevailing culture in the cities among the educated was that of unity beyond tribal differences. The role of African intellectuals in bringing the oppressed races together, dating as far back as 1906, and later partly triggered by the formation of the whites only Union of South Africa in 1910, culminated in the formation of the South African National Native Congress (SANNC), the predecessor of the ruling ANC, in 1912, is a demonstration of the fortitude of these Africans to do away with the tribal divisions. This did not go unchallenged but it was clear that they were winning in the cities. Now, the urban African, the intellectual who was supposed to be despised by his own people because of his upward aspirations, was already thinking post-tribal. Although it remains difficult to fully grasp their notions of a post-tribal society, it was clear that this was the prevailing philosophy all across the black intelligentsia. Perhaps they never bothered with the epistemology of post-tribal ethos simply because it is a complex phenomenon that depends largely on contextual environment. According to Zbigniew Bialas, in his book, *Post-Tribal Ethos in Contemporary Anglophone African Literature*, detribalisation can be understood as “a process of tribal disintegration. It

does not stand for a sheer physical termination of tribal existence; there are other, primary aspects of decomposition.” This definition becomes particularly problematic in the case of Themba whose disposition with regard to the notions of tribalism and ethnicity are rather unconventional. The main challenge with him is identifying those fundamental tribal traits before we can talk about him ridding himself of the various tribal elements.

As a starting point, it is prudent that we shed some light on Themba’s imposed or inherited identities before we can delve into his chosen identities. This is done with the objective of tracing his transition from a presumably tribal being into a liberal African or, as suggested in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the new breed of progressive African intellectuals called the “New African.” Themba was born in Marabastad, a racially mixed community just outside Pretoria in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Marabastad is the same area where Es’kia Mphahlele grew up and the area that he writes about in his seminal autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959). It is also the same area that Modikwe Dikobe uses to explore the underbelly of township life in his novel *Marabi Dance* (1973). We learn from Dikobe’s novel that there was prevalence of illicit liquor, which went along with their dance rhythms, aptly called marabi dance. The Marabi Dance was more than just a dance pattern; but a culture of this community, which spoke a variety of languages.

Themba grew up partly in Atteridgeville, a township in Pretoria and located not too far from Marabastad. The dominant languages in both areas included Sepedi, Setswana, English and Afrikaans, with some sprinklings of Zulu and Shangaan. Themba is known to have spoken only two of these languages, English and Afrikaans. The only other language that he was known to speak at times is Tsotsi taal, a street patois comprised of the various indigenous African languages injected with a dose of Afrikaans. A few of his stories and poems have Xhosa phrases, where words such as Thixo (God), mama (mother) and tata (father) are used. It should be noted that these are only phrases and that there is not a moment where he writes a full sentence in any language other than English.

It remains unclear as to how Themba as an African living in Marabastad ended up not speaking any of the dominant indigenous African languages spoken in the area. In a case where the surrounding community does not seem to have had a significant impact in his language acquisition, it is perhaps his genetic background that is likely to present logical reasoning for his linguistic identity conundrum. Apart from what would have been the mother tongue, it

would be expected that the dominant languages in the community would play an influential role in his language acquisition. Furthermore, his exposure to life in Pietersburg as a high school student, where there are three dominant indigenous languages, i.e., Sepedi, Shangaan and Ndebele, with the former being more prominent, it would again be expected that he would acquire at least one of the common languages in the area. This however does not seem to be the case. In an interview with Keorapetse Kgositsile, who knew Themba personally, he states that he never heard Themba speaking any of the indigenous languages. Kgositsile's assertions, which were later confirmed by Parks Mangena, are corroborated by Obed Musi, a former colleague and friend of Themba, who recalls:

I don't think there was ever an occasion when Can spoke a single line in an African language. He either spoke English or township lingo. The reason was probably because Can's surname was actually Tembe, a Shangaan name, and he had his roots in Pretoria. (Nicol, 1991: 179)

While Musi knew Themba quite intimately and gives great insights about his linguistic abilities as someone who conversed with him, his statement is unfortunately replete with inaccuracies. This is but part of the challenges of qualitative research, where even subjects that are deemed the most reliable are susceptible to confusion, loss of memory or misinformation. Evidence can be brought forward that from as far back as his high school days, which was from 1940-1944, Themba never spelt his surname any differently as suggested by Musi here. Similarly, there is no tangible evidence to suggest that he was Shangaan. The "Themba" surname has Nguni origins, and could be associated with anything from Ndebele, Shangaan, Swati, Xhosa or Zulu. Themba is not known to have spoken any of these languages but Musi's claims about his Shangaan background remain unclear and unsubstantiated. In a situation where there is no empirical evidence to associate one with a particular language or ethnic group, we would find reprieve in official documents where these specific details may have been required.

In his application for admission at the Fort Hare University College, Themba lists English Higher Grade and Afrikaans Lower Grade as the only language subjects that he did in his final year in high school. In his student records from Fort Hare, Themba consistently writes his race or tribal background as "Zulu," and his home language as "Afrikaans." It is obviously a matter of scholarly interest to investigate the reasons for Themba to list Afrikaans as his home language amongst all other languages that were spoken in Marabastad. Afrikaans in South

Afrikaans is a language spoken as a mother tongue by whites who regard themselves as Afrikaaners, and black people known as “coloureds.” The circumstances pertaining to how an African man in an African community could not identify with any indigenous African language as his own and instead adopted the lingua franca that is Afrikaans as a home language remains a question that is yet to be answered. In parts where a parent or guardian is required in official documents, Themba writes his mother’s name, Angelina Mgole, who worked as a seamstress at the Pretoria General Hospital. It is also worth noting that none of his five siblings is called by their African names.

To conclude our discussion on the linguistic paradigms, we also know that Themba studied at the University of Fort Hare from 1945 to 1947, and again from 1950 to 1951. Fort Hare is located in Alice, Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, an area dominated by the speakers of Xhosa language. Even the experience of staying here does not seem to suggest that he acquired sufficient language proficiency to identify with it. In his poem, “The Ciskeian Maid,” he alludes to his inability to speak the same “tongue” as his love conquest, yet, when the situation demanded he strung together a few words and they were able to communicate and share a moment of passion. The poem alludes to the linguistic barrier in the following lines:

I told thee then the wild tale of my love/  
But because I tripped on the Xhosa tongue/  
And the tales beyond words, I told thee half-/  
Words on which thou shall so passionately cling/

It is also possible that Themba’s failure to acquire any of the various indigenous African languages was his way of rejecting tribalism. It is irrelevant how ill-informed we feel this view might have been, but in our efforts to establish his ethos in as far as languages are concerned, this is an aspect worth considering. What we understand is that language is one of the fundamental elements in distinguishing one tribe from another and, therefore, removing himself from the tribal box could have been part of his process of detribalisation. Zbigniew Bialas in his book, *Post Tribal Ethos*, seems to be affirming this view, as he argues:

The conscious rejection of tribalism as a *modus vivendi*, in favour of other methods of organising social structures and hierarchies. Preparing non-tribal, alternative systems

of social organisation is in itself a clear indication of “mental” detribalisation. (Bialas 1993, 37)

The conscious rejection of linguistic confinement as another form of detribalisation cannot however, rid one of the acquired languages. If a language is spoken around you there are chances that it registers in your subconscious and you can fathom some elements of it even if you are not interested in communicating in that particular language. Given his exposure to the various African communities where different African languages must have been spoken, it is possible that Themba could converse in some of them but he either took a conscious decision not to learn anything further than English and Afrikaans or just chose not to communicate in these languages. It also appears that when the situation demanded he also spoke Tsotsi taal, the street patois fancied by thugs in Johannesburg. The nuances of the language and why it existed in the first place will be discussed in upcoming chapters. Suffice to say, in the interview with Muxe Nkondo, he interrogates Themba’s efforts to try to understand the tsotsi, the urchin, by drawing from his own diction and reaching down to his level. This of course, could be a survival technique as illustrated in stories such as “Mob Passion”, “The Urchin” and “The Dube Train”, among others, where the tsotsis seemed to be ruling the streets.

One anecdote shared during the course of the research speaks of a moment when a young Sesotho speaking woman was crossing the Swaziland border to Mozambique with a European foreigner. The woman could not speak a word of English, and Can Themba was concerned that she may be crossing the border against her will – a case of human trafficking. At that moment, Themba is said to have expressed himself in pure Sesotho, trying to ascertain if she knew that she was about to cross the border to another country. This anecdote holds no bearing in this study as it is unverified and there is no other account of Themba speaking the language. If this indeed happened, it would not be surprising because Sesotho is in the same language group as Sepedi and Setswana, languages that are most spoken in Polokwane and Pretoria respectively, places in which Themba spent a significant time of his upbringing. Furthermore, we learn from the interview with Kgositsile as well as Hopkinson’s book (1962:159) that Themba used to visit Lesotho, where the language is most dominant.

Language is but one aspect through which the tribal ethos manifests itself. Apart from the fact that his language dynamics remain a mystery, it appears that Themba was adamant to reject tribalism or anything that smacked of it in all its variations. One of the age-old traditions in

African societies is the institution of lobola, or payment of dowry in Western terms. In his short story “Kwashiorkor”, Can Themba disparagingly refers to lobola as “that hard dying custom” which illustrates his opposition to the practice. Lobola is a transaction that traditionally was done through the exchange of cattle between the families of the groom and the bride. It is seen as the reimbursement for the family of the bride who spent a lot bringing up the child who will now join and “work” for another family. However, there is another more philosophical explanation for the purpose of lobola through cattle. Cattle occupy a very significant place in African communities. When elders die, a beast is often slaughtered in their honour and when families want to communicate with their ancestors, sacrifices are performed and these usually include the slaughtering of a beast.

Cattle also produce milk, which also has some strong significance in many African societies. Milk is seen as the food for brothers and sisters not only because they drink milk from the same cattle in a household, but also because they suckle from the same breast as infants. In this sense milk or the cattle themselves become the glue that keeps them together. Philosophers like Rev. John S. Mbiti in his book, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) expatiates on the significance of many African practices including lobola and the significance of cattle. In latter days, the cattle were replaced by cash for the purpose of lobola transaction. It became exactly that, just a transaction without any ritual significance beyond the act of exchanging or buying goods. It is unclear which part of this transaction that made Themba uncomfortable, but he made it clear to his wife that none of his children should be paid lobola for. This is the instruction that Mrs Themba kept in the case of their two daughters.

It is also important to note that Can Themba did not conform to conventional social practices in his stance against tribal doctrines, but that he equally rejected some elements of Western civilisation. Religion is one of the aspects which were used to spread western civilisation and, even though he went to a Catholic school and identified as such, in later years after completing his studies at Fort Hare, Themba did not associate with Christianity. It is a well-documented fact that Western civilisation was sold in packages as scholars and eminent writers like Ngugi and Achebe have shown.

Poet SEK Mqhayi his Xhosa poem, “Aa! Zweliyazuza, Itshawe LaseBhilitani!” presents the dichotomies of a Bible and a Rifle, as representing the contradictions brought about by the missionaries. One of the key components of spreading western culture is obviously education,

which was coupled with religion. Missionary education, for instance, went along with entrenching Christian religion as the driving force both inside and outside the classroom. In explaining this, Es'kia Mphahlele in his compilation of essays, *Es'kia* (2002, 85-86), affirms this point as he argues: "Christian missionaries, whose schools Africans attended, tried everything they could to 'cleanse' us of our traditional beliefs and ways. They believed that Christianity held the only answer to the Ultimate truth about God and humankind."

As his wife alludes in the epigraph to this chapter, Themba was a confessed atheist, even though he was surrounded by staunch Christians including his own wife. As a liberal parent who apparently did not want to impose his views on his family, he urged his wife to allow their children to make their own religious choices. This she should do by ensuring that they were not baptised before they were able to make conscious decisions independently. As a result, Morongwa Themba remembers clearly the time when she was christened at about the age of fourteen. She was towering above all other children in height because she was above the average baptismal age in Swaziland, which is where they grew up. As fate would have it, both his daughters followed in the footsteps of their mother in embracing the Christian religion. Themba himself could not completely divorce himself from the Christian religion as in later years he taught at a catholic school in Swaziland.

Looking at the discursive paradigms of Themba's identity conundrum, a strong case has been built that his identity ethos was an epistemologically complex one. It is easier to identify the elements that he rejected than to actually put his preferences under a single confined space as a particular ideology. In other words, the achievement of our polemics so far is to tell what Can Themba was not, as opposed to what he was. While he was obviously part of the new black elite called the New African, as discussed earlier in this chapter, this is not a homogenous group with established guiding principles and therefore does not come any close to over determining Themba's point of view. The main challenge with an organic social movement is that it is fluid as it thrives on the consciousness of individuals. No one can be said to be veering off its established tracks because there are no tracks in the first place. Each one of them contribute to its establishment as they continue to pursue what is generally accepted as progressive modern ethos that progresses towards national unity.

In the following paragraphs, we will attempt to take a close scrutiny and evaluate Themba's ideological leanings as reflected through his own practical commitments and articulations. In

locating his kind of thinking, we will juxtapose it with the prevalent philosophies and attitudes during his time. A comparison of philosophies as espoused by some of his contemporaries will also be done as a way of exploring possible influences to his kind of thinking. Only then shall we be able to determine the kind of philosophies he espoused.

### **4.3 A Quest for Shared Identities**

Can Themba vehemently rejected the small tribal and bourgeoisie boxes that were created on the basis of tribal, ethnic and class backgrounds as determinants for one's associations. In fact, as we shall learn later in this chapter, he even rejected the racial delineations as instituted by the apartheid government. It is at times easy to reject, describe what one is not, but not as much when it comes to describing what one stands for. This is part of the reason why this study preoccupies itself with the trajectory of Can Themba as an account for what he became. For lack of any empirical evidence to the contrary, we shall postulate that the refusal to embrace a specific and well-established ideology was part of an attempt to carve shared identities.

The preceding chapter illustrated that Can Themba came into maturity and established himself as a voice to be reckoned with at the height of apartheid—a legislative government system in South Africa. As a fresh graduate from the University of Fort Hare, which was sharply establishing itself as the breeding ground for political activists who would be at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid and for the liberation of their countries not only in South Africa but also throughout the African continent, Themba effectively became part of the new elite. His going to Johannesburg, living in Sophiatown and becoming part of the first generation of the historic *Drum* writers placed him in a precarious position and forced him to navigate the reality of his blackness in an oppressive state. His generation added another layer to the so-called “New African” phenomenon, but like generations before them, they confronted challenges that were brought about by the realities of being black and educated in a world where the rest of their hue had not had the privilege of exposure to western education.

The challenge with the new African intelligentsia is that, much as they embraced the ways of “the white man” through education and other basic tenets of modern life, they were not fully welcomed in the white man's world. Conversely, and in a rather paradoxical sense, their natural attachment to African communities through lineage was not good enough, as they were not fully accepted by black communities because of their adoption of western ways. They belonged to both, yet not fully accepted in either. At a certain level they were even resented by both, as

some members of the white community, especially the police, felt threatened by their progress in life and made it their responsibility to remind them that they are still black and inferior, while the black society felt that they represented white supremacy in black communities. This is what led to them being called “the situations,” described by Bloke Modisane in *Blame Me on History* (1965) as “something not belonging to either,” something more like a fence-sitter, standing a chance to benefit from each side but also running the risk of falling into the wrong side. Modisane goes further to describe the “situation” as follows:

The educated African is resented equally by the blacks because he speaks English, which is one of the symbols of white supremacy, he is resentfully called the Situation, something not belonging to either, but tactfully situated between white oppression and black rebellion. (Modisane, 1965: 94)

The African intelligentsia became situations without them fully embracing white ideology or espousing the ideals of their white liberal friends. They earned the label by virtue of their perceived fence sitting and were therefore labelled and classified as such by both their own African communities as well as the white community to which they were close by virtue of education and class. It is clear that although there are several factors that led to this kind of categorisation, the fundamental aspect to it all was education. For through education they got better paying jobs, spoke the language of the white man and therefore could attend parties organised by white liberals and, occasionally they had a taste of white privilege.

In the years prior to the introduction of apartheid as a government system in 1948 in South Africa, the Unity government tried to use the divide-and-rule technique to disempower the black population, elevating the educated Africans above their own communities. They were given special privileges like being granted permission to buy some kind of liquor that was prohibited to the rest of the Africans, and also lifting certain rules with regard to official documentation. In his essay, “A Question of Identity,” published in his seminal book of essays, *Home and Exile* (1965, 32), Lewis Nkosi speaks of the levelling effect of apartheid, wherein the entire black population had to suffer and endure the effects of apartheid equally. Notwithstanding the negative effects of oppression, Nkosi believes that the apartheid government’s blanket system of oppression was helpful in ensuring that the black intelligentsia did not isolate themselves, instead they suffered alongside the uneducated and the illiterate. Nkosi draws parallels between the two systems:

During the rule of the United Party, which was dominated by English speaking white South Africans, educated Africans, mostly teachers, were exempted from the humiliation of carrying ‘passes’ or identity documents, which they would be asked to produce at street corners of the city by an official Tom, Dick and Harry. However, the subsequent boer administrations have discarded any such discretion and once again the life of the educated class is as insecure as those of the illiterate and semi-literate masses of our people. (Nkosi, 1965: 32)

The difference in the two systems does not, however, guarantee immediate rupture in thought and perceptions. Since the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, and possibly prior to this historical landmark, there was a visible social demarcation between educated blacks and those who were either not educated according to the western standards or were illiterate. This subject is interrogated intensely in Zakes Mda’s seminal novel, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), where the Xhosa people are divided according to the binaries of “Believers” and “Unbelievers”. In this system, educated blacks occupied the upper echelons of the social strata, even though they remained lower than the lowest white. Like in any environment where there is a hegemonic relationship, there was some level of class hostility that developed amongst the social strata of the black population. It is in this context that the black intelligentsia were resented by sections of both black and white communities.

The view that they were black Englishmen was perpetuated by the perception that they aspired to live the life of whites by befriending them and attending their parties. Given that many of them were not necessarily tribal subjects, and that Sophiatown was a mixed community, they had every reason to do away with tribal ways. Furthermore, Themba’s linguistic choices reveal that he had more affinity to the west and probably only spoke *Tsotsi taal* as a survival tool in the rough townships. In his paper, “Can Themba: The Storyteller and Journalist of the 1950s,” published in *English in Africa Vol. 16 No. 2* in 1989, Michael Chapman elucidates on this point:

They were enamoured of the fads of Western culture, they were regarded as curiosities by a paternalistic white-liberal intelligentsia, and were isolated from any purposeful mass-based activity. Accordingly, Themba’s own substance and style are denuded of experiential necessity and seen as ideologically ‘unhealthy.’ As u-Clever of Sophiatown, who claimed to speak no African language, and whose education in

English literature at Fort Hare manifested itself in the frustration of his writing tales of intrigue, violence and wish fulfilment, Themba is typified as an alienated ‘situation.’

One can argue that this generation of African intelligentsia lived a dual lifestyle: one that related to their people in the townships and the other that was suitable for their white liberal friends. Themba as a journalist had the townships as the crucible for his stories, as he is known to epitomise and capture the heartbeat of township life in his writing. He and his peers, including Bloke Modisane, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi and others, used to attend parties organised by progressive whites like Nadine Gordimer and Helen Suzman. In Nat Nakasa’s biography, *A Native of Nowhere: The Life of Nat Nakasa*, author Ryan Brown tells a story of how Nakasa, while attending a party organised by Francie Suzman, daughter of anti-apartheid MP, Helen Suzman, gave himself a tour of the house. Later, Lewis Nkosi found him sleeping in the main bedroom. When Nkosi enquired about the reasons for that, Nakasa’s response was that he wanted to see how the other half lived. This statement shows that much as they immersed themselves in the lifestyles of white liberals, they remained acutely aware of the differences in their society.

While befriending white liberals and attending their parties, they remained critical of the system and the role of their white counterparts whilst simultaneously attempting to build bridges created by apartheid between races. Their criticism came at different times and at different levels. Bloke Modisane, who in his book *Blame on History* (1965), appears to be bitter about his own pretence on certain societal matters, initially appeared to be docile and almost naïve of the racial dynamics. In an interview with Mike Nicol published in *A Good-Looking Corpse* (1991, 293) Jean Hart—who was one of the white liberals that frequented these parties—argues that Can “kept the real, objective complexities in front of him, as a kind of barrier, because that was one way of being honest with himself” (Nicol 1991:292). She goes further to say:

Can knew that and would say outright. He would say, You and I can never be real lovers, you and I can never be real friends, because our power-base is unequal. Bloke would avoid it and say, We love one another, there’s nothing society can do to us. (Nicol, 1991:292)

It may be argued that Themba's outspokenness about matters of race was his way of coping with his present condition. Hart often makes reference to Modisane, whom she feels was not genuine and tried to suppress his opinions for the sake of belonging. In fact, when he published his autobiography years later, Modisane confirmed these assertions as he confesses about doing things just to show off or spite his supposed detractors. At one point, he told the story of how he bought some Russian caviar at an exorbitant price, just for the sake of ensuring that he was not thought to be an unsophisticated and uncivilised African. The worst thing is that he did not particularly like caviar, but his act of buying it is what he confesses to be a pretentious luxury, "a bourgeois symbol of social affectation and palatal sophistication (Modisane, 96)" Modisane turns out to be a very bitter person, probably the angriest among his peers. At one stage, he does not seem to have enjoyed the parties that he was invited to as revealed in the extract below from *Blame Me on History*:

I am instead insulted with multi-racial tea parties where we wear our different racial masks and become synthetically polite to each other, in a kind of masquerade where Africans are being educated into an acceptance of their inferior position. (Modisane, 1965:158)

In this current study, we have not come across any record that reveals Modisane's annoyance with the parties that he was invited to. Instead, his contemporaries seem to affirm the view that Modisane was a great pretender and was attracted to the bourgeois kind of lifestyle. What is remarkable about Can Themba is that he comfortably straddled the social strata, easily associating with people from diverse sectors of society. He also kept his true feelings known, as demonstrated by Jean Hart's assertions above, wherein Themba's starting point was the acknowledgement of the socio-economic imbalances caused by their racial differences.

Tom Hopkinson has been at the receiving end of Themba's blunt and very frank views on identity politics. In one of their engagements, which bordered on confrontation, and probably one moment that left Hopkinson thinking seriously about the future of their partnership as editor and assistant editor for *Drum Magazine*. In this particular instance, Themba put Hopkinson in a corner, almost forcing him to be unequivocal about the side he would take in a racial war, as opposed to the nebulous stance taken by white liberals, something that Themba regarded as too patronising. Hopkinson reports that Themba asked him:

“When the shooting war starts—which side will you be on then, black or white? Because one day the whites will start it for sure.”

I made no answer, but Can pressed. “Which side will you be on?”

“Depends on who starts it, what the issues are, and where I’m standing at the time.”

Can snorted and went out. Our talk had been unsatisfactory to him as it had to me. (Hopkinson, 1962:111)

Apart from Themba’s clarity of views, which are illustrated distinctly in the above excerpt, what stands out about Themba is his passion for debate. He was never scared of engaging at different levels. We see him interacting quite comfortably with the gangsters of Sophiatown in his short story, “Crepuscule”, wherein he tries to win them back after they sided with his erstwhile girlfriend, Baby, who called police after realising that he was with another girlfriend who happened to be white. The tsotsis initially sided with Baby, but after he explained that going out with a white woman was actually a revolutionary act of reciprocity or retaliation, if you like, unlike others who procured their black sisters to white men.

What we learn from this scenario is that Can Themba, known as one of the leading intellectuals of the time, could relate comfortably and at equal footing with the street urchins. It is probably due to this association that Lewis Nkosi referred to him as the “supreme intellectual tsotsi of them all.” His dual role in society is eloquently articulated in the following statement by Obed Musi published in *A Good-Looking Corpse* (Nicol 1991, 179), where he states that:

Can could talk to a professor in the morning, a beauty queen at lunch-time and a gangster in the afternoon. And have everyone laughing and eating out of his hand.

The above is more than enough to illustrate that every individual possesses multiple identities, but Can Themba’s identity ethos is particularly curious because of the historical moment in which he wrote and lived in South Africa. His point of view can most probably be best understood when considered in the context of his environment where we compare him to his peers. Taking this route, there can be no better candidates to compare him with other than Bloke Modisane and Nat Nakasa. Both Nakasa and Modisane were Can’s colleagues at *Drum* for many years and were also close friends. This trio have a lot in common and also differ quite

remarkably. What is extraordinary about them is that they analyse their situation in their historical moment, but they also go further to analyse their own specific roles in the midst of it all, giving opinions about themselves and their peers.

There is mutual respect and understanding among the *Drum* writers of the fifties generation. Although they differ in many respects, some objective truths about their life histories are usually revealed when contemporaries write about each other. In his book, *Blame Me on History*, for instance, Modisane refers to both Themba and Nakasa, conversely, Nakasa talks about his relations with Can Themba in a number of published pieces. It is perhaps Themba's tribute to Nakasa, "The Boy with a Tennis Racket," that we get to know the author's genuine views about his contemporaries as he goes further to comment on each of their character:

The bitterest commentary on the South African is typified by Nat. All those South Africans who wanted to be loyal, hard-working, intelligent citizens of the country are crowded out. They don't want to bleach themselves, but they want to participate and contribute to the wonder that that country can become. They don't want to be fossilised into tribal inventions that are no more real to them than they would be to their forefathers.

Nat's was such a voice. Sobukwe's is that of a protest and resistance. Casey Motsisi's that of derisive laughter. Bloke Modisane's that of implacable hatred. Ezekiel Mphahlele's that of intellectual contempt. Nimrod Mkele's that of patient explanation to be patient. Mine, that of self-corrosive cynicism. But Nat told us: 'There must be humans on the other side of the fence; it's only we haven't learned how to talk.'  
(Themba, 2006: 156-157)

The above excerpt from Themba's "The Boy with a Tennis Racket" does more than just revealing the various individual characters, but also gives context to their identity ethos. When Themba wrote this piece after the passing of Nakasa in 1965, he was exiled in Swaziland as Nakasa was exiled in the United States of America (USA). One would expect that the piece would be filled with anger and frustration, given the fact that Nakasa had been systematically forced out of the land of his birth, a case not too dissimilar to his own. Nevertheless, the piece is instead a nostalgic one, journeying down memory lane and recapturing his first encounter with Nat, and reflecting on the lives that they lived in Sophiatown. The first paragraph alludes to their refusal to be reduced into tribal subjects while simultaneously rejecting the idea of

being turned into white subjects. Instead, it would appear that they believe in the quest for broader collective identities, beyond the tribal and ethnic confines. While at a broader level there are these common collective views, at an individual level they differ widely in their views and these have been captured concisely in Themba's statement above. It is also interesting that in this excerpt, Themba selected some of the most prominent South Africans who share common backgrounds and yet differ widely ideologically.

Themba was associated with each of the personalities listed above and shows complete understanding of their characters and what they stood for in society. Robert Sobukwe was his school mate at Fort Hare and went on to become a prominent politician and the founding president of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC); Casey Motsisi was once Themba's student and worked for *Drum* Magazine before developing into becoming a legendary journalist in his own right; Nimrod Mkele, who won the *Drum* short story competition after Themba and was one of the most educated journalists at the magazine; and Nat Nakasa, Bloke Modisane and Ezekiel Mphahlele were all Themba's colleagues at *Drum*. In this extract, Themba manages to illustrate to us that these men, much as they had similar backgrounds as the new elite of the 1950s, they were not a homogenous group. Their unique individual traits are integral in defining their identity ethos.

It is perhaps Nat Nakasa who came with the sharpest philosophies on the question of identity in this generation. Nakasa had come from a middle class family in Natal. Unlike Themba, he was linguistically grounded as he spoke Zulu at home, and cut his teeth in journalism writing for a Zulu newspaper. In spite of this background, he did not associate with any tribal doctrines. He took a conscious decision to ignore the apartheid laws and to act as if discrimination was non-existent. He was of the view that the best way to live with the colour bar was to ignore it. This was quite a controversial stance for a black person and an influential public figure living in Johannesburg at the height of apartheid. Perhaps Thabo Mbeki was justified for being furious at Nakasa's denialism because he rejected the reality that he was part of the oppressed black population so much that he refused to live in the racially demarcated townships. At times, he would even sleep in the watchman's shed rather than going to sleep over in the township. In his imagined space, he lived in a different world where there was no racial discrimination and people lived together in harmony.

Nakasa mentally created what he called the “fringe country,” which was the space where there was no colour and people just lived as people. The strangest thing is that this world existed, but on the periphery of the black reality which was dominated by oppression, poverty and violence. The fringe country that Nakasa created existed predominantly in his imagination, and only partially in exclusive suburbs of Johannesburg and occasionally in the townships when their liberal white friends successfully sneaked in without being noticed by the roving eyes of security forces of the apartheid regime. The *Drum* journalists, including Mphahlele, Nkosi, Themba, Modisane and Nakasa, all attended these parties but many of them were conscious of the fact that the relationship that they had with their white friends did not define the state of affairs in the rest of the country.

For Can Themba, genuine understanding of black people’s material condition was a precondition for the existence of any cross-racial relationships in South Africa. Much as he was a progressive thinker, this is the reality that dogged him and other black people in the country and he made it his business to clarify that from the beginning. He often reminded his acquaintances about this reality maybe a tad too often for their liking. Nakasa, on the other hand, was engulfed with delusions of grandeur— imagining a utopian society and could not understand even the threat he posed to the apartheid government. He believed that by living on the fringe he was no danger to anyone, as he was not a political activist. When he was invited to take up the Niemann Fellowship at Harvard, his application for passport was declined. This was a wake-up call for him, as he believed that he was no threat to the government since he was not a political activist. In an earlier letter, he had assured the Niemann Foundation that “as I have never been active in politics, except as a journalist, I expect no difficulty in obtaining a passport.” This was not to be, and left him with no option but to take the one-way exit permit, something that would make him a “permanent wanderer.”

One of his most popular essays, “Between Two Worlds,” which is published in a collection entitled *The World of Nat Nakasa* and put together by Essop Patel, Nakasa describes the life on the fringe as follows:

Some people call it ‘crossing the colour line.’ You may call it jumping the colour line or wiping it clean off. Whatever you please. Those who live on the fence have no special labels. They see it simply as LIVING. (Patel, 1975: 9)

Nakasa's idealism was only applicable to a small group of black elite and white liberals. They did have a taste of a free society, but only clandestinely behind closed doors and mostly in the affluent suburbs of Johannesburg, where there were no security forces lurking behind the curtain as was the case in the townships. As Brown (2013) puts it, "they came together, socially intellectually and artistically, in fringe country, the informal, multiracial association of intellectuals who chose to resist apartheid simply by attempting to live as if it did not exist." Of course, at times these gatherings became so raucous that they attracted the attention of the police, and on a few occasions, they ended up in jail. It seems like Nakasa was content with these limited liberties, which they enjoyed surreptitiously in their fringe country. This approach is no different from that of the Bantustan leaders, whose ideas of freedom were limited to their tribal enclaves. This is where I believe Themba differed in approach with Nakasa quite considerably. Although they both considered themselves detribalised, this was only a starting point, and they differed widely in moving beyond that point.

It is my persuasion that Themba was one of the first to realise that just living would not help while everybody was dying around them. This is part of the reason why he often stated it upfront when he met white liberals like Jean Hart, who was a permanent feature in these circles, and it would seem like everyone admired her. Themba was acutely aware that the fact that he was detribalised, and just like Nakasa, he "never owned an assegai" or any tribal associations as part of his lifestyle, was not enough to define his standpoint. He was always mindful of the fact that his lifestyle was not representative of the lives of many black people living in the townships of this country.

Themba on the one hand dispels tribalism as a defining factor for Africans in South Africa, while on the other he tries to build bridges, to carve a shared identity that would be accommodative to everyone. This does not however imply in any way that Themba was alone in these endeavours. Even though the African intellectuals were not an organised movement, the collective approach seems to be prevalent and keeps rearing its head in just about all their writings. Mphahlele is one of the major agents of this approach, which remained determinedly consistent. It is perhaps imperative to note that Mphahlele, unlike Themba, was born in Pietersburg and spoke Sepedi fluently. He later moved to Marabastad and Sophiatown, both Themba's neighbourhoods, and that is where his own consciousness comes from. Just like Themba, he acknowledges the existence of the tribe, but believes that national identity surpasses all that. The following excerpt appears in his essay, "The Role of an African Writer",

and published in *Words Gone Too Soon: A tribute to K. Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe*, edited by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane. With regard to tribalism and national identity, Mphahlele argues:

National Identity should free us from tribalism. Ethnicity is a neutral concept: a fact of history. We were born into ethnic groups. But tribalism refers to an attitude, a nasty one that imagines one ethnic group above all others by right. (Mzamane, 2005:212)

It would seem like the New Africans waged a fierce fight and were winning against tribal practices and could proudly pronounce themselves as progressive thinkers. This, however, was only a means to an end and not an end on its own. The monkey on the backs of every progressive South African has been racism and this has dogged them for several decades if not centuries. Although apartheid was officially introduced as a government system only in 1948, racial discrimination has been entrenched in South Africa since the arrival of the first European settlers in the land. The wars of dispossession in the 1800s and further conflicts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were perpetrated by this division. What has changed over the years are strategies to fight over the central question of racial oppression. The early African intellectuals decided to cooperate with the oppressive white regime, sending delegations to negotiate with the colonisers in Britain. This strategy of appeasement included volunteering Africans to participate in the World Wars in support of the colonial powers. Even under such circumstances, Africans were not treated equally as the British colonisers could not stand the idea of Africans killing Europeans even if those Europeans were their own enemies. Africans were never supplied with guns and ammunition, instead they had to assist by carrying arms, digging holes as toilets for British soldiers and performing other ancillary manual duties. Henry Nxumalo is one colleague of Themba's who had been part of World War II and had first-hand experience of that kind of humiliation.

The dream of an equal society could not be realised until racial discrimination was abolished. This Themba and his colleagues understood, and they were fortunate to have lived in Sophiatown where they could taste how a free society would be like. They were encouraged by the winds of change that were sweeping across the continent, as Ghana became the first country to attain colonial independence in 1959. Many other countries followed soon thereafter, and as we have come to learn, it would take another four decades for this to be realised in South Africa. South Africa only attained its freedom from the minority and

discriminatory white rule in 1994, and this was the culmination of years of struggle, which took different forms over the years. Perhaps someone like Nakasa had a foresight to understand that freedom for South Africa was not going to come immediately, and therefore enjoying the little legalities that one could find was the way to go.

It is from this perspective that Themba's views and all those of his contemporaries have contributed towards an ideal of nation building. Much as they were concerned with detribalisation, and they went about challenging its limitations in a variety of ways, this was a means towards establishing a single national identity. Any weaknesses in the approaches adopted by the various players in the New African movement can be attributed to their individual approach to collective struggles. Becoming part of a collective does not necessarily mean one has to be a card-carrying member of a political organisation because this has its own challenges. We have alluded, for instance, in the preceding chapter to Bloke Modisane's situation who had to tear his ANC Youth league membership card into pieces after what he considered as betrayal by Dr Moroka, the ANC president at the time.

What was needed was a well-defined intellectual movement that was not spearheaded by career politicians whose progressive view could be sacrificed at the altar of organisational principles. The establishment of Can Themba's House of Truth as a place of debate may have been aimed at establishing such a forum; but, unfortunately, there is no record of any concrete resolutions that ever came out of the debates that took place in there. Nevertheless, Themba continued with his own individual struggle, trying to change one person, one mind-set at a time. This is perhaps another factor that distinguished him from some of his peers. Whereas Nakasa tried to infuse himself within the circles of white liberals; tried to squeeze himself into their ambit, Themba wanted white liberals to be the ones trying to identify with him. Themba was not content with just being accepted, but tried to convert the white liberals into his own fold. This we learn in his escapades with Jean Hart, whom he refers to as Jane in "Crepuscule", when he takes her to the township for a night of bliss. Before going to his room, they do a round as per his routine, visiting relatives and shebeens in the township. It is here that Themba requests for a head wrap, known as a doek and commonly worn by married women in the African society. Themba's interpretation of the incident is as follows:

So that evening when I said, ‘Mama, how about a doek for Janet’, I was proposing to transform her, despite her colour and her deep blue eyes, into an African girl for the while. (Themba 2006, 67)

On the basis of the above, we can comfortably conclude that Themba definitely did not fit the description of the much-resented “Black Englishman.” One thing for sure, if conceptually tribal allegiances are not a precondition for detribalisation, then Themba and his contemporaries were detribalised Africans. They all transcended tribal, ethnic and racial differences. To transcend these does not necessarily mean they disputed their existence. As Mphahlele argues in the statement above, we all have our diverse backgrounds but it is the mentality that we are in control of. They chose a shared identity over the frivolous divisions of tribe and race. One might also argue that South Africa was not only a racially stratified society; it was also a class society. For a man with little education who could not speak English fluently, would have been found wanting in the discussions that Themba and his peers had during the multiracial parties that they often attended. Themba’s advantage was his ability to adjust to different situations, wherein he could speak the language of a tsotsi and be on par with them, pick up nice time girls at times, and engage at equal footing with intellectuals and politicians like Robert Resha, Robert Sobukwe and Duma Nokwe.

What we learn from Can Themba is that in an unequal society, it is not enough to refuse to be incorporated into different existential structures. In the quest to build a nation, it is also important for the majority to be assertive, carve their own identity and draw the minority into the centre. He did this in a variety of ways through his writings as well as his interactions. As a writer, Can Themba takes us away from the narrative of spectacles and brings our attention to the mundane, the unnoticeable, the marginalised and even the resented. As Nkondo indicates in the interview cited earlier, Themba was one of the first writers of this generation to get into the mind of the urchin who terrorised people in the trains, shebeens and in communities in general. He writes in a language that will be understood by the people that he writes for and this is one of his major strengths as a writer. He was a member of the elite who identified fully with the working class that he wrote about.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SUPREME INTELLECTUAL TSOTSI: THE COMPLEXITY OF CAN THEMBA'S SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL DISPOSITION

Intellectual activity was nothing if not fun, which led some to regard him [Can Themba] as flippant, reckless and irresponsible. For though he had studied English and philosophy, he eschewed the turgid, the solemn and the pretentiously weighty language of those who merely wish to sound abstruse. He lent to his thoughts the same vivid imagery, sharp staccato rhythm of the township language of the urban *tsotsi*, because he himself was the supreme intellectual *tsotsi* of them all—  
**Lewis Nkosi**

#### 5.1 Introduction

Can Themba is revered as a towering intellectual in South African cultural history, having distinguished himself as a teacher, journalist, writer and a fierce debater in his short but meteoric life. He is also referred to as the “shebeen intellectual,” owing to his love for intellectual debates while consuming copious amounts of alcohol in the shebeens. The combination of intellectualism, shebeen culture and the cult of a *tsotsi* is a complex conundrum that cannot be understood without a comprehensive analysis of his life. In a paradoxical sense, he is at the same time associated with the cult of a *tsotsi*, the township ruffians known for terrorising innocent people, mugging and stealing to make a living.

The central theme of this chapter grapples with perceptive notions of intellectualism and its relation to seemingly incompatible social factors of the shebeen culture and the cult of a *tsotsi*. It interfaces with the preceding chapter, which presented the discursive paradigms of Can Themba's identity ethos and located him within the realm of twentieth century African intellectuals. By way of introduction, my conception of intellectualism for the purposes of this discussion is in line with Antonio Gramsci's definition of an intellectual, as described in the introduction of *African Intellectuals in 19<sup>th</sup> Century ad 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa* by Mcebisi Ndletyana. In this text, Ndletyana paraphrases Gramsci:

We take our definition of an intellectual from the Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci. Intellectuals are individuals who, by virtue of their position in society and intellectual training, are preoccupied with abstract ideas, not only for self-gratification, but also to fulfil a public role. (Ndletyana, 2008:1)

Gramsci writes quite extensively on intellectuals and leaves us with many options to choose from and interrogate. In his essay, “Intellectuals and Hegemony,” published in his *Prison Notebooks* (1971), Gramsci expands the conception of intellectuals in accordance to one’s contribution to intellectual thought. He sets the parameters within the immediate social function of the intellectual in their field of specialty:

When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort. ([http://www.the-st-claire.com/night\\_course/Primary-Gramsci.pdf](http://www.the-st-claire.com/night_course/Primary-Gramsci.pdf))

In line with the above argument, the foundations of Themba’s intellectual architecture as a writer, a journalist and a teacher, is viewed against the social factors of the shebeen culture and the cult of a tsotsi. In its most prosaic definition, a shebeen is a place where people buy and drink illicit liquor, and this is the culture that was quite prevalent in Sophiatown of the 1950s during which Themba wrote many of his stories. The dominance of the shebeen setting in his writings makes it easy to interweave the shebeen culture with his intellectual architecture.

The shebeen represents many things in African communities, especially during the period of the 1950s. The existence of shebeens was generally an illegal undertaking, and the owners were always at the risk of being raided by the state security forces. This was the period in which there were legal prohibitions against the consumption of European liquor by black people. Since they were not allowed to purchase the liquor, they started brewing their own alcohol using traditional means. This was also a way of reconnecting with their customs, as brewing of alcohol is part of African traditional societies. The appetite for a drink was however not limited to traditionally brewed alcohol, so to appease the insatiable appetites many of the shebeen owners used whites to buy Western liquor for them. The shebeen culture therefore became an integral part of life in the Johannesburg underworld. This being an illegal forum, the tsotsi element was always prevalent in the shebeen environment.

A tsotsi is simply a slick township thug, many of whom distinguish themselves through their attire and language. It should be noted however that the definition of a tsotsi ranges from one community to another and from one era to another. Some tsotsis would master some elements of a tsotsi culture and not others. However, there are certain characteristics that seem to be the most dominant in the Sophiatown and Johannesburg tsotsi of the 1950s. A typical tsotsi character of the 1950s Sophiatown would possess some of the qualities described by Clive Glaser in his book, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935 – 1976*:

A tsotsi was a “slick guy” who dressed and behaved in a particular way. For Peggy Bel Air, who grew up in Sophiatown and became a prominent member of the Americans gang, the word represented “a style, a way of life.” (Glaser, 2000: 53)

The tsotsi character is one of the most dominant personalities in the works of the 1950s black South African writers, and even more so in the works of Can Themba. Their presence is always felt for the drama that it brings to the narrative, much as they brought danger and turmoil to the lives of many inhabitants of Sophiatown. Themba explores the tsotsi character in a number of texts, including “The Urchin”, “The Dube Train”, “Crepuscule”, and several others. The presence of the tsotsi is felt in almost every aspect of life and this Themba depicts impeccably in his writing. According to Muxe Nkondo, what distinguishes Themba in his exploration of the tsotsi phenomenon is that as a writer he looks from the inside, as opposed to hollow characters that seemed to be created by someone who is watching from a distance.

He was more interested in the person you meet in the house of truth, the person you meet in the tavern, what we called a shebeen at the time, how close can you come to that person. Read all his works, even when he writes about “The Dube Train.”

Perhaps what gave Themba an edge over many of his contemporaries is that he frequented shebeens alongside tsotsis and thus had authentic views and perspectives into the ways of the tsotsi. His depiction of the tsotsi therefore becomes genuine and intimate, and evades the superficial portrayal of character. He writes from the point of view of someone who has shared a drink with a tsotsi, had a conversation with them and understood them better than an outsider. Themba was part of the educated elite, which was often viewed with suspicion by other components in the class society that South Africa was becoming. The shebeen was one of the most prominent points of convergence where all classes amongst the black community interfaced. To paraphrase Nkosi, they all met in the twilight underground world of urban African life united by “the need for European alcohol.” It is through these interactions in the

shebeens, among others, that he grew to become the embodiment of the seemingly contradictory traits of an intellectual and a tsotsi.

These paradoxes are aptly captured in the epigraph used in this chapter as quoted from Lewis Nkosi's tribute to Themba, which has been reproduced in the recent publication of the latter's works, *Writing Home: Lewis Nkosi on South African Writing*, published by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press as "The Late Can Themba: An Appreciation." In this piece, Nkosi, who had known Themba both as a friend and a colleague, draws parallels between Themba's creative and intellectual potential and his actual achievements in the respective areas, and comes to the conclusion that "we mourn a talent largely misused or neglected; we mourn what might have been." In this way, Nkosi declares that Themba as an intellectual and a creative being, had a lot to offer but he fell short of his fullest potential.

What we learn from Nkosi and several other critics like Mari Snyman, who goes as far as to titling her Masters thesis, "Can Themba: The Life and Work of a *Shebeen Intellectual*" (emphasis my own), is that Themba epitomised the drinking and intellectual cultures of Sophiatown, if not regarded as the main proponent of the two. The reference to him as the "shebeen intellectual" is a clear illustration of the perceived paradoxes that are linked to Themba and his lifestyle. In order to make a polemical connection between the shebeen phenomenon and intellectualism, the concept of a shebeen will have to be understood in a much broader sense than mere "illegal drinking-places, where European liquor is sold at double prices", as described by Sampson. A more comprehensive definition of a shebeen would include the various purposes to which the shebeen culture was put.

The shebeen is a common setting in many of Themba's works and is used in a variety of ways. Amongst other things, a shebeen is a form of resistance against the repressive and divisive apartheid laws; a forum for intellectual debate; a place of reflection; a place to pick up "nice time" girls; a place to drown your sorrows after a day of covering horrific stories. In short, the shebeen culture in Sophiatown of the 1950s was a phenomenon that developed out of the circumstances of the time. As a very influential public figure, Themba's lifestyle was bound to spread over to those who admired him or his way of life. It is not surprising that one of his protégées, Casey Motsisi, was known as the "Shakespeare of the Shebeens" because he used to climb on top of the table in shebeens and start reciting Shakespeare's sonnets when drunk.

Motsisi shamelessly admits to his own helpless admiration of Themba to the extent of trying to emulate everything that he did—good or bad. In his tribute titled "Can Themba

remembered,” published in *Casey & Co.* (1978), a collection put together by Mthobeni Mutlootse, Motsisi confesses, “I so idolised him [Can] that I even tried to walk like him, speak like him and to be a woman chaser.” Some of his exploits like sexual conquests may not necessarily be of particular interest in this chapter, but Motsisi’s testimony in the above excerpt is a profound illustration of the complexity of the man’s character. Although he admittedly did not quite master all the aspects that he tried to emulate from his mentor and drinking mate, Motsisi grew to become a notable drinker and a legendary journalist in his own right. In a sense, the “shebeen intellectual” gave birth to the “Shakespeare of the shebeens.” It should be noted that Motsisi writes here with the benefit of hindsight, and continues to speak admirably of his fallen hero even though he acknowledges the follies of their unquestioning loyalty.

This argument is corroborated by none other than Themba himself, whose reflections on the shebeen culture and his contribution to it is divulged in his own writings. In one of his most personally reflective pieces, “The Bottom of the Bottle,” Themba had an honest moment of self-reflection where he evaluates the negative impact his destructive behaviour had on the youth that looked up to him. This is captured in the following words:

Lord, it struck me, what a treasury of talent I have here in front of me. Must they bury their lives with mine like this under a load of Sophiatown bottles? It was conscience that struck me, I say, because I knew that many of them looked up to me, my way of life, and repeated my despair and its defences behind my back. (Themba, 2006: 57)

What we decipher from the above extract is that Themba’s public influence was multifaceted and possibly paradoxical in its nature. The shebeen culture that he romanticised in his writing ultimately took root alongside his intellectualism in some of the people that admired his work. Consequently, it is almost impossible to speak of Can Themba’s writing without referring to his drinking. At certain moments, his drinking seems even more revered than his creative and intellectual oeuvre. It is in light of this dominant discourse that his daughter, Yvonne Themba in a recorded interview, argues that for a long time they knew only of his drinking. The true revelation of her father’s legacy came on the occasion to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of “The Suit” in 2013, when a number of intellectuals came out publicly to speak proudly of how much they owed their intellectual development to Themba as their teacher and mentor. His legacy will be explored more intensely later in this thesis.

Themba’s intellectual dispositions as well as social manifestations are matters that kept recurring in many of the interviews that I conducted for this research. If Themba is seen as the

proponent of the irresponsible drinking culture in Sophiatown and among the *Drum* journalists of the 1950s, none other than him has reinforced that perception. He writes quite extensively about this culture and anecdotes shared by many of his contemporaries seem to corroborate this view. Several prominent individuals including Nat Nakasa, Nadine Gordimer, Lewis Nkosi and Anthony Sampson, amongst others, claim to have been introduced to their first shebeen visit in Johannesburg by none other than Can Themba. Their accounts, combined with his own reflections, make a compelling case that Themba was indeed a major player in the proliferation of the shebeen culture in Sophiatown of the 1950s. Given this background, his title of “shebeen intellectual” may therefore not be misplaced. The interest remains his versatility and thus becoming the embodiment of very diverse traits. At this point, it may be necessary to return to Obed Musi’s assertion in Nicol’s book, *A Good-Looking Corpse*, where he says:

Can would talk to a professor in the morning, a beauty queen at lunch-time and a gangster in the afternoon. And have everyone laughing and eating out of his hand.  
(Nicol, 1991:179)

During our interview, Kathrada echoed this sentiment expressed by Musi here, when he said:

Although some people may describe him as an intellectual, I don't dismiss that of course, he was but he wasn't the type of intellectual who was somewhere above people. He was a very approachable down to earth person that you could meet and interact with. You know we had many intellectuals, they sort of a little above ordinary people like us so it was not easy, but not with Can. With Can it was easy to interact with him because for him, although he was described as an intellectual he was also a people's man.

What we gather from both Musi’s and Kathrada’s assertions are clear illustrations that much as Themba was a revered intellectual, he was not a reclusive one. He was deeply rooted in the popular culture of the times while at the same time his intellectual depth placed him amongst the greatest thinkers of the time. This chapter takes into consideration a number of interviews that have been conducted and juxtaposes them with the works by Themba, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as some critical works that document him and his writing, in order to come up with a comprehensive exposition of both his social and intellectual dispositions. To put our discussion within the relevant historical context, particular attention will be paid to the history of black intellectuals in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa and locate Themba within this continuum. A more in-depth understanding of the prominence of the shebeen culture and the cult of a tsotsi in Sophiatown will be essential. The following paragraphs will therefore explore these

phenomena as described by Themba and other social commentators as well as determining the most remarkable elements that best define his legacy.

## **5.2 The Dynamics of the Cult of a Tsotsi**

The cult of a tsotsi is barely ever associated with any decent or constructive endeavour. A tsotsi is often viewed as a menace to society, wreaking havoc and causing major inconveniences to both the authorities and ordinary citizens who are trying to make a decent living. Can Themba, as a writer who chronicled and interrogated the life stories of the black urban world, transcends these perceived binaries and brings the tsotsi and the intellectual together on the same pedestal. The point of convergence for these diverse characters is often the shebeen.

It may be prudent to paint a discursive picture of a tsotsi during Themba's time as a way of putting the polemics of this discussion in a historical context. In this regard, it is perhaps Glaser in his book, *Bo-tsotsi* (2000, 47) who best captures our notion of a tsotsi during this moment in the history of Johannesburg townships:

In contemporary usage, a tsotsi refers very broadly to an urban African criminal. During the second half of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, however, the meaning of tsotsi was far more specific. A tsotsi was a young man who dressed, spoke, and behaved in a clearly identifiable way. He imitated American "city slicker" clothing styles, spoke tsotsitaal, indulged in some kind of criminal or quasi-legal activity, and generally moved around in gangs.

The dominant features in this definition include criminality, language and the attire as elements that ordinarily distinguished tsotsis from other citizens. It should be noted that while this definition captures the essence of a tsotsi, the cult of a tsotsi evolves over time and a tsotsi from one area differs from that situated in a different locale. The tsotsis of the 1950s operated mainly in gangs, and often times their activities would happen under the watch of their own communities who may not be the targets initially. Things like theft, robbery and burglary were often perpetrated against the rich whites, and then the tsotsi would come back to sell to their clientele in the townships. However, the poor also fell victim of the gangster exploits, as the tsotsis got more brazen and indiscriminate in their activities.

It will be in the interests of this chapter to unpack this concept and draw parallels between intellectualism and the tsotsi mentality, as Themba seems to be the embodiment of both. Through his stories, Themba reflects on these elements and thus presents an authentic view of the cult of a tsotsi. In a rather coincidental affirmation of this statement, Kgositsile states that the gangsters resented the intelligentsia, whom they contemptuously called “situations”, but Can Themba was an exception. He says Can Themba could “walk in Sophiatown at night alone and be very safe. I don’t think there were too many people who could do that.” Considering Kgositsile’s assertion here, one cannot help but think of the brutal murder of Henry Nxumalo, who was butchered to death by unknown assailants in December 1957. Although the circumstances surrounding Nxumalo’s killing remain unclear, Sylvester Stein in his book, *Who Killed Mr Drum?* explores quite a number of possibilities and they all point to the elements of what can be referred to as the prevalent cult of a tsotsi.

What one would refer to as the “tsotsi movement” in Sophiatown was comprised mainly of gangsters who tormented people and fought against each other. There are well-known gangsters that existed in Sophiatown and this seemed to be part of the fabric of the township. It is perhaps prominent poet Don Mattera, who presents the most authentic picture of the world of gangsterism in Sophiatown, as he himself was a leader of the Vultures, a notorious group from Sophiatown. According to him, the Vultures were the most powerful teenage group in Sophiatown and neighbouring Western township (1987:106). Mattera goes on to list several other notable gangsters including the Russians, Americans, Gestapos, Berliners, and several other gangs that ravaged lives in Sophiatown and surrounding areas.

It is not the focus of this study to trace the genesis of the various groups, but basic insight may help present a discursive picture of the growth of a cult of a tsotsi in Sophiatown. These groups often started for a single purpose, sometimes as mere pickpockets or even attempting to restore order in the respective communities, but they ended up being a menace to the very same communities. Themba writes about the tribally based Russians, a gangster group that was comprised of people of Basotho descent working in the Rand mines. Although the beginning of the conflict remains a contentious issue, what is clear is that there was a major clash between the Russians and the Civil Guards comprised of members of other tribes. In his *Drum* Short Story Competition award-winning story, “Mob Passion”, Themba explores these clashes drawing tribal attitudes as the basis. The story, which received quite a focused attention in Chapter two of this study, revolves around Mapula, a Mosotho woman who is in love with

Linga, a man from the rival Xhosa tribe. The clashes as we see in this story, were not instigated by any personal reasons, but were largely perpetrated by the politics of difference.

Other gangsters, as we learn from Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, were formed, as vigilante groups to fight those perceived to be wreaking havoc in society, and they ended up perpetrating the same situation in their communities. Mattera writes from a first-hand point of view as a former gangster who was both a victim and executioner of gangster activities. It seems like what they relished the most was the sheer joy of being talked about like the famous actors in the films that they watched. In his book, *Memory is the Weapon* (1987:63), Mattera says, "People would talk about us in the streets of Sophiatown, for that was what we lived for – to be spoken of and to be feared. Respect had nothing to do with it." Themba may not have been an enterprising tsotsi, but because of his closeness to them, because of his affinity to human experience, and particularly his patronage of certain shebeens, a connection had developed between him and them. In fact, in "The Bottom of the Bottle," he indicates that even though they (he and his colleagues) were not tsotsis in the conventional sense, the tsotsis saw them as their allies.

Neither were we 'tsotsis' in the classical sense of the term, though the tsotsis saw us as cousins. I swear, however, that not one of the gentlemen who associated with me in that period was guilty (caught or not) of murder or rape, assault, robbery, theft or anything like that. True, we spent nights in police stations, but it was invariably possession of illicit liquor or, its corollary, drunkenness. (Themba, 2006: 57)

In a different story, "Crepuscle", Can Themba finds himself in an environment where he has to convince tsotsis who have taken a stance against him. It is here that Themba's genius and ability to interact with the tsotsi is best exemplified. He engages with them at their own level, patiently explains his motive and why they should support him, unlike the guys that "procure" their sisters to the white man. This is captured in the following lines:

'Look, boys,' I explained, 'you don't understand, you don't understand me. I agree with you that these whites take advantage of our girls and we don't like the way our girls act as if they are special. But all you've done about it is just sit and sizzle here at them. No one among you has tried to take revenge. Only I have gone to get a white girl and avenged with her what the whites do to our sisters. I'm not like the guys who procure black girls for their white friends. I seek revenge...' (Themba, 2006: 73)

Here, we see Can Themba, the author, demonstrating what Nkondo expresses with regard to his ability to get closest to the thug – the tsotsi. Although “Crepuscle” is presented as a fictitious narrative, it is based on Themba’s relationship with the British émigré, Jean Hart. She had come to South Africa to join her husband, Malcolm, and together they became part of the Johannesburg “underground” world. They befriended the ‘*Drum* Boys’ and other black intelligentsia and started attending parties in the townships. It was during these interactions that Themba met Jean and the two fell in love. The details of the affair will be discussed in later chapters. Suffice to say their affair was quite a spectacle and inspired several books including the abovementioned story by Themba himself. At the time, the different race groups were kept apart by the apartheid system, which enacted laws such as the Group Areas Act and Immorality Act to legitimise the discriminatory practises.

The Group Areas Act was a cause for division and hatred not only between the different racial groups, but also amongst the oppressed black population. Themba explores this aspect of South African history quite extensively in a number of stories especially in his journalistic writing. As part of his investigative journalism, Themba takes a special focus on the lives of ordinary people in Dube Township. These include the lives of hostel dwellers, which were characterised by ethnic violence, as well as their journeys as train commuters. The violence meted out by the tsotsis against their ilk is captured most remarkably in two of Themba’s journalistic pieces including “Terror in the Trains” and “Inside Dube Hostel.” These two pieces are a direct reflection of real life experiences, but they also inspired several other writings that are presented in a form of fiction.

Themba seems to have had a particular interest in the matters that relate to both the cult of a tsotsi and the violence, especially when it is influenced by the politics of difference. We see this in several of his stories where he grapples with this subject quite extensively and from a variety of angles. In the preceding chapter, where this study explores extensively “The Discursive Paradigms of Tribal Discourse,” reference is made to his efforts at demystifying ethnic and racial differences through his writing. In his reflections on “Inside Dube Hostel,” Themba makes a direct commentary on the scourge of tribalism in the hostel.

According to his analysis, there was a tsotsi element perpetrating the violence that was purported to be a tribally based feud. The tsotsis would attack someone, wearing an attire that resembled the traditional garb of a particular ethnic group, thus creating an impression that that group had attacked the other. Naturally, the other group would retaliate and violent clashes

would ensue between the identified groups. Once violence erupts, it gets out of control and the origins thereof are superseded by the fact that there is existential rivalry. He decries the fact that the community did not understand that the perpetrators of the violence were actually the tsotsis who capitalised on the existing tribal divisions. He writes in “Inside Dube Hostel”:

The bane of the situation was that ethnic grouping kept the tribes so apart that they could not get together and see through the tsotsis’ ruse – even though they lived in the same hostel. (Themba, 1985:117)

In this piece, Themba does not only record the spectacle of the violence linked to ethnic differences and the exploits of the tsotsis, he goes further to explore the stereotypes that are attached to the various ethnic groups which are the main cause of division among the oppressed. He makes reference to popular jokes that have been entrenched and certain stereotypes or perceptions about the different ethnic groups among the oppressed in South Africa. He does this by quoting a song that makes mockery of the various black communities in the country:

*You give birth to a Mosotho,*

*Then you give birth to a spy.*

*You give birth to a Zulu,*

*Then you give birth to a watchman.*

*You give birth to a coloured,*

*Then you give birth to a drunk.*

*You give back to a Xhosa,*

*Then you give birth to a thief.*

Although a song like this may be rendered in a light-hearted fashion, it is also indicative of how the stereotypes and divisions manifested among the oppressed. These perceptions perpetuated the tribal violence that took place in the Reef area in the fifties. With every instance of violence that took place, there was always a tsotsi lurking in the background as Themba demonstrates in the excerpts above. He employs the poetic licence of being a writer to explore the violence further in “The Dube Train”. This story, even though it is supposed to be fiction, is obviously based on his experience after the exposure that he gained while reporting on the

violence that took place in Dube. His investigation resulted in the two journalistic pieces, “Terror in the Trains” and “Inside Dube Hostel,” as well as the short story, “The Dube Train”.

He is more at liberty to explore the violence using his own imagination in “The Dube Train”, as a fictional text. Told from a first person point of view, in “The Dube Train” Themba is capable of injecting feeling and reflecting on the anxiety of those present in a train where they are tormented by a tsotsi. He captures his own reaction as the narrator and that of other men in the train as they cowardly wince at the expletives dished out by the tsotsi at a woman who tried to stop him from harming a young girl. The tsotsi ultimately assaults the girl, giving her a “vicious slap across the face so that her beret went flying.” She flung her leg over the unnamed narrator and tries to escape. The tsotsi walks past the narrator as he goes over to the girl to finish what he had started. The assault continues right before his eyes, and ultimately a “hulk of a man” bravely confronts the tsotsi.

Themba narrates the scene of the assault with such vivid and poignant imagery that a reader is often left hanging between the world of factual reportage and imaginative writing. The dramatic incident would not be complete without the image of a tsotsi at work using the familiar tsotsi weapon – a knife. In this instance, the victim is the hulk of a man who dared confront the tsotsi that was assaulting the girl. In the event that the tsotsi drew out a knife, the unnamed narrator remarks, “There is something odd that a knife in a crowd does to various people.” This phrase alone demonstrates the author’s intimate knowledge and familiarity with such a scene of violence. He goes further to describe the confrontation that ensues in the following words:

Seconds before the impact, the tsotsi lifted the blade and plunged it obliquely. Like an instinctual, predatory beast, he seemed to know exactly where the vulnerable jugular was and he aimed for it. The jerk of the train deflected his stroke, though, and the blade slit a long cleavage along the big man’s open chest. (Themba, 2006: 153)

This particular confrontation ends with the “hulk of a man” tossing the young urchin outside the window of a moving train. Themba concludes, “It was just an incident in the Dube train.” He observes that the passengers relished the chilling episode, but there was no sympathy for the boy or the man. It may not be totally beyond comprehension to infer that there is a greater metaphoric significance in this particular incident. In spite of the calamities that occur, including the ejection of human lives in the course of living, life, just like the “Dube Train,” goes on. The people have been so exposed to violence meted out by tsotsis that they have

become numb, unperturbed and, as Themba can be heard arguing in the video footage of “Come Back Africa!” violence has become part of their lives.

Themba uses the confrontation in “The Dube Train” to illustrate that although many of the clashes were deemed to be tribally rooted, there were pure tsotsi elements that had no connection with one’s ethnic group. In the story above, there is no reference to the tribal background of the tsotsi or the man, yet the two clashed over what can be regarded as basic moral and humanistic values that have no direct bearing to tribalism. The common denominator is an element of a tsotsi, which could be used to perpetrate violence in any manner or form.

### **5.3 The Shebeen as a Point of Convergence**

Shebeens played a significant part in the construction of the notions of a tsotsi in Sophiatown of the 1950s. In all its complexities, the shebeen came to define a prominent part of township life in the African urban world of the 1950s. It therefore becomes a common feature in the urban narratives of this kind.

The very notion of a shebeen indicates the illegality of its nature. The word “shebeen” is derived from “sibin,” an Irish word for illicit whiskey. To paraphrase the Wikipedia definition, “shebeens are most often located in townships as an alternative to pubs and bars, where under apartheid and the Rhodesia era, the indigenous Africans were barred from entering pubs or bars reserved for those of European descent.” While this definition offers the basic meaning of this covert establishment, we will soon learn that the shebeen phenomenon meant much more to the African in the urban world, especially during the politically volatile period of the 1950s and 1960s. With the increase of urban movement occasioned by the industrial revolution after the Second World War, there was an upsurge of shebeens burgeoning across the realm of South African townships.

The prevalence of the shebeen culture in the townships has a lot to do with the racially based laws of the time. The African people, as indicated in the above definition, were legally prohibited from buying “western liquor” from the pubs, and as alternative mechanisms, they either brew their own liquor or bought illegally acquired alcohol from the shebeens in the townships, if they did not do both at the same time. Es’kia Mphahlele in *Down Second Avenue*, Modikwe Dikobe in *Marabi Dance* and Bloke Modisane in *Blame Me on History*, amongst others, write quite extensively about illicit liquor trade and shebeens during this period in South

African history. Shebeens seem to be a dominant factor in Themba's lived experience, as they have prominence both in his fiction and in his journalistic articles. He goes to the extent of conducting an investigation and offering an analysis of the shebeen phenomenon in the 1950s South African townships.

We learn from the various texts that shebeens meant different things to different people within the same community. For Themba and most of his fellow journalists at *Drum*, it may have initially been a place to quench their thirst after a long day of covering gruesome stories of starvation, poverty and violence. It also became the main attraction of township culture where they took their white friends for a tour of the township. This we learn from Themba's "Crepuscule", where the narrator takes his white girlfriend, Janet, to a shebeen where he suddenly becomes a sensation among the patrons. This story also demonstrates the kind of cultural clashes and assimilations occasioned by the shebeen setting. Seeing that the narrator (presumed to be Can Themba) had come with a white guest, two men are rushed off their chairs to make comfortable space for the cross-racial couple. Here we see Themba's stature being elevated above that of other patrons, whom he had been drinking with, to the extent of being addressed as "Mr Themba," something not consistent with his character. Conversely, as indicated in an extract above, the gangsters show unhappiness with Themba and his friends who bring white men to take the black sisters from the township.

Themba and many of his *Drum* colleagues are known to have experimented with cross-racial relationships at a time when it was illegal to do so. Citizens from the black community were not only prohibited from living in or visiting white designated areas after certain hours, even the whites were not allowed to visit townships except on special occasions, like when they have to collect or drop-off their employees (mostly maids) after work. Jean Hart, Themba's erstwhile British girlfriend with whom he had a sizzling adulterous relationship, talks disparagingly about how after a party, she and other white liberals had to write letters for their black friends to give them permission to be in a white suburb for "work." All of this weighed down heavily not only on the black elites like Themba who had the privilege of partying, drinking and even sleeping with whites despite the prohibitive environment.

Bringing their white guests to the shebeens in the townships at the height of prohibitive apartheid laws such as the Immorality and the Group Areas Acts was their own way of defying the system. Therefore, in addition to the fact that the very existence of a shebeen was in

contravention of the law, shebeens also became the hub of illegal activities like different races enjoying life together on equal footing.

In Chapter one of this study reference was made to how Themba established his apartment – the House of Truth as a forum for intellectual debate. He and several of his friends had turned most shebeens into this kind of a forum, where drinking was coupled with debate and intellectual engagement. The shebeen had become, among other things, a point of convergence for people from all walks of life. To paraphrase Nkosi (2016: 26), in the shebeen one met “teachers, businessmen, clerks, showgirls, payroll robbers, ‘nice-time’ girls and occasionally, even renegade priests.” The shebeen was, essentially, an entertainment hub for everyone, including the tsotsis. Themba explores this phenomenon in numerous stories.

There is an established pattern in Can Themba’s relationship with shebeens. Apart from the fact that they are a dominant factor in his writing, which testifies to the broad lifestyle of the black urban world in Johannesburg of the 1950s, he seems to have played a prominent role in entrenching shebeen culture as an integral part of this lifestyle. He did not only frequent the shebeens, but he went as far as recruiting new patrons to these establishments. Many of his former colleagues and friends, black and white, seem to have a common experience of being inducted to the first shebeen experience by the man from the House of Truth.

By his own admission, in his tribute to Nat Nakasa entitled “The Boy with a Tennis Racket,” Themba presents a detailed account of Nakasa’s first day in Sophiatown, where he took him to the room where he would stay for “three minutes, five minutes?” before taking him to a shebeen in Edith street (Themba, 2006: 155). Nakasa himself would later give account of his own experience of staying with Themba, and their overt drinking escapades in the shebeens of Sophiatown as well as drinking sessions in the houses of white liberals in Johannesburg north.

It is Nakasa’s biographer, Ryan Brown, who presents a combination of the testimonies of the writers as well as the views of the observers. In her biography of Nakasa entitled *A Native of Nowhere*, Brown attributes the now infamous shebeen life and drinking culture to Themba as the chief architect. The following excerpt from the book supports this view:

“But the *DRUM* staff did their best to introduce new writers to their social scene, and Can led the charge. A man of crackling, constant energy, the former high school teacher put little stake in sobriety – or the people who practised it.” (Brown, 2013: 49)

In this book, Brown goes further to detail how Themba often called new reporters at *Drum*, and asked them a favour during working hours. It is easy to predict that that favour involved them buying alcohol for him, only that it was not exactly that straight forward. It is said that he would thrust an empty Coke bottle into the hands of the unsuspecting inexperienced reporter, pointed him in the direction of the nearest shebeen and say: “Bring me a Can Themba Coke,” and add that, “They’ll know what I mean.” The last segment demonstrates the familiarity with which Themba interacted with the shebeen owners. Sure, all shebeens around knew what the “Can Themba coke” entailed.

In an interview that I conducted with former *Drum* journalist and Can Themba mentee, Juby Mayet, she gives a detailed account of a similar experience. The only difference, perhaps, is the fact that she does not have a first-hand experience of being sent to buy what she calls the “Can Themba Coke.” Her testimony is from the perspective of having inadvertently drank the “Can Themba Special,” which is a bottle of Coke dashed with a generous dose of brandy. According to her, no one was allowed to touch Themba’s “Coke,” because only he knew what the contents in the glass entailed.

In my innocence, I thought it was Coke and one day we were chatting, walking around there discussing whatever. I took the bottle and took a couple of gulps and I said hell this coke tastes weird. It was the first time in my life I tasted brandy and coke, that was the “Can Von Themba” special.

This is the practice that became quite common at *Drum* as instigated by Can Themba, the sage of Sophiatown. According to Schadeberg, there was also the Cardinal Puff drinking game, which involved participants drinking copious amounts of alcohol in quick succession. Themba and many other *Drum* journalists participated quite enthusiastically in this game.

Themba was quite generous with sharing this lifestyle, as he introduced many of his friends to shebeens mainly in Sophiatown. Among others, he introduced Lewis Nkosi, who went on to be a legend until his last days with his drinking abilities. In his famous essay, “The Fabulous Decade”, which now appears in the collection of his works, *Writing Home: Lewis Nkosi on South African Writing*, Nkosi gives a detailed account of how Themba introduced him to shebeen life. Nkosi, by his account, was a teetotaller who had no ambitions of joining the drinking culture at *Drum*, had just arrived from KwaZulu-Natal. He says one of the first questions that Themba asked was whether the boy from Natal drank, with the answer being in the negative, Themba was disappointed but seemed determined to change the status quo. This

was not before he bemoaned the ‘bad choices’ that the proprietor of *Drum*, Jim Bailey, had made in bringing a teetotaler who would corrupt their morals. Here is Nkosi’s account:

He [Can Themba] then reassured the august company that nothing was lost yet; he vowed to break me in before the month was over. This was to consist generally of taking me on the rounds of Johannesburg shebeens or speakeasies, that twilight underground world of urban African life where all classes met, united only by the need for European alcohol, the consumption of which they were prohibited. (Nkosi, 2016: 26)

Nkosi resisted Themba’s overtures for over a month, and perhaps realising that resistance was futile, he took to the drink under a different tutelage barely three months later. His pride, of course, is the fact that someone else other than Themba managed to break him. Nkosi does not tell who the person is, and one would not be surprised that it was Nkosi himself who decided to have a drink without it being forced down his throat by somebody else. Nevertheless, Nkosi believes that he had won his own resistance struggle; because whatever happened he was determined that, it was not going to be Can Themba who was going to get him to drink. He regards Themba as “someone I presumed to be waging a war against my morals.”

While Themba may not have succeeded in breaking Nkosi’s virginity as a drinker, he does have a positive record to boast with introducing shebeen life particularly among the white liberals. His former editor at *Drum*, Anthony Sampson, with whom he enjoyed quite a close relationship, and South Africa’s first Nobel laureate for Literature, Nadine Gordimer, both have a similar story to tell. The same man – Can Themba, introduced them to their maiden shebeen experience. Although circumstances differ, and the nature of the shebeen is not exactly the same, both Sampson and Gordimer attribute this maiden experience to Themba and they do not seem to have any regrets about it.

On the occasion of the Can Themba Memorial Lecture in 2013, Gordimer made the revelation that Themba introduced her to her first shebeen experience. In an unpublished paper simply entitled, “Can Themba,” the late Nobel laureate reminisces:

Can introduced me to my first-time shebeen in the 1950s. Can had – he said – the honour of naming that shebeen “The House of Truth”. But it was something of the truth of African daily Johannesburg lives. (Gordimer, 2013)

It should be noted, however, that Can Themba’s abode at 111 Ray Street, in Sophiatown of the 1950s, which he named ‘The House of Truth’ as referenced in Gordimer’s excerpt above, did

not exactly meet the strictest definition of a shebeen. Shebeen, as earlier discussed, is a place that actually sold alcohol albeit covertly as it operated in the black underworld where it was illegal to sell “European Liquor.” A man of insatiable alcohol appetite like Themba could not carry out this illicit trade; otherwise, it would be tantamount to leaving a flock of sheep in the care of a wolf. Themba may not have sold alcohol in his ‘House of truth,’ but surely the den had all the attributes of a shebeen— drinking, music and debate all combined.

The distinguished editor of *Drum*, Sampson, on the other hand, was introduced to a different shebeen. Although the venue for his first shebeen visit may be different, the man who orchestrated it is the same. Sampson was introduced to ‘Back o’ the Moon,’ at the time a new shebeen that Themba had just discovered. The shebeen was to become one of Themba’s favourite drinking holes and one of the most legendary in Sophiatown. Sampson in his seminal work, *Drum: A Venture into New Africa* gives account of his experience in his maiden shebeen visit with Themba as follows:

Can [Themba] introduced me to Sophiatown. “Come to the Back o’ the Moon,” he said one evening. It’s a new shebeen I’ve just discovered. I think you’d be interested.”  
(Sampson, 1956:68)

The two visited the famed shebeen, and Sampson’s initiation to shebeen life did not end with the introduction to this particular shebeen only, it went further to introduce him to the plethora of shebeens that were sprouting in the area. Although Sampson believes that the most interesting shebeens were in Sophiatown, Themba pointed out shebeens that were within the city of Johannesburg, and not far from the *Drum* offices.

Themba showed his editor shebeens with different names such as “Going to Church,” “Cabin in the Sky,” “Thirty-Nine Steps” and “the House on the Telegraph Hill.” These names, it is understood, were not always the official names that everybody else used to refer to these shebeens. Themba himself enjoyed giving names that he thought were appropriate to the shebeens. There were others, including Little Heaven and The Sanctuary in Sophiatown, which Sampson in his book talks about. Themba also lists different shebeens in the different townships of Johannesburg.

In a comprehensive investigative piece entitled “Let the People Drink”, which is now published in *The World of Can Themba* (1985:160), Themba gives an in-depth analysis of the drinking culture in the townships. He says they are mainly two types, the respectable ones and those that

do not exactly care about their clientele. Among the respectable ones, he lists the Little Heaven and The Sanctuary in Sophiatown, The Greenhouse in Newclare, The Kind Lady and The Gardens in Western Township, The Basement in Orlando, and Paradise in George Goch. He argues that these make you feel at home, and the atmosphere is friendly and sociable. However, there are those that he believes are there just out to make money and do not show any care for the customers. He describes these shebeens in the following words:

They are dirty, and crowded, and hostile. The shebeen queen is always hurrying you to drink quickly, and swearing at somebody or other. ‘You b-s act as if you’ve licences to drink!’ she sells everything, brandy, gin, beer and skokiaan, hops, hoenene, Barberton, pineapple, and even more violent concoctions. It is in these that ‘doping’ takes place. (Patel, 1985: 160)

The comparison that we find above can only flow from the pen of an author who has been a frequent visitor to the various establishments. It would seem like Themba visited shebeens with a certain level of curiosity, or his observation of the various shebeens was a natural one given his overt exposure to the drinking culture. In his generation, Themba is probably only rivalled by Motsisi in his overt interest and understanding of the shebeen culture. This interest in shebeens can also be noticed when he is exiled in Swaziland, where he encounters his first shebeen in this British Protectorate, which is entitled “The Last Shebeen” and appears as the last piece in *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006). In this short narrative which is one of his last published pieces he wrote shortly before his passing in 1967, Themba (2006: 161) quips, “Trust Can Themba to find a shebeen in the Kalahari if there is one.”

Back in South Africa, Themba was part of a shebeen culture that not only he, but also the rest of his colleagues, including Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and Nat Nakasa wrote about, and acknowledge its illegal status despite its prominence in the townships in particular. With the flourishing shebeen culture, which is supposedly illegal, one wonders how the illicit liquor was obtained without the prying eyes of the hostile apartheid government apparatchiks. Of course, there are many reported raids by the security police, as Sampson reveals in his account, but the very existence of these drinking houses and illicit liquor raises questions of accessibility of liquor in the townships.

According to David B. Coplan in his book, *In Township Tonight: South Africa’s Black City Music and Theatre* (1985:145), some of the shebeens, including Aunt Babe’s, The House on the Telegraph, and the Back ‘o the Moon in particular, became “genuine nightclubs where the

elite of the African business, sporting, entertainment, and underworlds came to talk, listen, and dance to recordings of the latest American jazz.” If an illegal trade centre for alcohol becomes as prominent as Coplan describes here, there must have been a very strong and well-coordinated system operated efficiently to procure European liquor successfully.

The manner in which the shebeen owners obtained illicit liquor was also an area of interest to Themba as a journalist. One of the ways through which the shebeen owners obtained the white man’s liquor was through sending white people who were not very well off to the beer halls to buy alcohol for them. The white ‘runners’ were often given alcohol in lieu of payment. This was a familiar practice, as described by Nkosi in the following excerpt:

The liquor ‘runners’ were white people who bought large stocks from bottle stores and resold to shebeen queens at a profit. (Nkosi, 2016:26)

Themba was not satisfied with this kind of rudimentary understanding, and wanted to have a first-hand experience of the illicit liquor trade. He made it his mission to find out and, the curious journalist that he was, he embarked on an investigative journey to establish the covert transactions involved in this trade. He later reflected on his experiences in “Let the People Drink”, a narrative that was later published in his collection of stories, *The World of Can Themba*. Expressing the motive of his investigation, Themba says:

I wanted to find out where all this liquor comes from. This was tough because nobody wants to talk. Not only from fear of the police, but because the shebeens don’t want to give away their ‘holes’— the sources of their supplies. (Patel, 1985:161)

In his quest to find out where liquor came from, Themba had to be undercover and travelled in a van, which was responsible for delivering the covert liquor. Arranged by a friend, Themba met the ‘boys’ in town and he sat with the driver and the friend, separated by a bunch of flowers that was meant to be part of the disguise for the illicit liquor. Everything was done covertly and, because he had ulterior motives, unbeknown to the driver, he was not given much information. He was not told where they were going and whom they were meeting. He could only observe that he was in the Vereeniging area based on the car registrations that he saw. In the end, he was exposed to the experience but was not given information.

While a strong argument may be proffered that Themba’s legacy is tarnished by the overt focus on his drinking expeditions, the paragraphs above present a strong argument for the opposite. If anything, Themba’s oeuvre reflects a man who was unapologetic about his intimate

relationship with the bottle. He writes quite extensively about shebeen life and he locates himself at the epicentre of this prevalent culture in the black urban world of the 1950s. Shebeens were clearly in the main drinking places, but we also learn that there was much more to them. Perhaps for Can Themba, drinking went along with intellectual debate, hence the shebeen was his favourite hangout spot.

It may be because of the illegality of the nature of the shebeens that they became the points of convergence for different classes in society, including tsotsis and intellectuals united by their thirst and abhorrence of the establishment. Although the educated elite were engineered to create the buffer zone between the white community and the oppressed blacks, the shebeen brought them together. Can Themba epitomised the paradoxes of intellectualism and tsotsi. The shebeen was the forum that allowed him to straddle this complex social stratum with ease.

#### **5.4 The Construction of Can Themba's Intellectual Architecture**

Can Themba's intellectual architecture requires a balance of a variety of socio-cultural elements to decipher and have a full grasp of. The preceding section associates him with the cult of a tsotsi, a phenomenon that is perceivable as a contrast to intellectualism, yet Themba also stands as a model of a vintage intellectual.

The preceding chapter, which interrogated Themba's identity ethos, locates him within the realm of the early twentieth century African intellectuals, many of whom had received missionary education. It would be inaccurate, however, to presume that Themba's intellectual disposition is defined according to his level of formal education. The fact that he was a graduate of Fort Hare University College, and that he passed English with a distinction, does not account for his entire profile as a public intellectual. If anything, his education at the University of Fort Hare is only a confirmation that he received formal education and passed, and this can only account as a step towards the construction of his intellectual architecture.

The utilisation of formal education or academic qualifications to measure one's intellectual depth could be a convenient but not always accurate mechanism to serve as a reliable intellectual barometer. This is not to suggest that academic achievement holds no bearing, but a qualification only suggests that one has passed a test in a particular area. More than just qualification, which could at times bear no significance beyond a mere certificate of achievement, one's output is what entrenches them in the public domain as contributors in the

intellectual tradition of any society. It is no doubt that in his short but meteoric life Can Themba inscribed his name in the annals of the history of distinguished African intellectuals.

What is remarkable about Themba is that he had a very unorthodox approach in his intellectual disposition. Hermeneutists seem to fail to pigeonhole Themba, as his intellectual architecture cuts across the established boxes. One of the leading theorists on African intellectuals in Toyin Falola, who in his book, *Nationalism and African intellectuals* (University of Rochester Press, 2001), argues, “Thinkers may be variously labelled as pragmatist, traditionalist, assimilationist, or Afrocentrist, although the line is not always clear-cut. Some are radical, others are conservative.” Themba defies these parameters, and can neither be said to be radical nor pragmatic. The closest he can be is a pragmatist, simply because he adapts into different situations, but this is not always applicable, as testimonies by people like Jean Hart would show that he was never scared to take very unconventional positions at times.

There are many intellectuals, at times referred to as organic intellectuals, who did not undergo formal education but have proven their intellectual worth beyond reasonable doubt through their contribution to public discourse. This chapter employs Gramsci’s definition as a crucible for grappling with Can Themba’s complex intellectual disposition. It is perhaps necessary to revert to Gramsci’s definition of an organic intellectual, and unpack the various factors that he cites as being key in intellectual makeup. The fundamental elements that Gramsci mentions in his definition include “Position in society”, “intellectual training”, “preoccupation with abstract ideas”, and “fulfilling a public role.” These are all critical elements, but it should be noted that since the scope of intellectualism is quite broad, an individual can possess more than one of these elements and that one is not required to have all the elements combined in one.

In line with Gramsci’s expansive definition, it may be necessary to take a cursory look at different intellectual dispositions in order to define Themba’s own intellectual architecture. The element of position in society is probably the most challenging one, as the privilege of position does not always amount to intellectualism. It becomes necessary therefore to determine what one does with the position that they are bestowed with in order to influence or fulfil a public role. This phrase alone encapsulates a variety of elements that are mentioned in Gramsci’s definition and thus making them mutually exclusive elements in this complex construct. This element can be best associated with what is often referred to as “Traditional Intellectuals.” The notion of traditional intellectuals refers specifically to those appointed to positions of power and those whose reasoning fulfils a public role.

In his book, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, Toyin Falola writes extensively about the various intellectual dispositions. His definition of “traditional intellectuals” offers quite a wide range of personalities and is the one that best captures our perspective in this study. He describes traditional intellectuals as follows:

We can talk of “traditional intellectuals” comprising priests, kings, chiefs, and merchants who generated knowledge and exercised considerable power and authority. While the knowledge of the “traditional elite” was usually oral, it constituted the foundations of politics, it could be esoteric, and there were specialists who handled the interpretations of complex religious ideas. (Falola: 2001, 3)

This definition suggests that any community can produce intellectuals in their own cultural space as determined by the dynamics of that particular environment. It debunks all myths associated with foreign explorers, missionaries or colonial powers as the messiahs who introduced intellectual dispositions for the first time on their arrival on the African soil. It confirms that Africa, in particular, had its own intellectuals who are measured according to the barometers relevant to their own communities. Falola’s definition also advances another aspect that can be easily overlooked especially when grappling with intellectual traditions particularly on the African continent— the orality of traditional knowledge.

In some ways, Can Themba can be associated with this kind of intellectual as well. His former editor at *Drum*, Sylvester Stein, strongly believed that Themba was a natural leader. Themba worked under Stein as the Associate Editor, meaning he was the second in command, and was often left to take charge of the production of the magazine when the editor was not around. In his book, Stein repeatedly remarks about how much he believed in Themba, and that despite his recognisable drinking problems, he “never abandoned the thought that certainly Can could have been that leader of Africa whose future greatness I had perceived in the auspices” (Stein, 1999:274). In one such a remark, Stein says:

Can was a natural chief by force of personality, and intellectually a giant. I put him down as a coming man of Africa. (Stein, 1999: 86)

One of the major challenges associated with “traditional intellectuals” is that their stories, their accomplishments and capabilities are often not instantly reported. They are generally recorded retrospectively, and often after long periods of up to a generations since the moment they unfolded, which makes it difficult to preserve factual accuracies or verify authenticity. They

are passed down from generation to generation, and assume some kind of legendary status in oral narratives. This epistemology does not, however, deem oral narratives less important or question their validity. They do offer great insights and if anything, prove the resilience of the word of mouth and the importance of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next.

Although Stein constantly implies that Themba's demeanour gave him an impression that he was of royal blood, specifically a chief, genetically such a connection did not exist. The leadership qualities that he possessed were not earned in a political arena, nor were they a result of some cultural inheritance. As indicated in earlier chapters, Themba's roots were in Pretoria, and he had no association whatsoever with traditional leadership.

One thing for sure, Can Themba was a modern man. He was part of a cohort of African intellectuals who in the middle of the twentieth century were increasingly establishing themselves as the new black elite in South Africa. This new elite was taking over the political, cultural and intellectual space and driving the public discourse.

This is the generation of modern intellectuals who, as Mcebisi Ndletyana argues, "owe their origins to the spread of Western formal education, which began in some parts of Africa in the sixteenth century." In his compilation of essays entitled, *African Intellectuals in 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*, Ndletyana goes on to argue:

Early African intellectuals were a product of the missionary enterprise and the British civilising mission. They were part of a new middle class that the colonial agents wanted as a buffer between colonial society and the rest of the indigenous population. (Ndletyana, 2008: 5)

Themba could be a perfect fit for this definition, except that he tried to defy the notion of being used as a buffer between the colonialists and the oppressed masses. In fact, as discussed in earlier chapters, he refused to play this role. Instead, he tried to build bridges between elite intellectualism and the ordinary masses as exemplified in the case of the tsotsi in the previous section. The risk with building bridges is that you have to balance precariously between two dangerous terrains, something that could have detrimental effects. Although Themba sustained this quantum leap masterfully compared to many of his colleagues at *Drum*, his measure of success could not expunge the idea that as an educated black he was a product of colonial education. Falola elucidates on this aspect:

Virtually all thinkers have had to deal with the association of Western civilisation with imperialism and all the negative baggage that comes with it. They have also had to deal with the African past and traditions, and they see issues of tradition and Western civilisation creating a dilemma in terms of retaining or constructing an African identity. (Falola, 2001:52)

Although Themba was not a traditionalist or the proponent of African customs as opposed to the so-called Western civilisation, he was conscious of his social responsibility as an intellectual. As a writer of creative literature and a journalist, Themba always saw himself as the mouthpiece of his community. His stories reflect the social milieu and the cultural nuances of the urban African world. He also helped to deconstruct and simplify abstract ideas that otherwise would not make sense to ordinary citizens. He brought literature closer to the people, and since he was a journalist writing for the most popular publication, he brought people's stories to the paper and thus bringing the paper to the people.

It was through his writings that the residents of Sophiatown, Meadowlands, Alexandra and Dube, among others, saw their lives on paper. He wrote their stories in the language that they understood and in a manner that they could easily visualise. This is in line with one of the functions of intellectuals as articulated by Ndletyana in the introduction of *African Intellectuals in 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*. The introduction partly reads:

Intellectuals explain new experiences and ideas in the most accessible and understandable ways to the rest of society.... Intellectuals thus provide answers and leadership mainly in the conception and articulation of ideas. (Ndletyana, 2008:1)

What makes Can Themba an outstanding intellectual of his generation is probably in the manner in which he was able to navigate between different classes of society and relate to all of them without compromising a fraction of his persona. This malleable approach to life reflected itself in his idiom, in his prose, which transitioned from the esoteric writing that was palpable in the early days of his writing career, to the simple yet evocative literature that he produced as he matured as a writer. It was also in the authentic manner in which he and his colleagues captured the people's stories in *Drum*, which led to the black urbanites who initially did not buy the magazine before, to become reliable audiences of the magazine.

To unpack Gramsci's conception further, the aspect of Themba's "preoccupation with abstract ideas" and "fulfilling a public role" are easier to discern as they are recorded in the form of his

writings, many of which have already been referenced in the paragraphs above. In the final chapter, we will further expatiate on Themba's intellectual legacy, and seek to prove that his writing cuts across genres and that his intellectual disposition is embedded in his writing. It is a moot point to try to grapple with his preoccupations in his writing, because every creative output attests to his intellectual mind. This includes his assertions on politics, romance and philosophy, which can be found throughout his writings.

What is worth exploring, instead, is establishing his reading habits in order to understand the kind of material that shaped his thinking. In this regard, we will rely primarily on the assertions of people who interacted with him, as well as some of the material that he mentions in his own writing. The earlier chapter on "Intertextuality and the Evocations of Shakespeare in Can Themba's Writings," had a special focus on the traces of William Shakespeare in Themba's writing, and does not overlap with this section. Here we are looking broadly at some of the texts that could have contributed in the construction of his intellectual architecture beyond his pedagogic training.

In this regard, it may be fair to start with Juby Mayet, who spent a night with Themba and witnessed part of the construction process of Themba's intellect. According to Mayet, she was rather bemused to find Themba, a man who was widely recognised as a leading intellectual, reading a comic magazine. When she asked him about this seemingly bizarre act from an intellectual, Themba told her that it is important to read indiscriminately. This is perhaps the first lesson to keep, that Themba's disposition is not one that was constructed at a single sitting in a classroom. Instead, he continuously honed his mental faculties through reading. This tale by Mayet inclines one to subscribe to Essop Patel's argument in the preface to *The World of Can Themba*, in which he remarks:

The aspiring black writer is seldom surrounded by volumes of belles-letters; instead he is in the midst of human conditions and experiences – hunger, misery, deprivation and lurking fear. (Patel, 1985:1)

This diagnosis however may not be a true reflection of Themba's own intellectual architecture, as there is more than enough evidence that he read widely. The testimonies by some of his students and others who knew him personally, suggest that despite the challenges and competing social demands, such as alcohol, Themba continued to have a very close relationship with books. According to Kgositsile, his commitment to writing was undoubtable, as he would write even in a crowded environment:

Can Themba could be in a place with people drinking, making noise or even fighting if they had to be fighting, and, he was always with his notebook so his jackets were always a little distorted. And he'd just whip out his notebook and write. And the following day he'd just go to the office and set up the typewriter and write what he produced.

In the next chapter, a detailed discussion will follow about some of Themba's lowest moments that were key in the destruction of his persona. They point particularly to 1959, and yet, there is evidence that as late as 1962, during his exile days in Mbabane, Swaziland, Themba still had an intimate relationship with books.

One of his friends and fellow journalist, Parks Mangena, is still in possession of a book that was presented by Themba to him as a gift in 1962. The book, entitled *Lonesome Traveller* by Jack Kerouac, an American novelist and poet, sits comfortably in Mangena's house in Mbabane as one of his most prized possessions. This book was published the same year and the fact that it reached Themba, who had never been to America, in such a short space of time can only suggest that he was a committed reader who made an effort to get hold of books. In her paper at the Can Themba Memorial lecture, Gordimer argues that Themba read Euripides and Blake, simply on the principle that "all human knowledge and all human art, achievements, belong to be used by the intellects of the world."

This aspect of Can Themba, as discussed in chapter two, as also pronounced in Schadeberg's book. Here, Schadeberg talks about intellectuals as a different breed based on the discussions that they used to have. From the first day Themba reported to work, he connected with the likes of Anthony Sampson, who was the editor at the time. It would seem Schadeberg excused himself from those discussions, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," Can said, looking at Tony [Anthony Sampson]. *A Tale of Two Cities* was very popular amongst Sophiatown intellectuals and at *Drum* everybody quoted lines from the book, even more so than from *Knock on Any Door (sic)*...I drank my coffee while Tony and can carried on debating Shakespeare and Dickens and comparing their work with that of contemporary African writers. (Schadeberg, 2017: 253)

The consequence of his wide readership are probably visible in first, his proficiency in English language, and secondly, his vast knowledge. This should not be construed to mean that one's proficiency in English language qualifies them as an intellectual. It should be understood within

the context of Themba reading English as a major at the University of Fort Hare and expressing himself through English language as a language of choice. It is through the English language that he articulated his ideas and fulfilled his public role as an intellectual, it is therefore appropriate to use the language as one of the essential barometers for his intellectual output.

We have previously alluded to Mattera's assertion, where he refers to Themba as the "connoisseur of the language," and Gordimer referring to him as the "master of language." As previously argued, this mastery is evident in Themba's writings as referenced throughout this study. At this stage, it may be necessary to refer to legendary journalist and distinguished newspaper editor, the late Aggrey Klaaste, whose assertions seem to encapsulate both Themba's linguistic abilities as well as his intellectual disposition. In a piece that appeared in *Trust Magazine* in September 1975, Klaaste argues:

His English was beautiful, high intellectual, and yet with swagger of journalistic style that was sheer stimulation and titillation.

The value of Klaaste's contribution here is not just on the two aforementioned elements, but also in the fact that this style did not make his writing obtuse to the extent of him being an abstruse writer. His writing remained lively, dynamic and accessible to the people that he wrote about who were also his primary audience. His purpose was always to connect with the people, including the tsotsis as discussed earlier. His stature was that of a figure that connected everyone, described by Obed Musi in the following phrase: "Can was more of a teacher than journalist, more of an intellectual than a hard scribe, more of a pedagogue, but *he made people feel at home and you enjoyed his company (my emphasis).*" The latter part suggests that as an intellectual, he fulfilled his purpose to society. Es'kia Mphahlele, a former colleague of Themba's, presents a more scholarly discussion in his book titled *Es'kia* (2002):

Although imagination is a single writer's crafting and shaping spirit, it should ideally shape a people's collective consciousness, dreams and struggle to become. I don't think we have any use for the alienated human desperately trying to chew up his or her own intestines." (Mphahlele, 2002: 410)

Whilst Mphahlele is not necessarily talking about Themba in this essay, his assertion fits the description of Themba's purpose. One can comfortably say that as an intellectual, Themba was never the reclusive kind, even though he possessed elements of a bohemian construction. He

was gifted with a great mind, and went to school to receive an education and continued to expand his knowledge through indiscriminate reading.

Whilst he possesses the elements of a traditional intellectual who displayed his abilities through regular debates mainly in his House of Truth, he has also distinguished himself through his writing, something that can be preserved for posterity and offers immediate reference for his intellectual output. His determination to transmit knowledge, to nurture young minds inside and outside the classroom, speak of a man who was a great visionary with a fortitude for the future of the intellectual tradition on the African continent. The fact that today, more than fifty years since his passing, his works remain relevant and are widely celebrated, cements his place among the pantheon of African intellectuals.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The argument proffered in this chapter is that Can Themba was a very versatile person whose character had a crossover appeal. The dynamism of Themba's persona translated to his writing, which expanded his reach across different classes and generations, which accounts for the wide appreciation of his works.

The conception of an "intellectual tsotsi" as coined by Lewis Nkosi comes across as a paradox that can only be associated with Can Themba. For in his entire generation of writers and intellectuals of different dispositions, there is no other public personality who is known to have straddled the social strata with ease as much as Themba did. The preceding sections offer discursive paradigms in Themba's intellectual growth, and present empirical evidence that his evolution took different forms. While he remained a product of missionary education, and imbibed copious amounts of the works of the romantic poets, he took a conscious decision to localise both his content and language, so he could speak directly to the immediate audience.

These could be the early indications of the decolonial project, where African intellectuals started to rid themselves of unnecessary colonial elements, and only embraced those that would be constructive in their immediate environment. His joining *Drum* Magazine in 1953 was part of this project, as *Drum* was initially established with misguided perceptions about the reading habits and desires of the African in the urban space. As discussed in the preceding chapter, which deals with Themba's identity ethos, Themba himself had to undergo some kind of evolution. This evolution put him closer to his audience, the African people that he wrote about.

This process is in line with Nicholas Creary's argument in his book, *African Intellectuals and Decolonization*, in which he states:

Decolonizing the mind is thus the dual task of first, placing African discourses first at the centre of scholarship on Africa; and second, of dislocating African humanity from this human-inhuman binary. (Creary, 2012: 2)

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Themba reached the highest peak of intellectual output, for we know that his fullest potential was never realised. If he indeed possessed the levels of intellectual and leadership potential expressed by Sylvester Stein, who believed that he could be a prominent leader on the entire continent, surely Themba's best intellectual output was yet to come. What Stein refers to "a man of personal leadership and profound reasoning power," such powerful words remain just an opinion. For in the absence of empirical evidence, in as far as his leadership traits are concerned, compounded by the fact that he does not have a biography to speak of, even his editor's assertions bear no meaning beyond speculative injunctions. These assertions, however, are not useless, for they form the basis of a scholarly investigation, and through the combination of various elements as evidence, we are able to develop a substantive argument.

Nigerian scholar, Femi Osofisan, argues that an intellectual must be in sync with the rhythm of his people. This is particularly important for a writer who is reporting and interrogating contemporary issues that affect a people at the present moment. Although using the metaphor of music, his illustration in *Literature and the Pressures of Freedom: Essays, Speeches and Songs*, Osofisan makes the following injunction:

The artist's song will gain wide acceptance only when the community sings along with him; it is when the other citizens add their voices that the song, born out of the artist's solitary genius, can turn finally into a communal property, and become collectively regenerating. (Osofisan 2001: 36)

This statement goes beyond exploring abstract ideas and suggests that there must be a strong connection between the intellectual and his immediate audience. As argued extensively in the section that deals with the cult of a tsotsi, and even more expansively in Chapter Five of this study, Themba had a very close connection with his audience. He spoke their language and interrogated their living conditions exceedingly well.

The element that may be worth exploring at this stage is whether Themba's intellectual disposition added any meaningful value to the people that he wrote about. In this regard, the most appropriate answer would be that the duty of a writer is to write, and he did this very well. His writing served the purpose, otherwise the audiences would not have bought the publications he wrote for, and we would not be talking about his writings today. Furthermore, many of his former students have gone on to become intellectuals of note in their own rights, and continue to nurture budding intellectuals.

As a man of debate, Themba also contributed to intellectual growth orally. Mattera reveals that he used to teach families, and the debates at the House of Truth stimulated intellectual engagement, and, as revealed by Hopkinson, he also had intellectual engagements with right wing students from the University of Pretoria, and delivered guest lectures at institutions such as University of the Witwatersrand. Despite their too wellknown differences, Hopkinson admits that Themba delivered one of the best lectures he had ever heard:

I knew how well Can could talk from having driven him up a couple of times to give lectures to groups of students at the Witwatersrand University. One such talk he had given – delivered mainly over his shoulder as he walked up and down in front of a blackboard— was one of the most brilliant lectures I had ever heard. (Hopkinson, 94:1962)

It is unfortunate that the contents of the letter are unavailable, and Hopkinson does not share much in that regard, otherwise we would be able grapple with Themba's abstract ideas. However, what is clear is that Themba was at his best when it comes to intellectual engagement, and he relished such opportunities. Furthermore, he was clearly a dynamic mind whose intellectual discourse varied from engaging with students in the classroom to engaging, junior reporters in the newsroom, to engaging with editors in the newsroom. His sphere of influence spread to the different stations of life— cutting across age, gender and class divides.

This speaks to the legacy that he leaves behind, one of the elements that Falola cites as being crucial include that an intellectual must make tangible contribution to society through their chosen trade.

For as intellectuals—African or otherwise—working within the domains of various disciplines, the responsibility that we have is to make our respective scholarly projects concrete undertakings aimed at human betterment. (Falola, 2001: 151)

Although it may be rightfully argued that an intellectual has got no obligation in ensuring a positive legacy in a form of community development, Themba's chosen vocation as a public intellectual, which includes aspects such as working as a teacher, creative writer and journalist, demand that he leaves a trail of evidence in his wake. In this sense, Themba fulfils the last element in Gramsci's notion of an intellectual, which is fulfilling a public role. The ease with which he combined the dichotomies of intellectual and tsotsi, entrenched him in the annals of history as one of the greatest thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE WILL TO DIE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE DESTRUCTION AND THE DEMISE OF CAN THEMBA

I have heard much, have read much more, of the Will to Live; stories of fantastic retreats from the brink of death at moments when all hope was lost... But the Will to Die intrigues me more... I have often wondered if there is not some mesmeric power that fate employs to engage some men deliberately, with macabre relishment, to seek their destruction and to plunge into it.—  
**Can Themba, 1972**

#### 6.1 Introduction

Can Themba succumbed to coronary thrombosis on 8 September 1967, while exiled in Swaziland. He was only 43 years of age. His lifeless body was found in his rented room in Manzini, where he stayed while teaching at St Joseph's Catholic Missionary School. The circumstances surrounding his death remain sketchy, as he was alone when he died.

It can be justifiably argued that 8 September was the culmination of a downward spiral in the destructive journey that Themba had embarked upon since joining *Drum* in 1953. His own writings, reflections by his friends and colleagues from this period, as well as the anecdotes shared by some of his companions in the interviews conducted for the purposes of this study, reveal many destructive elements that could have contributed towards a deterioration of some sort. One of the pieces in which he seems to be very much aware of the destructive effects of alcoholism, is "The Will to Die," from which we took the epigraph for this chapter. Typical of Themba's writing, the story is thinly veiled as fiction, if replacing the name "Can Themba" with Philip 'Foxy' Matauoane for the first person narrator qualifies it as fiction.

Nevertheless, here we have a first person narrative from Can Themba, talking supposedly about a fellow teacher and colleague, Philip, whose profile is strikingly similar to that of the author.

He is a graduate of the University of Fort Hare, having majored in English, and he also trained to be a teacher, among other resemblances he shares with Can Themba.

In this particular story, we gain insight into the suffering of a man who tried to wash away his troubles with alcohol and whose health was fast deteriorating. As highlighted in the preceding chapter that deals with Themba as the so-called “Intellectual Tsotsi,” the shebeen features quite prominently in this story as well. There is a gradual trend in Themba’s writing, where he writes as an observer, raising sharply his opinions, like he does in his journalistic piece, “Let the people Drink” to pieces of writing where he becomes the subject of the narrative, where he openly describes his own relationship with alcohol. In these stories, like in “The Bottom of the Bottle” as well as “The Will to Die”, we see a Can Themba who is deeply involved with the drinking culture, and who seems conscious of the corroding effects of alcoholism. He lays bare his feelings for everyone to see, as the following extract demonstrates:

Superficially it hurt him to cause us so much trouble, but something deep down in him did not allow him to really care. He went on drinking hard. His health was beginning to crack under it. Now, he met every problem with a gurgling answer of the bottle.  
(Themba, 2006:91)

The sentiments expressed here— the constant reliance on alcohol amidst the deteriorating health – echo the dominant views from other writers when they tell the story of Can Themba. It is perhaps Lewis Nkosi who captures Themba’s lifestyle succinctly in his tribute, “The late Can Themba: An Appreciation” (Nkosi, 2016:205), where he describes Can Themba having lived a “suicidal kind of living that was bound to destroy his life at a relatively young age.”

It should be noted that the polemics in this study only focus on social and psychological factors and do not attempt any medical or scientific diagnosis of the elements that contributed to the destruction that ultimately took Can Themba’s life. The destruction can be explored from a variety of angles, including the professional aspect, wherein he left teaching and took up journalism, the romantic associations and the legalities that surrounded it, going to exile and his ultimate demise in Swaziland. The impact of alcohol abuse will receive particular attention in this chapter because it permeates almost every aspect of Themba’s life and seems to have played a fundamental role in his destruction. Whether this was wilful or not, is a matter that will be viewed against the contextual environment in which he lived.

It is widely recorded that Themba left teaching to join *Drum* Magazine after winning their inaugural short story competition in 1953. What was never mentioned in the public domain

until 2016, is that for a long time Themba was not fully paid as a teacher. After graduating his BA degree from Fort Hare University College in 1947, Themba worked as a teacher but was regarded as an “unverified” teacher, owing to the fact that he did not have a teacher’s diploma. That gave the Transvaal Department of Education powers to reduce his salary, despite the fact that he held a degree in which he passed his English major with a first class. This information is entailed in the correspondence that Themba had with the University of Fort Hare, Rhodes University and the Transvaal Department of Education between 1952 and 1953. The original letters are archived in Can Themba’s student records at the University of Fort Hare, and are included as one of the Appendices in this thesis.

Desperate to get paid a full salary, between 1950 – 1951 Themba enrolled for the University Education Diploma (UED) at Rhodes University. However, he had to be located at Fort Hare as a native college. His return to teaching after doing the diploma did not help matters, as he could not get the actual certificate immediately after completion. The offer from *Drum* came at the moment when he was getting more despondent due to lack of recognition in the education sector. After joining *Drum* as a reporter in 1953, he continued enquiring about his certificate for a considerable period. The play, *The House of Truth*, penned by the current author, presents an in-depth exploration of this aspect of Themba’s life story. Although the play is a work of creative imagination, as a biographical play it relies heavily on real life experiences. Themba’s troubles with education authorities form a substantial part of the play. This aspect of Themba’s life has been receiving particular attention in popular media since the premiere of the play.

It would appear that while Themba worked for *Drum* Magazine, he continued with his efforts to obtain official documentation for his teaching diploma. The crux of his grievance was the lack of recognition for him as a teacher, which effectively prohibited him from being paid a full teacher’s salary. His concerted efforts to get the teaching diploma, even when he worked as a reporter for *Drum*, demonstrate his determination to go back to teaching, on the one hand, while on the other could imply that he was not entirely happy at *Drum* Magazine. Although he rose to the position of associate editor of the magazine, he was not paid accordingly.

Themba seems to have been overtly attached to both *Drum* Magazine and South Africa. He was the last remaining senior member of the pantheon of writers from the illustrious “*Drum* Decade,” as described by Lewis Nkosi in the essay of the same title (Nkosi, 2016:205). His sidekick, Casey Motsisi, managed to stick with his mentor, but they were just about the only two remaining from the esteemed group of ‘*Drum* Boys’. Many of his companions, those who arrived before him and those who joined the magazine later, including Ezekiel Mphahlele,

Arthur Maimane, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, left the country while Themba was still trying to churn out a living in South Africa as he tried to resist the urge to go into exile. It was only after all of his companions had gone, after he lost his job at *Drum*, and after his lover was deported back to England, that Themba resorted to go to exile.

In Swaziland, Themba worked as a teacher while also writing for different publications locally, in South Africa and abroad. In 1966, he was banned under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965, which prohibited him from being published or even quoted in South Africa. This must be the ultimate assault to anyone plying his trade as a scribe, for writers write to be read, and Themba was deprived of this basic right. By this time, Themba was already drinking excessively, an element that is prevalent in most of his 1960s self-reflective writings such as “The Will to Die,” “Bottom of the Bottle,” and “The Last Shebeen.” Alcoholism is often cited as the main contributing factor to his demise.

These issues are worth exploring as only fourteen years earlier, in his first interview with *Drum* Magazine, Themba claimed to be a teetotaler. We would learn that in a very short space of time, he underwent major changes in his life and these changes are depicted in his own writing as well as in writings by others about him. The content of his writings and the perspective that he takes in interviews, in his analysis of issues, as well as the perspectives of those surrounding him at the time, are all crucial in the analysis of Themba’s own personal circumstances. This study is premised on Biographical-Historical approach as its theoretical underpinnings, which makes it important to cast the net wide in order to consolidate the different fragments of Themba’s life. In grappling with this complex construct, we draw parallels between the content of his writing, his perspective as the author as well as reflections by some of his peers at the time. The combination of these elements illustrates that there is more than one factor that contributed to the destruction and the early demise of such a great mind as Themba’s.

Over the years, excessive alcohol consumption has been cited as the primary factor that took Themba’s life at a relatively young age of 43. This is further compounded by the fact that Themba, through his own writings, seems to romanticise his drinking and acknowledges its excessive nature. Alcohol abuse has become one of the primary factors that have come to define Themba, probably only rivalled by his indisputable writing abilities. There is an element of intellectual apathy amongst those who research on Themba’s works and embrace his alcoholism without exploring the epistemological perspective that would include taking due consideration of the factors that lead to it. From a research point of view, we cannot be content with the idea that he was just an alcoholic, without interrogating the reports that when he came

to *Drum* he was not drinking any alcohol, yet in a matter of fourteen years he died of what is believed to have been exacerbated by alcohol abuse. The interest of this study will be behavioural, making use of Themba's writing, writings about him, as well as the perspectives of some of his peers who were interviewed as part of the research for this study.

This study seeks to discover elements that precede alcoholism and explore the possibilities of alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism. In other words, alcohol abuse may be a symptom of a deep pain that Themba was trying to deal with. This is also viewed against the crucible of Themba's assertions in the "Will to Die" as quoted in the epigraph above. The following paragraphs will explore the contributing factors to Can Themba's destruction and ultimate demise, and attempt to draw parallels between his writings and the actual incidents that took place in his life. This chapter reinforces the assertion that there is a very thin line between Themba's stories and his lived experience. Often times they are intertwined and, while he may not have written his own epitaph, he surely provided enough fodder for its completion. Ours is to connect the interplay between a series of events to make a composite whole.

## **6.2 The Dilemma of a Teacher in the Newsroom**

The first coverage that Can Themba received in *Drum* Magazine was in March 1953, when he was interviewed by the first black *Drum* journalist, Henry Nxumalo, and photographed by legendary photographer, Jürgen Schadeberg, in his shared apartment in Sophiatown. The interview took place in late 1952, shortly after he was selected as the winner of the inaugural *Drum* short story competition. At the time, he was a teacher, unbeknown to him that he would be most well known and inscribed in the annals as a journalist for the same magazine.

Here we see a young, immaculate and decent looking Themba in a white shirt and a tie, sitting in front of a typewriter with books spired across his desk. This image accompanied an article written by Nxumalo, where he announces Themba as the winner of the prestigious prize. The article was reproduced in Mike Nicol's *A Good Looking-Corpse* (1991:159), where the winning author is described as a "twenty-eight-year-old bachelor who initially called himself D. Can Themba." Themba is introduced as a teacher who writes in his leisure time. "When his work as a teacher is over for the day, Themba seeks the peace of his room, where he can work," reads the article. In the same article, Themba is quoted saying, "winning the *Drum* contest, I feel inspired to go on writing and writing until one day, perhaps I'll be a really famous author."

It should be noted that at this stage there is no indication that Themba was contemplating leaving his job as a teacher. He saw his accomplishment of winning the *Drum* contest as a vital step towards the fulfilment of his dream as an author, presumably while still keeping his job as a teacher. In the preceding paragraphs, reference is made to Themba's genesis, which includes leaving teaching and joining *Drum* Magazine as a reporter in 1953. He became one of the most educated reporters of the time, alongside Ezekiel Mphahlele, who also came from the background of teaching and was in possession of an honours degree. Many of the reporters did not have any tertiary education qualification, and others, like Nat Nakasa, did not even complete high school. Themba was to establish himself not only as one of the most educated reporters at *Drum*, but also as one of the most gifted writers of that generation. Within a year he became associate editor of the magazine, thus taking charge of its daily operations.

It was while working as the associate editor that Themba's influence was felt beyond the articles he penned as a reporter. He helped discover and nurture young talents. He took some of his old students from his teaching days under his wing, and mentored them as reporters for *Drum* and its sister weekly newspaper, the *Golden City Post*. His protégés in the newsroom include the likes of Motsisi, Stan Motjuwadi and Joe Thloloe, who became legends in their own right. Thloloe views Themba's role in the newsroom as the continuation of his vocation as a teacher. In his presentation at the Can Themba Memorial Lecture in 2013, Thloloe argued that in Can Themba he "had a teacher in the newsroom." The impact of Themba's teachings in the newsroom will be the subject of the next chapter, suffice to say here the teacher in Themba did not die when he found himself in the newsroom. In fact, it would seem that he regarded teaching as his innate responsibility, if not a calling or lifetime commitment.

This level of attachment to the teaching profession is demonstrated by Themba's fervent desire to be recognised as a teacher. He was in constant correspondence with the University College of Fort Hare, Rhodes University and the Transvaal Department of Education regarding his qualification for the University Education Diploma (U.E.D.). The U.E.D. was offered at Rhodes University, which was an institution meant exclusively for white students, therefore he had to be based at Fort Hare.<sup>10</sup> He exchanged no less than thirty letters with the education authorities between 1952 and 1953. There are complexities that lead to delays in the issuing of his U.E.D., which would qualify him as a fully-fledged teacher. The delay in receiving his

---

<sup>10</sup> The correspondence between Themba and the respective education authorities was obtained from the University of Fort Hare archives. The letters have not been previously published and some of them are unmarked, which makes it difficult to reference each letter separately.

results was partly due to his failure to pay the outstanding University fees. What followed was a flurry of correspondence, which exposed glaring inconsistencies between the universities and government. This information is entailed in archival records at the University of Fort Hare, and prior to the premiere of *The House of Truth*, there was never any public interest in this aspect of Themba's life.

A close look at the correspondence reveals the seriousness with which Themba took the teaching profession and his determination to get due recognition as a teacher. In the following paragraphs, I select a sample of the correspondence that Themba exchanged with the respective institutions, as a way of demonstrating his unrelenting quest for recognition as a teacher. On 19 March 1952, Themba wrote to the University of Fort Hare and paid for the outstanding fees so that he could get the results of his U.E.D. The letter reads thus:

Find enclosed the sum of five pounds, ten shillings and no pence, which I believe settles my account. Kindly arrange to have my examination results sent to the above address. I regret the delay which is due to the fact that I have only just received my first salary.

The motive behind Themba trying to obtain his U.E.D. is simply to gain recognition and be paid accordingly as a teacher. At the time, he worked as a teacher at Madibane High School in Western Native under the Transvaal Education Department. The regulations of the Department demanded that he holds a teaching qualification in the form of a University Education Diploma for him to be recognised and paid accordingly. It should be noted that after teaching for a period of three years at Madibane High School in Western Native Township, Themba decided to return to the Cape Province where he enrolled for the teachers' diploma. This was because he was not paid a full teacher's salary as he was regarded as an "uncertified" teacher.

Rhodes University finally issued his U.E.D. to the Fort Hare University College, which acknowledged its receipt in a letter sent to Themba on 27 March 1952. A couple of months passed and Themba still had not received the U.E.D. He kept sending letters to the respective institutions, pleading for the issuing of his certificate. In a letter dated 29 June 1952, he sent another reminder to one Professor Dent, at Fort Hare University College:

Up to this moment I have not received the U.E.D. certificate to which the Registrar assured me I was entitled. It would be a great kindness if you could arrange that it is made and sent to the above address.

The Transvaal education Department under which I serve as a teacher employs me as an uncertified teacher “pending the production of certificates,” and pays me accordingly. You will appreciate therefore that the delay is causing me hardship.

I have also asked the Registrar for a statement to the effect that I was in residence at Fort Hare as a student for the following periods: 1945 – 1947 and 1950 – 1951, both inclusive. I wish to apply for tax exemptions for those periods and therefore need the statement.

Yours faithfully,

D.C. Themba

Rhodes University only issued Themba with a provisional Education Diploma and not the actual Diploma, owing to the fact that he had failed History of Education III, which is a requirement for the fulfilment of his qualification for a diploma. The rules for the issuing of the provisional U.E.D. seemed to be ambiguous, as Themba challenged their validity in his current situation and there were contradicting views with regard to the interpretation of legislations between Rhodes University and Transvaal Education Department. After a protracted exchange between Themba and the respective institutions, he was ultimately advised to register an additional subject with the University of South Africa in order to qualify for a full U.E.D. He sent a letter to Fort Hare enquiring whether the procedure was valid and acceptable, which the University later confirmed that it was indeed the correct procedure.

He subsequently registered with the University of South Africa, studying *Philosophy I*, as an additional subject, which he passed and duly informed Rhodes University. Following the successful completion of the course with UNISA, on 3 February 1953 Themba wrote again to Fort Hare pleading for the release of his U.E.D:

In accordance with your assurance made to me in a letter dated 28.3.52, that the procedure I suggested of taking *Philosophy I* as an N.D.P. subject with the University of South Africa, is quite correct, I have done so and have passed as the enclosed Statement of Results testifies. Kindly pass this on to Rhodes University with the enclosed exemption fee of one pound, payable to Rhodes.

I shall be pleased to receive my U.E.D. certificate as soon as possible for registration with the Transvaal Education Department whom I serve.

It is likely that by the time the letter above reached the University, a positive response from the University was already on its way if not already reached Themba. The confirmation of the issuing of the certificate was sent to Themba on 5 February 1953, a month before he was announced as the winner of the *Drum* Short Story Competition (he was already aware of this achievement at the time). The letter, sent by Rhodes University to Fort Hare read:

This student completed in 1951 all the requirements for the U.E.D. except for the academic subject in the place of History of Education from which he was exempted. He has now passed *Philosophy I* as an external student of the University of South Africa. I am enclosing his certificate and \$1 note for exemption fee. I should be glad to know that he has now fulfilled all requirements for the U.E.D. and that the diploma will be issued to him in due course.

Yours faithfully

Registrar

However, Themba never received the certificate as promised in this correspondence. After numerous attempts, he sought to establish whether the provisional diploma, which he was in possession of, had no professional value. In a letter dated 29 June 1953, at the time he was already working for *Drum*, he writes to Fort Hare enquiring about the conditions of the provisional diploma, as the information was required in connection with the adjustment of his salary. He seemed to be particularly frustrated during this period, and the final nail in the coffin was the letter from the Registrar at Fort Hare University College, dated 18 August 1953, which partly reads as follows:

Each Education Department has a right to accept or reject whatever Diplomas it chooses. In fact, the Cape Education Department has sometimes accepted a provisional diploma. But that does not oblige the Transvaal Education Department to do likewise. If the Transvaal Education Department regards a provisional as not entitling the holder to an increase in salary the University which issued the Diploma can do nothing to change the situation.

This particular letter essentially sealed Themba's fate and dashed all hopes of him getting a full teacher's salary. The above excerpts were extrapolated from a series of correspondence that Themba had with the respective institutions between 1952 and 1953. It is clear that the issue of his recognition as a teacher weighed heavily on him; otherwise, he would not have expended so much energy in pursuit of the certificate. It should be noted that this

correspondence began when Themba was teaching at Madibane High School, and continued even after he was appointed as a reporter at *Drum Magazine*.

The difficulties that Themba had with the education authorities were part of a systematic abuse of the rights of the broader African community under the apartheid regime. While he made significant efforts over a reasonable period, it might have made it easy for him to accept the offer from *Drum Magazine*. Joining *Drum* did not exonerate him from the systematic troubles of apartheid South Africa. In fact, it can be rightfully argued that joining *Drum* exacerbated the problem as he was now in the coalface of apartheid atrocities.

Despite the obvious brutalities and crudities of apartheid, what is clear is that even the lack of a certificate and change of jobs could not stop Themba from teaching. It is in this regard that Joe Thloloe, who was keen to have his breakthrough in journalism in the late 1950s, talks about Themba having been his teacher in the newsroom. This is in respect of the guidance that Themba gave him, which resulted in the young Thloloe publishing his very first article in the *Golden City Post*. At the time, Themba was the acting editor and he showed him why the articles did not work and what he should do for his work to make it to print. He took Thloloe, whose articles had been rejected by the editor without any guidance, through the paces. Thloloe reminisces about this experience:

Every time I took my material to [the *Golden City*] *Post* it would be spiked and never got published and the first person who gave me a chance was Can Themba. He was acting News Editor at the time and I took a story to him and he looked at it and said please change this, please change that, like a teacher he was. I took the stuff that I wanted and I rewrote it the way that he had suggested and lo and behold it was published and for the first time I had been published in the *Golden City Post*, which at the time was a huge honour and that gave me courage to continue giving material to the *Post* and ultimately I ended up working for *Drum*.

Themba's sacking from *Drum* in February 1959 instigated a period of instability in his life, if it did not exacerbate it. While he was the associate editor at *Drum*, the second in command of the magazine and the most senior black staff member since 1954, Themba found himself becoming a news editor for the *Golden City Post* in 1960. This was a demotion, but it followed a period of joblessness. However, his return to the newsroom seems to have been welcomed with open arms, particularly by the younger generation of journalists whom he mentored. Harry Mashabela opines in his 1968 tribute to Themba, published in Vol 2 of *The Classic*:

Later, he [Themba] strutted round the newsroom, overwhelming without any inhibitions, those of us he did not know. Can was back in journalism again, after a year or so of conspicuous absence. We were to become pretty close. (Mashabela, 1968:11)

It was mainly during his second stint in journalism that Themba worked closely and mentored the likes of Juby Mayet, Harry Mashabela and Joe Thloloe in particular. Motsisi is the one who seems to have had a presence on Themba's side for almost his entire career until they were separated by death. In interview with Don Mattera, he also reveals another aspect of Themba and his attachment to teaching. He says Themba used to be hired to teach families English language in and around Johannesburg. Although he could not mention the specific date in which Themba was hired to perform this task, the indication is that he did a lot of this especially after his departure from *Drum* Magazine in 1959 and before his departure to Swaziland in 1962.

What is clear is that Themba's professional life was an interchange between teaching and journalism. This period coincided with major socio-political changes in South Africa, as there was a drastic change in society after the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960. Themba was directly involved with the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, as Hopkinson reveals that he was usually called in to give insight to international experts who visited South Africa with the intension of finding out more about the broader political implications of this historic landmark.

Following this incident, there was more harassment from the apartheid security forces, and many social activists fled into exile, while others were incarcerated in apartheid prisons, most notably the likes of Mandela, Sisulu and Sobukwe, being sent to Robben Island as political prisoners. Themba as a teacher and senior journalist, who was obviously part of the black elite, would later find himself in the records of the apartheid security apparatus. He was ultimately banned in 1966, but by that time, he had already taken refuge as an exile in Swaziland. At the time of his death in 1967, he was still juggling between teaching and journalism.

### **6.3 Systematised Deprivation of Occasions for Loving**

The subheading for this section of the chapter is derived from Nadine Gordimer's 1963 novel, *Occasion for Loving* (Virago Press, London). The novel was inspired by Can Themba's lived experience, even though the characters may not necessarily be representative of him and the people around him at the time.

The novel is about Jessie Stilwell and her husband Tom, a white couple living in Johannesburg under apartheid South Africa. They together with their family friend, Boaz Davis, who brings

along his English wife, Ann, are involved in the Johannesburg underworld where liberal whites clandestinely interact at equal footing with blacks. They were part of what Nat Nakasa referred to as the “fringe country” (Patel 1975:9), a world where black and white lived and drank together in harmony, despite the discriminatory apartheid laws. In Gordimer’s story, Ann falls in love with Gideon Shibalo, a black man at a time when such an association was illegal in South Africa. They all are entangled in the quagmire of a clandestine affair and love suppressed by racial laws. This scenario is strikingly similar to that of Themba when he fell in love with Jean Hart, an English woman who came to South Africa to join her husband, Malcolm.

Jean Hart came to South Africa in 1957. Her husband was already part of the liberal circles in Johannesburg, attending parties in the townships and drinking with journalists from *Drum Magazine*. Upon Jean Hart’s arrival, a party to welcome her was organised by Ma-Bloke, (Bloke Modisane’s mother), herself a shebeen queen, in Sophiatown. It was at this party that she first laid eyes on Themba, and the subsequent conversation was not impressive according to her. Hart would later tell Mike Nicol in an interview that was later published in *A Good-Looking Corpse* (1991:181) that “apart from that introduction though, he turned out to be a most gentle and tolerant and humane person, not a heavy politico at all.” Jean Hart was quite attractive and most of the *Drum* boys, including Modisane, fancied her. It was not to be, as she eventually fell into the hands of Themba.

According to Sylvester Stein, former *Drum* editor and Themba’s boss, this incident became a socio-political allegory reflecting the absurdity of the discriminatory laws of the time. It was one of the most legendary relationships from the 1950s and one of the riskiest at the time. The lovers were both aware of the threat posed by the security police and either thought it was a worthy cause or valued their love for each other more than the prospects of going to jail. They both knew that the affair put them in “mortal danger,” as Stein elaborates:

Never mind the mere saucy aspect that she was a married woman, happily married to Malcolm, as charming a person as her, but for white and black lovers to be caught at it was to put them in mortal danger. Punishable by law with many years in prison, there was also the risk that violent white upholders of so-called ‘Western Christian Civilisation’ might take the verdict and the carrying out of sentencing into their own hands. (Stein, 1999:132)

This relationship was such a spectacle that it inspired several novels, where Themba is featured prominently. Amongst the books that were inspired by this incident was Stein's, as he accounts in his book, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*:

I never did get at the full truth until eventually a total of four different books based on that daring story appeared. As it happened, one of them was a novel of my own. (Stein, 1999:133)

In addition to Stein's novel, there is *The Wanderers* (1959) by Ezekiel Mphahlele, where there is a character named Pan, a very close derivation of Can, then there is *Mating Birds* (1986) by Lewis Nkosi and *Occasion for Loving* (1963) by Nadine Gordimer. In an interview published in Nicol's *A Good-Looking Corpse* (1991:180), Nadine Gordimer acknowledges the connection between the novel and Themba's life. 'The basis for *Occasion for Loving*, the idea not the characters, was taken from Can's love affair with a white woman, but that sort of thing was happening to lots of people.' What is probably most significant about this affair in respect of the current chapter is that it exposed Themba's vulnerabilities, and it is often cited as a turning point in his life.

What we learn is that even though he was not known as a very sentimental being, Themba found himself hopelessly in love with Jean Hart in a South Africa that legislatively prohibited love between different races. This is seemingly a matter that remains sensitive even to Themba's contemporaries, more than half a century since it happened. In a video-recorded interview that I had with Juby Mayet, one time a protégé, close friend and colleague of Themba's, she flatly refused to give an opinion on the affair. When I probed her about the affair, she was quite evasive and her most explicit comment was that:

We had suspicions, there were some of us who had inclines of it but it was his private life and we felt it wasn't our place to ask questions or to discuss it or anything. And, of course, in those days in the eye of the so-called powers that be, at the time, it was criminal for them to be associated with each other. (Juby Mayet, 2015)

In "Crepuscule", a story based on this affair thinly veiled as fiction, Themba gives us some insight into this relationship. In this story, Jean is called Janet, and the narrator is Can, obviously representing the author, Can Themba. In fact, whether Themba wanted to write this as a piece of fiction or a social commentary remains unclear, but that aspect will receive more attention in the final chapter of this dissertation. In "Crepuscule", we see the reaction of both blacks and whites to the affair as an extraordinary undertaking.

The police, acting under apartheid laws, and following on a tip-off from Themba's ex-girlfriend, who happens to be black, rummaged the room in which the couple was sleeping but were not successful in catching them in bed together. Amongst the fellow black people in the township, Themba becomes something of a sensation for dating a white woman. The most telling moment, however, is probably when a group of gangsters commend Themba for scoring "fish meat,"— a misogynistic reference to a white woman as a delicacy to be devoured. They go on to ask, "How does a white woman taste?" to which the narrator retorts:

That was going too far. I had too great a respect for Janet, the woman, to discuss that with anybody whether he was white or black. (Themba, 2006: 73)

Themba's response here demonstrates the genuine feelings he had for the woman. He looks beyond the skin colour and recognises Jane (or Jean) as a human being first, and not just as a white woman. The existence of four novels as alluded to in Stein's argument above, and a short story, "Crepuscule", which has since been adapted into a stage play and premiered in 2016 at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, and also staged at the Grahamstown National Arts festival, is a clear illustration of the wonderment of the affair.

The sensitivity around the affair could have been influenced by a number of factors, including that Hart was a married woman, Themba was romantically linked with somebody else when the affair started, there were legal prohibitions against romantic affairs between blacks and whites, and all of this happened in a highly policed apartheid state. The couple seem to have been acutely aware of the social and racial tensions that were to arise because of their affair, and this is something that they addressed and accepted in the early stages of their relationship. They stayed in friends' houses, moving from one house to another, avoiding the police and the glare of the public, but somehow Themba does not seem to have been prepared to face its consequences, or at least, to be forcefully separated from her the way it happened. In Nicol's *A Good-Looking Corpse*, Hart elaborates on the relationship:

'Can, who was very analytical as well as being fun, thought things through and I think saw that you couldn't indulge in love and friendship without constantly remembering that those things were going to get distorted by the environment. It was a great pain to him because he was a very open, loving, and amiable man.'(Nicol, 1991:181)

Throughout her interview with Nicol, whenever she talks about her dearly departed lover, Hart makes constant reference to the fact that Themba was sincere and realistic. He accepted the

conditions under which they lived but, perhaps, he was not exactly ready to face their brutal nature, as it would seem like he never coped with her forced departure from South Africa.

The security police raided Jean Hart's apartment at the ungodly hour of two one morning. The police brought proof of all her antiapartheid activities, including pictures of her involvement with the underground schools in the various townships. The special schools were established by the South African Communist Party (SACP) as an antidote to Bantu Education, which was believed to offer inferior levels of education for black people in South Africa. The police had a comprehensive file on her, and there was no denying her involvement with these structures. They duly told her (presumably and her husband) that she should leave the country within thirty-six hours.

‘Ruth [First] and Joe [Slovo] suggested that it probably would be a good idea if we left because we were endangering others. So we sold up and started hitchhiking out. We didn't make it within the thirty-six hours; it took us about two days to sell up but they didn't come back... All this happened just after the Sharpeville massacre.’ (Nicol, 1991:335)

Sometime in 1960, as the Sharpeville Massacre occurred on 21 March 1960, the British songstress and social activist left the South African shores unceremoniously with her previously dejected husband and leaving behind a broken-hearted journalist lover in South Africa. Although Themba tells the story of his affair with Hart, the impact of the breakup is something that we learn about from other sources.

Lewis Nkosi, amongst others, writes extensively about how devastated Themba was after Hart left the country. Apart from the fact that he was in love with her, it remains unclear as to what it is exactly that troubled Themba about the departure. To begin with, at the time Themba was married to Anne Sereto, as they tied the knot in 1959, a few months before Hart had to leave. Even though Hart claims that they stayed together with Themba, under the circumstances, it is apparent that by the time she left the country, she was already back in the arms of her husband, Malcolm. She consistently makes use of the pronoun “we”, as she relates the story of the raid, suggesting that there was somebody else she was deported with. One thing for sure, they went back to England and lived together as a married couple for a number of years, and later divorced. Nevertheless, Themba was left suffering tremendously as Nkosi relates:

The only time I've seen Can Themba's nerve nearly snap was when he was in love with a beautiful young English woman at a time when she was about to leave the country.

He was himself trapped – and it seemed forever – in the land of apartheid. At that time I had a glimpse into someone’s suffering and I don’t care to see it again. (Stiebel and Chapman, 2016:207)

Jean Hart’s departure from South Africa was not the end of the strong connection that Themba had with her. He continued worrying about her, and expecting to hear from her all the time. According to Stein (1991:73), “Can seemed to be anxious about a letter from a girlfriend that after several weeks had still not materialised.” While there was no assurance that a letter had been sent in the first place, those around him began to worry seriously about Themba’s situation. He was getting anxious, wondering if in fact a letter had been written, or if written ever posted off to him. His desperation seemed like contradiction in terms, because Themba was known to have displayed the “devil-may-take-the-hindlegs kind of attitude”, as described by Lewis Nkosi in his tribute to him.

In the same eulogy, Nkosi seems to suggest that the attitude that Themba displayed was just a facade, behind it there was a deep pain in his heart. The forced break-up with Hart exposed all these vulnerabilities in him. There is also an indication that he took to alcohol to numb the pain and disguise his own anguish. This is what Nkosi (2016:207) calls a “prodigious reliance on alcohol as a drug.” To add substance to Nkosi’s claim here, Stein, who refers to Themba as a “renaissance man” and an “expert of existentialism,” cites a conversation between Themba and his protégé, Casey Motsisi, with whom he spent a substantial time in the shebeens when the majority of their peers in literature and journalism were leaving the country:

‘But look man, Casey J., before we go on, I’ve built important decisions on this letter. It will tell me whether life is worth living or not, or whether to sensibly stick to liquor.’  
(Stein, 1999: 74-74)

If the above excerpt is a true reflection of Themba’s feelings, it becomes apparent that he never received the letter and he kept his word. Nkosi’s assertion that Themba was troubled by her departure is corroborated by the above extract from Themba as reported by Stein, and by Nadine Gordimer, who witnessed the after-effects of it all. Gordimer elucidates further on Themba’s suffering and how he took to alcohol with more vigour during this period:

‘So yes, Can suffered very badly from the end of that affair and whenever he suffered he always turned to the bottle. He got to the stage where he couldn’t work anymore. You should have seen the condition he was in in those days, often in this house. You

just didn't know what to do with him. It was tragic to see someone of his intellect, wit and charm so wasted.' (Nicol, 1991:180)

Since Hart left the country in 1960, Themba juggled teaching and journalism. Shortly after he was sacked from *Drum*, he returned to teaching, finding a job at the Central Indian High School in Fordsburg. In the period between 1960 and 1961, he returned to journalism, working in the *Golden City Post*, before resigning and going into exile in 1962. Circumstances under his resignation remain unclear, but the broader socio-political environment had worsened and, as we would learn later, not favourable for someone as outspoken as Themba.

While most documents that attempt to cover his life story, including author biographies published in authoritative texts such as *The World of Can Themba* (1985), a collection of his works compiled by Essop Patel, indicate that he left the country in 1963, and there are contradicting documents that suggest otherwise. The very latest of Themba's collections, *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006), indicates that he was in Swaziland by 1962, and couples this with stories that he wrote for *Eyethu* newspaper in the British protectorate. Furthermore, in my visit to Swaziland in March 2017, I had a glorious opportunity of interviewing legendary Swazi journalist, Parks Mangena, who interacted with Themba both in Sophiatown and in Swaziland. Mangena is in possession of a book he received as a gift from Themba and inscribed in his distinct handwriting. Themba's autograph in the book indicates that he signed it in 1962 in Mbabane. This, together with other corroborating evidence cited above, disproves information that for a long time has been regarded as being authoritative in the public domain.

This lack of accurate data about his movements has for a long time sowed a feeling of uncertainty particularly with regard to the period between 1960 and 1962. What is clear is that, much as he was despondent after losing his job at *Drum*, teaching and journalism always dominated his life, and during this period he did both. His unofficial role in the newsroom was that of a teacher, as described by Thloloe in his narrative. There are many possibilities about his activities in the country, as Mattera's interview quoted above, reveals that Themba continued teaching English to families in and around Johannesburg.

Whatever he chose as his main vocation, what is clear is that drinking was a prominent part of his lifestyle, especially after he was fired from *Drum* and before he left for exile. What is apparent also is that Themba did not necessarily start drinking when his lover was deported, but this might have exacerbated the problem.

#### 6.4. The Destruction of *Drum* and its Personalities

The period leading up to the dismissal of Themba from *Drum*, his going into exile and ultimate demise, can be best understood in the context of the destruction of the personalities that were associated with the magazine during the same period. For whatever happened at *Drum* did not affect Themba alone, and was the reflection of the atrocities that happened throughout South Africa. It is just that each person finds different means of coping with the situation.

While this study is about Themba, it is also important to note that he was part of a generation, a cohort of writers who not only made history in the South African literary and journalism landscapes, but also in the shebeens. It seems like drinking became part of a certain subculture at *Drum*, with Themba standing out as the main architect. This drinking came with taking certain risks, perhaps just for the thrill of it. This sense of communality (or collective victimhood) at *Drum* is captured by Nkosi, in his previously referenced “The *Drum* Decade,”

A *Drum* man took sex and alcohol in his stride, or was supposed to, and stayed in the front line of danger so long as there was danger to be endured. Of course, the *Drum* style was more implicit than prescribed, but no less paramount in one’s life for all that. (Stiebel and Chapman, 2016:24)

The brutal murder of Henry Nxumalo in December 1956 seemed to be an isolated incident, but viewed retrospectively, it might have signalled the beginning of the destruction of a generation. Many of the *Drum* writers either were to be dispersed all across the world or were to die early deaths. In his book, *Who Killed Mr Drum*, Sylvester Stein uses Nxumalo’s death as an entry point, but goes on to lament the premature deaths of the rest of the “*Drum* Boys”, including Themba’s in 1967. What is peculiar about the deaths of the rest of the *Drum* writers is that those who died young did not do so in a similar fashion as Nxumalo, dying at knife’s edge in the hands of the ruthless thugs, even though their deaths were equally tragic.

Nxumalo’s death was followed by that of Nakasa, presumed to have committed suicide in New York. The reason that has been proffered for the apparent suicide is that Nakasa was depressed at the time, as going into exile was not his first choice. This presumption has been brought into question in recent years, as Ryan Brown’s *A Native of Nowhere*, Nakasa’s biography, raises a number of possibilities, including that he might have been killed. There was involvement of the notorious United States of America’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in his scholarship, and he fell from Jack Thompson’s apartment, his friend and benefactor, who worked for the Fairfield Foundation, which turned out to be the conduit of the CIA. This raises alarm

especially that Nakasa's file was classified for more than forty years after his death. Stein elucidates on other deaths, but these two have a direct relevance to Themba, as they both worked closely with him and he wrote moving tributes to both.

There had been an exodus of journalists streaming out of *Drum* and out of the country while Themba and a few others, most notably his sidekick, Casey Motsisi, remained in the magazine and in the country. Themba was the associate editor at the time, and he contributed to several other publications, editing *Africa* and contributing to *Africa South* publications at different times. There was the perennial problem of insufficient salaries, which never increased and which employees often challenged the editors and the proprietor about. Because the salary was so miniscule, Motsisi used to refer to it as the 'monthly mockery.' In spite of the low salary, and the fact that Themba was more educated than most, and was actually the associate editor, he stayed on at *Drum* until he was ejected in 1959.

The person who was at more or less the same level as Themba, and who probably shared the same frustrations with him, was Ezekiel Mphahlele. Mphahlele held an honours degree in English and, just like Themba, he came to *Drum* with a teaching experience. He joined *Drum Magazine* in 1955, and at various times he held different senior positions including political reporter, subeditor and fiction editor. The movement between the different positions did not, however, instigate any upward progression in his salary. Mphahlele gives his account of the salary situation in *A Good-Looking Corpse* as follows:

We were paid just miserably on *Drum*. I remember I was being paid £43 a month to start with. And I had an Honours in English. I said to Eprile when I joined that the pay was low for my qualifications. He said that it wasn't my academic qualifications that were important here but experience in journalism, and as I was just starting I had to be on the same scale as the other reporters. I had no choice so I took it on. (Nicol 1991:352)

By the time he left *Drum* in 1957, after two years of serving in relatively senior positions at the magazine, Mphahlele was still getting the same salary of £43 a month. He goes on to infer that "When Can Themba was assistant editor he wasn't getting anything for that position." The question of the salary was obviously troublesome, but it was not the only thing that bothered Themba as a reporter and associate editor.

Before Themba was ultimately fired from *Drum*, he had faced a disciplinary action that impacted on his finances and status as the associate editor. He and Bob Gosani were sent on an assignment to Kimberley, traveling in the company car. On their way they passed

Potchefstroom, they were arrested for possession liquor and drunkenness. Following this incident, Hokinson decided that Can's salary was to be reduced, and his title of being the Assistant Editor revoked. What this meant is that he would continue operating as an assistant editor but he would not be paid accordingly. Further to this, "Can was to be told that any incident of the kind in future would mean immediate dismissal (Hopkinson, 1962:96)." It would appear that Themba was the lucky one, as Gosani as a free-lancer got immediate dismissal. It was a matter of time before the same happened to Themba.

In previous conversations that I had with the late Nkosi, albeit casually, he had indicated that they had to face atrocities during their reporting, and these affected people of their kind and were largely executed by the white minority government and reporting on these also meant that they stayed in their subconscious way after they had witnessed them. Consuming copious amounts of alcohol helped them to transition from the haunting images and provided them a bit of escapism from the atrocities that they bore witness to everyday. Such an argument sounds valid to account for the drinking culture that was prevalent at *Drum*, but leaves one wondering how Mphahlele was never affected the same way. It might as well be true that Mphahlele worked for only two years at *Drum* and during that period, he did not spend much time as a reporter. He was largely office-based as a subeditor and fiction editor, and was not on the ground with the other reporters who were exposed to the crudities.

Nonetheless, regardless of the validity of Nkosi's argument here as a justification for the excessive drinking culture at *Drum* or among the journalism fraternity at large, this account here brings to the fore another possibility. A close look at Themba's writings demonstrates that indeed there were atrocities that they had to witness. Although he is somewhat in denial, the following passage from his reflections as captured in "Kwashiorkor" (Themba, 2006: 84), gives some insight about the life of a reporter back then:

"My life, a reporter's life, is rather full and hectic, and I am so vertically cast about in the whirlpools of Johannesburg that no single thought, no single experience, however profound, can stay with me for long. A week, two weeks, or less, and the picture of the kwashiorkor baby was jarred out of me, or perhaps lost into the limbo where the psyche hides unpleasant dreams." (Themba, 2006: 84)

Apart from the daily reporting, Themba was also bothered by the editorial interference by the proprietor of the magazine, Jim Bailey, who extended his hand beyond the duties of a proprietor. It would seem that his life as the associate editor was even more frustrating than

when he was just a reporter. He had been given a title that only presented illusions of editorial mandate. He was running the magazine but had virtually no decision-making powers.

On one occasion, he and his editor, Sylvester Stein, had decided on the cover of an edition that they were working on. They had chosen a picture of two tennis players, one white and the other black, kissing each other in display of good sportsmanship. This image was meant to demonstrate that the world was moving on, that racial prejudice was as backward and irrelevant as the entire apartheid system in South Africa. This plan was to be thwarted by the proprietor, Bailey, who thought it could cause unnecessary political turmoil. The South African government would view such an image as being offensive, so Themba had to carry the unenviable task of removing the image from the issue. At the time, Stein the editor, was visiting Lesotho and upon his return and finding out what had happened, he decided to resign from the magazine. He resigned from *Drum* and left in 1957, “and for nine months the paper was without an editor” (Nicol, 1991:257). After Stein’s resignation, Themba was one of the three senior journalists who alternated in editing it. The others were Jurgen Schadeberg and Humphrey Tyler. With *Drum* being a magazine for black people, Themba was the most authoritative figure in this continuum.

As the experienced journalists streamed out of the country, Themba remained as the only senior black journalist and even though he worked acrimoniously with Stein, it did occur to the white editor that Themba deserved more than he received. He was performing the editor’s duties and for all practical purposes, he was the editor even though as a black man he could only be confined to the level of the associate editor. Stein expresses the views that he harboured in the following lines:

He was the heart of the paper. Perhaps he thought underneath that he was the one who deserved to be editor and perhaps underneath I thought the same, and if he couldn’t he might as well spend his time as he liked. All to be attributed to frustration with the system. (Stein, 1999: 96)

This honest reflection by Stein reveals the anguish that Themba probably suffered on a daily basis. The mere knowledge of the fact that no matter how educated you are, no matter how experienced you are, and no matter how well you do your work, you will never gain the recognition of being the editor, nor will you get any salary raise. This scenario is not too different from the experience he had with teaching, which actually drove him out of the

profession. It should be understandable that when he was confronted by the same demons in a different environment, something was bound to give.

At least Stein understood and empathised with Themba, something that he would not get from his future editor. Stein was replaced by Tom Hopkinson in 1958, a respected journalist and novelist, but a man with a different management approach for the magazine and its contributors. He laid down the law, which Themba was most likely to break as he had done with previous editors. The rule that Themba was most likely to break is the one that gets between him and his drink. This is the law that Hopkinson emphasised upon, in addition to unaccounted for absenteeism from work, something that Themba was also notorious for. Hopkinson gave Themba several warnings over his lateness at work, lengthy absences and general lack of discipline, he had to do the seemingly inevitable in his eyes. Stein gives account of this incident in the following excerpt:

A little while back Tom Hopkinson after warning Can about his lateness, his unexplained and lengthy absences, his lack of discipline— as his other editors had— after warning him and warning him, had warned him yet again, as his other editors had, and finally he'd given him 'one last, final warning' and after that the sack! As none of us had. (Stein, 1999:236)

Stein goes further to describe the sacking of Themba as leaving the magazine as an empty shell, with its soul and its crew spread all over the world. Hopkinson took the decision to fire Themba despite the warning from Jim Bailey (Hopkinson, 1960:63), that he should not fire anyone from the newspaper. Themba in particular, as the most senior black staff member was seen, as Stein describes him, as the heart of the paper and the intellectual powerhouse at *Drum*. This was also not an easy decision to Hopkinson, who relates the incident as follows:

At the beginning of February, I sacked Can Themba. This was for me a real disaster, not only from the loss of an assistant editor, on whose knowledge of the South African background, quick wit, and what was quite often cool judgements, I had depended very much for the past year—but as a sign of my own failure. (Hopkinson, 1962: 159)

Themba's departure from *Drum* marked the end of an era, a rapid progression towards the end of the fabulous decade. The loss of his job, coupled with the deportation of his lover as discussed in the preceding section, contributed to the destruction of character. The apartheid government was also becoming more vicious in dealing with those who were likely to contradict its policies. It was at this stage that Themba leaned more towards the drink.

## 6.5 Sinking to the Bottom of the Bottle: Themba's Alcoholism and its Effects

Alcohol consumption was part of Can Themba's lifestyle and it seems to have played a fundamental role in the destruction of his character. The prominence of alcohol in his life is prevalent both in his own writing as well as in writings about him by other people. However, while this chapter grapples with the destructive effects of alcoholism, the verdict is yet to be passed whether Themba is defined by his apparent reliance on alcohol or his creative genius.

It is undeniable that Themba drank alcohol, and he drank massively. It is also true that he was first and foremost a writer, and he was a distinguished one at that. In almost every text that interrogates the life and works of Themba, these dichotomies seem to be the most common, thus highlighting prominent binaries of his life. In fact, because he became known in the public domain as a writer and journalist, and alcoholism is a behaviour that followed thereafter, it seems the latter grew to become a dominant force and its association with his demise, places it as the ultimate winner. For this reason, Themba's phenomenal drinking, which he romanticised both in speech and in writing, seems to overshadow his exceedingly great writing talent, to the annoyance of his offspring and all those who appreciate his work.

At the Can Themba Memorial Lecture, Yvonne Themba, the last-born daughter of the late Themba, bemoaned the overemphasis on her father's drinking, albeit acknowledging that it did exist. Her view was that the lecture revealed another aspect of her father's positive legacy, one that is more constructive and that should be more prominent than the dominant narrative of Themba as an alcoholic. In her tribute to her father, published in the special publication for the launch of "The Suit" stage play in 1993, Yvonne quips while acknowledging her father's drinking:

I have also been told about his tendency to imbibe with the same gusto as he displayed when he worked. PHEW! I was beginning to worry that I had a saint for a father!  
(1993:4)

In this manner, she does not suggest in any way that her father did not drink, nor that his drinking should not be spoken of, but that the focus has been too much on his drinking at the expense of his vocation and neglecting his legacy as someone who worked as a teacher, writer and journalist. This chapter shines the spotlight on all these aspects, in the interests of determining the dominant factors in the destruction of character.

A cursory look at the works that offer criticism on either the life or the works of Themba, shows that alcoholism often features alongside his impeccable erudition as a writer, journalist and

philosopher, if not considered as a substantial part of it. This is largely because Themba in his own works writes about the drinking culture in Sophiatown, with himself as the main proponent of that culture. His writing about the drinking culture that he was part of in Sophiatown, which seems to have followed him all the way to Swaziland, borders on romanticisation. This is corroborated by writings from different critics, whether they are writing about him, his companions in the “*Drum*” generation, or the period of the 1950s South Africa, the name of Can Themba is often associated with drinking. In a text like Brown’s *A Native of Nowhere*, for instance, Themba is said to be leading the charge at promoting the culture of drinking in the newsroom and particularly in inducting the new reporters to it.

One of the most comprehensive academic studies of Themba’s works is Mari Snyman’s thesis, which stands out as a typical example of a text that attempts to capture the binaries of construction and deconstruction in Themba’s life. Gleaning from the title, there is a recognition and acknowledgement of Themba as a writer and journalist, hence there is reference to his “work”, but then there is also the recognition of his association with a shebeen, which speaks to the destructive aspect of his life. Alcoholism is clearly an albatross around Themba’s neck and to tell his life story without paying particular attention to this aspect of his life, will be to do a major disservice to his legacy.

One of the most startling revelations about Themba’s alcoholism is the claim he makes in his first *Drum* interview with Henry Nxumalo, that he does not drink. It may not have been much of a shocker at the time, but since Themba’s drinking at *Drum* became so legendary, it makes it difficult to believe that he did not drink before joining the magazine. The article goes with a picture taken by Jurgen Schadeberg in 1952. In this image, we see a young Themba, aged 28, in a white shirt, tie, glasses and sitting in front of a typewriter as if working. Schadeberg in his book *The Way I see It*, describes the moment in the following words:

On a stoep with a red polished floor we found a scholarly-looking man sitting in a dilapidated rocking chair. He was wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, a white well-ironed shirt and a conservative dark-blue tie. Can was surprised to see us and expressed great pleasure when Henry told him the good news. (Schadeberg, 2017: 215)

The subsequent article, following its publication in *Drum* back in 1953, appears in Nicol’s *A Good-Looking Corpse* (1991:159). In this article, Themba says, “As for hobbies, I have none other than my reading and writing. I don’t drink but smoke heavily...”

The man who was present when the interview took place, and who would take the maiden picture of Themba published in *Drum*, was Schadeberg. Since he was there from the beginning, his opinion is important in ascertaining the validity of the claims made by the esteemed author in the article. Snyman was fortunate to get the opportunity to interview the legendary photographer for her unpublished MA research. The full transcript of the interview is included as an appendix to her thesis. In this interview, Schadeberg's view corroborates the claim made by Themba in his initial interview that he did not drink. Part of his response to Snyman says:

He only started drinking once he started with *Drum*. There was very much a drinking culture during that period, and there were a number of people at *Drum*, who encouraged the drinking. It was illegal for black people to drink, so it was something to fight the system. (Snyman, 2003: 109)

The assertion by Schadeberg above does more than just endorsing Themba's claim in his interview with Nxumalo. It also alludes to the pervasive drinking culture at *Drum*, which, according to this excerpt, predates Themba as a scribe for the popular magazine. It is well documented that Nxumalo was legendary for his drinking. The slight difference between Themba and Nxumalo could be that Themba counts a number of recruits under his belt – having introduced many of his contemporaries and protégés to their maiden visits to shebeens (as alluded to in earlier chapters) in the townships. Furthermore, he romanticised drinking in his writing, to such an extent that it naturally got associated with him.

The drinking culture was actually accepted, if not condoned, by the authorities at *Drum* Magazine. This aspect is revealed by Schadeberg, who says one of the most popular games amongst the *Drum* writers was the Cardinal Puff, which essentially promoted the drinking culture. He further reveals that drinking was actually condoned, as he argues:

I found it difficult to understand that both Jim and Tony, and now Sylvester, it seemed, tolerated and even encouraged this drinking behaviour. The argument that most of our black writers were intellectual geniuses on a higher plane and therefore their eccentric, erratic behaviour was almost to be expected, even acceptable, made no sense to me. Can now often disappeared for several days at a time. (Schadeberg, 2017:260)

What we also learn from the above excerpts is that the *Drum* journalists also used drinking as a form of resistance against the unjust apartheid laws. Black people were by law, not allowed to drink the so-called "European" liquor, and this made them even more rebellious, and

sharpened their thirst for alcohol. In his piece, “Let the People Drink”, published in *The World of Can Themba* (1985), Themba challenges these laws and mocks them for their ridiculousness.

Prohibition has been proved impossible. There is too great a thirst for drink among the unentitled. And too great a thirst for money among the bottle store keepers. And prohibition is asking for too much from the police. (Themba, 1985:164)

In a different story with a very different setting, “The Last Shebeen”, which is only two paragraphs long and closes his latest collection, *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006:161), Themba ends with a strong injunction: “Let the Law just say nix, and we’ll be foraging.” This story was written in Swaziland about a shebeen that he had discovered in one of the townships, and he quips, “Trust can Themba to find a shebeen in the Kalahari if there’s one.”

Whether Themba’s drinking was perpetuated by the desire to defy the apartheid laws, devising a coping mechanism in the midst of reporting gruesome stories, the frustrations with underpayment or was purely a self-destructive endeavour, is a matter that remains contentious. One thing for sure, all these factors conspired against a talented soul whose life was cut so brutally short at the tender age of forty-three with potentially his best work still lying ahead.

Themba objectively, if not proudly, talks about his life where drinking seems to be a dominant factor. One of the pieces in which he seems to be doing self-introspection is “Bottom of the Bottle”, where he talks about his own drinking and reflects on a moment of self-awareness. Themba was a very influential figure at *Drum*, with younger reporters such as Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi and Casey Motsisi, amongst others, learning a lot from him. Their education did not end in the newsroom, in fact, quite often, it did not begin in the newsroom either. The shebeen was the favourite platform for initiation and good conversation and drinking was a fundamental part of their orientation. Many of them had to hobnob with Themba as he hopped from one shebeen to the next in Sophiatown. In the case of Nakasa, on arrival in Johannesburg, Themba took him to his room only to show him where he would be sleeping, and then started trawling shebeens with him.

In the “Bottom of the Bottle,” Themba seems aware of the negative impact that alcohol has, not only in his life, but also in the lives of the young people that look up to him. At this moment, his “conscience” struck him, and he distances himself from the situation, and objectively considers his influence in the destruction of the young men around him. He comments:

The table was spired with bottles of brandy, gin, beer, and we were at the stage of high discourse, much like the majestic demons in the burning pit. For a moment, as I looked

at those young men around me, the luxury of a mild flood of conscience swept over me. They had all at one time or another had visions: to escape their environment; to oppose and overcome their context; to evade and out-distance their destiny, by hard work and sacrifice, by education and native ability, by snatching from the table of occupation some of the chance crumbs of the high-chaired culture. Lord, it struck me, what a treasury of talent I have here in front of me. Must they bury their lives with mine like this under a load of Sophiatown bottles? (Themba, 2006:56-57)

While only monikers are mentioned here, and perhaps they are made up names in the interests of protecting the personalities behind these characters, there are known young people who were very close to Themba and who lived a life that is more or less as destructive as his was. Nat Nakasa, a younger colleague and subordinate of Themba's, got frustrated and died in America in 1965, two years before Themba. Casey Motsisi, who was Themba's sidekick and stayed on at *Drum* for as long as Themba was there, and who was devastated when Themba was fired, but kept the fires burning, died in 1977, exactly ten years after Themba's death in similar conditions. The point of these deaths is not just to recite the rollcall of the demise of the *Drum* boys, but also to demonstrate that what Themba is talking about in "The Bottom of the Bottle" is a situation that he noticed out of his own objective reality.

There is also an element of submission, where he seems to have given up on his own alcoholism. He asks the question of whether they should go the same destructive route that he is going. He invokes the dreams that they may be letting go of, the dream to overcome their current circumstances. This comes across as meaning he has chosen his path, and that there is no turning back for him. However, it is not in his interests to have the young men bury themselves along with him under "a load of Sophiatown bottles."

One of the pieces in which he seems to be very much aware of the destructive effects of alcoholism, is "The Will to Die," from which we took the epigraph for this chapter. Typical of Themba's writing, the story is thinly veiled as fiction, if replacing the name "Can Themba" with Philip 'Foxy' Matauoane for the narrator qualifies it as fiction. Nevertheless, here we have a first person narrative from Can Themba, talking supposedly about a fellow teacher and colleague, Philip, whose profile is strikingly similar to that of the author.

In this particular story, we gain insight into the suffering of a man who tried to wash away his troubles with alcohol and whose health was fast deteriorating. As highlighted in the chapter that deals with Themba as the so-called "Intellectual Tsotsi," the shebeen features quite

prominently in Themba's writing. There is a gradual trend in his writing, where he writes as an observer, raising sharply his opinions, as we have seen in the extract from "Let the people Drink" piece above, to pieces where he becomes the subject of the narrative, where he openly describes his own relationship with alcohol. In these stories, like in "The Bottom of the Bottle" as well as "The Will to Die", we see a Themba who is deeply involved with the drinking culture, and who seems conscious of the corroding effects of alcoholism. In the introduction to this chapter, reference is made to this story where he lays bare his feelings, inadvertently admitting to his own reliance on alcohol as well as its devastating effects on his health.

There is a peculiar narrative in many of the stories that Themba wrote in the early sixties, where there is a pervading sense of despair. In many of these stories, Themba seems to be concerned about the social impact of excessive alcohol consumption, as with the case of Foxy in "The Will to Die," as well as the deterioration of health due to the same problem. He reveals the suffering that he was going through and that he tried to use alcohol as a way of coping with his troubles. The issues that have been raised above, including being a black professional under a racially divided South Africa where black people are at the bottom of the hierarchy. The oppressive apartheid system, the working conditions that exposed him to some of the most brutal atrocities against his own kind, as well as the frustrations that he suffered both as a teacher and the associate editor could have resulted in his excessive alcohol consumption.

The deep pain that Themba suffered is revealed in a number of his stories, including the following extracts from various texts:

I knew that they were excited by me when I said: 'Why should one believe in anything, when one could live – live, gentlemen, at 212 degrees Fahrenheit? The trouble is, gentlemen, for me, human nature stinks; but that is all the material we have to work with.' They said these things I said. But never with my own deep sense of doubt, the sleepless, tossing suspicion that often made me itch in the very heat of my enthusiasm. (Themba, 2006:57)

As I brood over these things, I, with my insouciant attitude to matters of weight, I feel a sickly despair which the most potent bottle of brandy cannot wash away. What can I do? (Themba, 2006:64)

But I keep having a stupid feeling that somehow, Phillip 'Foxy' Matauoane would have felt: This is as it should be.' Some folks live the obsession of death. (Themba, 2006: 92)

The above extracts reveal that Themba was a troubled soul. The anguish that he felt could not be hidden to himself even though he tried to put up a brave face among his friends. The first excerpt from “The Bottom of the Bottle,” reveals the deep sense of self-doubt that he felt and that his friends and protégés were not privy to. It is this sense of honest self-reflection that reveals Themba’s anguish and vulnerabilities, which he tried to wash away with alcohol and hide behind drunkenness. The second excerpt confirms Themba’s use of alcohol as a means of attempting to erase his troubles with alcohol. It is apparent that the troubles were much too deep, too severe, so much that “not even the most potent bottle of brandy” could wash them away. The very last excerpt, taken from “The Will to Die,” is one of the last pieces that Themba wrote before his passing. It subsequently became the title of his first collection of short stories, which was published posthumously in 1972. This particular story has a domineering element of submissiveness, of giving up on life, if not somewhat depressive. It tells the story of Foxy, who had obsession with death, and the character of Foxy is very much like the author himself. In a situation where life seemed to resemble fiction, or rather in the case of Themba, the affirmation of the close link between fact and fiction, there is a similar incident as told by Hopkinson. On a Monday, following a week in which they produced their latest edition of the magazine, Themba and the rest of the staff that reported to him did not show up at work. Infuriated by this incident, which happened within weeks of his arrival, Hopkinson decided to go to their houses and force them to come to work. He started at Themba’s place and this is how he describes the scene after knocking hard for a long time:

At last a face at the window, and a girl let us in. Can, lying across rather in bed, was in sleep from which no shakings or shoutings could recall him. Once his eyes rolled up, and it seemed that the dying man might recover consciousness, but a second later he had slid back into the pit. (Hopkinson, 1962: 90)

This was, in a sense, baptismal by alcohol for Hopkinson, as he also ended up in a shebeen to cool off his frustrations. Schadeberg believes this was a hopeless case, as Hopkinson seemed very impatient and did not try to understand the people that he worked with. This was also the kind of criticism that Hopkinson received from his boss, Jim Bailey.

These reflections are similar to the reflections shared by some of his contemporaries like Nkosi, Hart, and others mainly interviewed by Nicol in his book. It would appear that Themba suffered stomach ulcers for a very long time. In fact, stories of him suffering ulcers surface as early as the 1950s, before he was fired from *Drum*. In a supposed fictional depiction of Themba as

Pan, in Mphahlele's *The Wanderers*, he is constantly mentioned as suffering from pangs of ulcers, which were alcohol induced. Since Mphahlele left *Drum* in 1957, the possibilities are that either he witnessed the suffering or he was told about it.

Themba's handling of his frustrations and the destructive behaviour he embarked upon in the form of alcoholism is apparently a common behaviour that Samuel C. Klagsbrun writes extensively about. In *Suicide: The Will to Live vs. The Will to Die* (1984), edited by Norman Linzer, Klagsbrun opines:

The issues involved in blatant continuing self-destructive behaviour in the face of clear evidence of self-damage beg for attention. Certainly the problem of massive denial that is "I can overcome anything" plays a role in the personality of such patients. (1984:235)

Themba was technically a patient, but one that relied on self-care— who diagnosed and treated his ailment his own way. He might have been in denial, and tried to hide his health condition, turning to the bottle to ease the pain that is caused by drinking. Keorapetse Kgositsile, who knew Themba in the 1950s even though he did not work for *Drum*, talks about Themba's suffering every morning. He says Themba would not walk straight, as he bended to contain the pain in his abdomen area. This was until he got the rigmaakertjie – his morning drink to heal his body. In this 2013 interview, Kgositsile demonstrates how Themba would walk before getting his morning drink and how lively he would become just after gulping it down. He says:

One time Can Themba came from covering some story in Lesotho, and he walked into Whities, almost bended over with pain, and wanting a drink. And initially, there were a number of people there. At some point Casey decided to pour him a drink, almost filled up his glass with brandy. And Can went tha-tha-tha- (sound demonstrating gulping down), and then f-f-f- (exhaling and straightening up with relief). So it seemed like, this thing is okay for him. We didn't realise that it was not healing, it was numbing the pain. But the destruction of the liver continued.

Nkosi, who worked with Themba at *Drum*, also mentions the ulcers:

Can grinned happily, arms lifted to silence the hubbub. Anyway, I say to hell with politics and bottoms up to glasses. He tossed the entire contents of a large glass of brandy down his throat, smote his chest and grimaced while the alcohol burned its way down his ulcerous stomach. (Stiebel and Chapman, 2016: 34)

The above excerpts emphasise Themba's reliance on alcohol not only to wipe away the troubles of the day, as initially suggested in this chapter, but it was also to numb the pain caused by his

ulcerous stomach. The assumption that alcohol numbed him is what led to people like Kgositsile to accept that Themba was better off with his drink than without. His erstwhile British girlfriend, Jean Hart, acknowledges Themba's alcoholism in her interview published in *A Good-Looking Corpse*.

‘As you would know he was an alcoholic and that I think is where he buried that clarity of vision of what was possible in the society in which he was living. I think it was true of Can that he drank to stop hurting. He drank most of the time.’ (Nicol, 1991:181 – 182)

It is clear from these accounts that Themba was becoming an alcoholic, and the reliance on alcohol could be the determination of the will to die. There was the emotional pain that he suffered, perpetuated by the story of blackness in the racially stratified South Africa where even the most learned had to bear the crudities of unfair working conditions, and also the physical pain, which was as the result of the reliance on alcohol, as a coping mechanism against the atrocities of the time. To conclude this chapter, let us discern meaning from all the arguments above, and assess the implications of all the forces that conspired against Themba and their impact in the destruction of his persona.

## **6.6 The Road to Swaziland: A Kind of Suicide**

The Swaziland chapter of Can Themba's life is one of the least written about aspects in all the critical texts that interrogate his works. Invariably, as a South African writer the interest in his work comes mainly from South African scholars compared to those from the Swazi neighbours. This approach has unfortunately left a significant void in his biography, especially in accounting for his last days. I had the privilege of visiting Swaziland twice in the year 2017, and attempted to retrace Themba's footsteps in this small southern African country.

It is important to note that Themba was initially very reluctant to go to exile. In “Requiem for Sophiatown”, he asks a rhetorical question:

“What about our African intellectuals who leave the country just when we need them the most?” (Themba, 2006:54)

This question, which seems rather random and is not followed-up with any substantiating argument, could be key in reflecting on his sentiments about exile. He probably saw his duty as that of supporting the development of his country and fostering change from within. This

argument is in line with Mphahlele's reasoning for coming back to live in apartheid South Africa, after many years in exile. Mphahlele returned to South Africa in 1978 despite warnings against that decision from his peers in the literary fraternity as well as those in the liberation movement. Dennis Brutus, among others, wrote an impassioned letter to Mphahlele pleading with him and showing him the harm that his decision could potentially cause the liberation movement.

Themba stayed on at *Drum* until Tom Hopkinson fired him in 1959. He remained inside South Africa, watching some of his contemporaries stream out of the country. Many of his colleagues left the country much earlier than him. These include Mphahlele, who left in 1957, Arthur Maimane left in 1958, Bloke Modisane left in 1959, Todd Matshikiza left in 1960, and Lewis Nkosi left in 1961. When Themba went into exile in 1962, he left behind Casey Motsisi as the only remaining member of the illustrious 1950s pantheon of *Drum* writers, and Nat Nakasa who was preparing to launch *The Classic*, South Africa's first black-owned literary magazine published in English.

In a video-recorded interview that I conducted with Themba's widow in 2013, Anne, who passed on a few months later, she indicated that her late husband left South Africa with the sole purpose of writing a book once in exile. He could not do so under the circumstances of the time in the country. Swaziland as the destination of choice for exile is a curious one, especially when the majority of South African exiles preferred to be outside the southern African region, and many went as far afield as Europe and the Americas. I posed this question to Mrs Themba, whose reply was simply that Swaziland resonated with her husband's surname. The name "Themba," is of Nguni origins, and could fit in any of the Nguni languages, including Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and Ndebele. In southern African countries outside South Africa, the Nguni languages are spoken mainly in Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

In my interpretation, this meant he did not want to leave South Africa in the first place, and that he still wanted to be culturally connected to the country, as there is a strong cultural interface between Swaziland and South Africa, even though the political boundaries dictate otherwise. I later came across a written message prepared as part of the publicity material ahead of the performance of Themba's most famous story, "The Suit", in 1993. In this unpublished document, Mrs Themba quotes her husband motivating for his destination of choice for exile:

“The best way out will be to emigrate to one of the protectorates, where I will be as free as air to write the book; and we shall live off the royalties of the book.” (Anne Themba, 1993:2)

Themba left South Africa in 1962 and found himself a teaching job at the Swaziland Trade School, also known as Swaziland College of Technology (SCOT), a tertiary institution where he was English lecturer. This is where he worked with Parks Mangena, with whom I had an interview in February 2017. Through the help of Father Ciccone, a Catholic Priest, he later found himself another job as a teacher at the St. Joseph’s Catholic Missionary School in Umzimpofo, just outside Manzini. He remained there until his demise in September 1967, following his banishment in South Africa under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965 a year earlier. A strong case can be proffered that going to Swaziland was the concession of defeat on the part of Themba, and he did not survive exile either. The chapter that precedes our current one suggests that Themba was already on course for destruction, and going to exile did not reverse this downward trend.

According to Mbulelo Mzamane, Themba used to spend a lot of time at The George Hotel, one of his favourite watering holes in Manzini. The George was only one of them because according to veteran Swazi journalist, Mangena, there was also a “Can Themba corner” at The Central Hotel, their favourite watering hole in Mbabane, where they used to drink. The countries might have changed, but the drinking culture remained the same. This view is implied in Themba’s story, “The Last Shebeen”, where he talks about a shebeen that he discovered in Umsunduzwa Township, half a mile outside Mbabane. He goes on to say:

It’s probably the only shebeen in the whole of Swaziland. Of course, it’s only a piccanin three-quarter affair, but already I’m on tick there for those Sundays when the Law says we can’t carry liquor out. (Themba, 2006: 161)

If the preceding section suggests that Themba was already an alcoholic before he left South Africa, this closing section confirms that he never got any reprieve in exile. In fact, his will to die might have been even stronger. One is tempted to concur with Nkosi’s observation when he says: “Can Themba’s own anguish and despair led to a suicidal kind of living that was bound to destroy his life at a relatively young age (2016:205).” In his paper, “Self-Destructive Behaviour: Slow Dying” published in *Suicide: The Will to Live vs. The Will to Die*, Klagsbrun brings a perspective that can easily be linked with the situation of Themba.

Of the many forms of slow deaths that professionals meet, certainly alcoholism and drug abuse stand out as major examples of slow suicide. (Klagsbrun, 1984: 235)

The constellation of frustrations must have gotten the better of him. Having left South Africa, the South African problems crossed the border with him. The subsequent excessive liquor consumption was a kind of suicide. The banishment is often mentioned in passing, whereas this must have delivered one of the most severely crushing blows to any writer. Themba, who had serious reservations about communism and had written in his *Golden City Post* column published on 15 May 1955, “This is Why I am not a Communist”, where he put a strong argument about why he was not in support of communism, was ironically declared as a statutory communist in 1966. The impact of such a step by the South African government must have been devastating to Themba, a writer who went into exile with the sole intent of writing a book.

What this meant is that it is not only that he could not come back home, but he could not be quoted or published in his home country. He died a year later. Whatever the medical terms attributed to his passing, it is indisputable that he did not die a happy man. As Stein (Stein, 1999:250) puts it, beneath it all he died of a broken heart:

Can too died in a foreign land, though one closer to home, the British Protectorate of Swaziland, and in pallid obscurity, enduring a last few years of life quite unlike the old one. Here again an official and respectable cause of mortality is pinned up on the bulletin board, coronary thrombosis; yet gossip had it that he tumbled off a lorry on a drunken spree, breaking his head and bringing on a heart attack. Yes, no, well – yes, perhaps the official verdict was right, strictly right, *for whatever the actual mode of his going, he surely died of a broken heart* (emphasis my own). (Stein, 1999:250)

Earlier in this chapter, I alluded to a number of circumstances that weighed down on Themba. I also highlighted the manner in which he turned to the bottle each time he encountered problems. This is highlighted by many of his contemporaries, and is even corroborated by Themba’s own writings. Even though there could be a medical term for the illness that ultimately took Themba, it is no doubt that there is a constellation of factors that led to his ultimate demise. The following analogy by Stein attempts to give an overview of the various factors that he was aware of. It should be noted that the troubles that Themba had with the Transvaal Education Department over his recognition as a teacher, in particular, are not mentioned by any of the previous critics. While the extract below omits this very important

aspect of Themba's destruction, it is not too far off the mark in trying to capture some of the key challenges that he had to face:

Can had needed to absorb a number of hard knocks – the girl he had loved was gone and he could not follow her, all his colleagues had run off, the life was leaking out of the magazine and he'd been banished from his milieu, his House of Truth and all Sophiatown. Casey too, as his sidekick, suffered from the side effects of Can's depressions. (Stein, 1999: 203)

The frustrations that Themba suffered were largely orchestrated by the apartheid government, but he did not make things any better with his reliance on alcohol as a coping mechanism. His ultimate passing cannot be separated from all the troubles that he faced, which most probably led him to finding solace in alcohol. In other words, there is interface between the frustrations both in the classroom as well as in the newsroom, the apartheid laws that prohibited rights of association, and excessive drinking that followed.

The passing of Themba has also become something of a legend, leading to lots of speculation and a variety of accounts about his death. The divergent views about the life of a man who passed away half a century ago further complicates the factual accuracy of some aspects of Themba's life story. The period of his life in Swaziland in particular, as he edged closer to his demise, is a hard nut to crack, as he did not write as prolifically as he did in earlier years, which gave to some extent the basis for the interpretation of his own life.

What has been unclear for a very long time in most of the critics, are the whereabouts of his family when he died. In fact, his family is barely mentioned, to the extent that Obed Musi in *A Good-Looking Corpse*, says he has never met anyone claiming to be Themba's relative. One of the factors that this research confirms is that Themba went into exile first, leaving his wife and young daughter behind. They later followed, and stayed with him in Mbabane. However, when Themba found a teaching post at St Joseph's Missionary School, he rented a flat in Manzini, a city not too far from Mbabane. He only came back to join his growing family in Mbabane on weekends. Regarding this, Mrs Themba writes:

I was running the first UNICEF-sponsored nursery school in a township in Mbabane, when Can was transferred to St. Josephs Mission in Umzimpofo, five kilometres outside Manzini. Can, therefore, came to Mbabane over weekends.

The extract above should answer many lingering questions about Themba's situation in Swaziland, especially regarding the reason why he was alone when he died. There are different

accounts of his death, and this makes it all the more difficult to be sure of how his lifeless body was discovered on 9 September 1967, a day after he had passed on. In the first place, there is Pitika Ntuli who was a student in Swaziland at the time and used to visit Themba in his flat. Ntuli's claim is that one Friday afternoon he went to see his mentor as usual, but after several knocks on the door, there was no response. The door was firmly locked, but he looked through the keyhole, and could see the feet of a man lying on the bed. He was motionless.

The feet undoubtedly belonged to the man he was looking for— Can Themba – but the young Ntuli was left bewildered when his mentor did not respond to their knocks on the door. The natural inclination was to assume that Themba was drunk and had passed out. On his way back to Lubombo, Ntuli was bothered by Themba's nonresponse, so much that the following morning he had to retrace his steps, hitchhiking and traveling the estimated 25k kilometre distance back to Themba's place in Manzini. On arrival, there were police cars and ambulances. The lifeless body of Themba had been discovered on his bed. This shuttered him, as he had always looked up to Themba from when he was a young boy visiting Sophiatown from Witbank, in what is today known as Mpumalanga province.

The other account is from legendary poet Don Mattera, who was never in Swaziland but had known Themba while living in Sophiatown and is in his own right an iconic literary figure. According to Mattera, he is envious of the manner in which Themba shuffled off this mortal coil, because his exit nurtured living creatures on earth. He says this because he understands Themba to have died peacefully in his bed, as has been reported, and was not discovered immediately. When he was finally found, birds of prey had arrived first and feasted on his eyes. What was stretched out of the house was a body with gorged eyes. This account of events has not been mentioned by any other interviewee, and for that reason the researcher has not attempted to seek corroborating or contrasting views on the matter. It remains unclear where Mattera got this version from, but it does not contradict the first one in any way. It only adds some gory details that register a horrific image in one's subconscious.

The last version is a spectacular one and probably one of the most ideal for a writer's exit. The profile in Themba's latest collection, *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006), suggests that Themba died while reading a newspaper. One would imagine that as he gasped for air in his final breath, the newspaper just fell on his face, like the drawing of a curtain after a splendid performance on a theatrical stage. The profile in this book captures his death in the following words, "while reading a newspaper in bed he died of a coronary thrombosis in September 1967." This version

is corroborated by Simon Maziya, but he goes further to indicate that there was a smell as Themba's lifeless body had been laying there for days:

They went to his house, they found out the lights were on then they knocked on the door nobody opened there was no response. Now they went away, they came again now I understand when they came they found a bad smell, I think the body was decomposing. So they called the police, they came, they broke the door they found out that he died while he was reading a newspaper.

It can be justifiably argued that Themba's death was the beginning of the process of reconstructing his life. The fact that a man who died exactly fifty years ago still dominates the public discourse today attests to his literary genius and the resilience of his influence. He owes his durability neither to journalists who wax lyrical about his exploits, the creatives who recreate his works, nor to the academics who try to sound sophisticated using esoteric if not abstruse language in their criticism of his oeuvre. He immortalised himself through his pen.

To end this chapter, let me invoke the words of the late South African Nobel laureate for Literature, Nadine Gordimer, who was one of the speakers at the Can Themba Memorial Lecture held at the Pretoria State Theatre on 21 June 2013 as referenced earlier. Concluding her eulogy to Themba, simply titled "Can Themba," Gordimer said:

Can Themba will never be dead, for us. South African literature, South African readers of his writings, the stirring flash of enlightenment, and the vivid pleasures of his interpretation of our world, along with his.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### RE-MEMBERING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE FRAGMENTS: AN EXPOSITION OF CAN THEMBA'S SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

I see him [Can Themba] as a living ancestor. That's why I don't memorialise him as if he didn't have a background. I find it difficult to see him as if he's gone... Can won't die. He won't die. Actually, his writing is breathing life into him all over again. – **Mothobi Mutloatse**

#### 7.1 Introduction

Extrapolated from the interview with Mothobi Mutloatse, the above epigraph speaks to the transcendent nature of a work of art to even surpass the lifetime of its creator. Can Themba stands out as one of the best South African writers who typify this scenario, as his work continues to live way beyond his time and age. Fifty years after his passing, Themba's works exude enormous potential to remain part of the literary discourse for the foreseeable future. This lends a different paradigm to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, which put emphasis on the consideration of the lives and times of the persons written about.

In devising the suitable methodology for the purposes of this thesis, I adopted the Biographical-Historical approach, which integrates the entire realm of human behaviour, socio-economic circumstances as well as public perception. While the preceding chapters grappled extensively with aspects such as the epistemology of human behaviour and the socio-economic circumstances, this chapter endeavours to interrogate the element of "public perception." Public perception can be linked with the contextual environment during and beyond the lifetime of the author or the person who is the subject matter. In the case of Can Themba, public perception encompasses aspects such as criticism, recognition, intertextuality and re-imagination. The focus of this section is the interrogation of these aspects beyond the life of Themba as a way of reconstructing his image.

At the time of his passing in 1967, Can Themba had been banned for about a year by the South African government. This effectively meant that he was an illegal writer. In this manner, the government hit him where it hurt the most – emasculating him and making it impossible for him to practice his innate vocation – as part of the reason he decided to go to Swaziland was to write a book. He could neither be published nor quoted inside South Africa, which probably discouraged him from writing as hopes of being published diminished. The preceding chapter dealt more elaborately with the effects of such draconian laws, and this chapter can only make a rudimentary reference for the purposes of contextualising the argument. The Biographical-Historical approach that I have adopted in this study takes due consideration of these factors which hold a great bearing in the construction of public perceptions.

It is also important to note that Themba was not the only one to be silenced via government legislation. In fact, according to Mbulelo Mzamane in his introduction to *Hungry Flames and other Black South African Short Stories* (1985), he was one of about 46 writers and social activists banned under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965.

Between 1960 and 1966, the government made a desperate bid to wipe out the literary achievements of the preceding decades. A Government Gazette of 1966 named 46 exiles as ‘Statutory Communists’ – among them Abrahams, Mphahlele, Modisane, Themba, Maimane and La Guma, all of whom could neither be read nor quoted in South Africa. (Mzamane, 1986: xviii).

The government’s attempts to muffle Themba’s voice and those of his contemporaries was not only aimed at preventing the spread of their influence to the immediate audiences, but was also meant to wipe them off the face of history. The banishment had devastating effects on Themba and his career, as discussed in Chapter six. The government probably attained a certain measure of success in terms of silencing and frustrating Themba during his lifetime, but they could not suppress his legacy as he continues to rise like a phoenix in the Egyptian mythology.

Although his articles and short stories had been featured in some of the leading newspapers, magazines and journals all over the world, there was no book under his authorship. He expressed his intention to write a book to his wife, and had intimate discussions with Casey Motsisi about collaborating with him in writing a short story collection, but this was not to be. While he died without publishing a single book in his lifetime, his passing seems to have brought his works to life, and fifty years on his name is still entrenched in the annals of writing in South Africa. A novice to the South African literary and journalism landscapes would

understandably wonder why a man who died far away from home, without a book to his name, deserves to be part of the national memory fifty years after his death. This question is eloquently addressed in Kgositsile's interview, where he says:

When you consider that everything you've read by Can Themba was written on the run, so to speak, either to beat the deadline, that the guy was a genius. I mean, I don't know how really to put it, that where some people have blocks of time devoted to writing, without interference, Can didn't have that. (Kgositsile, 2015)

The question of the extent of Themba's contribution further elicits a dialectical quest towards the understanding of memory and the notions of "Re-Membering" and "Reconstruction". The thesis of this chapter is persuaded by Lars Eckstein's argument in his book *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* (2006), in which he interrogates the importance of literature in telling a people's history and its capability of preserving knowledge. In his introduction to the book, Eckstein makes a bold statement: "Literature must also be reckoned as a special form of cultural memory in itself" (2006: xiv). He further draws parallels between literature and memory in the following extract:

One of the most fundamental tasks of literary studies should surely be to find ways of analyzing literature in its historical, political and social contexts without ignoring the achievements of the modern and the postmodern periods... The present study accordingly posits that there is indeed a fundamental connection between memory as *ars* – and memory as *vis* – in the text's perceivable *structure of dialogic reference* – and memory as *vis* – in the sense of its *identity-giving potential*, directed at a specific historical reality. (Eckstein, 2006: xiv)

In the first part of the excerpt above, Eckstein makes a strong argument about the importance of historical, political and social contexts in the study of literature. Such an approach augments the role of memory not only in chronicling a people's heritage, but also in serving a mnemonic role about the importance of the past in our present and future developments. This also presents history not just as a series of dates and facts, but also as a crucible against which we endeavour to measure human progress. It is probably in view of these factors that Don Gifford in his book, *Zones of Re-Membering: Time, Memory and (un)Consciousness* (2011:14), argues, "Our individual and collective memory is stored in the arts." The arts, particularly literature, is one of the most efficient vehicles of preserving memory and transmitting it from generation to generation. From this background, we are able to construct the notion of "re-membering", as

opposed to just remembering as a form of retrieving information from the deep crevices of memory. Our notion of re-remembering speaks to the process of putting together fragments of memory to make a composite whole. It is about reassembling dispersed particles of a singular object.

Literary art and journalism are the media that Themba chose as his form of self-expression. It is the durability of these two platforms that has ensured that he remains a significant part of our collective memory. In other words, Themba's writings have played a catalytic role in entrenching his name in the annals of South African history way beyond his own lifetime. He did not only write about his country and the happenings at the time, in many ways Themba chronicled his own story through a number of poems, short stories and articles he published in various platforms. Although he did not have a published text as a biography at the time of his passing, Themba's personal story can be sifted through his own writings and writings by others about him and his era especially in the works of his contemporaries like Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa and Bloke Modisane, amongst others. In the introduction to *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic* (2006), Eckstein elucidates on the importance of literature as an agent for memory in the following words:

Literature may be employed by writers as a medium of individual, collective and cultural self-realization, a medium in which models of memory and forgetting are acted out and critically positioned against contemporary discourses of social commemoration. (Eckstein, 2006: xiii)

Notwithstanding the fundamental role of memory as explained by Eckstein above, as well as other scholars elsewhere, it is also imperative to concede that memory is not always consistent and reliable. There are memory lapses as one story told has a potential to travel, get divergent narratives, assume different interpretations, shapes and forms, and morph into something totally different from its original version. The epistemology of re-remembering is premised on the view that memory is susceptible to loss or diversion. It is a concession that vital elements of a story can be dismembered. In earlier chapters, for instance, empirical evidence was brought forward about how Themba's identity as recorded by different scholars has assumed different forms over the years, depending on who is documenting it at a particular moment. This unreliability of memory is demonstrated more glaringly by the factual inaccuracies with regard to simple yet important details like names and dates as demonstrated earlier.

The earlier chapters endeavoured, amongst other things, to present a holistic view of the construction of Themba's identity. The preceding chapter ventured into the period of his deterioration, the destruction of character and his ultimate demise. The early demise of Themba did not only end his life, it also left fragments of his story dispersed all over the place. By tracing both his construction and destruction, this study attempts to provide reasons and factors that contributed to Themba's phenomenological existence. It preoccupies itself with the politics of being. Taking from the discourse proffered in the earlier chapters, this one focuses not only on the collection of the different particles, but also on the reconstruction of the image that had been destroyed. Our notion of reconstruction bears some resemblance to the one advanced by Kelly L. Wrenhaven in the book, *Reconstructing the Slave* (2012: 5), where reconstruction is not aimed at disputing existing notions but instead attempts to restore representational and ideological images.

This chapter also illustrates that it is not the longevity of one's life that creates memory. In his short but meteoric life, Themba inscribed his name among the distinguished canon of African writers. Mthobi Mutloatse's assertion in the epigraph above, as taken from an interview I had with him in 2013, provides the basis for the central argument of this chapter. During the interview, Mutloatse emphasised on the genius of Themba's work and its evocative power, which reverberates through the ages. The central argument in this chapter echoes similar sentiments — it speaks to the durability of Themba's works. Further to this, the chapter attempts to consolidate and present a comprehensive view of Themba's social and intellectual legacy as the interlocutor of the 1950s and 1960s literary discourse. It contends that although Themba passed away in 1967, he continues to live through his works, which immortalised him to such an extent that his name transcends different epochs.

The evolution of Can Themba's name took a form of a gradual reconstruction, a re-membering of fragments of history — a putting together of a dismembered tale into a composite whole. The first significant moment after his passing was at his funeral, held at the St Joseph's Mission School in Umzimpofo, outside Manzini in Swaziland. One of the greatest ironies about Can Themba's life is that his burial symbolically marked the beginning of a new life for him. A man who professed to be an atheist, an existentialist and at times a romantic nihilist, Themba was buried like a Bishop, as he became the first civilian to be buried in the St. Josephs cemetery. Much as Themba was well versed with the Christian doctrine, he refused to join the rest of the school in their daily prayers. According to Simon Maziya, his student at St. Josephs, Themba often told them to go and pray for their sins:

I don't remember, you see er, worshipping with Mr. Can Themba, or he was too busy or what he would say "You go and pray for your sins" and he would not go there, so I wouldn't say he was he was not a Christian, [or] he was a heathen. I will not say that but I don't remember, you see going to church and pray with my, my teacher (laughs).

This is a matter that retrospectively baffled even his widow, Anne Themba, who confessed that she never gave much thought to the significance of the burial. The St. Josephs Mission, under the stewardship of Father Angelo Ciccone, offered to preside over the burial, and the family readily agreed. The man of the cloth who was an Italian émigré had struck a strong friendship with Themba during his last days in Swaziland.

Themba had made plans for his own burial, indicating to his wife that she should never mourn him and that only one speaker may be allowed to eulogise him at the funeral. Indeed, the single speaker eulogised him, according to G.D. Trevelyan, who attended the funeral even though he did not know much about Themba before, reports in his article published in the *Contrast* in 1968. Trevelyan speaks of the unidentified man who delivered the eulogy as someone who knew Themba from his days as a high school student. Themba was the third teacher to pass away from the school in a short space of time and he was laid to rest at the mission cemetery. He became the first civilian to be buried in a cemetery that was reserved exclusively for the clergy. The burial of an atheist among the clergy is as much of an irony as Themba's life itself and could stand as a metaphor that depicts the reincarnation of the scribe in accordance with the Christian doctrine. By being buried among the clergy, he was introduced to a new Christian dogma, which involves resurrection. This metaphorically signifies his transition as a "born again," to use charismatic Christians' terms.

Indeed, Themba's name took a completely new life after his burial and a strong argument can be proffered that he became a more significant and recognised figure in death, than he was while he was still alive. A number of significant initiatives took place following Themba's burial. Although there are too many developments to mention over the past fifty years, this Chapter attempts to identify some of the key initiatives that played a significant role in ensuring that Themba's legacy is kept alive. A year after his passing, *The Classic* literary journal, which was founded by his late friend and colleague, Nat Nakasa, and which he had helped in founding, published a tribute edition to Themba in 1968. Since Themba remained a banned person even in death, the tribute edition did not include any of his works. Instead, it featured eulogies from

some of the people that he worked with including Harry Mashabela, Juby Mayet, Casey Motsisi and Stan Motjuwadi. I will expatiate on the content of these tributes later in this chapter.

In 1972, five years after Themba's death, Heinemann Educational Books in London published the very first collection of Themba's works, titled *The Will to Die*. The book was distributed across the world but could not circulate legally inside South Africa. It was only in 1982, fifteen years after his passing, that the ban on Themba was lifted. This instigated interest in Themba's works and subsequently the reprints of *The Will to Die* and several other publications. Following his unbanning, a local publisher, David Phillip, obtained the rights to republish Themba's works inside South Africa. This publication was followed in 1985 by a more substantial collection of his works edited by Essop Patel and simply titled, *The World of Can Themba*. The latest and arguably the most comprehensive collection of Themba's works was published by Penguin Books in 2006, under the title, *Requiem for Sophiatown*.

Amongst all Themba's works, his short story, "The Suit", is obviously the most famous and probably the most successful short story by any South African. "The Suit" was first published in the inaugural issue of Nat Nakasa's literary journal, *The Classic*, and thus gave it a strong foundation to outlive both its founder as well as Themba himself. After its first publication in 1963, "The Suit" was soon republished in an anthology edited by Nadine Gordimer for school syllabus purposes. Over the years, the story has been prescribed for school syllabus and studied at various tertiary institutions. Further to the utilisation of the story for pedagogic purposes, it has been adapted into graphics, stage and film over the years. This story epitomises the pinnacle of Themba's literary oeuvre and will receive particular attention later in this chapter. Suffice to say, its evolution over the years has ensured that Themba's name remains in the canon of African literary giants. It keeps reinventing itself via different mediums and platforms.

The availability of Themba's works in the public domain has elevated his status as a major contributor to South Africa's literary architecture. The interest in a literary output brings with itself literary criticism that not only focuses on the author's individual contribution, but on the generation that he belonged to as well as the growth patterns in our literary contours. Some of the most prominent critics argue that Themba was one of the most talented writers of his generation and in a paradoxical sense, there is at the same time amongst many an admission, stated or otherwise, that his literary output does not match his creative and intellectual potential. According to Mzamane, this is what led him into exploring the possibilities of collecting Themba's work and having it published:

Somebody described Can Themba at one point as maybe the greatest living author who was never published as well. So that kind of thing stuck, and I knew Aunt Anne, his wife as well, so we had decided to go to the funeral but also to find out whether or not they could not pick up some of the pieces and probably anthologize some of the work that had come before. That is how the *Will to Die* actually was conceived and executed.

Until this point, Themba had no book to his name and he was heavily criticized for not living up to his fullest potential. Scholars like Nkosi have been more explicit in spelling out this assertion and wrote extensively about it as referenced in earlier chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to put together the various strands in constructing a substantive argument that would present a composite whole.

Taking practical examples as illustrated above and tracing Themba's level of popularity during his lifetime and contrasting it with the accolades that he received after passing, this chapter grapples with the question of Themba's life after death. The focus here is on how his works grew and impacted on different people and thus reconstructing his own image in the process. It also takes cognisance of the arguments presented in the preceding chapters, and attempts to present a concise argument that surmises the construction, destruction and reconstruction of Themba. This chapter attempts to string together various strands of Can Themba to present a wholesome being as a way of formulating a conclusive argument. It evaluates the divergent views, sometimes contradicting accounts, and consolidates Themba's intellectual and social legacy into a single entity.

## **7.2 Retrospective Cognisance and Consolidation of Memory**

The absence of a complete biography of Can Themba compels us to rely on the existing published material, including Themba's writings and writings about him as the baseline for this study. The anecdotal musings gathered through research and captured largely on audio-visual format, combined with archival material in addition to this baseline, play a critical role in solidifying the memory of this scribe.

Some of the earliest reflections of Themba's biographical elements after his passing were published in 1968, a few months after his burial. These include a publication that reflects on his funeral even though the author was neither familiar with Themba as a person nor well versed

with his works, and another one, which is penned by individuals most familiar with his personality. As mentioned in the previous section, in July 1968, in its Volume 5 Number 2 edition, the *Contrast* literary journal published Trevelyan's piece in July 1968. The piece is dated September 1967, which is the month in which Themba died and was buried. Trevelyan had attended the funeral in Manzini and the piece was about his reflections of the experience.

In the first instance, this piece by Trevelyan settles the contentious issue of the year of Themba's death, which until now has been fluctuating between 1967 and 1969, depending on which source you use for your reference. One of the most confusing elements regarding Themba's biographical details, once again, is that even the seemingly authoritative texts like *The World of Can Themba*, publish incorrect details about the author saying he died in 1968, something that is disproved by the article referenced above. An article by Sthembiso Hlongwane of *Drum Magazine*, written after his visit to Swaziland in 2013, which included an extensive interview with Father Angelo Ciccone, suggests that he died in 1969. This, again, is too off the mark and contradicts records that register Themba's passing in 1967. Trevelyan's article should be one of the most credible sources in as far as the year of death is concerned, as he reflects on his experience of having attended Themba's funeral.

The article also provides insight into the burial of Themba, as there is minimal recorded information of his last days in Swaziland. It reveals that father Ciccone presided over the burial ceremony, which was conducted under the auspices of the Catholic Church. Themba had died while working as a teacher at St Josephs, a Catholic mission school located in Umzimpofo, outside Manzini. According to Trevelyan, the chosen speaker had known Themba from primary school, and later shared a room with him at boarding school, where Themba sacrificed his own bed for the speaker. The identity of the speaker is unknown to Trevelyan as he writes:

Can had entered his life as a friend of his brother in primary school, but it was in his first high school year that he really became acquainted with Can. The school they attended was a boarding school and there weren't enough beds. So, as a junior he was allocated a blanket and the floor, until Can allowed him part of his bed. This he had for the rest of the year. (Trevelyan, 1968)

Trevelyan, who concedes that he did not know much about Themba's works, clearly did not know the speaker at the funeral; hence, he does not mention his name. Given the fact that the speaker knew Themba from a young age, and that he lived in Swaziland at the time of Themba's death, our search for the identity of the speaker should be narrowed down. Most notable is the

publication date of the article, which precedes the date of death that other publications seem to purport. This article, coupled with the publication of special tributes to Themba by *The Classic* early in 1968, clearly shows that Themba passed away in September 1967.

The other person who claims to have attended the funeral service is the late Mbulelo Mzamane, one time Themba's student and a distinguished literary scholar. At the time of Themba's death, Mzamane was exiled in the neighbouring Lesotho where he was a student at the University of Roma. Mzamane had done his high school education in Swaziland, and was the beneficiary of Themba's tutelage during those days. Mzamane's reflections of the funeral indicate that the speaker might have been Rosette Nziba, one of the founders of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in South Africa. A fellow teacher at the nearby Salesian School in Manzini, Nziba must have had intimate knowledge of Themba. According to Mzamane, Nziba was friends with Themba and speaking at his funeral provided him with an opportunity to deride his detractors. Pitika Ntuli, who says Themba and Nziba used to engage in intellectual debate for hours on end, also confirms the friendship between Nziba and Themba:

He actually liked Rosette Nziba who was one of the PAC leading intellectuals who was in Swaziland. When that guy would actually join, you could see kind of sparks of actually intellect, there will be a bottle here of brandy sitting there untouched because the minds were so actually engaged.

Mzamane informs us that Nziba came from a religious family, with his father having been a priest in the Methodist church. By virtue of his religious background, Nziba was the most obvious choice to speak on occasions such as funerals. This, of course, is in addition to the fact that he knew Themba very well, having shared a room with him in high school, also studied at the University of Fort Hare, through to his last days as a teacher while they were both exiled in the British protectorate. According to Mzamane, Nziba's eulogy started innocuously, reflecting on the positive traits of the departed friend. He then moved on to the devastation caused by his death, questioning the reasoning and fairness of a god who would take such a good man, instead of eliminating the white mercenaries from the South African apartheid government who were killing innocent people. This eulogy had evocations of Themba's own speech at an unidentified friend's funeral, in which he famously said: "The son of a bitch had no business to die!" It remains unclear at whose funeral Themba uttered these famous words, but it has widely referenced, with Nkosi using it to prelude his tribute to Themba (2016:205).

According to Mzamane, Nziba's eulogy took another turn, addressing matters at hand, which included squaring up with those who were not too friendly to him and his departed friend. Nziba presented different options to the Creator, saying if it was not his intention to eliminate the *boers*, he could have taken even some of Themba's detractors amongst them, including W.D. Madikizela and Mokgokong. Mokgokong was one of Nziba's colleagues at Salesian. Madikizela, the story goes, had denied Themba entry into his house in the middle of a rainy night. Themba, who was a married man at the time and whose family was in Mbabane, had a piece of adultery in tow. It is unclear whether it was due to the consideration of this fundamental fact that he refused to open the door for Themba, but it is no doubt that that experience left a sour taste not only in Themba's mouth, but also in that of his good friend Nziba's.

Mzamane also reveals that it was at the funeral that the idea of publishing Themba's works in a book was first mooted. He had travelled to Swaziland with two academics, Professors Roy Holland and Donald Stuart, the latter having taught Themba at the University of Fort Hare. Mzamane informed them about stacks and stacks of books he had seen on the occasions that he visited Themba in his flat in Manzini. He introduced them to Themba's widow, Anne, and this resulted in the collection of Themba's stories and compiled into a manuscript. Mzamane started teaching Themba's stories to his students even before they were published in book form. This process culminated in the publication of Themba's debut collection, *The Will to Die*, five years after his passing. It also launched his career into the African literary canon, as the book was published as part of the prestigious African Writers Series, which was founded by Chinua Achebe in 1962.

The publication of Themba's debut collection constructed his image beyond the readership of the newspapers and magazines that he had written for. This is not to cast any aspersions on *Drum Magazine*, *The Golden City Post*, *Africa!* or any other newspaper or magazine that Themba had previously written for. After all, he was known and respected across the African continent and the Diaspora, way before he had a book of his own. In a recent conversation (which unfortunately was not recorded), distinguished writer, Ngugi wa Thiongó, alluded to the positive influence that Themba and the rest of his colleagues from the "*Drum* decade" had in his own literary appreciation. Themba grew in stature as a literary powerhouse to the extent of being celebrated in different parts of the continent where *Drum Magazine* was distributed and being published by Langston Hughes as one of the prominent African writers.

### 7.3 Consolidating Discursive Narratives: A Teacher in the Newsroom

Public perception is one of the most crucial phenomena in consolidating public memory. As part of doing research for this study, I conducted interviews with those whose lives were touched by Can Themba, one way or another, and these are crucial in our endeavours to reconstructing his image.

This section pays particular attention to testimonies by a number of people, including those who were taught by him in the classroom, newsroom, his contemporaries, as well as those who have studied and been influenced by his works. The objective is not to treat this as a case study, instead it is to garner as much corroborating Biographical and Historical data about our subject. It is clear from the evidence proffered that Themba's entire career straddles the teaching and writing arenas, and this happens interchangeably throughout his lifetime. While writing was helpful in entrenching his name in the annals of literary history, his career as a teacher is referenced only sporadically, almost as a footnote. This is an unfortunate occurrence as Themba displayed a great passion and commitment to teaching.

Themba expended a significant amount of time and energy making concerted efforts to return to the classroom and his lack of recognition as a teacher was one of the major destructions in his life as illustrated in Chapter six. His career as a teacher began at Madibane High School in the Western Native Township, where he taught after graduating from Fort Hare University College in 1948. This stint came to an abrupt end within a space of two years, when he decided to go back to the Cape in 1950 to study towards the University Education Diploma. He took the decision to return to the desk precisely because he wanted to be recognised as a teacher as lack of recognition did not only affect his status in the workplace, but also ensured that he was not paid fully as a teacher. Upon his return to Johannesburg in 1952, Themba went back to Madibane, where he resumed his teaching career. In the period between 1952 and 1953, he exchanged over thirty letters with the authorities trying to gain recognition as a teacher. His second stint as a teacher was again short-lived, as he quit teaching in 1953 to join *Drum* Magazine as a reporter and later the associate editor. After being fired from *Drum* in 1959, he returned to teaching, securing himself a teaching job at the Central Indian High School in Fordsburg and intermittently practised journalism working for the *Golden City Post* until 1961. He later resigned, and went on a self-imposed exile in Swaziland where he first taught at a tertiary institution, the Swaziland Central School, and later at St Joseph's Catholic Missionary School where he worked until his passing in 1967.

It is ironic that for a man who spent so many years in the classroom, there is barely anything said about his impact as a teacher. Themba's image cannot be complete without the reflection of this fundamental aspect of his life. This is one of the central objectives of this research, to try to reflect on each of the key aspects of his life, including gathering the views of some of his products from his days as a teacher. After further investigation, it has become clear that his influence was not confined into the classroom alone; instead, it stretched across the realm of society as Themba touched the lives of many. His writings were widely distributed and ensured that his influence stretched beyond the walls of the classroom. *Drum* Magazine as the regular platform on which he was plying his trade, was distributed across the continent and thus reached audiences in places that Themba himself had never been to. He was later published in other platforms, locally and internationally, and this expanded his realm of influence. Over the years, Themba's works have been prescribed for school syllabus at educational institutions and this bears testament to the extent of his influence not only in terms of reach, but also in terms of the richness of his literary output and its enduring nature.

However, it can be justifiably argued that the entire generation of writers from the 1950s cohort can lay claim to this level of influence. This wholesale approach towards the writers from the *Drum* decade is probably one of the contributing factors to the neglect of Themba's particular legacy, where he is only considered as part of a group, thus relying on the caricature of the 1950s journalist as opposed to individual identities. A closer look would reveal that Themba stands out not only as part of a generation, and the romanticised drinking culture, but also for his deliberate efforts in imparting knowledge both in the newsroom as well as in the classroom.

In the case of Thloloe, as illustrated earlier, Themba's intervention gave wheels to a career that has lasted for over fifty years, which included serving as the country's Press Ombudsman and the Director of the Press Council. It was in recognition of his role in mentoring him that Thloloe says for the week Themba was the acting editor, he had "a teacher in the newsroom." It would appear that there are many other young scribes who got their break in journalism or honed their journalistic skills under the tutelage of Themba.

It was after his passing that tributes started pouring from a number of people that he had taught and mentored in journalism. Amongst those is Stan Motjuwadi, popularly known as "Black Stan" during his days as a journalist for *Drum* Magazine and *The Golden City Post*. Motjuwadi penned his ode to Themba as part of the tribute edition of *The Classic*, published in 1968. In

paying homage to the departed scribe, Motjuwadi reflects on his anticipation of Themba after they were informed of his impending arrival at Madibane High School:

Like all the other pupils at Madibane High School in Western Township, I eagerly awaited the arrival of the new English Master from Fort Hare. More especially as we had been told that he was brilliant and had passed English with distinctions at the University. (Motjuwadi, 1968: 12)

Upon arrival, Themba did not create as much positive impression to match the hype that was built by the school principal ahead of his arrival. His appearance was a bit of a letdown, to say the least, for he did not try to impress even on the first day of school. In a reworked version of the same article, published in *The World of Can Themba* (1985), Motjuwadi contrasts their level of anticipation with the actual outcome. In the piece titled “The Man from the House of Truth: A Recollection of Can Themba,” Motjuwadi indicates that by virtue of having passed English with a distinction from a University, their level of respect for the new teacher had already escalated, but this changed when they were confronted by his unimpressive appearance:

You can imagine our disappointment when the principal Mr Harry Madibane proudly stood on the stage and introduced the new Wonderboy. He was scrawny with an incongruously puffy, rubbery face. At my most generous, I would not say he looked a ‘bit’ distinguished. Sartorially he was a disaster. No tie, a cheap baggy grey workman’s gabardine’s trousers, a khaki shirt, shoes that had an overdue date with the repairers and the kind of jacket a fussy student would not be seen dead in. Quite a let down after the imposing figure we had over the days built up in our minds. (Patel, 1985:5)

Themba’s disappointing appearance seems to have been an antithesis of what he would become once he started addressing the school assembly. The impression that he created is similar to that created by poet S.E.K. Mqhayi to the young Nelson Mandela, when the famous poet visited their school in Healdtown. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994:47-48), Mandela shares his experience of seeing Mqhayi for the first time in person. Mandela had considered Mqhayi his hero because of his impressive poetry, but when he finally got to see him the heroic figure seemed too ordinary, short and unassuming. He begins to speak and within no time, Mqhayi grows in stature, and suddenly the respect that Mandela had for him is restored. Likewise, in the case of Motjuwadi, we see Themba’s stature growing as he speaks:

Fortunately our disappointment was short-lived. From the moment he opened his mouth to address us, we were, to use a cliché, eating out of his bony palm. Blinking all the time like something unused to harsh lights, he spoke in a cool, sophisticated voice. He used words we were accustomed to, but he used them the way only he could. Eloquent and articulate, he really made the occasion his show without being pompous. On the contrary, he made us feel like his equals. (Patel, 1985:4)

The impact of Themba's oratory skills seems to have spread across many other students in the school. Perhaps the advantage here is that it was not just his inaugural speech, nor his appearance on the day that created a lasting impression on the minds of his students, but his teachings. A number of his former students are now coming out to affirm the positive impact he has had on them and the guidance that he gave to them as a mentor even outside the classroom. Themba counts a number of prominent South Africans as some of his products as a teacher. Amongst others, we can make mention of Desmond Mpilo Tutu, Anglican Bishop Emeritus and a Nobel Peace prize winner, and the witty journalist Casey Motsisi, who followed on Themba's footsteps both in his profession as well as in his lifestyle.

The relationship between Themba and Motsisi as mentor and protégé respectively, is one of the most famous and well-documented partnerships in the history of journalism in South Africa. Motsisi, a legendary journalist in his own right, shared his reflections regarding his relationship with Themba after the latter's passing. In *The Classic* Vol 2, No, 4 edition of 1968, which paid homage to Themba, Motsisi says of his mentor:

I first came in touch with Can during my search for knowledge at the then Western High School on the outskirts of Western Native Township where he taught literature, poetry appreciation and history in Matric. (Motsisi, 1968: 7)

The reflections from people who knew the writer present a different dimension to the theory of the Biographical-Historical approach to literary criticism. Instead of focusing on the author's life and times as represented in his own text, we get accounts from those who knew him, and this reaches beyond the established parameters of the Historical-Biographical approach as defined by M.J. Mogoboya in his unpublished doctoral thesis, "African Identity in Es'kia Mphahlele's Autobiographical and Fictional Novels: A Literary Investigation". Mogoboya defines this approach as:

The Historical-Biographical approach argues that factors outside the text have a direct influence on it. In other words, *writers mirror their lives and times in the context of their texts* (emphasis my own). (Mogoboya, 2011:32)

While Mogoboya provides impeccable insights into the Biographical-Historical (or Historical-Biographical approach as Mogoboya prefers to put it) theory as a scholarly approach, our current study expands the scope of this method beyond the purpose of mirroring “their lives and times in the context of their texts.” Since the writer is dead, and he did not have an autobiography, one of the vital methods of reconstructing his image is through the prism of those who knew him. We are not only mirroring his image, but through comparison and collaboration of accounts from different individuals, we are actively interrogating his image.

This method alone does not help in formulating a complete image; it is only part of remembering the dismembered fragments. The data collected from the individuals is still subject to verification, analysis and comparison. There is a particular way in which proud products of a particular teacher are expected to speak of their master and therefore their accounts cannot be presumed to be precise all the time. While we remain acutely aware of these dynamics, such accounts are fundamental in presenting authentic perspectives on the subject.

The following paragraphs will capture mainly the reflections of some of the individuals who were influenced by Themba’s pedagogic endeavours. We adopt this approach as a necessary step in the discursive strategies of the research while we remain conscious of the possibility of subjective revisionism. This refers to a situation where some would be driven by sentiment as opposed to fact, into offering a different account in the interests of refining the subject’s image or even their relationship. It is expected that different people would have divergent views about the same person, and this is applicable even to Themba whose legacy remains a very complex phenomenon. While Motjuwadi and Motsisi speak fondly of the man and how much they admired him as a teacher, it is perhaps Sol Rachilo who speaks more explicitly about how Themba fared as a teacher in the classroom. Rachilo credits Themba as his English master for his proficiency in speaking and writing English language today. He admired and appreciated Themba no less than the pair of protégés previously mentioned, but he goes further to express his gratitude and the specific lessons he learned from Themba:

We enjoyed being in Dorsay Can Themba’s class because he was our English Master. Very wonderful intuition and imparting knowledge, applying the Socratic Method all the time.

It seems like imparting knowledge is what Themba enjoyed the most in his vocation, whether in the field of education or in journalism. In the previous chapter, reference was made to Themba being hired to offer private English lessons to families. Further to that, Themba imparted knowledge through paying special visits to different schools. Distinguished intellectual and academic, Muxe Nkondo, who in the late 1950s was a student at Orlando High School in Soweto, had the privilege of receiving this knowledge directly from the source.

Themba was invited by a certain Mr Makhubalo, also a graduate of the University of Fort Hare and, just like Themba, happened to have majored in English. At the time, the English examination had three parts, including poetry. As part of the poetry paper, they were required to write an essay on one of Keats's poems, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which is a poem about a cold wintry morning in England. The Johannesburg winter is definitely nothing compared to England, where there is regular snow. This was a very difficult poem to teach to students who had no idea of what European winter felt like, so the great English master was called in to try to share his insights with the students. The fact that the lesson took place on a hot day in October, and at a time when it would be understandable if the students even forgot how their last winter was like, must have made it even more difficult to understand the poem.

Nevertheless, Themba read the poem to them, explained its meaning and described the feeling so vividly that the students started feeling cold. Nkondo speaks of his classmate, Nana, who felt so cold that she started having illusions:

The way he commented on the cold, on the chill, my classmate Nana, we all felt an immediate chill, so much that she stood up and in a kind of hypnosis, started closing imaginary windows. There were no windows, but it became so cold in that room because of the evocative power of Can Themba's understanding and his hold on words.

Nkondo argues that the evocative manner with which Themba read Keats's poem is also found throughout Themba's works. He had this ability of connecting with his audience, of having them fully engaged in his writing, to the extent of creating the illusion that the reader is part of the story. His interest was to ensure that he penetrates the subconscious of both his readers and his students. It is probably this kind of teaching that impressed Hopkinson on the occasions he accompanied Themba to deliver lectures at Wits University.

In the classroom, Themba seems to have been equally dedicated in ensuring that the full potential of his students was realised. Rachilo claims that as soon as Themba realised his potential, he looked after him and even took time to guide him through his lessons:

Immediately he was aware of my potential as far as English was concerned, he was helping me even after hours. He'd say, listen, your essay was good, this is how in future you must build up what you write. When he was around, he was already guiding me on how to go on about the English language, especially writing.

The attention that Themba seems to have given to Rachilo is not limited to the classroom, as he seems to have done the same in the newsroom. This echoes the sentiments expressed by Thloloe quoted earlier, that Themba continued serving as a teacher even beyond the walls of the classroom. It should not be forgotten that even though Themba left teaching and joined *Drum* in 1953, he continued with his efforts to obtain his University Education Diploma. While he did not go back to the classroom to teach full time during the period he was working at *Drum*, it would appear that he did become a “teacher in the newsroom,” as Thloloe coins it in his testimony.

“A teacher in the newsroom” now stands out as a metaphor representing a man who continued with his vocation of teaching even though he was in a different setup altogether. Although his teachings at various levels have not been adequately recorded, it is beginning to be clear now that Themba was a teacher first before anything else. More people are coming out to testify how Themba impacted on their lives. The likes of Motsisi, Motjuwadi, Mayet and Mashabela, who were touched by Themba in a variety of ways, all stand as testament of Themba’s teachings in the world of journalism.

According to Motsisi, Themba was not just teaching him literature at school and the tools of trade in journalism, he was teaching him life. The “life coach” that Themba had become to Motsisi and other young people had his own weaknesses, as discussed extensively in Chapter seven, and invariably those who learned from him did not always distinguish between what ought to be emulated and what should not. As a result, young men like Motsisi tried to imitate everything Themba did, including the way he walked, the way he talked, as well as the way he drank. The blind loyalty might have bordered on exuberant deification of an individual, but Motsisi does not seem to have any regrets. In his tribute to his mentor, Motsisi says:

I followed him like a second shadow through the cracks, crannies of a fated Sophiatown as he hobnobbed from shebeen to shebeen... I so idolised him that I even tried to walk like him, speak like him and to be a woman chaser. But I realised at a certain point that I was made of less sterner stuff. (Motsisi, 1968:8)

Young journalist, Lucas Ledwaba, likens Themba to a farmer who sprinkled seeds on fertile soil and reaped the rewards in the form of all the products that he boasts today. This assertion is echoed by Thloloe, who says Themba replicated himself, and thereby ensuring that he leaves a positive legacy. Mayet shares similar sentiments, saying:

He gave a lot of other people, apart from me, the inspiration to always try to be better or to reach greater heights. And, as I say, always to tell the truth in whatever situation.

To try to capture the testimonies of all those who were taught or influenced by Themba in any way would be a separate project altogether. Such an initiative would have to include all the schools he taught at, including the Central Indian High School in Fordsburg, Madibane High School in Western Native Township, the University of Pretoria students he engaged on religious matters, those who benefitted from his guest lectures at Wits University, the various families and individuals who received private lessons both in Johannesburg and Swaziland, as well as all those who have learned from reading Themba's stories. The current author was taught and encouraged by the late Mbulelo Mzamane to do research on Themba, and in his younger years he (Mzamane) had received private lessons from Themba. Themba's influence encapsulates education, literature, journalism and life in general.

There are similar testimonies even in Swaziland, where he spent the last days of his life. Simon Maziya was a Form I student (Grade 8) at St Josephs in 1967, and was taught by Can Themba. He has memories of Themba teaching him Biology, and the teacher happened to be fond of Maziya because he was one of the best students in class. It was after the holidays in September that he heard the devastating news of the passing of his teacher. Themba had also left a message that Maziya and another student should be promoted to the next grade before the end of the year, as they had demonstrated vast knowledge beyond their current level. Themba's wish was granted and Maziya progressed to Form II before the end of the year. Maziya later qualified as a teacher and taught at his alma mater – St Josephs Missionary School.

As an unintended product of this research, the current author has compiled a number of testimonies in the form of video-recorded interviews, mainly from those who were influenced

by Themba one way or another, which resulted in the ongoing production of a documentary. The documentary is provisionally titled, “The Teacher in the Newsroom,” and includes interviews with some of the people who were influenced by Themba’s works or his direct teachings. “The Teacher in the Newsroom” is probably the most fitting functional phrase that best captures the essence of Can Themba’s legacy. He was a teacher in the classroom, in the newsroom, and a teacher wherever he found himself. He was a teacher both by profession and by inclination. The next question would be, if so many people are so indebted to Themba for his teachings, how much recognition has he actually received.

#### **7.4 Retrospective Restoration of Memory**

The availability of Themba’s collected works in book form led to more engagement with his literary and journalistic oeuvre and restored his place in the annals of the South African cultural heritage. Themba’s works have not only outlived his own lifetime, but they continue to hold meaningful value fifty years since he passed on. Over the years, he has received numerous accolades that affirm his remarkable contribution to both the literary and journalistic landscapes. These accolades are only done posthumously, and at best, they can only give retrospective recognition, thus restoring part of the public memory.

One of the earliest accolades Themba received was the recognition by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in 1989. COSAW was the national association of writers established in 1987, during the dying days of apartheid South Africa. This organisation aligned itself with the liberation struggle, particularly the African National Congress (ANC) as the biggest and oldest liberation movement in South Africa. The ANC and other major political parties were banned and it was mainly civil movements and cultural structures that kept the revolutionary fires burning at home and continued with the struggle mainly spreading the Black Consciousness philosophy.

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), whose major proponent was Steve Biko, flourished during the early seventies right through to the 1980s. This was the period when all political organisations were banned, and many political activists imprisoned, and a lot more had been exiled. The banning of political activity, coupled with the banning of a total of 46 writers under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965, led to many writers and political activists streaming out of the country particularly in the 1960s. To some extent,

government legislation managed to cut off continuity in literary productivity and influence from one generation to the next. The new writers did not have immediate heroes to emulate, as many of the writers were either exiled or banned whilst inside the country, and many of their works were not in circulation due to the government imposed restrictions. In his paper, “The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture”, published in *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (1991), Mbulelo Mzamane points out that two of Themba’s protégés, Motsisi and Motjuwadi, served as the link and thus ensuring continuity between generations:

Casey Motsisi and Stanley Motjuwadi, both of whom had emerged towards the end of the Sophiatown renaissance, also bridged the gap between the evolving writers and their exiled predecessors. Both were journalists who provided some degree of continuity with the past... The literary revival of the Black Consciousness era was to a degree made possible through the inspiration and example of these writers. (1991:182)

In the first instance, what this excerpt from Mzamane illustrates is that even though Themba had long departed by the time of the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement, he played a catalytic role in its development through his products, who remained the vital link that connected different generations particularly the *Drum* generation with the Black Consciousness Movement. The other connection that Mzamane makes here, between a political movement and culture, is based on the assumption that it is widely understood that literary activity, particularly in South Africa, was linked to political activities during the struggle against apartheid. In this paper, Mzamane illustrates this point, showing how platforms for poetry, theatre and music, were used to exhort people into action. The aim of the black consciousness literature was to liberate people from their own mental bondage and make them proud of whom they were and what they stood for. Mzamane elaborates:

Black Consciousness and the cultural renaissance it fostered illustrate the adage that when people live under conditions of severe repression, with no attention paid by the rulers of their political voice, culture often becomes an important medium for expressing their desire to transcend their oppressive situation... The legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness lies in the way culture came to take on the burden of articulating African political aspirations after the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress had been outlawed in 1960: it also lies in the manner in which culture came to be utilised in prosecuting the liberation struggle. (Mzamane, 1991:185)

The recognition by COSAW of Themba's contribution to public memory was a vital step in the restoration project. It happened just a month before the then President, P.W. Botha, handed over power to the younger F.W. de Klerk due to economic pressures as a result of sanctions by several countries around the world. The liberation movements in South Africa had been mobilising international solidarity against apartheid, which was declared by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly as a crime against humanity in 1966. This is to put in context Botha's stepping down and the pressures under which de Klerk had to take over the reins of power.

Botha had announced his retirement in April of that year, and de Klerk would make the announcement of the unbanning of political parties within the first four months of his rule, thus ending almost three decades of banishment of all political activity in South Africa. This is the context within which Themba was recognised by the writers' movement, which made him a pioneering figure in the transitional period. By that time, it was already clear that the political tide was turning and the writers' movement understood the importance of restoring public memory by recognising their predecessors like Themba. Academic and activist, Andries Oliphant argues in an article in *The New Nation* in August 1989, that naming the library after Themba was "a tribute to the spirit of the Fifties." The article partly reads as follows:

The decision to name the library after Can Themba was motivated by the fact that his work epitomised the spirit of resistance, innovation and wit of his generation. By remembering him, the tradition of resistance dating back to the fifties finds a continuation in present cultural struggles... The launch of the Can Themba library and the events which accompany it underlined the extraordinary advances and gains made by cultural workers under extremely difficult circumstances. (Oliphant, 1989)

The specific mention of Themba's "resistance" as one of the key elements that he was recognised for, is a clear indication of the political inclination of COSAW. The newspaper in which Oliphant published the article, *The New Nation*, was one of the most progressive papers and aligned itself with the liberation discourse. It had Zwelakhe Sisulu, son of famous Rivonia Treason accused, Robben Islander and liberation struggle stalwart, Walter Sisulu, as one of its senior contributors and later editor. The motivation given by Oliphant above is similar to that given by the government of the democratic South Africa when President Thabo Mbeki bestowed the Order of Ikhamanga to Themba in 2006. The citation said he was recognised for his "excellent achievement in literature, contributing to the field of journalism and striving for

a just and democratic society in South Africa.” The Order of Ikhamanga remains the highest honour Themba received from the government of South Africa to date.

In 2013, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of “The Suit”, the national Department of Arts and Culture hosted the Can Themba Memorial Lecture to coincide with what would have been his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday. The occasion, for which the current author was the key organiser, was supported by *Drum* Magazine, the centre for the Book, a component of the National Library of South Africa, and the State Theatre. The guest speakers included Nobel laureate and Themba’s contemporary, Nadine Gordimer, writer and academic Mbulelo Mzamane, and Thloloe. Gordimer presented a written paper, simply entitled “Can Themba,” which has been referenced in Chapter seven, whilst Thloloe and Mzamane engaged on a panel discussion giving insights on the life and times of Themba in a way that had not been publicly done since his funeral in 1967. Although the lecture does not qualify as an award ceremony, it did have a positive impact in the public discourse. The media reported quite extensively on this milestone and Themba’s name was once again in the public discourse.

In his message for the occasion, Minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Mashatile, who was unable to attend the event, said Themba was “a writer of exceptional talent.” Mashatile was represented at the event by his special advisor, Keorapetse Kgositsile, himself a legendary writer who had personal interactions with Themba during his lifetime. Kgositsile read the Minister’s speech, which included the following excerpt:

The icon that we are celebrating this evening is remembered as an eloquent debater, immensely talented writer and a daring journalist... He distinguished himself from most of his peers with his incisive intellect and a prose style deeply steeped in the nuances and rhythms of life in the township. ([www.dac.gov.za/speeches](http://www.dac.gov.za/speeches))

Over the years, in a number of productions that either focused on Sophiatown or the *Drum* era, including books, theatre and films, Themba is always featured as one of the characters, or sometimes certain characters are based on his life. These include the play *Sophiatown* by Malcolm Purkey, *Baby Come Duze* a play by Mthobi Mutloatse, *Who Killed Mr Drum* by Sylvester Stein, and *Drum* a film by Zola Maseko starring Hollywood actor, Taye Diggs. The year 2016 saw increased representation of Themba in theatre. The Market Theatre hosted the adaptation of Themba’s short story, “Crepuscule”, which was later performed at the 2016 Grahamstown National Arts Festival. The same festival also saw the premiere of the first bioplay based on the life of Themba on 30 June 2016. The play, *The House of Truth*, written

by the current author, received rave reviews and went on to be performed at the Market Theatre and Soweto Theatre respectively in the first half of 2017. It has recently graced stages at Mmabana Arts Centre in Mafikeng North West Province, Port Elizabeth Opera House in Eastern Cape, and Theatre on the Square at the Nelson Mandela Square, Sandton. The play is now available in book form and was officially launched at the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory on 8 September, the day in which Themba passed away fifty years ago. The 8<sup>th</sup> of September is also celebrated globally as International Literacy Day.

These are some of the significant initiatives that affirm Themba's legacy in both the journalistic and literary landscapes. Although the intension is not to recreate Themba's lived experience, taking due recognition of these factors contributes quite significantly towards the reconstruction of his image. While the drinking was part of his life, as illustrated in Chapter seven, it is clear that his writings as well as his role as a teacher, are aspects of his legacy that were unfortunately downplayed. One can argue that the element of alcoholism has been overemphasised and romanticised at the expense of his more constructive contribution to society. As a way of illustrating the resilience of Themba's literary output, the following paragraphs will focus on what is definitely Themba's most famous story and arguably the most successful short story ever written by any South African.

### **7.5 “The Suit” for all Seasons: Re-imagining Can Themba's Transcendent Narrative**

If there can ever be a need to single out a sole literary output as the most impactful in constructing the image of an artist, in the case of Can Themba that story will undoubtedly be “The Suit.” Notwithstanding the significance of all his other works in constructing the literary genius that Themba is known to be, “The Suit” stands out as the pinnacle of his literary oeuvre. A strong argument can be advanced, therefore, that “The Suit” catapulted Themba into something of a legend in the world of letters.

The thematic focus of this section is to trace the influence of this particular story and how it positioned Themba in the annals of the South African literary landscape. Most importantly, the public response to the story would help determine the Can Themba image that has been recreated after his death. Reference has already been made to the multiple reproductions and re-imagination of this story and it can be rightfully argued that, the more reproduction takes place, is the more Themba's name is entrenched in public memory. With every new publication, there is bound to be new readers and possibly new criticisms of the text. In the

case of this story, it has been reproduced in various mediums, thus engendering wider audiences beyond the conventional literary audiences. By virtue of its popularity, “The Suit” has received enormous scholarly attention, and the purpose of this chapter is not to offer any further literary criticism, but to trace the trajectory of a single story in reconstructing a writer’s image.

“The Suit” can be summarised as a story of a man, Philemon, who acting on a tipoff from a neighbour (Maphikela), catches his wife (Matilda) in their marital bed with another man. The fellow adulterer jumps out the window and escapes half-naked, leaving his suit behind. Instead of the predictable violent reaction, Philemon employs a psychological trick, using the presence of the suit in their household as a punitive measure against Matilda. He forces Matilda to treat the suit like the visitor that it was, feeding it and carrying it with her when they walk on the streets. Matilda tries to devise interventionist measures to cope with the disgrace that she has caused, joining a Cultural Club for married women who bring positive antidote to the embarrassment that she had caused herself. When all seems to be getting better for Matilda, her husband seems a few steps ahead, as he humiliates her even further in front of women from the Cultural Club. The story ends with the death of Matilda in an apparent suicide and Philemon crying over her lifeless body.

“The Suit” was first published in the inaugural issue of Nat Nakasa’s literary magazine, *The Classic*, and thus becoming the headline story of this new literary outlet in 1963. It appeared alongside another contribution by Themba, a poem curiously entitled “Dear God.” Other contributors to this inaugural issue included the likes of Lewis Nkosi, Richard Rive, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi, who all came from the *Drum* stable and who were already some of the leading literary voices on the continent. The likes of Nadine Gordimer, Nimrod Mkele, and Philip Stein were part of the board of Trustees and Editorial Advisers. The magazine had been in the making for a very long time and by the time the first issue came out, Themba was already exiled in Swaziland. In this inaugural issue, Nakasa wrote as part of his editorial note:

It will be the job of *The Classic* to seek African writing of merit... Although an effort will be made to use mostly South African writing, *The Classic* will welcome and solicit contributions from writers in Africa and the rest of the world. Particularly welcome will be the work of those writers with causes to fight for, committed men and women who look at human situations and see tragedy and love, bigotry and common sense, for what they are. (Nakasa, 1963:1)

*The Classic* had been given its name by Themba. In a truly ‘*Drum Boys*’ style, a decision was taken that they go to the nearby shebeen in order to think clearly as they were trying to find an appropriate name for the journal. While they were busy cracking their skulls trying to figure out the best possible name, Themba asked the name of the dry cleaners behind which the shebeen was located. It was The Classic Dry Cleaners, and so the journal got its name. “The Suit” was to be published multiple times after the first publication in *The Classic*, as indicated earlier in this chapter. This story is still widely celebrated and continues to resonate with different generations of readers. We trace the influence of “The Suit” in the writings of different generations of South African writers and its re-imaginings across a variety of genres.

“The Suit” demonstrates Harold Bloom’s assertion about the *Anxiety of Influence* (1973, xxiv), which he describes thus: “The dead may or may not return, but their voice comes alive, paradoxically never by mere imitation, but in the agonistic misprision performed upon powerful frontrunners by only the most gifted of their successors.” To this end, “The Suit” has singlehandedly kept Themba alive and ensured that his name reverberates through the ages. Themba died at the age of 43, and his story continues to be celebrated more than fifty years since its first publication. Its sphere of influence runs across the literary, theatrical and film industries. In line with Mutloatse’s assertion in the epigraph to this chapter, “The Suit” has kept the voice of Can Themba alive throughout the decades.

At this stage, one can boldly submit that this is the most successful short story by any South African writer. The story was adapted onto a stage play by Mthobi Mutloatse and Barney Simon in 1993. After a successful run at local and international theatres, the story was adapted as a musical by British playwright and Director, Peter Brook. This set its international outlook on course, and has now been performed in over 25 countries worldwide, including France, Britain and the United States of America (USA). The play continues to make its mark among local audiences, having been performed over the past five years on prestigious stages such as the Market Theatre, Grahamstown Arts Festival as well as the Performing Arts Company of the Free State (PECOFS) in Bloemfontein. It finished another successful run at the Market Theatre in June 2017.

The current author penned a story entitled “The Suit Continued,” published in the inaugural issue of the *Southern African Short Story Review* in 2002. The story is an experimentation with Themba’s “The Suit”, narrated from the perspective of the man who jumped out the window. The story has since been published multiple times, and most notably in the author’s short story collection, *African Delights* (2011). The first section of this book is entitled “The Suit Stories:

A Tribute to Can Themba,” and includes three stories that experiment with Themba’s “The Suit.” The first story, “The Suit Continued,” as described above, is a re-imagination of the original story, presenting the perspective of the man who jumped out the window. The second one is “The Dress that Fed the Suit,” penned by Zukiswa Wanner. The story is written from the perspective of Matilda, giving contextual background to her apparent suicide. The story connects directly with “The Suit Continued,” and presents a clear continuation from Themba’s original story. The last story in this section is titled “The Lost Suit,” and although it deals with the same period and the central theme surrounds the suit, this story is not necessarily a continuation of any of the other three stories. It offers a different exploration of the subject of the suit, presenting a journey of a man in relentless pursuit of his lost suit.

The book has been prescribed at different universities locally including Rhodes University, the University of Pretoria as well as Stellenbosch University, and each one of them seems to have a particular interest in this section of the collection. In 2014, the University of Stellenbosch, in addition to prescribing a module on the *Drum* writers, prescribed *African Delights* for English third year level. As part of the course, students were required to write their own re-imaginings of “The Suit”, exploring it from different points of view and offering new perspectives on the characters and the storyline. This sets in motion a process of constant revival, as new writers explore different dimensions of continuing with the legacy of the original story.

In 2011, Kitso Lynn Elliott produced *The Tailored Suit*, a short film with resonances of Themba’s story, which is unapologetic in acknowledging “The Suit” as the influence. Most recently, Jarryd Coetsee produced the film adaptation of *The Suit*, featuring the Kani dynasty, the young and talented Atandwa alongside his father, legendary actor and producer, John Kani. The film has received numerous recognitions and went on to win the 2017 Golden Horn Award for Best Short Film at the South African Film and Television Award. The accomplishments of this particular story are too many to mention without seeming to present a rollcall of creative explorations instead of a scholarly investigation. In short, whether in its original form, adaptation or extension, “The Suit” remains Themba’s most successful creative work. There is no other story by any South African writer that can claim success to match that of this particular story. It is worth reiterating that, if there is a single story that could be a writer’s greatest legacy, for Can Themba that story would be “The Suit.” This story almost singlehandedly inscribed Themba as a legendary short story writer who stands head and shoulders above his peers.

## 7.6 The Significance of Can Themba's Epochal Narratives

The objective of this particular chapter was not only to demonstrate how Themba immortalised himself through his works, but also to illustrate how his star began to shine even brighter after his passing and through different epochs. This is not to say he was not celebrated enough during his lifetime. Instead, it demonstrates on the one hand, that the circumstances of the time, including the hostile government legislations that suppressed his potential, while on the other, it bears testament to the resilience and tenacity of his creative work to live through the ages.

It is indeed true that Themba's work was not as widely distributed while he was still alive, but the impression amongst those who had the fortune of coming across it during his lifetime is that he was considered both an intellectual and a creative genius of his time. His works earned him respect amongst his contemporaries from the moment he first published in *SANC* and *The Forterian* as a student at Fort Hare University College where he was also known as the "Poet Laureate of Fort Hare", to his pieces appearing in *Zonk* magazine, through to his breakthrough at *Drum* Magazine, at *The Golden City Post*, *Africa*, *Africa South* and all other publications in which his works appeared. More than the impact of his published works, Themba's contemporaries revered him for his intellectual mind, a trait he earned through regular debates he had with his peers and often hosted in his House of Truth at 111 Ray Street, Sophiatown.

It is probably on the basis of knowing his capabilities that Nkosi, despite acknowledging Themba's superior intellectual capacity, is left dissatisfied by his actual output. In his piece, "Fiction by Black South Africans", originally published in his collection of essays, *Home and Exile* (1965) and now reproduced in his posthumous publication, *Writing Home: Lewis Nkosi on South African Writing* (2016), edited by Lindy Stiebel and Michael Chapman, Nkosi argues that amongst the black South African writers of the time, Themba stands out because of his intellectual mind and language proficiency but his final literary contribution is miniscule:

Themba has perhaps the liveliest mind and the best command of the English language; but apart from his recent story published in *Modern African Prose* he has been annoyingly shiftless, throwing off cheap potboilers when magazines demanded them. (Stiebel and Chapman, 2016: 60)

In earlier chapters, reference was made to Nkosi's tribute to Themba, republished in *Writing Home*, where he argues that Can Themba's actual achievements are more disappointing (compared to Nat Nakasa's) because "his learning and reading were more substantial and his talent proven" (2016:208). What is probably conspicuous with its omission in the initial piece

on “Fiction by Black South Africans,” is the acknowledgment of Themba’s writing talent, which is clearly acknowledged in the piece where he pays homage to the departed scribe. Themba’s enormous potential as a creative intellectual and his actual creative output are the binaries that are always discernible in many of the published critics of his work.

It should be noted however, that Nkosi’s essay on “Fiction by Black South Africans” was written in 1965, before Themba’s works could be collected and published in book form. While they were colleagues at *Drum* and at the *Golden Coty Post* before Nkosi went to exile in 1961, it remains unclear if he managed to follow and read closely all Themba’s works in other publications in order to make a conclusive assessment of his literary oeuvre. While Nkosi makes a valid point about the infinitesimal nature of Themba’s literary contribution, a sentiment echoed by this very study especially in the preceding chapter, he failed to acknowledge the aesthetic value of the little that Themba had managed to publish. This is a simple matter of quantity versus quality. Our current chapter has demonstrated, for instance, how “The Suit”, a single short story was able to entrench Themba’s name in the annals of the literary world. This trait is not new with Themba, as authors like Chinua Achebe, for instance, got famous after publishing his debut novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and has not been able to publish any other book to surpass this seminal work in stature in his lifetime.

The other reality is the failure to take due consideration of the kind of material published in the available platforms like *Drum Magazine*, which was the main outlet in which Themba published in the 1950s. *Drum’s* focus was popular culture, and the majority of the stories that they published were of that nature. There is a significant difference both in terms of content and literary aesthetics, for instance, between the stories that Themba published in *Drum Magazine* and the ones he published in *The Classic*. Some of Themba’s most revered short stories, including “The Suit”, “The Urchin”, and “The Dube Train”, were published in *The Classic*, which is a literary journal. With regard to the quantity of Themba’s published works, and to account for the material that he supposedly was working on before his untimely death in Swaziland, his widow, Anne Themba, wrote in a special publication dated August 1993 and simply entitled, “The Wife Remembers,” prepared for the maiden performance of “The Suit”:

Can kept scripts in a tartan attaché case which went missing. I had to make do with the odd scripts in my possession, with the remainder collected from *Drum* offices. I am grateful for the joint efforts of Jim Bailey former *Drum* owner, Professor Donald Stuart and Roy Holland, who pieced together what became *The Will to Die*.

*The Will to Die* was only published in 1972, seven years after Nkosi published his piece on “Fiction by Black South African writers.” Following the publication of this collection, there is noticeable transition in Nkosi’s opinions about Themba’s work in the piece that he published in 1975, probably owing to the availability of Themba’s works in book form. In his essay titled, “The Late Can Themba: An Appreciation,” first published in *The Transplanted Heart* in 1975, Nkosi actually acknowledges Themba’s writing talent and this could be informed by the reality that at that time *The Will to Die* had already been published and he might have read more of Themba’s works. Nkosi’s swift acknowledgement of Themba’s creative genius could be indicative of the growing stature of Themba as a creative intellectual.

This chapter also reveals that someone like Mbulelo Mzamane, who had taken interest in Themba’s work early on, read and started teaching his stories while they were still in manuscript form. In his introduction to his book, *Hungry Flames and other Black South African Short Stories* (1986: xi), Mzamane observes, “Can Themba writes about the underworld life of Sophiatown in a highly evocative manner and with unrivalled authenticity.” This is the sentiment that would later be shared by numerous other critics, including David Rabkin in his unpublished doctoral thesis, “*Drum Magazine (1951 – 1961): And the Works of Black South African Writers Associated with it*”, where he says:

What he notes, in his reportage as in his fiction, is the way in which the black people, among whom he lives, cope with the complex and far-flung web of restrictions and definitions imposed upon them. To this task Themba brought a fine ear and eye for the absurd and the idiosyncratic. (Rabkin, 1975: 120)

The increased criticism of Themba’s works after the publication of *The Will to Die* unleashes a whole new era in the appreciation of Themba’s works. The citation from Rabkin and Mzamane above, both show their recognition of Themba’s unique contribution to the literary landscape, as opposed to being lumped together with a coterie of writers in a homogeneous manner. It is also during the same period, after the publication of *The Will to Die*, that Nkosi whilst still critical of Themba’s miniscule literary contribution acknowledges his brilliance as a writer. In the final analysis, this could only imply that the publication of *The Will to Die* placed Themba on a different pedestal and there was more interest in his works, which earned him the respect of different scholars around the world.

Although to date there is a total of only three collections of Themba’s works (i.e. *The Will to Die*, *The World of Can Themba* and *Requiem for Sophiatown*), his stories, articles and poems

have been published in various journals, magazines and anthologies across the world. Many of these publications are duplicative in nature, as they often feature the same stories that appear in the three collections, with “The Suit” being the most reproduced of his pieces. A few of his other works are still available in the archives, which includes stories that he may have written under unknown pennames. In earlier chapters we made reference to his story, “The Wanton Wolf”, published under the name, Morongwa Sereto, as an example of his works that may go unnoticed and recognised as part of his literary output.

Kgositsile emphasises the importance of considering the context within which Themba wrote, in order to fully understand the extent of his commitment to writing. He says Themba never really had time to sit and focus on writing, a luxury that many would take for granted:

When you consider that everything you’ve read by Can Themba was written on the run, so to speak, either to beat the deadline, that the guy was a genius. I mean, I don’t know how really to put it, that where some people have blocks of time devoted to writing, without interference, Can didn’t have that.

The constant running that Themba had embarked upon, included juggling journalism and teaching work, avoiding the police, skipping the country and trying to publish despite banishment. Parks Mangena also reveals that at times Themba asked to publish stories under his name. Furthermore, his widow, Anne, reveals another aspect, that the Tartan Attaché case in which he kept some of his works went missing. With all of these works put together, one can submit that Themba’s published works still come short of potential displayed by his talent. Consequently, there is more criticism of Themba’s work than there is work that he actually produced himself. Rabkin’s (1975:123) assertion that “...much more has been written about Themba than he has written himself,” as reflected in the passage used as the epigraph in the opening chapter of this thesis, is a poignant and concise observation of the impact of Can Themba’s works beyond the quantity of his literary production during his lifetime.

It looks at the impact, what this chapter considered laboriously under the subtopic of “public perception,” an element that has not received intensive interrogation in the Historical-Biographical theory as defined by Creswell (1988). It becomes essential, therefore, that in considering Themba’s works, and we also take particular interest in its reception by others beyond his living days.

It is also in line with this view that the notion of “A Teacher in the Newsroom” has come to be associated with Themba. One of the most consistent phrases prevalent in the interviews

conducted with those whose lives Themba touched, is “imparting knowledge.” This came through from Muxe Nkondo, who received his teachings while at Orlando High School in Soweto, Mbulelo Mzamane, who received special lessons from Themba in Swaziland, as well as Joe Thloloe, from whom the phrase has been adopted. In the interview, Thloloe makes the injunction that his lasting memory of Can Themba is “somebody who could teach, and somebody who could nurture young talent.” This element is palpable in the impact that he had on the likes of Juby Mayet, Casey Motsisi, Harry Mashabela and Stan Motjuwadi as discussed extensively in this chapter. What we learn from all of them, in essence, is that Can Themba was the interlocutor of the 1950s journalism as well as a leading intellectual and philosopher of the time whose mission was to impart knowledge. It is in this regard that Thloloe says Themba “replicated himself” through his products.

It is largely due to his ability to straddle the social and intellectual strata that Themba’s influence transcends and connects different generations. There is no other South African writer whose short stories have been reimagined through works of creative expression as much as Themba’s stories have. From “The Dube Train Revisited” by Mbulelo Mzamane, based on Themba’s “The Dube Train”, to the current author’s “The Suit Continued”, Zukiswa Wanner’s “The Dress that Fed the Suit”, Makhosazana Xaba’s “Behind The Suit” and “The Suit Continued: The Other Side,” which all reimagine Themba’s masterpiece, we witness the growing influence of a writer way after his demise. The intergenerational dialogue that Themba spearheads through his works is a clear affirmation of Mutloatse’s assertion that Can Themba will never die. His writings keep him alive by engaging on a continuous dialogue with different generations, not only of readers, but also of writers and other practitioners in the arts sector who reimagine his works through graphics, stage play and film.

Although he may not have been aware of the extent of the intergenerational dialogue that Themba would later inspire, Michael Chapman in his article “Can Themba, Storyteller and Journalist of the 1950s: The Text in Context” published in *English in Africa* Volume 16 Number 2, makes a poignant injunction about the essence of Themba’s influence in sustaining intergenerational dialogue in the following excerpt:

By placing Themba, as a writer of the fifties, in infinite dialogue with our own times, we realise something of the nature of his stories as the conditions of a practice. Can Themba’s style takes its strength from its epochal delineations, his human and literary pursuit, in its search for identity and purpose in a restrictive socio-political system, constitutes a continuing challenge. (Chapman, 1989: 28)

What is remarkable about this particular statement from Chapman is not only his apt observations about the epochal nature of Themba's works, but his own transcendence from the text to his human pursuit. This augurs well with the theoretical approach that undergirds this study, which extends from the text to the biographical detail of the author. In such a scenario, we are able to trace and assemble Themba's nuggets of influence not only in the literary circles, but also throughout the various provinces of life. As he continues to advance his argument, Chapman puts emphasis on Themba's epochal resonance as a vital tool in consolidating memory:

In his attempts to write stories out of the detritus of Sophiatown, his voice resonates, paradoxically, because it is so true to its own milieu. And given our need, variously, for memory, idealisation and dialectical enquiry, we may continue to enter into processes of both identification and exchange with Themba's stories.

It is perhaps Mzamane who exceedingly took interest in tracing the epistemology of Themba's sustained intergenerational dialogue with the contemporary writers beyond the year 2000. In an anthology that pays homage to two writers who passed away relatively young, Phaswane Mpe (10 September 1970 – 12 December 2004) and K. Sello Duiker (13 April 1974 – 19 January 2005), titled *Words Gone Too Soon: A tribute to Phaswane Mpe and K. Sello Duiker* (2005: xiii), Mzamane, as the editor, brings together a kaleidoscope of cross-generational South African writers and lauds the significance of the anthology in spearheading the inter-generational discourse in South African literature. In his introduction, he draws ontological connections between the works of seasoned writers like Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Zakes Mda and the younger generation of Tiisetso Makube, Zachariah Rapola, McQueen Motuba, and others. He further puts emphasis on the importance of the collection in bridging the generation gap in the following extract:

Thus while we can rightly speak of new directions in South African literature and society, there are inevitably echoes from the past that are evident in such work as Sipiwo Mahala's "The Suit Continued", based on Can Themba's "The Suit." Such inter-textual discourse goes on all the time among the new-order authors, in their endeavour to connect with the past. (Mzamane, 2005: xiii)

This injunction comes across as an antidote to the earlier diagnosis he made in his introduction to *Hungry Flames*, as referenced earlier in this chapter, where he bemoans the apartheid government's deplorable efforts in trying to cut one generation from the next through

banishment. Despite all the adversary forces that pitied Themba's influence against longevity, his works seem to have injected a certain aura of immortality to such an extent that his influence keeps reinventing itself across epochs. The manner in which Themba's works keep resurfacing make Muxe Nkondo's injunction during the interview sound irrelevant, when says:

We must find a way of televising Can Themba in such a way that he becomes a celebrity, like a football player. He becomes available as part of popular culture without losing his seriousness.

To conclude, despite the fact that Themba features in almost every historic study pertaining to *Drum* Magazine and Sophiatown, and that his peers have written quite extensively about him, there is no documented study that comprehensively explores his human experience. This study is the first of its kind that adopts the Historical-Biographical approach predating his tenure as a reporter for *Drum* Magazine. The significance of this study, therefore, is not only that it endeavours to consolidate the dispersed fragments that are crucial in re-membering the vital elements in the consolidation of a scholarly repository to reconstruct Themba's image, but it also contributes to the intergenerational discourse in the South African literary landscape.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE CAN THEMBA PHENOMENON: AN INFINITE JOURNEY

There's a theory that was associated with T.S. Eliot, where he says the mind that creates is different from the man who suffers. So T.S. Eliot made a distinction between the experience of a writer and what he writes about. Can Themba collapsed that distinction. The man who suffers is the mind that creates. It's one and the same thing.

<sup>11</sup>Muxe Nkondo, 2013

I must instantaneously declare that the life history of Can Themba is as indefinite as many of his writings, mostly of which are imperceptible in terms of the conventional literary genres. Both in his writing and in his lived experience, Themba challenges established conventions and orthodoxies regarding intellectual behaviour, ideologies, reading, writing, life and living. The dominant binaries in Themba's life as demonstrated by the paradoxes of a tsotsi and an intellectual manifest themselves in various aspects of his life especially in writing. He was, as Es'kia Mphahlele (1985:8) puts it, "a rebel par excellence."

In an attempt to capture the essence and have a deeper understanding of Themba's work, this study tried to investigate how Themba became what he became. In its most prosaic sense, this study endeavoured to answer the basic question: "who was Can Themba?" In other words, the central question seeks to investigate Can Themba's biodata and linking this with what he has written and what has been written about him and his work. In grappling with this diagnostic question, particular attention had to be paid to the making and the breaking of Can Themba, and how he has been remade over the years. These tenets, some of which are salient and others nebulous are captured in the subtitle, *The Construction, Destruction and Reconstruction of Can Themba*. This discursive theme compelled us to go beyond the caricature of a venerated writer and journalist, and trace his development into the iconoclastic figure that he became and the factors that contribute to his resilience as a subject of both public and academic discourse.

---

<sup>11</sup> This excerpt is extrapolated from an interview with Muxe Nkondo conducted in 2015.

It traced the making of a creative intellectual as opposed to evaluating the established public figure. This is the injunction of the field of literary history, which implores us to go beyond the text and concern ourselves with the background to a story and the life history of the author, thus combining the historical-biographical approach as the theory that underpins this study. This approach enables us to interrogate the life history of Themba using both the available literature as well as archival material and interviews. We also learn from Themba's corpus of literary output that while the precepts of the historical-biographical approach are aligned with a writer's lifetime, it is necessary to go beyond the lived experience and trace the writer's legacy, which often outlives their lifetime. Interviews and posthumous critical reception confirm the cogency of this approach.

The construction of the Can Themba phenomenon is traced from an early age, where he showed a great promise as a young boy growing up in Marabastad and later in Atteridgeville, Pretoria. Reference has been made to the memoir, *Who Killed Mr Drum* (1999:86), in which former *Drum* editor, Sylvester Stein, shares an anecdote where Themba's "uncle" said they could notice something distinct about the young Can Themba's intellect as early as the age of two. The moment that turned things around for him was when one Reverend Tontsi, who also recognised his intellect when he was still a young boy, supplied him with reading material and encouraged him never to part with a book. It was against this backdrop that his mother sent him to a boarding school in Pietersburg, where he pursued his studies resulting in him becoming the first recipient of the Mendi Memorial Scholarship, with which he went to study at the University of Fort Hare. In his assertions foretelling Themba's greatness from a young age, Rev. Tontsi was later vindicated by Sylvester Stein. The latter sincerely believed that Can Themba would become a great man of Africa and at the time of his death, Themba was believed to be exceptional indeed, but there is reason to believe that he was not as great as he could have been. Veteran journalist and Themba's protégé, Harry Mashabela (1968:12), puts it succinctly in his tribute to the fallen scribe when he says, "Can Themba was what he was and not what he could have been because his country is what it is."

The interest of this study was, however, not so much about the great promise that Themba had, but more about understanding the man beyond the caricature of a *Drum* man that has been publically displayed over the years. Such an undertaking would presumably harness the different strands of his lived experience and enhance better understanding and interpretation of his work. There is no recorded study that pays particular attention to the construction of Can Themba, particularly tracing his biographical details from an early age and linking it with the

public persona that he became. Most of the critical work that has been produced on Themba focuses on his work in later years but the construction of his character remains enigmatic.

In its pursuit of accurate biographical details, this study might have dispelled certain myths and corrected factual inaccuracies about Can Themba's lived experience, even though this was not the primary objective of the research. Some of the myths include the popular view that Themba's family was virtually non-existent, an assertion that was perpetrated chiefly by Obed Musi, his former colleague at *Drum Magazine* and at *The Golden City Post*. Perhaps the most bizarre factual inaccuracies relate to his biodata, where his surname and tribal background are put into question, and the rather trivial questions such as the date of his death, having repeatedly been inaccurately recorded.

An example of the prevalent factual disparities can be best exemplified by the last two collections of his own works, *The World of Can Themba* (1985) and *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006), which record the year of his death as 1968 and 1967 respectively. As a result, these inaccuracies are replicated in subsequent critical work by some leading literary scholars. These disparities are conspicuous in a single line from one of Chapman's most expansive papers on Can Themba, simply entitled "Storyteller and Journalist: Can Themba in Sophiatown", published in his book, *Art Talk, Politics Talk* (2006:55), where he opines:

*Having gone into exile in 1963, Themba was 'silenced' in 1966 under the provisions of the all-embracing Suppression of Communism Act, and in 1968 he died of alcohol-induced thrombosis. (Emphasis my own)*

After an elaborate investigation, which included a visit to Swaziland and interaction with some of Themba's contemporaries in the land of kaNgwane, it became clear that Themba was already in Swaziland by 1962. This view is corroborated by a number of articles including his published pieces in Swaziland newspapers that year and which have been reproduced in *Requiem for Sophiatown*, as well as a book that he autographed for Parks Mangena in which he indicated both the year (1962) and location as Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland. Mangena confirms that he received the book directly from Themba who was already in Mbabane at the time.

Similarly, the early chapters of this study demonstrate that family records and reportage of the time present substantive evidence that he died in 1967 and not 1968 as some of the published texts imply. This assertion is informed by an extensive research, which included digging into family archives, verifying published documents as well as conversations with people who had

attended Themba's funeral service. The recent unveiling of Can Themba's tombstone in West Park cemetery should dispel any uncertainties. The association between coronary thrombosis and excessive alcohol abuse is a medical issue and did not receive extensive attention in this study. Suffice to say, there is more than enough evidence to prove that there existed at a certain stage of his life excessive alcohol abuse problem, and that this was subsequent to a number of social and psychological pressures, with which he tried to cope by turning to the bottle. The medical verdict remains to be passed as to whether coronary thrombosis to which he ultimately succumbed on 8 September was as a result of alcohol abuse.

What this study wilfully tried to demonstrate in as far as his lived experience is concerned, is that Can Themba was more than just a journalist and that his writing played a critical role in constructing his public persona. What has not received much scholarly attention prior to this study, however, is Themba's construction and how it is reflected in his writing. The early years of Themba's life prior to joining *Drum Magazine* in 1953 have not received much critical attention. We learned in this study, for instance, that Themba was initiated into a culture of letters when he was a student at Khaiso High School. He had an insatiable appetite for reading, he published his initial poems, articles and stories in student journals such as *SANC* and *The Forterian* as far back as 1945, while he was still a student at the University of Fort Hare and, most importantly, the evolution of his writing is reflective of his own intellectual genesis.

One of the stark coincidences about Can Themba is that his former English lecturer at Fort Hare, Prof Donald Stuart, who by virtue of being his educator was involved in his construction, re-emerges after his passing and is partly responsible for his reconstruction through the publication of his works posthumously. As revealed by Mbulelo Mzamane and later Anne Themba, a subject that was discussed extensively in Chapter seven, Stuart collected Themba's stories and this led to the publication of his first collection *The Will to Die*, five years later. The argument that emanates from this experience is that Themba's star began to rise after his passing. It is clear that should Themba's stories not have been collected and published in book form, his name could have easily vanished from the face of history. Conversely, the publication of his book entrenched him in the annals of the South African literary discourse.

The vicious circle that has come to typify both the architecture of his writing and his life is what this study recognises as "Can Themba phenomenon." Can Themba's journey as a writer is intrinsically linked to his other life interests, given the fact that he was always a writer while working as a teacher, and that he continued doing so until his last days on earth. In the final

analysis, the House of Truth that he was constructing was left as an incomplete structure, but it provided a foundation for many young minds through which he resurrected himself. The House of Truth therefore means more than just a space that he inhabited at 111 Ray Street, in Sophiatown of the 1950s. It metaphorically represents Themba's dynamic but incomplete life project. It represents the vibrancy of the debate and intellectual engagement that Themba believed so much in and fervently tried to advance. It represents the reading and writing culture that was the forte of the *Drum* man. It also symbolises the infinite dreams that Themba cherished and pursued but never realised in his lifetime. Most importantly, it represents who Can Themba was and what he stood for. The re-emergence of the House of Truth in various ways, including in the form of a play, is a clear demonstration of the resilience of his intellectual disposition. To understand Can Themba, to get to know what made him and what broke him, we need to get inside the House of Truth where his life unfolded.

A close reading of Themba's works reveals that inside the House of Truth he wrote his own life history. While many of his stories may not fit any conventional literary genres, they possess unique elements of strength that defy established literary orthodoxies. The volatility of his writing earned Themba both critical praise and rebuke from different scholars at equal measure. These salient paradoxes have become some of the definitive features of the Can Themba phenomenon. One of the imminent scholars who were critical of his works happens to be Muxe Nkondo, who had the pleasure of being taught by Themba during a special visit to Orlando High School in Soweto in the late 1950s. While Nkondo was impressed with Themba's lesson, which seems to have stayed with him forever, this did not cloud his judgement of Themba's writing, about which he writes a very unflattering review. In his review of *The Will to Die*, published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Volume VIII, Number I, in June 1973, G.M. Nkondo is quite scathing in his views on Themba's work. Part of the review reads:

This volume attests to a lack of skill in Can Themba's handling of the short story... Most of the stories are of dubious merit even on technical grounds. 'Crepuscule', the first story in the book, sets out to probe the black man's perilous sense of cultural negation (a sense of something akin to sterility) in South Africa. But it is loose, if not random in its structure and lacks the self-containedness and epigrammatic force characteristic of the short story as a genre. (Nkondo, 1973: 112)

In this review of Themba's book, Nkondo seems most disappointed by the author's lack of conformity to conventional characteristics of a short story. While Nkondo recognises the

positive aspects of the story, that it is “disturbingly illuminating”, he remains unsatisfied with its transcendent if not amoebic nature. The above review demonstrates the general concern about the fluidity and the difficulty of locating Themba’s work within the ambit of conventional literary genres. We would later realise that the transcendent nature of his work imbues it with very unique elements that have come to typify Themba’s literary oeuvre. It shows that for as long as we try to confine Themba’s work into a particular orthodox, we are unlikely to realise its significance and full potential because his stories do not always fit into the established frameworks of literary genres.

Can Themba’s writing defies structural impositions, and it is not just the structure and the meaning, but also the narrative techniques and character portrayal vary in his works. The ambiguity of form is evident in his entire body of work, with the exception of a few stories that he published in some literary journals in the 1960s, Themba’s stories largely straddle different paradigms. In the majority of his stories, there is usually the overt presence of the author, not only through the voice of the narrator, but also in the direct expression of his opinions as well as in the reflection of his lived experience.

A few of Themba’s stories including “Crepuscule”, “Bottom of the Bottle”, and “The Will to Die” have been used in earlier chapters to illustrate this assertion. In his review, Nkondo chose to pay a particular focus to “Crepuscule” as the first story in *The Will to Die* and as the story in which the multiplicity of narrative approaches is quite glaring. “Crepuscule” is indeed a story that remains quite difficult to locate within the ambit of the conventional literary genres because of the undefined form and structure that remain common features of Themba’s stories. Although the narrative style seems to suggest that it is fiction, it is widely understood that this particular story is based on Themba’s lived experience, and the author, whose first person narrator is known as Can Themba, wittingly or unwittingly betrays this. His companion, the English woman with whom he visits Themba’s relatives and a shebeen before they go to sleep in his room in the township, is referred to in the story as Jane, a close derivation of Jean, the woman that Themba had an affair with.

In “Crepuscule”, Themba tells the story of him and his white girlfriend, Jane, with whom he comes to the township (Sophiatown) and who just wanted to be with him without turning him into an anthropological subject. In Sophiatown, they first visit his aunt and later a shebeen where he is treated with respect on account that he brought a white woman to the township. After the rounds in the township, they go to sleep in his room, and in the middle of the night

he wakes her up and despite her protestations, he insists that they go to her apartment in Hillbrow. As fate would have it, they leave just as the police were on their way to raid his home after receiving a tipoff that Themba was committing the crime of being romantically linked to a white woman. There is a subplot of a jealous ex-girlfriend named Baby, who upon discovering that Themba was with Jane, went on to report him to the police. Baby is a Xhosa woman and her reasoning for calling the police is simply that Themba could not humiliate her for “a white bitch.” The police wanted to catch them in bed, so that there was no denying their association but they arrived shortly after the couple had left their love nest in Sophiatown.

As Themba narrates this story, he takes us through the journey and the challenges of a racially stratified South Africa along with the emergent stereotypes that develop out of the discriminatory legislation. “Crepuscle” was first published in *The Will to Die*, and is one of the stories that were rescued after the passing of Can Themba in 1967. It is widely understood that the story is based on Themba’s lived experience and gives a first-hand account of his affair with Jean Hart. In this story, in the quintessential Can Themba narrative, the author at times presents a narrative prose, at times he becomes philosophical, at times poetic, but the entire narrative is laced with a profound sense of vivid imagery. Nkondo’s comment above, that Themba tends to use the story merely as an excuse for a discursive social commentary, is best illustrated in the following excerpt:

There are also African nationalists who profess horror at the thought that any self-respecting blackman could desire any white woman. They say that no African could ever so debase himself as to love a white woman. This is highly cultivated and pious lying in the teeth of daily slaving in town and in cinema. (Themba, 1972:3)

The narrator in the above extract offers an opinion on the discursive social issues in a racially stratified society. It would seem that Themba was quite aware of the significance of his relationship with Hart, and that it had broader implications on race relations in South Africa. In the above excerpt, Themba gives a discursive analysis, and the story is no longer personal, but is a story that grapples with the dominant paradigms in South Africa of the time. While one would be tempted to treat this story as a memoir, Themba’s decision to change the name of his companion and call her Jane, instead of Jean, her given name, suggests that he may have wanted to cover the story with the thin veil of fiction. While this view could be somewhat persuasive, Themba the narrator infuses his own personality into the story. The following extract illustrates clearly that he is a present character in his own story:

There are certain names that do not go with Mister, I don't have a clue why. But, for sure, you cannot imagine a Mr Charlie Chaplin or a Mr William Shakespeare or a Mr Jesus Christ. My name – Can Themba— operates in that sort of class. So you can see the kind of sensation we caused, when the shebeen queen addressed me as Mr Themba. (Themba, 1972:5)

The excerpt above proves beyond reasonable doubt that Themba is both the narrator and a present character in the story. The inept imposition of the author's voice in this story certainly typifies what makes it difficult to box Themba's writing into any particular literary genre. The story takes certain twists and turns, becoming partly a memoir, a piece of lyrical prose, a social commentary and even offers literary criticism. The example below, which follows elaborate citation from the opening paragraph of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), demonstrates on the one hand, the prevalent element of intertextuality in Themba's work and, on the other the use of literary criticism to illustrate his views about his society:

Sometimes I think, for his sense of contrast and his sharp awareness of the pungent flavours of life, only Charles Dickens— or, perhaps, Victor Hugo—could have understood Sophiatown. (Themba, 1972:6)

It is a crepuscular shadow life in which we wander as spectres seeking meaning for ourselves. And even the local, little legalities we invent are frowned upon. The whole atmosphere is charged with whiteman's general disapproval, and where he does not have a law for it, he certainly has a grimace that cows you. (Themba, 1972:8)

The latter part of the excerpt offers Themba's analysis, after having used Dickens as a gateway for a social commentary. The above excerpt is also a clear example of the portions where he diverts from linear storytelling and raises direct opinions, something that Nkondo is highly critical of in his article. This story illustrates, as often found in most of other stories by the author, that in Can Themba's world life and literature are intertwined. This is the distinct feature of South African writers particularly during the period of the 1950s and 1960s.

This is probably one of the reasons that the *Drum* decade (1951-1961) did not produce so many novels by black South African writers. The short story was the most prominent genre, with *Drum*, *Zonk* and later in the 1960s *The Classic* becoming their primary publishing outlets. After the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, when many of the writers streamed out of the country and went into various destinations of exile, it was the autobiography that thrived the most. The

urgency of reflecting on the South African experience was probably too intense for these writers to focus on longer and more imaginative prose like novels. Most notable, Es'kia Mphahlele wrote *Down Second Avenue* and Bloke Modisane published his *Blame me on History* (1963), and these books rank amongst the major reflections of the period by this generation of writers. After having written his autobiography, when he had to write his thesis at the University of Denver in 1968, Mphahlele reverted to the self-reflective mode, where he wrote a biography disguised as fiction. His novel, *The Wanderers*, which features incidents and characters modelled on the lives of those around him during the 1950s, was written in partial fulfilment of his doctoral studies at the University of Denver. As indicated earlier, one of the characters is named Pan, and it is too easy to fathom that this character is modelled on Can Themba. It is for this reason that Nkosi argues:

South African fiction seems determined to close the gap between the author and his inventions; often the author is his own subject matter, the anguish of his characters essentially his own. (Nkosi, 2016:73)

One of the distinct features of the writers of the 1950s is that they were their own chroniclers and critics at the same time. They did not just report the incidents that took place in the newspapers that they worked for; they wrote about their own experiences and critiqued each other's works. Mphahlele and Nkosi are some of the most prominent critics from this period. Although Themba is not prominent as a literary critique, he wrote extensive features on the likes of musician and actress, Dolly Rathebe (whom *Drum Magazine* alleges to have been romantically linked to Themba). He also covered features on Casey Motsisi, who was his student, Mphahlele, particularly on obtaining his Masters degree in English, as well as tributes to Henry Nxumalo and Nat Nakasa. His literary criticism is not very well known, probably because it hardly ever is a stand-alone feature, where he writes a paper that is simply aimed at offering literary criticism. The few instances where he can be said to be writing exclusive literary criticism are when he wrote the review of *Road to Ghana* (1960) by Alfred Hutchinson and the foreword to *Darkness and Light: An Anthology of African Writing* in 1958, published in London and inspired by the independence of the Gold Coast in 1957. In 1959 the book was to be made available in South Africa and Themba penned the review simply entitled, "Here it is at Last" published in the *Drum Magazine* issue of May 1959. Both pieces are now available in Themba's latest collection, *Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006).

In these two pieces, Themba makes some poignant observations that would later be echoed by other social commentators. In his foreword (2006:44), he says: “Here, Africans are creating out of English a language of their own: a language that thinks in actions, using words that dart back and forth on quick moving feet, virile, earthy, garrulous.” This assertion would later become part of the discourse on language spearheaded primarily by Ngugi wa Thiongó as a proponent of African languages. Ngugi, whose seminal collection of essays, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), is emphatic in his defence of African languages and dismissal of the hegemony of the English language especially in African societies. On the other side of the continuum, there are writers like Chinua Achebe, most notably in his paper “Politics and Politicians of Language in Africa Literature,” published in his collection of essays, *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009), as well as in an earlier essay, “In Defence of English? An Open Letter to Mr Tai Solarin,” published in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975:87), seems to be echoing Themba’s philosophy of Africans creating their own language out of the English language by infusing their cultural nuances, imagery and idioms. Achebe claims that writers who choose to express themselves through the medium of English language do so to:

“Enrich their idiom and imagery by drawing from their own traditional sources.”  
(Achebe, 1975:87)

This demonstrates, amongst other things, that Themba was ahead of his time as he made these observations on language as early as 1958, and the debate on language would later resurface at the historic Makerere Conference in 1962, which led to Ngugi denouncing even his English first name, James, and choosing to write in his Gikuyu mother tongue.

Themba had very strong opinions on the issue of literature and politics, which would become a contentious matter in the criticism of South African literature by black writers in particular. When *Darkness and Light* was made available in South Africa in 1959, Themba’s review, which he penned for *Drum Magazine*, closed with the following lines:

Much of the literature of protest has been trapped into sacrificing its sincerity for the cause. This does not detract from the justice and vitality of the cause. It does not even suggest that no great literature can come from great causes. But no artist will ever be content to substitute the noise of the war for the music of his soul. (Themba, 2006:47)

In this excerpt, Themba touches on the delicate topic of literature and politics, which is one of the most contentious issues in the South African literary discourse. The argument that Themba is making in this review, which was originally written in 1959, would later resurface in the public discourse through the works of Nkosi, amongst others, where he criticises the obsession of South African writers with the documentary prose and neglecting the form. In his 1965 essay, “Fiction by Black South Africans,” republished in his latest posthumous collection, *Writing Home* (2016), Nkosi is particularly critical of the overt portrayal of the political condition in literature by black South Africans. Nkosi would return to this theme repeatedly in his career as one of the leading essayists from the African continent. A substantial part of this thesis, particularly in Chapter three, which is entitled “A Politico in a Poet: The Paradox of Poetics and Politics in Can Themba’s writing”, grapples with this aspect of Themba’s writing. Although he often made some poignant observations through such sporadic references, Themba never lived to develop a sustained argument that would explicitly document his assertions. Themba’s philosophical positioning, including his own biographical background, is reflected through his writing. His writing transcends different genres, and often provides a glimpse into his life, his philosophy as well as his reflections on the society in which he lived.

Themba seldom separates his writing from his lived experience, and the literary material that he reads is always part of his daily existence through both his imagery and lexicon. Chapter two of this study presents an extensive analysis of intertextuality in Themba’s writing, with a particular focus on the evocations of Shakespeare in his works. It demonstrates, among others, that William Shakespeare was a vital ingredient in the construction of Themba’s voice as a writer. His influence is discernible particularly in Themba’s early writing. In later years, as Themba develops and becomes more confident in his peculiar voice as a writer, he consciously uses Shakespeare as the prism through which he takes a critical look at his society. In her unpublished lecture delivered in 2013, paying homage to Can Themba, Nadine Gordimer describes his piece, “Through Shakespeare’s Africa,” as a “story-essay-political philosophy in one.” The refusal to be defined by the form of a singular literary genre is the distinct feature of Themba’s writing as observed in “Crepuscule”, “Bottom of the Bottle”, “The Will to Die”, and several of his writings. Almost every piece of his writing has elements of lyrical prose, philosophical statement, biographical reflection and imaginative writing in one. Unless we accept this as the Can Themba kind of writing—the “Can Themba Phenomenon,” any attempts to confine all his works into the conventional literary genres are doomed to fail.

Over the years, a number of scholars and social commentators have made different assertions about Themba's writing. The views expressed by Nkondo in his 1973 article, with regard to structural formations of Themba's writing, are further enunciated in the works of different scholars including Themba's peers like Nkosi and Mphahlele. In ironic twists that have become quintessential of Themba's writing, some of these assertions would change over the years. In his article "Storyteller and Journalist," referenced earlier, Chapman observes change of views from Mphahlele regarding Themba's writing:

In considering Can Themba's stories, Es'kia Mphahlele's response underwent interesting modifications. Soon after leaving South Africa in 1960 in anger and disillusionment, Mphahlele could see in *Drum* only a trivialisation of black experience. 'Themba,' he said, 'is basically *Drum*: romantic imagery, theatrical characters, Hollywood, with a lace of poetic justice' (1960:343). But after having returned to South Africa in 1978 to end almost twenty years in exile, Mphahlele said that in retrospect he believed Themba helped a liveable myth. (Themba, 2006:56)

This change of views is also found in Nkondo, who had initially published a scathing critic of Themba's work particularly with regard to the nebulous structure of his works. In my interview with Nkondo in 2015, he made an about turn in his argument about the structural issues with Themba's writing. He says Themba is first and foremost a "lyric poet," and should not be confined to particular literary orthodoxies:

That's why I'm now wiser about Can Themba instead of subjecting him into narrow poetics about the tightness of the image, the organic unity of the image, the tightness of narrative structure, the sense of closure, all the things that we were taught, Can Themba collapsed that.

In a metaphorical sense, what Nkondo is agitating here is the viewing of Themba's life from *inside the house of truth*, as opposed from the outside, like a tourist peeping through the bus window to view a township life about which they become experts. The excerpt used as an epigraph in this chapter, where Nkondo talks about how Themba collapsed the gap between fact and fiction, is articulated in the context of his defiance of conventions. During the interview, Nkondo referred to the theory propagated primarily by T.S. Eliot about the relationship between the author and the story, which Themba seems to be challenging in his writing. Eliot maintains the distinction between the writer and the story, arguing that the character that is reflected by the story is a very different person from the one who is writing.

In his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*; Alfred A. Knopf, New York (1921), Eliot separates the writer from his writing in this manner:

The mind of the poet is a shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself, but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates, the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.(Eliot 1921)

The thesis of Eliot’s epistemology is related to the metaphysical theory of the connection between the writer and his writing— that they are not necessarily the same. According to this school of thought, the poet is not emotionally involved with the message he delivers because he is just the “medium” through which the message is conveyed. At a discursive level, one would argue that what is written in the story is a reflection of the author’s preoccupations. It is their ideas that are shared in the text. They choose a particular subject because they feel strongly about it. They have a special interest and would like to communicate an idea pertaining to that particular subject. In this sense, the author is intimately involved in his text both intuitively and emotively. The extent to which they reflect on lived experience versus their imaginative power is what determines the nature of their writing.

According to Nkondo, Themba defies T.S. Eliot’s theory, as he collapses the metaphysical barricades between the author and his text. He bridges the gap between fiction, lived experience and many other forms of storytelling. In fact, his writing often meanders through different forms of storytelling. The emphasis of Nkondo’s latest argument is that Themba the storyteller and Themba the person overlapped in most of his narratives. As such, Nkondo believes that “The Will to Die” is overtly biographical and was a cry for help:

Its very autobiographical, everything, you know for example that short story, “The Will To Die”, if you know Can Themba in an advanced age, that “Will To Die”, he was such a genius, he turned it into a joke, he almost caressed death, caressed suicide, made it look like a joke but it was a desperate cry for more and more living space we didn't have. That is why he left for Swaziland, looking for living space because he couldn't make the distinction between who's man suffering and the mind that creates.

In this excerpt, Nkondo echoes the sentiments of this study, that in the final analysis, Themba's life is depicted in his writing. A close reading of Themba's works, the understanding of its hybridity, demonstrates that he interweaves the different tenets into a single entity, and thus telling his own life story. This view is further articulated by Chapman in the following excerpt:

Themba the journalist and Themba the writer become completely intertwined. It is not that he follows Plaatje's author-journalist practice where, as in *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), emotive incidents are used to illustrate the attack on government legislation. Rather, Themba the author becomes caught up in the fascination of the shebeen life, and his journalistic self, which is supposed to be adopting the high moral tone of *Drum's* crusading mission, is forced reluctantly to extricate itself from the 'ruptures' of the story. (Chapman, 1989:209)

While it is helpful to consider each story on its merits, it is also important to observe the platforms and the historical moment in which they were published. The timing is particularly important in the Historical-Biographical theories, as it determines the circumstances and thus portrays the contextual environment of a particular story. In Chapter two of this study, for instance, where there is extensive interrogation of intertextuality and the influence of Shakespeare in Themba's work, an epistemological exposition of Themba's early works, and the evolution of his writing, demonstrate the importance of going beyond the text and the consideration of the contextual environment around a literary text.

The poetry and stories that Themba published in the *SANC*, *Forsterian* and in *Zonk* in the 1940s, for instance, are remarkably different in both form and content, from those he published in other platforms like *The Golden City Post* in the late 1950s and early 1960s. To demonstrate my point, if we were to consider the stories that were published in *Drum* Magazine in the early 1950s, it would be easy to decipher that they have a popular sensationalist tone, and that their thematic focus is romance and tribalism, influenced largely by the focus of the magazine, which thrived on stories of that nature.

It is mainly the pieces that he wrote solely with the intention of publishing in literary journals in the 1960s that can easily be categorised as short stories of a fictional nature, though it can be argued that in any fictional undertaking there is always an element of truth. In 1963, Nat Nakasa established *The Classic* as a publishing outfit for African writers. In its inaugural issue, *The Classic* carried two pieces by Themba: his seminal short story, "The Suit", and a poem simply entitled, "Dear God". For literary purists, "The Suit" provides the much-needed

reprieve in Themba's literary oeuvre because of its solid narrative structure. "The Suit" is undoubtedly Themba's most celebrated work, and continues to make epochal inroads through the process of reproduction, adaptation and intertextuality. This received particular attention in Chapter seven, where an argument that the story is not only Themba's most famous, but also it could also be the most successful South African short story of all time. The rest of Themba's stories published in other literary journals in the 1960s seem more defined, more focused, more compliant to form, than any of his earlier works. Although he might not have been conscious of the commonality in terms of time and publishing platforms amongst these stories, in his scathing article Nkondo observes their distinct nature in terms of form:

Possibly the most refreshing pieces – indeed those that can be safely termed 'short stories' – are 'The Urchin,' 'The Suit,' and 'The Dube Train.' All three are distinguished by a tightness and unity of structure, which manifests itself in a singleness and unity of theme. (Nkondo, 1973: 118)

The common thread that runs through the stories that Nkondo mentions here is that they were first published in the 1960s. While this illustrates some level of maturity in Themba's writing, it also reveals another reality about the relevance of publishing platforms. "The Urchin" was submitted to Es'kia Mphahlele for a contest run by the South African Centre of the International PEN Club. The story was subsequently published in *African Writing Today*, edited by Mphahlele and published in 1967, the same year Themba died. "The Suit", as alluded to earlier, headlined the inaugural issue of *The Classic*. Themba also reworked his piece of reportage, "Terror in the Trains," published in *Drum* in October 1957, and reproduced it as "The Dube Train", a story that has the makings of a classic short story. "The Dube Train" was first published in *Modern African Stories* in 1964. This last story bears testament to Essop Patel's (1993:5) assertion that Themba had "the rare quality of fusing raw experiences from his terrain in Sophiatown with incisive imagination. He gave his life to writing." In the same piece, produced at the time of the adaptation of "The Suit" in 1993, Patel rightfully observes:

Can Themba was no ordinary journalist and story teller. He was a rebel. Can scorned conventions, tradition, customs and authority. (Patel, 1993:9)

His refusal to thread on the beaten track is interrogated in Chapter three, which grapples with Themba's political disposition. The Chapter highlights Themba's close relationship with a number of politicians from different political formations. It also makes reference to an article that Themba wrote for *Drum Magazine* in 1957, in which Themba directly addresses political

issues. In the article, controversially titled, “Who will lead the Congress Now?” (1957:19) Themba recounts the story of how he went to a shebeen and got to hang out with political figures like Robert Resha, Tennyson Makiwane and Lionel Morrison. It so happened that one of them was accused of “living a dissolute life,” and they set up a mock trial, where Themba acted as the “Magistrate.” It would seem that imitating reality was indeed one of Themba’s favourite pastimes, as one of Mangosuthu Buthelezi’s most vivid memories of his student life at Fort Hare, was when Themba hosted a mock graduation and acting as the rector of the university. In the case of the mock trial in Sophiatown, however, fiction was to be resembled by reality, as the verdict of the mock trial was that the accused was found guilty. The very next day, Themba recounts, three of the participants (i.e. Resha, Makiwane and Morrison) in the mock trial were arrested for High Treason. The incident is what Themba calls the “comical farce that had in it foreboding ingredients of upcoming tragedy.”

In short, although these stories may have been inspired by lived experience, they were written with a clear intent of publishing in literary journals and demonstrate a certain level of maturity in Themba’s writing. It is no doubt that Can Themba was in the process of becoming and his best stories were yet to be published. His untimely death at the tender age of 43 deprived readers the realisation of his full potential both as a writer and as a social observer. Moreover, if, as the family alleges, any of his stories kept in his tartan attache case were indeed lost, it is very unlikely that the stories contained there were published under anybody else’s name. Themba’s distinct voice would betray any efforts to disguise his writing. This is the argument that Kgositsile makes in our 2013 interview, where he insists, “even if his name was not there, you would know that no one would’ve written that. Even a contemporary, like Nadine Gordimer.” This is the uniqueness of a narrative voice that Themba carved for himself. For his writing was he. He told his own story through his writing in a unique way. His life story has neither been told fully nor ended yet. What we learn through this study is that Themba’s life is an infinite journey. His demise in 1967 seems to have given him a new life. Since he immortalised himself through his writing, he keeps reincarnating himself as more interest in his work grows. The dawn of a new life is best symbolised by his burial among the clergy at the St Joseph’s mission.

To date, Can Themba has been buried three times. In 2010, his family disinterred his mortal remains from the St. Josephs cemetery where he was buried in 1967. This reburial was organised by the family without any fanfare or the involvement of the state. His mortal remains were reburied at the West Park cemetery in Johannesburg, to mark his second burial. This reburial was organised by the family without any fanfare or the involvement of the state. His

reburial was quite distinct from that of Nat Nakasa, whose mortal remains were repatriated from the United States of America to much fanfare. The Minister of Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa, described the objective of returning Nakasa's remains as the restoration of his dignity and his nationhood. The same can be said about Can Themba. The occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his passing solicited a number of tributes across the arts, culture and media fraternities. After her passing in 2014, his wife was buried alongside her husband, who had passed almost fifty years earlier.

The third reburial coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his passing. On Saturday, 30 September 2017, the Department of Arts and Culture working in close collaboration with the Can Themba family, hosted the unveiling of his tombstone. This ceremony was the culmination of a number of activities that focused on paying tribute to Themba during the month of September, which is also commemorated as Heritage month in South Africa, with 24 September being national Heritage Day. The series of events for the month commenced with the launch of *The House of Truth*, a book by the current author. The occasion was hosted at the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory, and was held on Friday, 8 September, which is the day Themba passed away. This occasion provided a platform for a number of individuals, including the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Education in Gauteng province, Panyaza Lesufi, Joe Thloloe, actor Sello Maake kaNcube, Themba's daughter, Yvonne Themba, and the current author to pay tribute to the fallen scribe.

The unveiling of his tombstone on 30 September 2017, marked the third burial of Can Themba. His remains alongside those of his wife were exhumed and reburied in a different section of the cemetery—the heroes' acre—where he lies next to other South African cultural icons.

These events affirm the view that Themba's life is an infinite journey. He keeps reinventing himself all over again. This academic project is part of that journey of rediscovery. It is the first of its kind to take a considered view of the life and times of Can Themba from the inside, to look at life through his own prism in order to better understand the full meaning of his works and how they relate to his lived experience. While it does not complete his life story, as the Can Themba phenomenon refuses that kind of rigidity, it should make significant inroads in the understanding of the subject. My submission is that an academic project should not be only about passing an examination. More than just contributing to the scholarship, it should help improve humankind. It should enrich public knowledge and form part of the public discourse.

## References

- Achebe, Chinua, 1958; *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann, London
- Achebe, Chinua, 1975; *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London
- Achebe, Chinua, 2010; *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, Heinemann, London
- Andrew, M.G. 2002; *The Southern African Short Story Review*, QACE, Fouriesburg
- Attridge, D. & Jolly, R, 1998; *Writing South Africa*. Cambridge University Press. UK
- Attwell, David, 2005; *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*. UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg
- Barnett, Ursulla A, 1983; *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914 – 1980)*. Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town
- Bloom, Harold, 1973; *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press, New York
- Bloom, Harold, 2011; *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. Yale University Press, New York
- Brown, Ryan, 2013; *A Native of Nowhere: The Life of Nat Nakasa*. Jacana Media, Auckland Park
- C. Gallagher & S. Greenblatt, 2000; *Practicing New Historicism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London
- Chapman, Michael, 1989; “Can Themba, Storyteller and Journalist of the 1950s: The Text in Context”, published in *English in Africa* Vol. 16 Number 2. Grahamstown
- Chapman, Michael, 2006; *Art Talk, Politics Talk*. University of KwaZulu Natal Press
- Coplan, David B, 1985; *In Township Tonight: South Africa’s Black City Music and Theatre*. Ravan Press, Johannesburg
- Creary, Nicholas, 2012; *African Intellectuals and Decolonisation*. Ohio University Press, USA
- Distiller, Natasha, 2005; *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture*, The Edwin Mellen Press, United Kingdom

- Eckstein, L. 2006; *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York
- Evans, G.B. 1976; *Shakespeare: Aspects of Influence*. Harvard University Press, England
- Falola, Toyin, 2001; *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*. University of Rochester Press New York, USA
- Gallagher, C. & Greenblatt, S. 2000; *Practicing New Historicism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London
- Gealy, S. 2009; *Biographical and Historical Criticism*. Paper on Literary Theory
- Gevisser, Mark. 2007; *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*. Jonathan Ball Publishers, South Africa
- Gifford, D. 2011; *Zones of Remembering: Time, Memory, and (un)Consciousness*. Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York
- Good, Dan et al, 2004; *Researching Life Stories: Method, Theory and Analysis in Biographical Age*. Routledge Falmer, London and New York
- Gordimer, Nadine. 1963; *Occasion for Loving*. Virago Press, London
- Guerin, W.L. 2005, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Gunner, L. et al, 2006; *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*. Wits University Press, Johannesburg
- Hachten, et al, 1984; *The Press and Apartheid: Repression and Propaganda in South Africa*. University of Wisconsin Press, USA
- Hermeren, Goran, 1975; *Influence in Art and Literature*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey
- Hokinson, Tom, 1962; *In the Fiery Continent*. Victor Gollancz, London
- Johnson, David, 1996; *Shakespeare and South Africa*. Oxford University Press, USA
- Killam, G.D, 1973; *African Writers on African Writing*. Heinemann, London
- Lange, Matthew, 2013; *Comparative Historical Methods*. Sage Publications Ltd, London

- Linzer, Norman, 1984; *Suicide: The Will to Live vs. The Will to Die*. Human Sciences Press, New York
- Mahala, Siphiso, 2011; *African Delights*. Jacana Media, Auckland Park
- Mandela, Nelson, 1994; *Long Walk to Freedom*. Little, Brown and Company
- Manganyi, N. Chabani, 1983; *Exiles and Homecomings: A Biography of Es'kia Mphahlele*.
- Manus, Vicki Briault, 2011; *Emerging Traditions: Toward a Postcolonial Statistics of Black South African Fiction in English*. Lexington Books, United Kingdom
- Masemola, Kgomotso, 2006; *Cultural Memory, Discursive Migrancy and the Aporias of the In/Appropriated "Other": The Diphora of Becoming in Anglophone Black South African Biography (1954 – 1995)*. [Unpublished PhD Thesis]; University of Sheffield, England; 2006
- Massey, Daniel, 2010; *Under Protest: The Rise of Student Resistance at the University of Fort Hare*. UNISA Press; Pretoria
- Matshikiza, Todd, 1961; *Chocolates for My Wife*. Hodder & Stoughton, London
- Mbiti, John, S. 1969; *African Religions and Philosophy*. East African Educational Publishers Lt, Nairobi
- Mda, Zakes, 2000, *The Heart of Redness*. Oxford University Press, Johannesburg
- Mehl, Dieter, 1983; *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge
- Modisane, Bloke, 1986; *Blame Me on History*. Simon and Schuster Inc., New York
- Mogoboya, M.J. 2011; *African Identity in Es'kia Mphahlele's Autobiographical and Fictional Novels: An Investigation*. University of Limpopo, Turfloop
- Mphahlele, 2002; *Es'kia; Es'kia*. Kwela Books, Cape Town
- Mutloatse, Mothobi (Ed.), 1980; *Casey & Co: Selected Writings of Casey Motsisi*. Ravan Press, Johannesburg
- Mzamane, Mbulelo. 1986; *Hungry Flames and other Black South African Short Stories*. Longman African Classics; England
- Mzamane, V. Mbulelo, 1991. *Cultivating a People's Voice in the Criticism of African Literature*— Published in Staffrider Vol. 9. No 3, Johannesburg

- Mzamane, V. Mbulelo, 2005; *Words Gone Too Soon: A tribute to Phaswane Mpe and K. Sello Duiker*. Umgangatho Media, Pretoria
- Ndebele, S. Njabulo, 2006; *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg
- Ndletyana, Mcebisi, 2008; *African Intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*. HSRC Press, Pretoria
- Nicol, Mike, 1991; *A Good-Looking Corpse*. Secker & Warburg, London
- Nkosi, Lewis, 1965; *Home and Exile and Other Selections*. Longman, London & New York
- Nkosi, Lewis, 1983; *Mating Birds*. St. Martin's Press, USA
- Okri, Ben, 1997 ; *A Way of Being Free*. Head of Zeus Ltd., London
- Osofisan, Femi (ed.), 2001; *Literature and the Pressures of Freedom: Essays, Speeches and Songs*. Opon Ifa Readers, Ibadan, Nigeria
- Patel, Essop (Ed.), 1975; *The World of Nat Nakasa*. Ravan Press, Johannesburg
- Pityana, et al (Ed.), 1991; *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. David Phillip Publishers, Cape Town
- Rabkin, David, 1975; *Drum Magazine (1951 – 1961) and the Works of Black South African Writers Associated with it*. Ph.D Thesis; University of Leeds, England
- Ravan Press, Johannesburg
- Rosenthal, Gabrielle, 2004; *Qualitative Research Practice*. Thousand Oaks, London
- Rutherford, Peggy, 1958; *Darkness and Light: An Anthology of African Writing*. The Faith Press Ltd, London
- Sampson, Anthony, 1956; *Drum: A Venture into the New Africa*. Collins, London
- Schadeberg, Jurgen, 2017; *The Way I See It*. Picador Africa, Johannesburg
- Shakespeare, William, 2003; *Othello*. Spark Publishing, New York
- Snyman, Mari, 2003; *Can Themba: The Life of a Shebeen Intellectual*. unpublished Masters dissertation; University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg
- Stein, Sylvester, 1999; *Who Killed Mr Drum?* Corvo Books Ltd, Great Britain

- Gealy, S. 2009; *Biographical and Historical Criticism*. Paper on Literary Theory  
*The Fort Harian*. August 1951; Alice
- Themba, Anne, 1993; “The Wife Remembers.” The Duze Workshop Ensemble,  
Johannesburg
- Themba, Can, 1955, “Can Says: I am not a Fascist either” published in *The Rand Daily Mail*,  
22 May 1955, Johannesburg
- Themba, Can, 1955; “Can Says: This is Why I am not a Communist” published in *The Rand  
Daily Mail*, 15 May 1955, Johannesburg
- Themba, Can, 1956, “Banned to the Bush” published in *Drum Magazine*, Johannesburg
- Themba, Can, 1972; *The Will to Die*. David Phillip, Cape Town
- Themba, Can, 2007; *Requiem for Sophiatown*. Penguin Books, Johannesburg
- Thurman, Chris, 2009; *Shakespeare in Southern Africa Vol 21*. Shakespeare Society of  
Southern Africa, Johannesburg
- Trevelyan, G.D. 1968; “At Can Themba’s Grave” in *Contrast* Volume 5 Number 2. National  
English Documentation Centre, Johannesburg
- Wald, Alan M, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Selected Essays on Marxist Traditions in  
Cultural Commitment*. Humanities Press, New Jersey, USA
- Watts et all (ed.). 1994; *Multiple Identities: A Phenomenology of Multicultural  
Communication*. Peter Lang, Frankfurt
- West, Linden and Merril, Barbara, 2009; *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*  
*Sage*, Los Angeles
- Wrenhaven, K.L. 2012; *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*.  
Bloomsbury, London
- Xaba, Makhosazana, 2013; *Running and Other Stories*. Motjaji Books, Cape Town
- Zwane-Siguqa, Makhosazana (Ed.), 13 & 20 June 2013; *Drum Magazine*. Johannesburg

## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWS**

## 1. Ahmed Kathrada

The others who used to pop in at my place every now and then, it had become a second home for them coming from Sophiatown, coming from Soweto, they used to come to my place in Martha Street because they had nowhere else to go in Johannesburg. I came to know of him and admire his writings and I had the privilege of meeting him on a few occasions, I was closely involved in the campaign of removals, the mass removals and so forth and our close associate Dr Xuma who was staying there and then of course there was this freedom square where we used to go and have meetings all the time.

Oh yes, Nadine's place because you know we were not white, we were not allowed to take part of alcohol, not allowed unless you have permits so you go to friends and comrades who are white at their house, they can serve you with refreshments and all that so you can socialise much better at their houses, but when you come to my place we were not allowed, we were also restricted about these things. So that's how I must have met Can at Nadine's place socially.

Although some people may describe him as an intellectual, I don't dismiss that of course, he was but he wasn't a type of intellectual who was somewhere above people, he was a very approachable down to earth person that you could meet and interact with him. You know we had many intellectuals, they sort of a little above ordinary people like us so it was not easy, but not with Can, with Can it was easy to interact with him because for him, although he was described as an intellectual he was also a people's man, he couldn't be otherwise because Sophiatown, you can't stay in Sophiatown and isolate yourself from people. So in that sense Can was much more approachable although if one goes only by his achievements and his writings, one may get the impression that he's the type of intellectual that you have to start making appointments with his secretary then you see him, it wasn't like that with Can, he was a down to earth approachable people and approachable to anybody. What I know personally about him and what I heard about him is that he was a people's man, regardless of what he wrote and all that he remained a people's man, approachable to the ordinary people. That did make him stand out from other so called intellectuals who are not very approachable but he wasn't like that. And out of, not to sort of take him away from people like Nokwe and Professor Kgositsile, they were similar, that group of people, I should talk about, they were similar.

They were living in Sophiatown and Soweto and all that, when people came to Johannesburg even a simple thing like going to a toilet, where does one go if you are not white. So in that

sense I had this flat in Market Street, a lot of my friends and comrades from Soweto, from Sophiatown, these places they made it their home, because it was easy for them. Because as you know in that period there were these boards, Europeans only, I'll show you a photograph of that type of boards. Non-Europeans and dogs not allowed, outside lifts, outside libraries, outside restaurants, outside hotels there were these boards, so to socialise...

Well that's where one comes to know him, because that's where also his character as a people's man comes out in his writing, because no matter how brilliantly he wrote you could see by his writing that he remained a people's man, he was close to the people, he knew their problems, he knew the struggles, he knew everything about them so he could write even if he is a "so called" intellectual, he knew from personal experiences what it was to be an ordinary person living in these townships. So that was his strength that he could write about Sophiatown not from someone who hears from others about Sophiatown, from someone who knew Sophiatown from personal experience and could write about it first-hand.

## 2. Anne Themba

This is the answer I wanted from women, whoever I asked to marry me and when I ask her why she would marry me, she'd tell me that I'm Can Themba the BA, Can Themba the English teacher, Can Themba the journalist, you name it. He felt that they didn't want to marry Can, they wanted to marry the titles, you see and now here I am, he's been looking for this questions for all this time and only now a girl has come forward and then he said, "For goodness sake, let's get married soonest."

Can's education comes from a reverent Tontsi, it was a AME church minister who encouraged Can to read in order to be a better person, in order to know English in future, "Read, Read, read my child, please read." He used to supply him with books to read and he followed the minister's advice.

So he used to carry a book in his pocket, you know his jackets used to be like this, slanting and its only now after so many years that Morongwa tells me, "Mom, the children used to say my dad carries a nip around in his pocket." and now I said to her, now doesn't this stuff in the nip get finished for him to chuck the thing away, must there be a content in the thing to show what it contains, it was so sad but that part of it was very good, it answered so many questions.

There and then, even at home if a story comes to him at the peak of night he'd jump out of bed and I'd just be woken up by the yanking of the typewriter. And then when he comes back to bed then I say, why did you do this? Suppose we have visitors, what are they going to think of us? Then he says, "If I wait until tomorrow that thought will be clean and gone so I've got to grab it now." this is how it goes. "Alright, this holiday I promise you I will write the book when the school's closed, when the schools close I'm going to write the book so that when they open I just give you your book and say there's your book, there's your book." I said, "I'd be so happy, I'd be so happy." He would say mission accomplished. Just the happy lucky man who's on holidays, the school holidays and he's looking forward to completing the book he came to do, now unfortunately he died of a heart attack

The Fathers and Sisters were so fond of him, they were so fond of him, they actually came to me after the announcement of his death, and they came to me. I remember the Father saying, "Smile Mrs. Themba," And there was the Father and two Sisters, so they had special come to ask that Can be laid to rest in their cemetery, it was a special request from them, please, that's the last gift they want to give him.

I'd love him to be remembered as a people's person, as a people's person. That man loved people you know.



### 3. Don Mattera

Well Can Themba when we describe him, *njenga manje*, he was a connoisseur of the language, like you have a connoisseur for *utshwala*, wine...they taste and they tell you vintage, this year, that year...he was like that with the word, Professor Mpahlale also to a different degree was a connoisseur because he was a reader, Can Themba we knew of him would look for the best word, he would not look for the fashionable word, he would look for the best word to describe an issue if you... the bottom of the bottle, requiem for Sophiatown, the best language, because requiem comes from the Catholic- Latin expressions, it's like *umlindelo* for *thina abo-darkie* so that is writing from the nth-degree obviously spelt n-t-h, the highest quality degree and that is what his writing showed and little pre-cautious guys like us who came from a catholic upbringing were the requiem was an everyday – for Jesus and we came and we hear this man speak and we hear and read his pieces, some of us used to say, *nxa one day I will be like that*, because he was a connoisseur of the language and he was bombastic and why not because he knew the language, and he was -- , he bragged, he showed it he didn't hide it, and he was a bragger, quietly so but he knew that language is his weapon to achieve the fame and also to get the women that he wanted and the adulation that he wanted, so uLewis Nkosi no matter what they say, they may be dead but they used to drink from the fountain of that man's mouth when this man speaks, you wait for the spit, you catch the spit and you drink it, because the spit itself is intellectual I don't want to talk about *ukuhlansa* I'm sure all the *laities* would want to go and see what kind of brandy was there but I just wanted to say he was the master of the language of this queens language if we may so call it. Then of course there was Peter Abrahams, a different kind of penetration of the language you see the rain drops in the window you see the boy licking the rain drops as he goes there in his book *tell freedom*, with Can Themba you see yourself *ukuthi yisiphuzane*, you're a drunk and you're at the bottom of the bottle and then he says, and in my associates of not caring about what people are saying I live at the bottom of the bottle, you so... that writing I'm sorry it comes once in a lifetime not even Don Mattera, Professor Mpahlale had something else, he was analytical, he was also influenced by the Americans and the American writers Sojourner Truth, Margaret, some great ladies that were writing , this man never ever told you which books he read Can Themba, he would not tell people what books he was reading because some of us would not come to that level, he conquered Shakespeare, in a way *is jy toppie, is jy praat, is jy skryf*, he said Shakespeare is his berdfers, *makanxilile* I met him twice and then twice he was bombastic, twice , when they were

making ifilm come back Africa with Miriam Makeba and we were doing what we were doing cleaning up the two rooms, *hey lad, sonny, come here, who are you?* And

He was a connoisseur of language like Nadine Gordimer, controlled and understood the power of words, so what can I say about Can Themba, I think if he had not died the way he did it was a great death, it's a great death when you lie and the birds pick out your eyes that's how I want to go they should leave my body on the mountains and let the vultures eat the meat instead of putting me underground that's what I've always said, Can Themba was a fatalist as well, come rain come shine I'll be who I am whether you like it or not. So I was given the opportunity to write about him when they were honouring professor Mpahlele, and I said Can Themba reminds me of a man standing near snake pit.

In times that they appeared was also just after the African-American influence of the African-American literary influence played the big part here in South Africa among the so called black intellectuals African intellectuals and most of them were touched by what Langston Hughes and what others wrote, county coloury, nobody ever talks about is --.so we were influenced lot by what black Americans were doing because there was movies we used to have old American movies, in which American jazz, American writings not just the ordinary guys at the bottom but the likes of Can Themba,

A prophet armed comes with a message, a prophet gives the message they come and they say uyisdakwa nje wena they push you down so they unarm you, once you are unarmed they outcast you, so that is Mr Can Themba and he helped him in his demise because he didn't have the staying power that others have and he didn't have the support that says leth'sandla sakho, I'll walk with you, run with you. Sadly Can Themba did not know this phase in his time he did not turn around maybe for some but his life turned around it helped us understand who we are, why we cry why we hope, why we despair, why there is a pot of gold at the end, there is no bloody rainbow there.

Lots of statements but when you read Can Themba you see uShakespeare moving there, you see uYates you see the flowing language very powerful that kind of human being is dying out, it has died out, my kind will definitely die out, E'skia Mpahlele said Don Mattera is a natural poet because he doesn't tuck and pull and scream at words until the words scream back but I just wanted to say there are certain things that we write that history will one day remember and one of them is called degrees, there is no hurt quiet like being unloved and unwanted among one's own in one's own land, there is no hurt like that ,that kind makes you want to sink and

fall in the hole just like Can Themba fell, he felt no more love from anyone, his world had become shrunken, his body, everybody and then ugijimela ebhodleleni there are many there are too many.

#### **4. Joe Thloloe**

I've been in the industry since 1961, and sadly I came into the industry towards the end of the DRUM days, but the most important thing I knew about Can is that he allowed me to write my first story on Golden City Post, I'd been working for the world for quite a while, and at the time we looked up to Troy street in Johannesburg we looked up to it as the pinnacle of our career if you want to work for DRUM or work for Post then you'd certainly be at the top of your career but every time I took my material to Post it would be spiked and never got published and the first person who gave me a chance was Can Themba he was Acting News Editor at the time and I took a story to him and he looked at it and said please change this, please change that. Like a teacher he was I took the stuff that I wanted and I rewrote it the way that he had suggested and lo and behold it was published and for the first time I had been published in the Golden city post, which at the time was a huge honour and that gave me courage to continue giving material to the Post and ultimately I ended up working for DRUM but that's my lasting memory of Can Themba, somebody who could teach, somebody who could nurture young talent and somebody who cared.

Black journalism had become radicalised, much more than the journalism of the 1960s and the 1950s, the Can Thembas' found an outlet in their humour, in their irony, in their ability to laugh at the system if you might call it that, at the time that we came in it was much more difficult to laugh at what was happening around you, we felt the pain much more sharply, for example in 1972-73 we formed the union of black journalists because we were unhappy with the way that black journalists were treated in the newsrooms we were being badly paid, we were being treated like the scums in the newsrooms, all the positions, the senior positions and the supervisory positions went to whites who supervised our own writing.

The Can Thembas' responded in a particular fashion to what was happening around them, with apartheid solidifying itself, their writing and perception of the world was different from the Sol Plaatjies who were writing in a different context and that the Can Thembas way of writing was different from the writing of the late 1970s, the black consciousness movement, because again it was responding to history.

## 5. Juby Mayet

Can was news editor of *Golden City Post* so I got to know Can that way. I didn't talk to any of them very much but they were keen and I was keen and they said okay I must come and work during, it was the middle, it was the June mid-term holidays that year, '57, 1957, see ages, and ages, I don't think you were born that time. At any rate, that's how I met Can and that's how I got to learn about the "Can Von Themba" special, which was a half a bottle of Coke sitting on his desk, which me in my innocence thought was Coke and one day we were chatting, walking around there discussing whatever. I took the bottle and took a couple of gulps and I said hell this coke tastes weird, it was the first time in my life I tasted brandy and coke, that was the "Can Von Themba" special.

Can was a, he was an amusing guy, he could talk, I can picture him now standing there, hand in the pocket with that lopsided grin of his, he used to call me Kid. Never used to call me Sharon or Juby.

Can said something which resonated with me and stuck with me and last night I was trying to think what it was, I knew it had something to do with bombs and bullets and I thought and I thought, and it had something to do with truth and I thought and I'd drench in my memory picturing this Can, with his glass in his hand, the cigarette in the other hand and you know, not lecturing us but, and it came to me almost verbatim. It was something to the effect that, he said to me, "You know, truth is more powerful than bombs, bullets or bullshit."

So Can and I ended up sleeping at Bob Gosani's place in Kofifi, and they had for me and Can, you know those old stretcher things you used to fold, stretcher beds that fold up, I think they were called stretchers, they opened up a stretcher for me and Can to share and I'm thinking to myself, "My God, I'm going to sleep next to Can Themba, am I going to be safe?", You know I was an innocent, I was still young and innocent. Anyway I thought well what the hell, I'll just get in there and go and sleep if you can. I was reading something, candle light or Lenten lights and then. I heard Can "roselling" something, reading next to me, I looked at it and I looked at it and I said "Can, what are you reading?" and he showed me. You know in those days they had those picture love story things, in Victorian times in England I think they would have been called "Tanny Dreadfuls", not A4, they were larger than A4, maybe 20 pages or so, 4 pictures per page with captions, you know those picture stories. He was reading one of those and I looked at him and I said, "My God! Can, are you actually really reading this rubbish?" I was astounded, this great man of intellect, you know this teacher. So he turned and he looked at me

with his lop-sided grin of his, I think at that stage he was still calling me Kid, he said to me, “Kid you read anything and everything, because you can learn something from anything and everything, never look down upon reading material such as this.”

He was a very sociable kind of person. He had no airs about him, you wouldn't think that he was this great Can Themba that we know, he was just one of us ordinary, sometimes sloppily dressed, tie skew you know, he never spoke down on you, he never looked down on anybody. He was just an ordinary person, he was just an ordinary loving and lovable human being.

I mean Can also, him leaving South Africa to start with. You know sometimes it doesn't help to swear now or to throw things but if I could find some of the people responsible for the things that have happened, and if I had an AK47 I would line them up and shoot them, one by one, “Sat”, there's Can, there's Nat, there's Louis you know, there's Henry. We had suspicions, there were some of us who had inclines of it but it was his private life and we felt it wasn't our place to ask questions or to discuss it or anything. And of course in those days in the eye of the so-called powers of that be, at the time, it was criminal for them to be associated with each other.

He was probably frustrated, but I think he managed to keep his emotions and his feelings quite reasonably in check, the only thing that got worse of course was the drinking. Can was one of its leading lights, I mean his writing was the kind of writing that few others could attain, aspire to it yah but to reach, but it gave, I'm sure it gave a lot of other people apart from me the inspiration to always try and be better, you know, to reach greater heights and as I say always to tell the truth, in whatever situation, that's what got me into trouble, I know it. As I sit here sitting thinking now, I can see him smiling at me, maybe a bit cynically, saying something like, “And Kid don't go overboard.”

## **6. Jurgen Schadeberg (With the assistance of Claudia Schadeberg)**

Working on *Drum* in 52 in 1952, Early 1952 we decided to introduce a short story competition and erm we had a number of intellectuals and writers and so on. There were many entrances so we eventually decided to give the first prize to a person, a man called Can Themba who I

believe was a teacher in Johannesburg and erm we managed to get his address and the prize was 50 pounds, which was quite a lot of money at the time. Henry Nxumalo and myself went to see him and I went before and after and Henry was to present him with the 50 pound cheque and cash I think and those days we didn't use cheques on DRUM.

Anyway, we arrived at his house it was sort of a middle class house in Sophiatown and he was sitting on the veranda on the stoep as they used to call them and reading a newspaper in an armchair. So we walked up to him, up to him and erm he was erm looked terribly respectable and very middle class wearing a tie and a neat shirt and so on and erm he was terribly polite and when we then of course, told him that he won the prize on *Baby come duze* [Mob Passion] the short story and he was very surprised, very happy and I then asked him if he could, I could have a look at his office where he works in the house. This was a house of the family where he rented a couple of rooms and we went to his work office and I took a picture of his place and I was very surprised it was unlike Sophiatown, which was a bit of a wild place. Everything was very neat and terribly respectable and he had his books on the shelf and neatly put together and so on. So I took a picture of him writing on the type-writer and we then, yeah well that's the first time I met him and I asked him to come and see us and meet Jim Bailey the owner of DRUM and Sampson the editor and our other staff if he likes and erm weeks later he came into the office and Jim Bailey met him and immediately offered him a job as on a writer on ...on DRUM.

Well the first days that Can arrived on DRUM he seemed to be a little bit out of place. He was a respectable teacher that used to, erm he didn't drink, didn't seem to drink he didn't smoke erm err and erm he found I think on the first day or so, he found the place a bit funny because we were all a bit crazy and we were all... everybody had...was drinking occasionally which was noticeable with the smell of alcohol and so it took two or three days he adopted and he got used to it and he started taking off his tie and his jacket and he started to relax and erm he was very fascinated by Anthony Sampson and Jim Bailey, who were both sort of former Oxford intellectuals and continuously discussed Shakespeare and Dickens and the (inaudible) and so on they kept on talking. In any case I didn't know what they were talking about you see, I didn't know anything about British literature and erm so but anyway Can was with them and he knew all about it and there were talking and the guys in the office started getting used to him and occasionally he seemed to smoke a cigarette and over the months that passed he was one of the boys, one of us. Every month we had a meeting the staff meeting and discussing stories to do and what we were going to do for the following month's copy of DRUM and so on and that's how I brought up the problem with Olympics the fact was that black people weren't allowed

to participate in the Olympics South African blacks weren't allowed or so called non-whites those were Indians or people from a coloured community and erm weren't allowed to participate and erm he said to Can "That's a very good story for you isn't it", Can said "blah, blah, boring, boring ...people running around doing, kicking footballs, balls and so on I've got more important things to think about". So it came out that he really wasn't interested in journalism as such so Henry Nxumalo then came up with the story and he did the story on why black people or non-white people weren't committed to join the Olympics South African Olympic team which was a disgrace of course and eventually it was changed and took so many years erm so that proved to me Can's direction and Can's interest, unfortunately Jim Bailey gave a lot of parties and in those parties he introduced cardinal puff a game from the royal-afro's what you do is you put in front of you...you get in front of you a glass and you fill it up with some brandy, neat brandy and then you'd lift it with one finger and you say "I drink to the house of the cuddle puff for the first time tonight", and you sip once and you put it down once and then you put up one finger on top of the table the other finger on top of the table and the other finger on top of the...one finger on top of the table, one finger... one foot up, the other foot up you go up ...and then you say I drink to the house of the cardinal puff puff for the second time tonight with two fingers, then you'd put your, you'd pick up your glass and you sip twice and you banged it down twice, and you would put two fingers, two fingers, two fingers and you would repeat for the third time, the third time you said I drink to the cuddle of puff and I drink for the third and final time tonight with three fingers and you'd sip three and you'd turned it around and it was you see now if you succeeded doing this you became a cardinal you see and erm everybody wanted to be cardinal but now most people never got through this especially after they had to finish the brandy and face up the glass again and start from the beginning again with a new glass of brandy and so on, everybody got totally drunk so next thing people were laying on the floor they were drunk so erm so Jim Bailey decided that he'll get truth out of people when he gets them drunk you see he has to get them drunk, that's how he can identify the character and personality of a person, it's all nonsense of course erm so Can Themba fell into this trap and I think this is when he started the him, him also started to join the drinking culture that existed on DRUM there was a very strong culture of going into shebeens, having discussions and meetings in shebeens and so on which were all quite fine but they were destructive to which people didn't turn up on Monday after a long weekend they didn't turn up on a Monday and sometimes on a Tuesday and so on and that was a great problem but I, at that time I had somehow sympathised with this because black people were beaten up often it happened to some of our people their face was smashed by police for no reason just

you know cheeky kaffir, don't you come and look at me like this that sort of thing you see cheeky, cheeky and they'd hit them hard and they take them to their van and beat them up in their vans and of course there was also not only the physical humiliation there was the mental, the psychological humiliation of people they weren't, you weren't supposed to look a white man in the eye you see and you were supposed to go out of their way in the pavement and so on and then Can brought one of his former students Casey Motsisi, he brought him into the office and introduced him to us as a candidate to write a column for DRUM, Casey was a very intelligent young short little fellow who had a tremendous sense of humour and rem he was a good, him and Can were real great buddies and he then, I get stuck when I talk to people normally I go overtime.

Yeah but we came up with a number of stories and had many problems with special branch and so on so one day we were doing a story about erm the what it would be like for an African, a black man going into a white church how would the church react so we decided that Bloke Modisane one of our writers would be this guinea pig he would have a bible and dress himself well and we took him to a church, I...I got myself camera called a robot camera which specially made to hide, it had mechanical clockwork wired up it had 50 expellers in it, and you had your camera lens in your pocket and I got myself a waistcoat and I put a hole and put the camera in the waistcoat and went to the church Bloke went in first and erm after about a few minutes he sat down and one white person, there were only white persons in the church obviously and the service hadn't started yet I was leaning over to Can and I tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to get out erm so first of all Bloke objected but this fella insisted and other people started getting up and insisted and asked him to leave that was the first time that happened to them and I got some pictures of that then we tried another church we tried an Anglican church and at the time the editor was Sylvester Stein and Bloke Modisane was my assistant photographer came along and waited in the car and then Can with his bible and me with my hidden camera followed him and sat near...near we sat down and the priest came up and shook Can's hand and greeted him and welcomed him so that was a problem now because Can... Bloke wouldn't leave the church; I slowly got up and left as the service started and Bloke wouldn't come out he was too polite now because the priest welcomed them and everybody so Sylvester started hooting the car and making noises and so on for them to come out because he said we can't spend the whole year going every Saturday or every Sunday to one church we have to go to another church and see what happens, so after the church was finished Bloke came out and people shook hands with him, white people and so on, Sylvester gave him hell and said we can't use you again in the story you're too weak and you should

have had the guts to come out and Bloke of course defended himself and said you can't do that, you're welcome somewhere you can't just walk out, anyway so the decision made by staff ourselves was that Can Themba would take over for the next search we went to was erm an Afrikaans Dutch reformed church and I went in together with Can again as usual but somehow I think they noticed us because after the service had started nobody said anything to Can, I started to walk out and they wouldn't let me out there was somebody at the door and said you can't leave you stay here with your friend pointing at Can so they knew we were together so I had to wait until the service was finished so as we walked out the church was surrounded by police with hand guns and so on and erm the head of suspense Browns then ( inaudible) interviewing all of us and then I had to show proof where I lived and they took me home and so on and erm anyway this was published in a newspaper and the local daily mail now the problem was the church was the seven days Adventist church American church that has service on Saturdays on a Saturday morning the city was full because on those days all the shops that were in the city and all the... that was purely a city of people running around with pack parcels and packages and buying things going shopping and so on it was a shopping morning and erm anyway we arrived and there were people already going in and as we walked in the office down knew we were coming because they had already because they read it in a newspaper, they had two ( inaudible) and they grabbed Can , dragged him and pushed him into a car and then they noticed Sylvester Stein was around too and they noticed Sylvester Stein and said " there's another one" and grabbed Sylvester Stein and dragged him to a car and then they saw me " there's another one" and I started running you see I had been taking pictures all the time with... I was running through town and they were about half a dozen young men with bibles in their hands chasing me through city shopping (inaudible) you see passing people with parcels falling down, dogs barking, and eventually I got into the side street and I ended up in a building where Bloke and my guys were and I ended up at the workshop and I hid in their place and I hid in their place and that's when apparently a man was heard walking up and down the steps and he was looking for me and couldn't find me and eventually they had took Can Themba and Sylvester for a ride in the car and then they thought they were going to get beaten up or something but they took them to major Springers office the special (inaudible) headquarters and they said well there's nothing we could do about it they said leave them, so they released them , Released Can and Sylvester Stein and of course we had a big laugh after this, a very exciting story, so that was the end of that story with the DRUM church and we proved that it was impossible for a black man to go into a white church you see and they claimed to be Christians and so on we... anyway that was a very strong powerful story for the magazine and

erm that was one of the few times where Can was actually involved in investigative stories Can was in my view more a writer and not a journalist he was in terms of journalism he was thinking as a writer a great writer he didn't have that feeling of the touch, the nose of investigative journalism.

I had sympathy with the Africans because of Apartheid, the humiliation and so on it was one way out because Africans or most people from the non-white community were not permitted to consume alcohol they had what they called "kaffir beer" had the beer in beer halls which was rather privilege of staff they sold to working Africans which was very very alcoholic and so on, selling them you got very big fines and sometimes some weeks imprisonment if you were caught drinking or with alcohol or and so on erm so I felt sorry for them but then to my surprise and to my horror many years later I worked for some white papers, I worked for the Sunday Times , I worked freelance for the daily mail and some of them they were really great big papers in Johannesburg and I found the journalists taking in more being more drunk more alcoholic than the Africans so that was the South African culture it had become part of South Africa culture due to South African history of adventurous not sort of European discipline but sort of that time in South Africa.

How did DRUM actually start , it started in Cape town in 1950 by a person called Bob Crisp he was a former very famous South African cricket player and erm he was a former 10 commander in the Sahara during the second world war he was seriously injured and he was taken ---- and erm he was also a journalist he was also writing stories he also was an entertainer and playing in bars and soon somewhere in Africa he was a lonely person but he was a great character unfortunately he didn't get on with Jim Bailey, Jim Bailey wanted more about the city and us to talk and interview, to talk to gangsters and people from the streets to get to the South African public that lived in cities or rather the city Africans from within the country so they had conflict and eventually Jim Bailey took over which was 1952 and I worked for Crisp for six months and did stories with him and I carried on working with Bailey on DRUM as picture editor and designer and so on .Can Themba was, I think on DRUM we had two great people, two were wonderful people and these two were Can Themba writer and Henry Nxumalo the journalist .

Jim Bailey wanted to come up with the idea of starting another magazine, a small magazine called Africa which would be good for Can Themba to edit and it was about first of using a lot of stories that DRUM hadn't been able to use or were leftovers from DRUM and some new material which Can could use it was quite a nice little magazine it wasA4 size and erm, it must've used all pictures from DRUM and used a pretty on the cover and erm but one good

thing happened in the magazine erm Can Themba got Langston Hughes the American writer to write a regular article for the magazine and that was one of the greatest American ... African writers who had the most wonderful most fantastic texts and terribly funny and terribly amusing the magazine lasted for about two years and unfortunately it didn't sell very well [use Langston Hughes' book covers] erm there were a lot of articles that talked about John Matshikiza about music, musicians, music events, music stories and there were photographic stories and so on and also by Arthur Maimane who wrote the crime stories about this detective the sort of Raymond Suttler style of writing talking about Dames --- but it didn't last unfortunately Some lasted many years until in the sometime in the 70's erm I had left and many many writers had left, Can Themba went off to Swaziland to teach because there was too much politics going on in DRUM and he was fired several times together with Bob Gosani, one day him and Bob Gosani went to do a story in Bloemfontein and interview a person and on the way they stooped in Kroonstad and in Kroonstad the smaller town, there was fire next to the liquor store and the two were running from the liquor store and carrying out the bottles and somebody asked Can for help and they filled up the car with bottles brandy and once there were... and they were caught by the police completely drunk and in they were in the middle of nowhere having finished the whole bottle of brandy and the police phoned us up in Johannesburg and told us what happened and we sent somebody to bail them out and get the car back and of course the story was never done because Bob and Can were fired at the time and this happened once too often that he was drunk and we had to run after the people and we had to find them, they used to disappear with some petty cash and it became more difficult I think Can had lost some marbles, the only thing he used to do I forgot to tell he used to have a matches in his mouth sticking out and that match used to move around when he talked after a few months suddenly the match turned into a pen and he had that pen in his mouth and he chewed in around and when he got excited it moved from left to right that pen and everybody was watching him every time he started talking getting worried that he might swallow the damn thing and that was show piece erm he was very skilled he used to practise a lot erm he also had an affair with some person Gina Hart, a white woman which was very worrying because you got nine months prison if you got found that you had sex over the colour line anyway he wasn't caught but everyone was very worried about him and eventually they stopped their affair and erm apart from that it was great fun on DRUM, there was a shebeens free drinking where he worked called Sam k house in Johannesburg in Troye street on the top floor usually in Johannesburg the top floor was used for servants they used to have little rooms on the top a bath at the top, above the top floor above the roof so people that worked in the house as maids or cleaners or

so on anyway apparently I didn't know about this there was a shebeen up there and people used to disappear and they would come back with a bottle of Coca-Cola and they used to drink with a straw very slowly and their eyes became more and more glazed and erm so this was a place everybody got supplied from .

Drum was erm I think went bankrupt in the late 70's early 80's and was taken over by *Rand Daily Mail* and everybody raided the place it was misused and a terrible mess apparently I wasn't there, I wasn't in South Africa at the time we returned to South Africa in 1985 I tried to look for my negatives which I left at Sunday Times and I couldn't find them apparently they were destroyed at some flood in the Sunday times photographic department and was destroyed so erm I then had to build up the new archives and then from the Daily Mail I went to the South African Newspapers Association which was the Sunday Times and News Express and of course DRUM, Drum was in the same building except had the separate interns and were allowed to use the main entrance and erm it moved to a bigger building, apparently my negative were destroyed or something, I couldn't find them at all .

Can Themba left DRUM at some time in the mid 60's, went to Swaziland erm unfortunately there he died and erm he didn't last very long of drink obviously... I left, and most of the others, Bloke Modisane left and went to England and then to Germany and Casey stayed behind I think he stayed behind South Africa and I left in 1964 and went to England for 20 years.

## 7. Keorapetse Kgositsile

Essentially, because I think simply put, you are both an explorer and a participant in terms of lived experience.

By the way he understood it [*Tsotsitaal*], he didn't speak it, I don't remember Can Themba speaking tsotsi-taal. What he did with English was what those who – did with Afrikaans, I mean that the how would I say when you pick up anything Can wrote, even if his name was not there, you would know that no one outside of his environment could have written that. In other words, even a contemporary like Nadine Gordimer, who did not live in the township could not have handled that language the way Can Themba would because the texture of life that he made it go through that shaped his expression in English was totally different from the texture of life explored by Nadine Gordimer.

By the way he understood it [*Tsotsitaal*], he didn't speak it, I don't remember Can Themba speaking tsotsi-taal. What he did with English was what those who – did with Afrikaans, I mean that the how would I say when you pick up anything Can wrote, even if his name was not there, you would know that no one outside of his environment could have written that. In other words, even a contemporary like Nadine Gordimer, who did not live in the township could not have handled that language the way Can Themba would because the texture of life that he made it go through that shaped his expression in English was totally different from the texture of life explored by Nadine Gordimer.

Can Themba was an exception. I mean, everybody including a thug. Can Themba could walk Sophiatown at night alone and be very safe. I don't think there were too many people who could do that. And I don't think there's anyone who was around, let's say in the 50s after Can Themba came to Sophiatown, I don't think there's anyone who can talk of Sophiatown since that period, without thinking of Can Themba. Politicians, gangsters, just people on the street, everybody.

He did not like to see anyone drink beer, because his attitude was if the cops pounced on you, and found you with a quad of beer, you'd be arrested with, you know, just with a lot of urine. That's the way he saw it – piss. So he couldn't respect that. If he found you drinking beer, he'd talk about you like a dog for a long time. So those of us who started drinking around him, started with hard stuff.

I would say a lot of us [unwittingly] contributed to alcohol eating at Can Themba's liver because we didn't realise the danger. You know, I remember for instance one time, after there

were no more watering holes in Sophiatown, the major watering hole was not far from the Drum offices and the old pass office – whities. There was a spot there called whities. And one time Can Themba Can from covering some story in Lesotho, and he walked into Whities, almost banned over with pain, and wanting a drink. And initially, there were a number of people there. At some point Casey decided to pour him a drink, almost filled up his glass with brandy. And Can went tha-tha-tha (sound demonstrating gulping down), and then (exhaling and straightening up with relief). So it seemed like, this thing is okay for him. We didn't realise that it was not healing, it was numbing the pain. But the destruction of the liver continued.

Definitely, stubbornly, uncompromisingly so [committed to writing]. Can Themba could be in a place with people drinking, making noise or even fighting if they had to be fighting, and, he was always with his notebook so his jackets were always a little distorted. And he'd just whip out his note book and write. And the following day he'd just go to the office and set up the type writer and write what he produced. You know, if Can Themba had written the way a lot of people write – they create time and quiet and that, I believe he could have maybe produced something we cannot begin to imagine. When you consider that everything you've read by Can Themba was written on the run, so to speak, either to beat the deadline, that the guy was a genius. I mean, I don't know how really to put it, that where some people have blocks of time devoted to writing, without interference, Can didn't have that.

## **8. Mangosuthu Buthelezi**

I remember that Can Themba was a very popular student because in fact he was one of the students I can describe as quite brilliant and therefore he was a popular student because he had a wonderful sense of humour apart from the fact that he was brilliant. I recall the day before the graduation there used to be a mock grad at Beda Hall and I recall vividly that Can Themba was a chancellor of that mock graduation. Can Themba actually kept those who graduated then at mock grad, dressed up in some very shabby garments as chancellor of the mock graduation.

when I visited Johannesburg it was natural that I would go, when he was still working for the Drum, also natural because of that connection as a contemporary of his at university that I would visit the place where he stayed in Sophiatown and you must remember it was during the time of prohibition when Africans weren't allowed to freely participate in drinking alcohol and I remember that during those visits alcohol flowed literally, and of course a lot of fun, I can never forget those visits.

I mean it was inevitable of course that political issues would be talked about at that time as well, because at Fort Hare I was a member of the ANC Youth League and therefore my interest in politics actually was ignited in fact as a member of the ANC Youth League, at the Fort Hare branch and one of our lecturers Mr., Advocate Pityi, Godfrey Pityi was our chairman then he left then Mr. Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe was our chairman too.

In fact Fort Hare was not only an intellectual center, which was inevitable in the sense that Africans were not allowed to study in any other university except Fort Hare, so in fact draws students in fact from all parts of Africa, I mean up to East Africa, I mean up to Kenya, students came down to Fort Hare to study at Fort Hare and many of them ended up as very important leaders in their countries.

It was done at the hostel yes; it was done at the hostel at Beda Hall. But I mean I used to stay at Iona but I attended, it was a very popular event for student's right across because it was a lot fun. You mean the authorities? His short stories were very brilliant and outstanding, like The Suit for instance.

I think in fact, as his contemporary I'm very proud of the fact that amongst us was a brilliant mind such as that of Can Themba at the time, I think that he stands out as one of the outstanding students of our times at Fort Hare.

I think that Fort Hare contributed a lot to the liberation of Africa as a whole, in so far as, as we said earlier in our discussion that it produced so many leaders from many parts of Africa, there are many leaders who graduated from Fort Hare from many African countries who actually played a role in the liberation of our people in Africa.

He was popular amongst us, we loved him because he was a very witty person, a very wonderful sense of humor, so we tended to sort of crowd around him because he always says somethings that are funny that made us laugh. We tended to crowd around him, he almost had a following because as students we used to like, enjoy some of his witticisms and his sense of humour, he was a very brilliant person. He was a great son of Africa and deserves to be celebrated by us. The younger generation should know that there was such a great person as Can Themba, who passed these shores.

## 9. Mbulelo Mzamane

Let me say, I think a lot of his stories work, and not only *The Suit*, *Mob Passion*, *The Dube Train*, which almost myself, like you did with *The Suit* later on revisit from my own particular perspective. They were alive for me; they were speaking to the environment from which they come. I could relate, they were permanently relevant for me, but I could also extend this from my own experience and so on, from my own perspective and that kind of thing. I think *The Suit* tends to work in similar fashion, probably it works even better than any of your in your face kind of political writing because it also puts before us kind of images, literally tropes for our contemplation as well, and then as you say, you have by analysis, by implication, by insinuation to realise that he is talking disapprovingly about the crowded, the inhumane, the animalistic conditions under which people are living in the backyards of Sophiatown.

It stays with you, it grows in you and it is something you can actually own eventually, you can literally own when you as an apprentice you kind of revisit those sorts of things, it's unlike someone trying to write poetry as if they were Shakespeare or Wordsworth and so on. Very, very imitational but not even imitational, a very artificial kind of language. You remember how we all thought that poetry has to have "thee" "thou" otherwise it wasn't poetry. These people taught you that language reflected the culture, reflected the situation and that you could speak as who you are, to reflect your own situation. (Intertextuality)

So one was exploring, I think I was trying to explore from "The Dube Train" that's both external and internal but Can Themba had given me the key towards further exposing the complexities of the environment in which African people found themselves.

Somebody described Can Themba at one point as maybe the greatest living author who was never published as well. So that kind of thing stuck, and I knew Aunt Anne, his wife as well, so we had decided to go to the funeral but also to find out whether or not they could not pick up some of the pieces and probably anthologize some of the work that had come before. That is how the *Will to Die* actually was conceived and executed.

The "Son of man", they sometimes called him. "The son of man could have been spared." But there was also this realisation, the good die young kind of thing. There was something pretty, tragic might be a strong word, pretty unavoidable about the situations in which they found themselves and I don't know myself now that I'm grown up that I could have made a case for

these people are exiles, these people are frustrated therefore these people ought to live this reckless, drunken sort of life because there was an element of that, of the bohemian about them.

The psychology is different to tell, we can only reflect practice because you know, the George opened at 11 and if Can Themba arrived a minute later, he felt like he had missed out on something so, so precious, that *ufika kakade sekhefuzela*, you can see that he was in a hurry not to miss the sacrament, as well. I don't know whether that is actually the same as you know, having a death wish or what, but the behaviour is certainly reckless, the behaviour is as reckless as that of Wonder Boy, the Stuff Rider, in *The Dube Train revisited*, and there's a thin divider between his characters, his violence is certainly internal and directed against self. That is so opponent and so pitiable about him.

We were small but you could walk in and sit there and therefore listen to the grown up conversations, some of the stuff we were picking up are coming from there. But we really later learnt that it was a hopeless case to try and drag the high priest from conducting the high mass. So we had to make sure we did the morning shift before 11.

I guess after someone reminds him that the children are still waiting for you he would come. Still as brilliant, still as coherent, still as articulate and so on. I think he loved teaching in short, I think he loved his literature and he loved imparting his love of literature to others. So that is what one irresistible was for him. As I say for me, it was the solidifying of the short story tradition in South Africa and I've written extensively about this. It was its solidification.

## 10. Mthobi Mutlootse

Where is Siphiwo, why is he not here? I think it should be a threesome conversation so that we bridge the generations and we don't get trapped in nostalgia because nostalgia can be retrogressive sometimes so I would rather we look at it as passing one generation to the other and fusing the two I think so because he has also interpreted Can Themba from his own defiant way he imagines and takes the side of the other character in *The Suit* so I said ja die laaitie delela but ok its fine but typical Can Thembas you don't follow you break the rules and that's also important to understand Can Themba because the way I see him I see him as a living ancestor and that's why I don't try to memorialize him as if he didn't have a background.

That's one of the things about Can Thembas writings they were dramatic almost like if you take John Steinbeck there were jumping at you his words and the images they really... he was almost like a musician there was rhythm and that's what attracted me to *The Suit*.

I'm just saying can one die, just by dying because he's, actually his writing is breathing life into him all over again for me I find it difficult to see him as if he's gone his spirit is floating here he's watching, he says sweetie to his wife this is going to make you rich but he's also saying to the country this is going to make us culturally rich because this I the only contribution to the theater festival that was held in London last year from Africa so Can's work represented the whole continent last year in London, I was really humbled by the fact that well Can Themba allowed me to do the dramatic pace with Bani Simon and the original cast of Sello Maake, Stella ka khumalo, Job kobatse and also used the music of the late Thomas Masemola all I'm saying is that Can doesn't want to go away even if he went away physically and is buried in Swaziland he's never left us.

Whatever happened I think Can was smiling over us and saying this was what I looked at. '*The Suit*' became the vehicle to then remember Can Themba.

No, strange enough do you know that Drum writers were mavericks most of them, they just happened to have found a home that allowed them to shine, the Arthur Maimanes were there, Casey Motsisi, it's just that you know it was a fertile ground for the imagination and creativity within journalism, so they were afraid of no one and wrote like the devil was on their tail, and enjoyed it that was the thing that was remarkable about these writers, you could feel the enthusiasm as well as the energy that was oozing out of their writing, of course people say they also drank like mad, and which is one of the sore points, ja they drank like hell and paid

the price most of them, so I don't want to idolize them blindly, ja we need to recognize that was one of the weaknesses of Drum writers , ja live fast die, young and make a beautiful corpse that kind of phraseology of course that's more myth than truth .

Err, do you know the Arch, Arch Emeritus, Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu....yes. You must go get him because when we took *The Suit* to New York the Arch was also there I think during the TRC process and he came to the show to watch the play and he did tell the guys that Can Themba was my teacher I'm proud of him.

No that's why I said I would like the memory of Can Themba, I think, to be recognized by the Department of Arts and Culture can they recognize him, can they set up a Can Themba memorial lecture? Can they do that? Is it possible? No, no leave Sphiwo alone I'm just challenging the Minister of Arts and Culture Mr. Paul Mashadile to do something about remembering Can Themba more sustainably not piecemeal especially in the year of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, ja anniversary, I'm saying birthday are you not giving birth to him again.

A Can Themba award for literature so every year young people are recognized for contributing to literature in any form any language whether slang poetry as long as it shows the creativity of Can Themba that for me becomes a living symbol. Ja young people, not established, please, not established young people that's how you connect the past with the present we do not also make him so distant so far that we only want the Sophiatown stories no young people must say they fill a part how would Can Themba have interpreted what's going on.

These were students teachers I think from Tlabane or somewhere they started interpreting the piece and then they then asked the question, which is fundamental, how would men feel if Matilda was Philemon and Philemon was Matilda and whatever happened had been reversed and it was Phil who had been caught red handed how would she have reacted.

Now in *The Suit* how Philemon he had to defend Philemon, he's so controlled yet he uses violence of a sort I've never seen because it's not physical, I mean he was so imaginative he takes a suit and he says to the wife you shall serve him , this visitor shall be treated with respect... man man, man...but only Can Themba could've created this kind of characterization, only him because a lot of people wanted to know where did he find it, no I don't know, in London they said this is a great mind at work. Kafka could not have written this of course he matched them that are one of the defiance of Can he says who...

By remembering Can Themba you are remembering the whole generation of DRUM writers, ja that's how I see it.

## 11. Muxe Nkondo

Thank you Siphiwo, as I said earlier I really want to express my deep sense of gratitude, this to me is a great honour, at the same time a great responsibility to participate in almost retrieving Can Themba's genius as it were and making it available to contemporary audiences, I think that to me is very, very important. I first ran into Can Themba in the 50s, in the late 50s when I was a student at Orlando High, which became Nakedi High, Bak'thalundo High, but I was a student there, my teacher there Mr Makhubalo, had studied with Can Themba at Fort Hare, both of them had majored in English. So occasionally Mr Makhubalo would invite Can Themba to come and talk to us with a number of issues, particularly on South African English literature. I won't forget one day, it was a hot October day in the afternoon, the matric class then was a windowless, airless, formerly a storage, we huddled there as matric students, very, very hot, dry subtropical heat in the midst of the ghetto there, and Can Themba came, had come to talk to us about poetry and I remember him taking us through John Keats, one of John Keats' earlier works, The Eve of St Agnes, which really talks about a love story, part of the romance traditions, a love story, in a very very cold wintery morning in the late district, its called The Eve of St Agnes. What I remember we were packed in that room and I was seated next to a lady, I remember her name was Nana, she came from Lady Selborne, Lady Selborne you know, those days and Can Themba took us through this poem from the first stanza, I remember very well:

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;

The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,

And silent was the flock in woolly fold:

Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told

His rosary, and while his frosted breath,

Like pious incense from a censer old,

Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,

Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

Not only did he read it evocatively the way he commented on the cold, on the chill, my classmate Nana, she felt, we all felt an immediate chill in the room. She got up and in a kind of hypnosis started calling imaginary windows, there were no windows, but it became so cold in that room because of the evocative power of Can Themba's understanding and his hold on words, incredible and this is something you see throughout his work, the evocative use of language, by evocative I mean in this sense, not just being able to describe the scene or describe winter morning but to create evocatively the impression or illusion as if it was winter itself, a very evocative power.

And very few of us, even now, have that kind power because he himself although he wrote short stories, he was first a foremost a lyric poet, a creative poet and poetry took the form of short stories, which that it took the form of post poems. Read any of his short stories, any of them whether it is *The Suit* or *The Urchin* or *The Dube Train*, any of it, you'll get a very immediate sensuous penetration of whatever he was talking about, he was able to evoke the internal texture of a phenomena around him.

Perhaps it was partly this, that Can Themba preferred the short story to the long fiction, because it gave him the kind of epic, dramatic moment to capture so many things in words, in short poetic structures, I think that's the way it is.

You could see even that the influence of modernist poetic, even when you read the other people who were very close to him, even if you read Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, although he wasn't at risk, his use of words, the kind of sensory relationship he had with words, just like John Keats. But politically what Can Themba would do, the failure to understand the action, the failure to understand the people in a tavern from inside, in terms of the phenomenology of their own lives, they are built to penetrate that, the failure of that is what Can Themba, Es'kia Mphahlele and others talked about, and that's how I remember Can Themba.

He's of all the poets I can think of up to Kgositsile, Can Themba was one who was preoccupied to getting as close as possible to the next person, the poetry of immediacy, the poetry of proximity, trying to as close as immediately present to the next person and it isn't even the intensity of language, the kind of ethical intensity, the feeling for the next person that he had. It came out in humour at times, apparently sarcastic humour but as a desperate long to reach the next person as intimately as possible. You could tell even when they walked into class the way he talked, he wasn't a very self-conscious journalist, or self-conscious academic, he was very closed, tall as ever but very closed and very familiar. It is a profound philosophy that, very

different from by the way from John Keats to come to think of it, John Keats' poetry tends to be epiphanic you want to be close to a nightingale, you want to be fuse with the ultimate, you want to fuse with nature but you know why John Keats wants to fuse with the next person? Nightingales, sky luxe, rolling oceans, Wordsworth. The romantics that influenced Can Themba missed one thing that he caught, the most important thing in poetry, language must get you closer and closer to the next person and that was Can Themba's genius. When he came to class you could feel his presence, the way he used his words, not to capture the beauty of duffle dales or the horizons or the misty mountain tops and stuff like that. He was more interested in the person you meet in the house of the truth, the person you meet in the tavern, what we called a shebeen at the time, how close can you come to that person. Read all his works, even when he writes about The Dube Train remember, he goes to Phomolong, those day it was a famous station and we'd go there. He says I gets to Phomolong and the train in full, jam packed and there's this guy who just towered over him, as black as tar, he'd say, he says it's the kind of guy if you looked at him he was so black and so intimidatingly bulky that he would blind your eyes, you wouldn't see him clearly. But when you looked away from him, you saw him more clearly, only Can Themba, that profound sense of irony, that profound sense of perception, all the things we talk about perception, disorientation, distortion, fear and anxiety, he captured it in apparent humorous manner. All in all, Can Themba was interested to get to know you as yourself. If you look at the way he writes about Nat Nakasa, the boy with a tennis racket. From the first day they met Can Themba would penetrate Nat Nakasa and I would understand him intuitively. So it represents in my option the best in African literature, now I'm talking the whole, African literature unlike 19th century romantic literature, is literature of presence, of being closer and closer to the next person, trying to understand the next person as intimately from inside as you were. They were interested in transcending the world, fusing with nature, with the ocean, with duffle dales, with nightingales, with west winds and stuff like that. It was very epiphanic, I was not epiphanic, I was the poetry of proximity, of nearness, of engagement and that's Can Themba's genius for me.

Can Themba was different, the man you met at the house of truth is the man you will meet in his short stories. So there was a theory that was associated with TS Elliot, where he says, "The mind that creates is different from the man who suffered." So TS took mid distinct between the actual experiences of a writer and what he writes about. He says you can go and experience the house of truth but when you write, you are a different person, you don't necessarily reflect what happens during the daily life. So that the mind that creates is not the same thing as a man who

suffers, those days it was a very powerful theory and we embraced it. Can Themba collapsed that distinction, the man who suffers, the mind that creates, one of the same thing.

Its very autobiographical, everything, you know for example that short story, The Will To Die, if you know Can Themba in an advanced age, that Will To Die, he was such a genius, he turned it into a joke, he almost caressed death, caressed suicide, made it look like a joke but it was a desperate cry for more and more living space we didn't have. That is why he left for Swaziland, looking for living space because he couldn't make the distinction between who's man suffering and the mind that creates.

## 12. Nadine Gordimer

Yes, but now let's look at the Second World War if you were black you couldn't carry arms, you could be the arms bearer and the sort of servant of the white man, the white captain or white lieutenant so that's what he must have been, you're in the war but you're not, you may hate Nazism and want to battle against the Germans but you're black so all you could do was carry guns for the white man, I found this astonishing when I read it, so I would love to know now why he joined up, yes I don't know there's something he talks about in his other books.

I don't know but it's very interesting to think about it, to speculate and that's what his work does it makes you think, and that's what his life does it makes you think.

That's right, I didn't remember that he was in the war now; it just shows that he didn't feature at all and he doesn't feature it in his writing I think he was probably very disillusioned with it so he may still have fought against the Nazis. It didn't have any impact it seems.

Really I didn't know about that, as far as I know he never talked about it, he was too busy exploring other things in his mind.

It wasn't in Sophiatown because there indeed you had so little materialism you didn't have these normal comforts and small luxuries in life but my point is that once you come into power and we see that with people in our government, you cannot have...you have to have your Nkandla's, you have to have your wives, you have to have many trips to these islands on private flights everywhere, you know I understand why it is but it doesn't mean to say that, one can say that it's good for them or for the country I think it is why because Africans/ black people it didn't start with apartheid, it didn't start with even with British financial and other Cavendish, it started in 1652 so all those years, centuries ago back in 1652 when the first white man who happened to be Dutch arrived here that was the beginning of colonialism it was the beginning of taking over the land I mean who could stop thinking going back to the idea that 13% of the land, 13%?! That was designed being given to the black population, but the whole land was being taken away from them, but anyway, I don't know what Can thought of that we could have talked about it.

No that was his phrase; I'm just taking, quoting it to you. I think that's such a misnomer in the old South Africa what do you mean working class? If you were black you belonged indeed...yes exactly. We had no black entrepreneurs the way we have today, we had no people who have made money in business and other things. Oh I couldn't call them the black elite, I mean there were... first of all we needed them in the profession, we need more doctors now and

we don't have them and when there were political like him we had had political leaders so and one was glad when people like him indeed emerged from this ditch in which everybody was thrown so I admired him as I've admired all our leaders, honest leaders.

I can't say, I don't know, you see he didn't come out at all in his writing, how...whether he was ever in the ANC, I don't know what his political allegiances were, whether he was in PAC or whatever he was in, I would like to know perhaps it will come out now, I'm afraid we must finish off now.

Well we going to have a lot more now when...if the bill comes in saying you can't buy liquor on Sunday; we'll have a lot more shebeens but now they are called taverns, a very colonial term I don't know why, I'm afraid we going to have to say goodbye now.

Yes it was, and then of course in this book, you see this book? Oh very much Nat Nakasa and I sat here planning there... right at the beginning and it was a good little journal I think we chose the wrong name for it, the classic...well I suppose classic meaning something that is going to blast you know but well..

No I don't think so because you know... that was such a tragedy that we all saw him off at the airport and never saw him again and indeed in err... he went to friends of mine in New York and they you know tried to help him when he was in such a bad way in despair but well that's another story, well I'm very pleased that you're doing this on Can Themba, well he was a lovely man, lovely personality and a very good writer.

Yes because all of these bits of your own and your own biography good journalist many say just as well as everybody else but what somebody like Can has to offer and of course he was a good friend of someone else whom I knew very well and he was in deed tied up with his sad end, Nat Nakasa, Nat was very talented one could have said the same thing about Nat, that of course ended tragically as you know, and there's a whole question people don't think about now, to take... you can't find it anymore here but to take an exit permit that's banishment. No ,no it's imposed upon you but the alternative is that you stay and go in and out of prison and have your books banned that he had.

Oppression and how, remember we had the censorship act I myself had three books banned that are written and the book that I collected of the poetry of black writers that was banned as well. Oh I mean how can you not the government decides that it must be banned so must you stop writing on the contrary, I don't know anybody who's being banished stopped writing if you're a writer at all, it's crazy.

I don't think was also banned *The will to die*, it may have been I don't know, it may have been I don't know, it was banned? I thought so, I knew that something, one book of his was banned certainly this one.

No, adamant is not the write word, to be adamant means you could fiddle around with something there, not adamant he wasn't clever of doing it he had it from within this desire to give expression that had not been given expression within his society and he, thank god whatever gods there might be, he developed the skill to do this at great depth as I say even a non-political story I use that in quotes, like a play *The Suit*, yes this is looking deep into relationships what a man expects of a woman and what a woman expects of a man, within, even within the cage of apartheid.

Oh very, DRUM was very remarkable. It's the first time that people (Africans) who had, who become certain people had a voice. Exactly they all, I mean DRUM was in deed but I think DRUM was a remarkable innovation the other journals that you had which were perhaps in an African language were all stuck to traditional news so to speak.

Yes, no I mean one could write letters to the letter page and so on but it was written by black urban people mainly.

Oh a long time I'm sure the last people disappeared into prison or they went into exile, off to Swaziland or overseas. When you Zeke think was a close friend of mine, Zeke Mphahlele and then he went off to talk in America and we lost him in all of those years. Oh yes all of them we kept contact, but still this is their country this is our country and they should have been here for the development of the literature and you must remember this is all pre '76 most of it because got television in '76 and at last the image began to take over from the written word and the result is today that so few young people read and children don't have a chance to read they always put in front of the tv and nobody reads to them anymore , and their reading is very poor even in their own languages, I heard this from people who teach.

Yes, they would rather read it from their toys than read it with a book in their hand, but that's very sad its very say for our young writers coming up and many of them with considerable talent but what could publishers do if they can't sell the books and cant distribute them properly, well I think we have to try and get, I'm always pressing for this libraries in schools and I think all of us we have a lot of books and there is some that perhaps we not going to read again or some we have doubles of even and Raks has been helping me with this because he takes books, has books taken to certain schools and if you give him a box of books there are

going to be there for people to read, and I have found very touching in maybe one case than maybe in others they found the parents are coming in and borrowing the books because they are starved.

Oh I wish I could answer you firmly in the affirmative, I don't know because the power of the machine as I call them all, it becomes refined and more affordable I think and of course every kid asks for that, you just turn on the little switch as you are running around and you have a story read to you.

But I wonder now if, let's look at the wonderful stories that Can Themba wrote but none of them as far as I know we've got to accept that television now is the medium has any been adapted to a televised place just as it changed from a soap opera, I really wish that you people who are in film would press for this because they are not grey, dull heavy things as I said they all really witty and quiet even sarcastic, well there's *The Suit* and there was another that I marked I wanted to mention, maybe here in the beginning. No he mentions, he talks about in one of his very early stories when he gets out, as he calls it, waving ponderously in our hundreds along with the thick in platforms that gather the populations discouraged by Naledi, Mndeni, Dube, Orlando, Pilmville and so on, kliptown, Springs, Benoni, Germiston great moors that spewed their worker ship over Johannesburg, so then he had this wonderful response to people and in there again he's a Catherine makes his own word 'workership' but isn't that good I mean words that you could use every day once you give it to the trade unions to use and that's the spirit of the worker and it's what happens to the worker as well.

Literature as culture, in our culture, absolutely essential nothing can replace it and of course you see many of the derivatives from literature we've been talking about, if I write a story or somebody else writes a story and then a certain number of people read the book many hundreds, thousands if its making it to a television program play we see, will see it so the influence of literature does not end with a written book, and literature expresses the spirit of the people what is happening to that spirit and what they are hoping to change in it what is destroying people, and to look at their lives, look at the corruption now which is extreme materialism you can't have enough if you have one Mercedes you must have two if you have one house you must have three as soon as you come out of the world if at all. This is what you getting this is what the young people aspire to and this is not culture this is materialism its everything that the crime in the west the Africans seem to have taken to from the west. Fact that it's a bad thing I would quite agree everybody for god knows if you were in Mkhonto and you were in prison and you would come out and that battle is won with the power at the end of the apartheid.

I met Can, Can Themba through Anthony Sampson the English journalist who came at the invitation of Jim Bailey, the rich Jim Bailey of that Bailey family who decided to open an urban magazine which would be written entirely by Africans but he didn't know how to get started and he brought Anthony Sampson, now Anthony Sampson was an English man and amazingly he fell into our world here and especially that most whites didn't he was in and out the townships all the time from the time he arrived here and so he was, he started DRUM and it was during DRUM times that Can started working for DRUM that must have been when I met him and that of course was In the 50's that was long ago and well we were both in a way beginning writers. I of course had published a couple of books but still regarding myself as a beginning writer and especially in our society I couldn't live the closed off white life I felt I would never develop as a writer or as a human being if I did so he was one of the means by which I moved in and I met many of the people who later became my black comrades when the ANC came about and that of course gave it a political direction.

Anthony Sampson, now he was a protégé of friends of mine in England and when he was coming to South Africa they said you must go and see Nadine and they told me he was coming and we struck up a friendship he and my husband Ronald and I which erm lost his whole life and mine and you know. So he introduced me to Can and I suppose the others but we talking about Can now and that's what comes to mind. And erm with Can I went for the first time in my life just around 30 to a shebeen and indeed then I became with Can and with Anthony someone who went to The House of Truth which of course was Can's place, the famous House of Truth so erm I really jumped in the deep end you can say but Can had a lot to do with it fortunately we hit it off and he was someone who liked people for what they were and how they lived and so it didn't matter a damn to him what colour I was and it didn't matter a damn to me.

I don't know why it was called that perhaps he called it that I don't know the house of truth yes.

Oh yes but of course it was forbidden for people like myself but we did all sorts of forbidden things you know I mean when I lived in a flat you were not supposed to have black people there and of course it was a white woman had to be an Afrikaner who was the care taker I suppose you call it yes, but this is not – we quickly realised that the stairs the fire stairs nobody would know who came up so they would come up to the flat up those stairs, and go down at any hour down those stairs but of course she wasn't at that side of the building at all.

Yes and for partying a mixture of the two as there often are, yes but one has to think is it enough to party across the colour line, and that's how with my stories but we not going into that that's how I got into liberation politics and with the ANC and gave evidence in several trials through my friend the wonderful lawyer George Bezos through him I also got to know Madiba but that's another story and with Can , Can had a wonderful personality and when you look at his books his readings you could see it there he was very serious in his intention he wanted to show how people were living what kind of existence they were forced into and what they were battling against every day and at the same time he had a lot of wit and humour yes because that's somehow the life saviour if you could still laugh at some of the things that happened to you and you could laugh even about the people oppressing you he did all those things.

Of course, of course, well of course it must have because it was part of my experience writing a process of expiration if you're going to be a writer at all if you're a writer at all you're not just saying well I'm going to write a story and it's going to be...you are the character, you are you know that is not it at all that's for people who write biographies or non-fiction for someone who has the imaginative as it's called I don't believe its imaginative I believe its expiration of what that means about being human you can't confined to one colour or one sex for that matter.

Well another thing Vusi Nat's vocabulary wrote in English and he's a wonderful writer in English but he adds to it not but he adds to it some colloquialisms and some general ways in the ways we speak and the way people spoke in the townships, without making you know things that had to be in italics or explained in the bottom of the page it just comes naturally the way it comes naturally. Now I would like to if I may come to the most extraordinary play of his *The Suit* and *The suit* of course has lived long and is consistently revived and every time its revived with a new cast new things are found in it.

Well you see there again is another dimension of him he was... I hate the term political writer because if you nonfiction good journalist that's what you are and as I say if you're a good writer then you are indeed delving into why people are the way they are why has this happened partly because what happened to them, partly because of what's inside them, partly because of the past, partly because of the present there are all these things to be explored now he did that but he also didn't neglect the dramas of personal life and of love life, of the erotic side of life and of course *The Suit* is the most wonderful example of that you know the story, yes, what punishment that the woman is left with a suit that a lover left quickly when the husband came home but he did this – wittedly but there was something very serious behind it he was able to do these things together to make a unity.

It would be interesting if he lived to know these are the pre feminist days, what he would've made of it now I often think of people wonderful writers who explained our life to us in this way their poems and their stories if they were alive now.

I'm not quite sure, I think he came back he was teaching yes this was a way of making a living and I think it was also he liked the contact with the young people and being able to open their minds he was never a person who in his life dictate and told you what to think he showed you, sometimes troubled you, sometimes annoyed you sometimes delighted you but he made you then put the book down and think about situations in your own life and the people around you, he made you open your mind.

Oh he had a pretty high standing as far as any black writer had we had, we writers had our own standards and he was high among our own standards and in intellectuals and readers of any colour some white people came to know his work and appreciated it indeed, I don't think he was ever published overseas nevertheless, I'm saying since his time I have managed writers that I've admired and think that they need to be read abroad as myself came with the reputation I was able to get them published this never happened with I think it was too soon for me.

### 13. Njabulo Ndebele

Then you know now that you are dealing with someone now for whom err... vengeance has become a rational thing, that he is going to hit back at his wife in a methodical and ruthless and insensitive way, so and that is... it builds interest in the character because you ought to say.. When is it going to end? Especially when you see the suffering and then the final thing for Matilda is when she says "Please just for now" you know, and then he says "No way!" if.. I remember well , and that kills her, you know, so I think it's the persistence of suffering, and the readers. Any number of times you read it, you go.. Oh!, you know, It's still continuing . I think it's... Can Themba managed to capture the immediacy through his language and the action in this. The action is tense, there's no wasted word, you know. Everything contributes to the movement of the story, you know. And right up to the end when she dies. And then he realizes too late that he stepped, he went overboard, you know. He should have stopped somewhere. That's another thing is that, his reaction at the end still tells us that he loved her in spite of this, otherwise why is he regretting , you know, that she is now dead and it's too late now for him to do anything about it. But it means that we can even extrapolate something that's probably not in the story now but maybe when you read it what you can find it, is that it's possible that what he was doing to her was hurting him as well.

At a certain point ego takes over from the sense of justice and the fact that , you know, surely this is enough and you may recognize that it's enough and then you say your ego, you know, takes over. And he clearly had a very brilliant mind, and there's no doubt about his brilliance. And it comes through even in his writing. The use of words, you know... and and err... I think that Can Themba, The effect of apartheid on him was err... to... I think he was inclined to sensationalize err... I just remember; saw a story here. One of my favourite stories is, sort of Romeo and Juliet story. The "Mob Passion" it's .. and the, then the other one is "Dube train." He grabs him, picks him up because he is a big guy and throws him out of the window. And all we hear there's a scream, you know. So Can Themba liked these sort of sensational writing. You see it everywhere in his writing and I think it was his way of responding to apartheid. There is pain and the suffering, and the brutalization and so on wants to reflect it that way. The difference even the suit still has those elements, but they are controlled by the artistic element so, so the persistence in the infliction of pain is.. is steady studied, you know. And pain by pain so..Er.. Those elements are still there of sensation but they have been toned down by the greater art.. Artistry in that story than in the others. The others don't quite succeed to break away from the sensationalist journalism you know, of.. of.. the time .. and so, but this particular story. One

story that I remember that I can compare from the artistic point of view with Can Themba's *The Suit*, is *In Corner B* by Ezekiel Mphahlele . Beautiful story of what happens during a week..er, you know families, uncles, people hiding liquor in the wardrobe.. and then a policeman coming, and being scolded by an old lady, you know. For one thing.. The texture of township life is so richly, you know, shown in that story. Again I think.. I think that when I describe community that's what I'm, I'm thinking about partly, so there are such stories that you will find that have an enduring a quality that is enduring beyond the times in which they were written and they will always appeal, regardless of who read them even in 2050,you know.

I remember that just prior to 1994, south Africans were debating the future curriculums in the schools, the syllabus. The the how you would teach origins of African literature, and from the university. We were replacing we were creating the departments of African literature, even the departments of English we were throwing out more and more increasingly works from Britain and introducing works from other countries. African writing into the curriculum, The biggest question is what do the south African universities,.. the African curriculum African literature curriculum look like today. I think my hunch that there has been retreat from the experimentation pre1994 and after1994 things kind of.. we forgot.

I know,you know, Africa people like Chinua Achebe are always being read, and so on but I'm sure there are some African writers whose work are prescribed and so I'm sure there are there but what I'm concerned about is the persistence and the gravity the development of expertise in the teaching of that literature so that there can never be a retreat, ever away from it, and when you.. the teachers.

## 14. Parks Mangena

The first time when I met him actually, kwakusendlini yakhe eSophiatown, lapho kwamilisa loMolefe nanku. So I was introduced in his house, ngaphandle kwale emsebenzini but in his house, which was called the house of truth. It was called the house of truth, he used to say, “when you get into my house you should stick to the truth, don't tell lies here.” So that’s how we remember the house of truth, that’s how we knew it.

A straight of whiskey, a straight of gin, a straight of brandy because some used to drink something else but mostly Can used to drink brandy. The same, and then let alone I switched to whiskey unlike ukrakra kweBrandy.

Yes he used to debate, but on certain subjects academic or even political any subject he would debate on that one. Besikhuluma kakhulu exchanging views on that one but he wasn't an emotional guy, cha and when you get him he is quiet, not he was emotional, he would keep quiet. Yes, you know when you debate you provoke each other sometimes but he was always cool.

Can didn't apply to join Drum, he was invited by Drum to go and work there because as a writer he won some short story fiction writing thats how he was invited and Jim Bailey felt that this is the guy that could be part of our staff then he invited him to join Drum magazine.

He was gifted, I think God gifted that man, I would say talent and besides that the heart, you know he would think of a story, we say in journalism you must have a nose for news and he had it.

He was very good at imparting knowledge, I’m happy you brought that one up, you know for his friends and so forth. He'd advise rather we do it this way, rather do it that way, or that story should be like this, teaching, there was that element yes, in him.

Yes I heard from some friends, teachers, South African teachers that we used to drink together in Central Hotel, a hotel in town in Mbabane, so I said “Oh is he here?” I didn't know he'd be here or meet him here. But eventually he did come to the Central Hotel, and we used to drink there with some of the teachers as a result we hugged each other, we didn't know we'd meet there other, at the Central Hotel.

No, he used to go there and drink at some stage, and then when we met we hugged each other. I said "I heard you were around here, he said "Yes, I'm a lecturer at Trade School", but because he used to frequent that hotel we named that corner, he used to be at the corner most of his time, Can's corner. It was called Can's drinking corner so is each time he came to town to Mbabane at that hotel, he used to be in that corner, you'd find him drinking brandy there, so we named that corner, Can Themba's corner.

Can was teaching English, he was a lecturer of English. While living in Babani mostly it was academic le eskolweni he was never involved in sports or other things like that, not that I remember. And some of them of course he couldn't use his name, he used ?, because I remember at some stage he asked me if I could send one of his stories under my name, no we were close to each other, we never hid anything.

He moved to St Josephs where he was teaching. St Josephs is a catholic mission where he taught, St Josephs. But not that he lived in the mission, but he had a room in town where he used to live. It was bad, I couldn't believe it, to me especially for a person who was used to him it came as a shock especially when they said they him dead already and you couldn't say a word or whatever it is. Because when you find someone already dead, you think what would he have said, what happened, you know that sort of thing. He didn't say he was sick, he never showed sickness at all. In his room, he was found in his room in Manzini he had hired a place where he was sleeping.

I think he enjoyed more writing, writing, he had taken up into that because of his writing, yes, as a journalist. Because he wasn't teaching, he never taught at a journalism school but would advice some of the writers, guide them in the writing of what they should do.

But where you see us there it in the veranda sort of, where we had set outside and they had brought some drinks to us, that's when we were drinking there, you know it was fresh, there was some air. Central Hotel, I'm sorry I've got borrowed teeth, that's why I can't be able to.. It was called the Central Hotel. The was only one Hotel there which near the garage, its called the George Hotel and then there was the one near the river, I can't remember the name now, because these hotels seem to change now, its no more there, there's a shopping complex now, I can't remember. Those were the 2 hotels in Manzini but the main one was the George Hotel, yes, he used to drink there.

He lived by the drink and of course loved his drink like I do. There are certain journalists ? Take Mosisi, all of us we used to drink. You know when we used to in Johannesburg, the

Golden City Post, Bantu World, inip you know inip in the jacket, you go to the bathroom, just like a bit and you are alright. Not necessarily to get drunk at work but have a shot, you'll be okay.

What I could say actually, Mosai Mahapi and he worked with him, Mosia used to live in Alexandra and kakhulu moRonnie Manyosi, Ronnie Manyosi was from Dube, he was a youngster name he worked Golden City Post, those were some of the people he mentored, he taught them. Not talking about Casey Motsisi actually he even taught him in school, when you write you talk about Casey Motsisi its the influence and guidance of Can Themba, even the style of writing, he had his own way of writing, his style is different from others. I don't know if you've read some of the writers, you can see that's his language. That was the type of a guy he was, that's the impression he gave me, an impression I have even today. Not that I can be like no I can't, but that is the impression Can helped with other people to write.

## 15. Peter Magubane

I can remember one yaseZeerust, where all journalists were banned from entering Zeerust, but Drum did not believe in being banned, it did not believe in being told what to do, so the editor said to us, to me and Can Themba you go to Zeerust and see what you can do there. We went to Zeerust, the first thing I did was, because there many policemen roaming around, why the press was banned is because the women who had burnt their passes were appearing. See, so I decided to buy half a loaf of bread, scooped to inside and put my camera inside there, I pretended to be eating my bread whilst I'm taking pictures, when I realised that this gimmick will soon be realised, I went and bought a pint of milk, I took out the milk and put my camera in the milk carton with my cable release from my pocket, I took pictures. Drum Magazine was the only newspaper that had the trial yaseZeerust.

We went to a church here in Johannesburg. It was an Afrikaner church, we didn't ask for permission, the church was in already, we just walked in like ordinary people coming to church to worship, we walked in, the minister, as we walked in he was preaching then he changed and looked towards us pointing the finger, he says, "Daar is..." let me just remember.. just one second... it was some insulting word, "Daar is eets en ons mist?" they didn't hear that he repeated, they all looked back and saw Can Themba and I walking in, all hell broke loose, and we realised that something is happening here, we moved out, we ran out of the church, I'd never run so fast in my life but boy I tell you.

No we thought churches were for everybody, that's what we had in our minds, we thought that I can be black, brown, red church, as a church person you can go in and they will let you in and we went in there because we wanted to see how white churches do their things, we were not going there to fight.

Can Themba could not run fast so they caught up with him and moered him, you see. Yeah, when we entered the church as the minister was praying and he looked up and said, "Daar is n devil , daar is n devil en ons mist" (There's a devil in our mist) and the whole church rose and we moved out and I could run fast but Can Themba could not run, they caught up with him.

Short people run. No actually when the minister said "Daar is n devil en ons mist" I realised there's trouble here, you know, I wasn't going to wait for another second I made a u-turn out of the church. Yeah we went, Can Themba's house was called The House of Truth, that's where truth was told because whilst you were drinking there's someone smooching there, you busy

drinking and eating there are other people smooching in the room there. It was in Ray Street, Sophiatown, The House of Truth, that's where the truth was told, that's where some of the good stories were planned.

Two rooms, in fact not two rooms but one big room with a door in the centre. It was quite big, this was used as a bedroom and that was used as a sitting room. Now when it came to work, we gave our work first priority.

The truth was told there, you could be drinking, someone could be smooching there, others would be playing cards, you know, others would be drinking. The House of Truth, yes we telling the truth there about life, you're having fun with your girlfriend, some others are playing cards and whatever, you know. Some of the stories we discussed there, our editor agreed with us that you should not be told what to do, you go out and do what you think is right.

Oh, brandy, beers, whiskey but I did not drink much, I took wee bit and at work, I did not drink at work. Ooh yes, but not to get drunk in such a way that they cannot do their work. Well beer, brandy was thee thing, beer took a long time give you a kick and those were good all days man.

He named it, because the truth was told there, see you want to kiss your girlfriend there, you do whatever you want to do, you drink whatever you want to drink. What you discuss there is mostly is how to get the story.

## 16. Pitika Ntuli

One of my very interesting and early influences was to be present in the House of Truth, where the leading journalists of the Drum Generation in Sophiatown were, because a friend of mine lived there, so in visiting him and the mother was a social worker, I ended up in the presence of the Nat Nakasas, of the Lewis Nkosis, and of Can Themba just being fascinated by simply how well they spoke English.

There's always this thing about Can Themba, his interest was in the psychology of human beings, what actually people think. It is not surprising that when you look at *The Suit*, *The Suit* is just about the psychological imaginations of human beings and human relationships, he demonstrated that throughout his interactions as far as I can pick up.

What happened is that I was walking in Swaziland somewhere in the mid-60s, and I heard someone shouting from the back, says "Young man just turns your back" and when I turned my back and behold, there was Bra Can Themba. I've taken from you, what I learnt from you, from your House of Truth, I've established my House of Truth in Lubamba." He says where, then I told him where it was about 20/25 kilometres from Manzini. One day at 2 o'clock here somebody comes in and we are sitting there having a heavy discussion about complementarity, theory, wave particle duality, when Solly Magwagwa who is around here was a young guy pressing us onto the issues of quantum mechanics. And then Can Themba came in here, so the discussion took in other issues the philosophies from Espinosa to DE cut? to whatever, Can was actually pushing us in there. There more he went up there and drinking the more clearer it is. In the small hours of the morning our House of Truth became a living haven of peace and intellectualism and of emotion. But because we were actually far away so in the end he arranged that we should meet over the weekends with him, this time to be discussing the issues of poetry and creative writing, because to him is that he liked talking about Edward Said, that Edward Said is somebody who studied English literature but he understood that English literature is an embodiment of english philosophy, of its psychology, of its economic structures, of its industrial structures. Sometimes we'd go over to St Josephs which again was further away from Manzini where he was teaching.

Can Themba was very frustrated in Swaziland, absolutely frustrated, that's why he spent more time with us as younger people.

In Sophiatown and through Drum, the Can Thembas interacted with people like the Sobukwes of this world, the Rosette Nziba, one guy he actually liked was Rosette Nziba who was one of the PAC leading intellectuals who was in Swaziland. When that guy would actually join, you could see kind of sparks of actually intellect, there will be a bottle here of brandy sitting there untouched because the minds were so actually engaged. Then Rosette died and all the things happened and then he kind of hit the bottle, but he tried very much because he was working for a Catholic Mission so that he would at least reserve it towards kind of for the weekend, but it was quite a frustrating life for him I guess.

So we all gathered around, there was a restaurant called The Reeds that was owned by the Davidsons, we would sit down there at The Reeds or at another place called the Punch Bowl where you sit actually outside and then we have all of these discussions and the people would just be walking about, would actually come in and feel this animation that is actually taking place of debates.

You know when you look at a story, short story like *The Suit*, and then you think of writers like Franz Kafka or Torgeski? who are kind of very psychological writers, who just penetrate the subconscious mind that's kind of a sadism that is in it that sense of revenge but rendered in a very brief and a very poetic way. That is what for me makes *The Suit* to be such kind of a classic, because its a story of what happens in the townships anywhere, infidelities, all jokes are about inter kind of relationships but there is this kind of a serious things that take place. So when he then creates these characters that becomes vengeful, normally today when someone is angry with you, what do they say? They say, there is nothing inside that suit, that means you are a nobody, isn't it? You are just a suit, because there is no body. But he reversed actually that in putting up a suit in there and then putting this imaginary person that lives actually in your own subconscious mind to become an interlocutor who questions us about our morality.

We went up there, I think it was on a Friday, and the room that he had actually rented, the keyhole was big, it was a wooden door and on the side of it was like this. So we peeped through here and we saw the feet lying in the bed and we knocked and knocked and knocked he didn't open, we knocked again and kicked the door, it didn't open so we said oh, its Friday maybe he is absolutely gone up and drunk, he'll wake up in the evening because sometimes we'll go over to the movies. So we went away and when we came back later we knocked again and asked people if at all have seen him and they said no, they haven't. We peeped actually through the door and Pika Maseko this friend we were with said, "I can still see the feet there." It was dark so in the end it was late, we were living 25ks away, we were not actually driving so we left.

Late at night it bothered me and it really worried me and I woke up in the morning and hiked and found myself in the place and as soon as I came in there was a ribbon around, the body was being carried and taken away. And I just remember standing there, went over to this place, the restaurant The Reeds and buried my head on it, and Aunt Jane who owned the place then she said to me, “Your friend, your father, your mentor, this is what life is.”

Can Themba was absolutely one of a kind, the warmth of his spirit, the sharpness, the witticism that it is. You’d utter a statement and immediately you’ve uttered a statement he’s going to pick one word out of that statement and turn it actually upside-down and make you realise what you’ve actually said, how profound the statement you’ve made. You know sometimes he would probe you with questions and then when you are frustrated and fed up and you are searching for words and you are actually talking, you see a glint on his face, like a glint you know, like a glint actually on his face then he says, “You’ve got it.”

I think Can’s own writings themselves, they are just one of that heritage, one of that legacy that it is. You know, whenever I look at what’s happening today, we do not have journalists of the Drum generation, we don’t have journalists of the Can Themba quality, we’ve got what? Glorified reporters. Can Themba’s legacy and the legacy of his own people was a combination of creative writing, philosophical writing and a proper investigative journalism, which is not existing today. If I were a journalist then I would have to go back to that kind of a generation and study the works of Can Themba, of Casey Motsisi, of Bloke Modisane, of Todd Matshikiza, and the rest of the people of that, of Juby Mayet and the rest of those people of that generation.

## 17. Simon Maziya

Can Themba was my teacher. .. I met him in 1967 when I was doing form 1 at St Josephs High School from erm my Primary School Mafutseni Roman Catholic Erm he was teaching me er Biology ja and another subject that he was teaching at St Josephs school was er mathematics urm no Can Themba was a good teacher and very brilliant. why do I say he was brilliant he was brilliant because I was told that he was also teaching at a university of of Swaziland. I don't know what he was teaching there anyway but erm he taught me biology and er we used to enjoy his lessons because he had a sense of humour.

He would take a glass or two when coming to class and that would make him very, very ,very active that's why we enjoyed his lessons we cracked some jokes and everything and so on but you know if he hadn't gotten a bit of maybe one glass or two you'd see that no man he is sick or something.

I remember one day um I was in a bus. And I found him there.. erm I think he had taken 2 I don't want to say he was drunk but I think he had taken 1 or 2 or 2 glasses and then he err fell asleep and then realizing that no man he won't know where to drop off then now I took his belonging and then I woke him up then I accompanied him to his house. on Monday I went to him and said sir do you know who accompanied you to your house he said no I don't know and I said I'm the one he said oh thank you very much Simon thank you very much now all in all he was a nice nice teacher so at St Joseph we used to have assembly early in the morning we pray and then after lunch too then we would go to church and pray he would not join us he would tell us you go and pray for your sins now we would laugh and you see.

When the school opened we were told the sad news that Mr. Themba had passed away so we were all shocked, but now although he had passed away but we received 1. Good news he said that girl Joana Filane and myself should be promoted to form 2. We were so happy but at the same time we said 'Ey! This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> term we are going to fail ;' and we feared failure really because we were thinking of passing JC or form 3 with flying colours. But the teachers said as Swazis if somebody says something before he dies that must be kept if yo, yo, yo your father says you must take this and give it to so and so as Swazis we respect that so we had to go to, to ,to form 2 fortunately for us we passed er went to form 3 now he was buried at St Joseph's cemetery and err the teachers and the students were all sad because we liked Can Themba very much and err as I say he contributed a lot to our to our lives.

Ja because he had some friends in Manzini I don't know his friends, but had friends er they would go to places as hunters and so on, but first day Can Themba was nowhere to be seen second day then the third day they were worried where's Can Themba? Where's Can Themba? Then they went to his house they found out the lights were on then they knocked on the door nobody opened there was no response now they went away they came again now I understand when they came they found a bad smell I think the body was di di decomposing so they called the police they came they broke the door they found out that he died while he was reading a newspaper he was just seated on a on a chair reading a newspaper and then now he collapsed whether it was heart failure I don't know because nobody told us about the postmortem.

But an extra brilliant somebody like Can Themba would not understand why you don't understand. Ja well I don't know I don't remember you see er worshipping with er Mr. Can Themba or he was too busy or what he would say "You go and pray for your sins" and he would not go there ,so I wouldn't say he was he was not a Christian he was a heathen. I will not say that but I don't remember you see going to church and pray with my, my teacher (laughs)

## **APPENDIX B: LETTERS**

81 Victoria Road,  
Sophiatown,  
Johannesburg.  
25th June, 1952

Dear Professor Dent,

Up to this moment I have not received the U. E. D. Certificate to which the Registrar assured me I was entitled. It would be a great kindness if you could arrange that it is made and sent to the above address.

The Transvaal Education Department under which I serve as a teacher employs me as an uncertificated teacher "pending the production of certificates", and pays me accordingly. You will appreciate therefore that the delay is causing me hardship.

I have also asked the Registrar for a ~~copy~~ statement to the effect that I was in residence at Fort Hare as a student for the following periods: 1945 - 1947 and 1950 - 1951, both inclusive. I wish to apply for tax exemptions for those periods and therefore need the statement.

Yours faithfully,  
D. C. Thumbar

152

letter

received  
on  
15th  
in the  
of  
viz  
lons  
only

for  
number  
tion  
lents

re  
trous  
lation  
led

# HODES UNIVERSITY

ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO BE ADDRESSED TO  
THE REGISTRAR



GRAHAMSTOWN, S. AFRICA

TELEGRAMS: "RHODESCOL."  
TELEPHONE 71

P.O. BOX 34

21st June, 1952.

The Registrar,  
University College,  
FORT HARE.

Dear Sir,

With reference to your letter R/80<sup>h</sup> of 8th June, I have again referred the case of D.C. THEMBA to the Dean of the Faculty of Education who has confirmed the view given in my letter of 22nd May. The matter will, however, be referred to the meeting of the Board of the Faculty early in August for consideration.

Yours faithfully,

ASSISTANT REGISTRAR.

X 31  
DRI/  
52.

1  
rest  
'e-  
ut  
s

e  
-  
ir

6th June, 1952.

R/604.

The Registrar,  
Rhodes University,  
GRIFFITHS.

Dear Sir,

Re: D.C. Thomba - U.E.D.

I acknowledge with thanks your letter W/E of 22.5.52 informing me that it was not possible for D.C. Thomba to obtain his U.E.D. Certificate.

As I did not think this was in line with previous practice, I referred this specific case to the University of South Africa and have received the enclosed letter.

I realise that Rhodes University is not bound by University of South Africa procedure, but I think this case merits reconsideration since in 1951 the U.E.D. course followed the University of South Africa Regulations.

I should like to raise the principle involved as soon as convenient and am asking our Senate to make a recommendation.

Yours faithfully,

Encl. 1.  
SMM/SN

REGISTRAR.

XXXXXXXXXXXXX  
Sir Faliq Agnew

29th September, 1953.

R/1314

The Secretary,  
Transvaal Provincial Education Department,  
Volkskas Building,  
Central Street,  
PRETORIA.

Dear Sir,

It would be greatly appreciated if you could let me have a reply to my letter R/1175 of 20th August, 1953, and inform me whether the Transvaal Education Department recognises a <sup>Provisional</sup> ~~Provincial~~ University Education Diploma awarded by Rhodes University.

Yours faithfully,

Registrar.

All communications must be addressed to the Secretary, The Transvaal Education Department (Native Education).  
Alle mededelings moet geadresseer word aan die Sekretaris, Die Transvaal Onderwysdepartement (Natuurle-son). (Natuurle-son). onderwys).

In any future correspondence please quote this number: Gellewe by enige verdere korrespondensie hierdie nommer aan te haal:

No. 7/3047

THE TRANSVAAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
TRANSSVAALSE ONDERWYSDEPARTEMENT  
(NATIVE EDUCATION-NATURELLE-ONDERWYS),

P.O. Box } 564,  
Posbus }

PRETORIA, 8-10-1953

Mr. J. M. M. M. M.  
3-0077 - 0

The Registrar,  
University College of North West,  
P.O. PRETORIA.

Sir,

RE: PROVISIONAL UNIVERSITY POLYMER DIPLOMA  
AWARDED BY UNICOM UNIVERSITY.

I am directed to inform you that your circular of 1/10/53, dated 29th September, 1953, addressed to the Secretary, Transvaal Education Department, has been referred to the Section Native Education for High School. In reply thereto I wish to state that this section does not recognise the Provisional University Diploma issued by you for selection purposes.

I am,

Yours obedient servant,

1953  
8.10.53

Old New School,  
Khartoum,  
Sudan  
27th June, 1958

The Registrar  
Fort Hare University College,  
P.O. Fort Hare.

Dear Sir,

The Transvaal Education Department informs me that it has written Rhodes University seeking the following information:

- (a) What the rate of my statement of the Provisional U.C.D. is;
- (b) What conditions attach to the Provisional U.C.D.

This information is required in connection with the subject of my salary, please. It would be a kindness if it were to be considered urgent. Perhaps it would have been settled if the Transvaal Education Department had communicated with Rhodes University through Fort Hare.

I would consider it a great kindness if you could advise a way through which the Transvaal Education Department could gain the information from Rhodes University.

Yours faithfully,  
D.C. Innes.

P.O. Box 647,  
Beberia.  
5th January, 1946.

The Registrar,  
S.A.N.C.  
P.O. Fort Hare,  
Alice.  
C P

Dear Madam,

I was surprised to hear that no report has been sent to the people who supplied the funds for my scholarship. However I informed them that I believe it is due to pressure of work.

Perhaps it will be possible for you to supply the requisite documents. It does seem that I cannot have the scholarship continued without these documents.

yours faithfully,  
D. Cam. Thembu.

P.S. I wrote to the Warden, Beberia Hall for a Certificate of Character etc.

RHODES UNIVERSITY

GRAHAMSTOWN, S. AFRICA

ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO BE ADDRESSED TO  
THE REGISTRAR



TELEGRAMS "RHODESCOL" P.O. BOX 94  
TELEPHONE 71

24 June, 1952.

The Registrar,  
University College,  
FORT HARE.

Dear Sir,

I wish to acknowledge receipt of your  
letter R/204 of 8th June, regarding D.C. Themba's  
U.E.D. Certificate, which is under consideration.

Yours faithfully,

ASSISTANT REGISTRAR.

81 Victoria Road,  
Sofiatown,  
Johannesburg.  
19 March, 1952

The Bursar,  
S.A.N.C.

P.O. Fort Hare.

Dear Sir,

Find enclosed the sum of five pounds, ten shillings and no pence (£5-10-0d), which I believe settles my account.

Kindly arrange to have my examination results sent to the above address.

I regret the delay which is due to the fact that I have only just received my first salary.

yours faithfully,  
D. C. Khambe.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

213 201428 21281

16th August, 1953.

P/1156

Mr. H.G. Themba,  
Bantu High School,  
Western Native Township,  
P.O. Box 11111.

Dear Mr. Themba,

Thank you for your letter of 11th August, 1953,  
and enclosures.

I discussed your problem very fully with Dr. Raam  
who knows the ins and outs of the Education world far better than  
I do.

Dr. Raam pointed out that any University Education  
Diploma is merely a Certificate of certain academic qualifications.  
Each Education Department has a right to accept or reject whatever  
Diplomas it chooses. In fact, the Cape Education Department has  
sometimes accepted a Provisional Diploma. But that does not  
oblige the Transvaal Education Department to do likewise. If the  
Transvaal Education Department regards a Provisional Diploma  
as not entitling the holder to an increase in salary the University  
which issued the Diploma can do nothing to change the situation.

That seems to be the position and I am very sorry  
that we can do nothing at all to assist you.

Of course, as soon as you pass an additional  
teaching subject, which Dr. Raam informs me might be Physics II  
or History III, your Provisional Diploma can be exchanged for a  
General Diploma.

I return herewith your Certificate and the  
communication to you from the Administrative Organiser of Native  
Schools.

Yours faithfully,

REGISTERED.

Receivd