

**CREATIVITY AND THE STATE OF THE NATION:  
*Of Writers and Intellectuals.*<sup>1</sup>**

I am wonderfully fascinated by the debates underway in our country today. I must be among very few people not to have read Ronald Suresh Roberts' biography of President Thabo Mbeki, *Fit to Govern*, and to be spared of understanding the contempt and anger the book appears to have elicited among some of our literati and intellectuals as to be so dismissive of it. I am a great fan of Roberts. I found his biography of Nadine Gordimer gripping and yet profound. I thought his intellectual depth was simply amazing; his grasp of literary history and his challenging political analysis was bound to be discomforting, but no reason for dismissing it. If *Fit to Govern* is anything like his other work one is not surprised at the fireworks that his latest work has elicited. Of course, we are all aware of a long tradition of critical and creative writing in this country, which we ought to be celebrating at events like these. I am especially conscious of the great literary tradition of the Eastern Cape, of writers, poets/imbongi and story tellers, of the publishing houses like Lovedale, of Xhosa works and nurturing of writing in isiXhosa, of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, of the *South African Outlook* – to look beyond Thomas Pringle and the first printing presses in Grahamstown.

I count it a great blessing that Bantu Steven Biko came into my life, and we formed a valuable intellectual bond. I owe it to Steve that I was introduced to a depth of intellectual learning and development much beyond mere prescribed texts, and to a critical engagement with the history and culture of our people. I count Steve as among this nation's greatest intellectual figures that circumstance denied the opportunity to blossom forth and to flower this nation in his generation. I am bound to remember Steve at times when much kerfuffle and obfuscation in our environment holds sway, and men seem to lose their reason, to paraphrase Shakespeare. Sadly though, it has to be that this is the moment when this nation celebrates its intellectuals, its writers, thinkers and creators. On the contrary, watch who are the most celebrated – it's the maverick politician, a thoughtless youth leader and a loudmouthed trade unionist; it is the footballer, a soapie star, a kwaito star, what I call a 'zing' musician; or maybe, the new BEE millionaires. Yes, it is rarely the writer or scholar; anyone who aspires to be an intellectual is often viewed with contempt. It is definitely not the most attractive thing to become a career academic in such circumstances.

Amartya Sen, the celebrated Nobel Prize Laureate for Economics published his book of essays in 2005, *The Argumentative Indian*<sup>2</sup>. In these essays Sen explores the philosophical, religious, linguistic, cultural and intellectual foundations of Indian society, and places them in the context of a changing world environment. He challenges many of his nation's claims and

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote opening address delivered by Prof N Barney Pitso at the Wordfest 2007, held in the Red Lecture Theatre, Eden Grove Building, Rhodes University Campus, on Monday 2 July 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*; Penguin Books, 2005.

traditions, and the means by which some justifications are sought for political and economic policies, and for exclusive social mores including the maintenance of some taboos. At the end of it, he arrives at what one may call the idea of an *argumentative democracy*, the notion that an essential identity of the psyche of being Indian is readiness to engage, to challenge, to argue every idea, each practice, to debate history, and as such nothing is ever settled but that India is an evolving specimen. He calls this “democracy as public reasoning”. Early on in the book Sen asserts that the role of the intellectual tradition in India has always been to give voice to the marginalized and as a tool to “resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation.” He goes on to say that

The critical voice is the traditional ally of the aggrieved, and participation in arguments is a general opportunity, not a particularly specialised skill (like composing the sonnets, or performing trapeze acts).

To illustrate his point, Sen tells of his encounter with an elderly villager in his native Bengal who tellingly confronts his prejudices about the poor and the illiterate when he says: “It is not very hard to silence us, but it is not because we cannot speak.” The role of the intellectual is to give voice to the silent.

The creative process is a unique and wonderful thing, involving as it does our human ability to generate entirely new and original thoughts, ideas and concepts; to forge in our minds the associations between those thoughts, ideas and concepts; and then to express them in such a manner that they result in a concrete and coherent creation that somehow touches a responsive chord in our fellow humans – an acknowledgement if you will, of that which has enriched and fostered humankind since its genesis.

And for as long a creativity has been acknowledged as a fundamental human impulse and recorded as such, there has been a concomitant acknowledgement that for some, the creative process, which Virginia Woolf calls the “*states of soul in creating*” is often accompanied, and perhaps even driven, by periods of disconnectedness with everyday reality (which some term “illness”); of forays into other levels of consciousness that somehow facilitate the process through its most difficult phases, allowing the creator to access unplumbed depths of his or her creative mind. Woolf explained this eloquently in her diary when, confessing a link between what she euphemistically calls “curious intervals” and creativity, she wrote:

These curious intervals in life – I’ve had many – are the most fruitful      artistically – one becomes fertilised – think of my madness at Hogarth – and   all the little illnesses – that before I wrote *The Lighthouse*, for example. Six weeks   in   bed   now   would   make   a masterpiece of MOTHS.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Diaries of Virginia Woolf in five volumes (Chatto and Windus: the Hogarth press)

But having traversed that ephemeral treasure chest of thoughts, images, sounds and concepts and found those that will best articulate our creative impulse, we need to embark on a process that will give them shape, form and content; a process that will culminate in a creation that can be understood, acknowledged and acclaimed by those who receive it. We need to pluck out of the air, as it were, the unravelled strands of our creativity and weave them into a tapestry that is intelligible to our audience. And that process requires discipline. It is a curious condition of humankind, I have found, that the two can never be mutually exclusive. In order for creativity to have genuine value and meaning it must be moulded by discipline – of thought, of expression - whatever its nature. A symphony without coherence will merely be a cacophony. A literary masterpiece without structure will merely be an unintelligible rambling, and a work of art without thoughtful expression will merely be a reflection of mediocrity. It is one of those dichotomies that one finds expressed so eloquently in Petrarchan literary convention – irreconcilable yet somehow perfectly evocative and harmonious.

When one attends such inspiring festivals as this, it is quite easy to be so swept up in the tactile, visual, imaginative and sensual expressions of creativity that one is inclined to forget that creativity is not limited to the arts. Perhaps that is because creativity finds it's most satisfying and pleasing expression in the arts. It is something that we all respond to. We all love beautiful music, words and images. But obviously creativity has an unlimited scope and application, and the creator of the "Dolosse" that we find dotted along our shorelines and in our harbours undoubtedly gained as much satisfaction from his practical yet brilliant creation, as did the contributors to this festival.

And just as we acknowledge that the creative impulse has no limits in terms of its ingenuity, brilliance or fields of application, so we must also acknowledge that the creative "yield" is similarly unconstrained. After all, the ultimate aim of the entire process is the validation from those who are exposed to our creations, of their value and worth. Once again, Woolf expresses that satisfaction as follows:

Monday, October 5<sup>th</sup>

A note to say I am trembling with pleasure – can't go on with my Letter – because Harold Nicholson has rung up to say *The Waves* is a masterpiece. Ah Hah – so it wasn't all wasted then. I mean this vision I had here *has some force upon other minds* [my emphasis]. Now for a cigarette and then a return to sober composition."<sup>4</sup>

It is only once the creation becomes "shared property" that its true value is realised. It is then that it has "some force upon other minds." Generally, we are inclined to think of this *force* on a micro scale. We are for example, inclined to think of books, poems, philosophies and so on, that have moved us, or changed minds and sometimes epically, lives. But over the

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<sup>4</sup> The Diaries of Virginia Woolf in five volumes (Chatto and Windus: the Hogarth press)

centuries, this *force* has wielded immense power and influence. It has quite literally changed the course of history several times, and that has happened when our *collective* imaginations and minds have been swayed and then guided onto a new path of thinking, doing or being – all by the power of someone’s creation. Once we have absorbed the change and we live it, we perpetuate it and extend its influence. And it is this lesson that one can apply to South Africa’s writers and intellectuals, particularly in regard to the State of the Nation.

We can assume that writers and intellectuals have, through their creative ability and attendant intellectual gifts and skills, the potential to exercise *some force on other minds* and I speak here of the force that guides us onto a new path of thinking, doing and being - once our imaginations have been captured. This implies of course, that we can create with a purpose.

How is all of this linked to the state of our nation, you make ask? The Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility (1990) states the following:

Members of the intellectual community have a responsibility to promote the spirit of tolerance towards different views and positions and enhance democratic debate and discussion (Article 20)

and

The intellectual community is obliged to encourage and contribute to affirmative actions to redress historical and contemporary inequalities based on gender, nationality or any other social advantage.” (Article 25)<sup>5</sup>

Clearly there is broad acknowledgement and acceptance of the role which the intellectual community can and must play, not only in participating in teaching, research and publishing, but also in promoting intellectual exchange; both nationally and internationally, and in contributing to social advancement. What I guess this is about, is not just independence of thought and the generation of ideas, but also intellectual integrity – as accurate a reading of the signs of the times, and true reflection of one’s observations. The avoidance, therefore, of mere representations of reality without a critical assessment, or disingenuous argument that presents a partial statement of the truth, or that is blind to other sides of the argument, or that simply present a narrow point that justifies decisions arrived at *a priori*. It also means a courage to speak out in truth without calculating the risks and to avoid the lure of uncritical palace intellectuals – always ready with the pseudo intellectual justifications of political judgements, or the refusal to acknowledge what is reasonable and meaningful by reason that it does not match one’s ideological presuppositions. There is too much of that in our country’s current politically charged climate.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/KAMDOK.htm> pg 5

There is a danger in a society where the culture of reading, as recreation or as pleasure is subsiding. South African radio and television simply do not help. One no longer has book reading or discussions on radio and television; not much drama; classical texts from all languages and cultures rather than 'soapies'; and no theatre except talk shows that are often allowed to descend into the depths of banality – yes, and many of us even pay licences for such intellectual abuse! It was the late Palestinian literary scholar Edward Said who bemoaned the disappearance of the book during the electronic age.

Where many of our young people do not come from homes where literacy is taken for granted, whose homes books surround and where a reading culture is a value to be enriched, schools do no better. There are many schools that hardly have a library; where learners are not encouraged to take out books to read for pleasure. Many schools do not even have amateur drama or book clubs, or poetry reading to cultivate virtuous habits. Sadly, with the onset of our new democracy, and with the elevation of science and technology as a normative intellectual pursuit, the social sciences and the arts are often undervalued. They are to be found among the army of unemployed graduates. What then does that do to the "reach of reason" that Amartya Sen talks about? We are all the poorer as a nation, and this nation will reap the bitter fruits of such neglect in the not too distant future.

There are signs though that this neglect is being noticed and addressed, especially in higher education policy. Gone are the days when Africans were educated for service in the colonial administration, or as future generations for servitude, or in the church as ministers of an alien religion. What we do know is that these best laid plans (of mice and men) collapsed because instead of producing docile Africans, the quest for freedom was accentuated. The elites soon claimed the humanity of Africa; they demanded the right to assert the soul of Africa. The middle passage between these hopes and aspirations which were raised and the vision of where we could be, have been nothing but calamitous. Today, the burden falls on the new elites to build Africa, revitalise her economy and systems of life, and to renew her shattered institutions and humanity. That aspiration can never be realised unless we are ready to begin at the beginning. It must begin with education – with our intellectuals.

One can never have "useless" education. WEB du Bois in his essay, *Of the Dawn of Freedom*, states this beautifully: "... for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless men strive to know (1994:20)." Any yet our nation seems to have a dearth of intellectuals who are brave enough to engage publicly and transparently in robust and self-critical intellectual exchange and debate on any number of issues; who are prepared to face that element of danger and revolution, dissatisfaction and discontent that du Bois speaks of. And perhaps that is why we should not be surprised at the emergence of such "establishments" as the Native Club, which has defined its objective as working towards contributing to the ongoing process of

decolonisation and eradicating apartheid and colonial mindsets. In the absence of broad public debate, it is quite logical that intellectuals would want, and even need, a space that would allow for such engagement. However, we need also to ask ourselves honestly whether or not there might be other factors or possible constraints, perhaps of a socio-political nature, that might currently be impeding open intellectual engagement to such an extent that intellectuals feel the need for a less “threatening” environment of engagement, such as a Native Club. More to the point though, we need to look into our own hearts and ask ourselves if we have not bowed to those constraints and become intellectual prisoners of our imagined or real ivory towers.

Currently two critical trajectories characterise higher education. One, higher education institutions are by nature conservative. Tradition has a strong magnetic pull, and laws of nature are pronounced for their regularity and predictability. Nothing is, that has not been before. This may translate to the notion that there is in fact no new knowledge, as all knowledge is merely a development of what has been. Two, that higher education by its nature is elitist. This suggests that a closed club, according to rules it sets for itself, must select those who attend institutions of higher learning. Translated, this also means that this club selects those who fit a particular mould. One could also apply this criticism to clubs such as the Native Club. The danger is that such a club becomes less and less critical, and simply reproduce themselves. These two tendencies are precisely antithetical to transformation, which higher education in Africa is enjoined to embrace. I believe that if there is need for such a “club” it should also attend critically to the native culture and consciousness that Franz Fanon so eloquently criticises in post independence Africa. The idea of a new conformism, servile enrichment, a valueless dedication and personal advancement, a lack of idealism are all features of our new democracy. The word “struggle” these days is used merely to justify personal enrichment and no longer social enhancement and betterment of communities. Almost as if Franz Fanon never existed, we have all these signs in our society among ourselves today

In a recent essay, Homi K Bhabha stated the following:

All advances in knowledge, if they are truly transformative, bring with them a shadow of uncertainty and incalculability. 'New ways of knowing' as Hans Weiler has appositely pointed out, 'bring with them, a profound doubt about established conventions in the production of knowledge and an exhilarating sense of a new beginning.'<sup>6</sup>

And this is where our writers and intellectuals have such a fundamental role to play in reintroducing and re-asserting their independence, and the ethos and practice of critical reflection and engagement; in

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<sup>6</sup> Homi K Bhabha: Global Pathways to Knowledge: Narration and Translation; UNESCO Forum Colloquium on Research and Higher Education Policy; 1-3 December 2004 Pg 5.(in draft) quoting Hans N Weiler: Challenging the orthodoxies of Knowledge: Epistemological, Structural, and Political Implications of Higher Education; UNESCO Forum Colloquium on Research and Higher Education Policy, 1-3 December 2004.

engaging with that profound doubt - not necessarily through the establishment of new "Clubs", however well intentioned or whatever their aims - but through a kind of critical engagement that requires honesty, integrity and courage. Independent and innovative thought must be prepared to abide by its conscience, and take the consequences of its convictions.

Perhaps what is required from higher education, and concomitantly, from our intellectuals and our writers, is best summarised by that African American scholar and pioneer of the Pan African Movement, WEB du Bois, in his inimitable words:

The function of a university is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, *to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life*, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilisation <sup>7</sup>

A cultured and civilised society, however, is not simply the goal of universities but the collective endeavour of societies. It ought to be the aspiration of every parent in the upbringing of the family, of the school in the development of a culture of teaching and learning, in higher education in the development of a quest for knowledge and the acquisition of desirable intellectual competencies and practical knowledge, in society as a whole in valuing and moulding moral character. I hate to generalise about this, but I do want to suggest that in the silence of our intellectual community we let slip a responsibility we have in the building of a society we can be proud of.

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<sup>7</sup> WEB du Bois: THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK; Dover Publications Inc, New York; 1994. Pg 52