

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# SOUTH AFRICAN DRUM WRITERS OF FICTION: THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND AFRICAN IDENTITY

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### Introduction

In the 1950s, many black writers, whose goal was to talk about their predicament in the apartheid era emerged in South Africa. The *Drum* magazine was the major avenue for their outcry. The magazine which “depicted a vibrant black culture” had stories dealing with themes of “urban deprivation and the resilience of the black people” (South Africa Info 2008). This chapter traces African cultural identity in African fiction of the *Drum* decade. Its primary focus is the way South African writers of the *Drum* decade used the culturally alien English language to depict a distinctively African consciousness. In other words, the discussion illustrates how *Drum* writers displaced western discourse from texts written in a western language. In *Drum* stories, African artistic expression drew from the oral tradition and the discussion of language use in African imaginative writings usually included a discussion of oral literature.

The objectives stated above will be realised through an analysis of a few selected *Drum* writers: Mbeba, Modisane, Sentso, Ngubane, Rive and Motsisi. Although English was the medium of expression for the magazine, these South African *Drum* writers were preoccupied with depicting African cultures of black townships in the 1950s as a means of addressing the apartheid system that was championed by people of western cultures. In order to achieve their goals, they devised strategies that would counteract the harm of western hegemony. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989: 116) define “hegemony”, as domination that is “exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power over the economy, and over state apparatuses.” For this

reason, the use of English, as the medium of expression of the literature of oppressed Africans, is considered problematic. That is why "South African English must be open to the possibility of becoming a new language ... also with regard to grammatical adjustments that may result from the proximity of English to indigenous African languages" (Ndebele 1991: 114).

*Drum* writers were compelled by circumstances to adopt a postcolonial attitude because they were faced with the task of amplifying a people's disposition that chafed against alienating apartheid conditions. Mphahlele (1992: 52) observes that it "was a period of political ferment, as the mass organisations were relatively free to protest on the open platform". According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989: 2), postcolonial writing sums up literatures that have emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonisation and have carved a niche that foregrounds their "tension with the imperial power" and highlights "their difference from the assumptions of the imperial centre". In other words, *Drum* writers had to negate western hegemonic representation. Edward Said (in Williams and Chrisman 1994: 146) rightly contests hegemonic representation of oppressed peoples of the world by those favoured by dominant discourse, as was the case with the oppressor/oppressed relation of blacks and the white South African ruling elite during apartheid.

Normative or dominant discourse, is an expression used in postcolonial criticism to refer to "a system of statements within which the world can be known" or "the complex of signs and practices which organizes social existence and social reproduction" through which "the world is brought into being" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 70, 71). English, as the thinking language of the oppressor and the communicative instrument of the writer is the breeding ground of dominant discourse. Thus, postcolonial writers such as those of the *Drum* decade consciously dislodged colonial discourse from the English language in which they wrote.

### **The Domestication of English by Selected *Drum* Writers**

Black storytelling of the 1950s is "crowded with the demands of identity-making, survival techniques, and community necessity at the cutting edge of the urban experience" (Chapman 1996: 237). The idiosyncratic styles of many individual *Drum* writers have been recognised, except for Mphahlele whose unique domestication of English to convey the African outlook has not been thoroughly explored. Chapman (1996: 241) merely finds Mphahlele's style to be "apposite to his

conception of African life, evaluating its humanity in the everyday rhythms of community living". This chapter focuses on how *Drum* writers invariably used their short stories to portray African lifestyles and experiences despite their individual stylistic differences.

In the short story "Rhodesia Road", originally published in *Drum* magazine in 1951, Mbeba purposely distorts the conventional word order of English. For example Yakwindula and Yakusoza's dialogue reveals their envy of the men returning from distant employment in urban Harare with bundles on their heads. In this dialogue, unusual phrases like "Do you so say!" (p.1) and "All these things avoid" (p.2) are used, rather than "Do you say so!" and "Avoid all these things". The effect is that it reminds the reader that the boys and their grandmother are conversing in what Chapman (1989: 208) describes as "one of the Nyasaland languages" although the story is written in English.

Later in the story, Mbeba hints at the characters' African frame of reference by allowing them to express their anguish in the face of the alienation of farm conditions by means of African proverbs and idiomatic expressions such as "Can lightning strike the tree twice? (tragic events do not happen repetitively (p.4) and "As one grows, one comes to see things" (wisdom increases with age) (p.6). Other instances of such mediation of English discourse using proverbs and idiomatic expressions are "It was 'I must see more yet' that killed the bushbuck" (failure to be contented with one's territory may lead to danger (p.8) and "My mouth is bone dry" (p.8) (I am astounded). In this way, the English language is purged of foreign discourse and made to carry authentic African outlook.

When the characters have a respite from the estranging farm labour and meet leisurely after hours with fellow Africans, mediation of the English language is intense, allowing the use of African idioms. This is achieved using onomatopoeic phrases like "motors crying "pe-e-e-e", bicycles saying "twee twe-e-e" (p.7) and "the drums saying gudu-gudu" (p.8). In the Sotho equivalents of these characters' vernaculars, the expressions are literally *mebotoro e lla e re ...*, *dipaesekele di re*, where *di re* or "say" is confined in conventional English to describe people's words and not sounds produced by inanimate objects like motor cars and bicycles. At one stage, the writer even uses "*Odi*" and "*Odini*" (p.5), vernacular words to represent the knock-and-answer customary practice of the community. This technique ensures an atmosphere of African consciousness and lifestyle.

In Modisane's short story, "The Dignity of Begging" published in *Drum* in 1951, the use of English portrays a conflict between hegemonic English and the unsuccessful attempts to turn it completely into an African

discourse, a hybrid state of mind which is represented by the thinking of the urbanised blacks in the 1950s. Modisane's descriptions of Nathaniel's (the beggar) property in Pampoenfontein as a "farm" (p.16) and his wife as an "amnesia case" (p.16) for accepting matrimonial proposal from a person as physically deformed and temperamentally aberrant as himself, are evidence of such linguistic ambivalence.

Nathaniel's portrayal as a beggar (p.10) and flamboyant gambler (p.13) shows that the money he accumulates from begging on Johannesburg streets and from betting at horse races is insufficient to buy him a farm. Besides, the apartheid legislation of the 1950s allowed only whites to own farms. The fact that Nathaniel's extended family is occupying his Pampoenfontein property suggests that the word "farm" does not carry its native sense of the estate of one individual or of a nuclear family. Evidence of the protagonist's extended family occupying Pampoenfontein is found in the use of such expressions as, "My father smiles and beckons for us to come into the house" (p.16) and "even my mother becomes a statue of amazement" (p.16). It can be reasonably inferred that while Nathaniel uses his trickery to fend for his wife and children, members of his family live in the same homestead or village as his father, mother and siblings. Such an arrangement in the black life of the 1950s was possible only in a village or township like Sophiatown where Nathaniel rents "a room" (p.12), and not on what is called a farm in native English. Since the 1950s, rural residence for blacks has been derogatorily referred to as "farm" (Mojela 2002). It is the African meaning that is likely to be the accurate interpretation of what Nathaniel's property in Pampoenfontein really is. By saying that "I got myself ... a property in Pampoenfontein" (p.12), Nathaniel is only boasting of benefiting from the economic support of his family in the village where his parents also live in their own separate homestead and within walking distance of his own.

Modisane's use of the word "farm" to capture the culturally distinctive worldview of blacks is an instance of *Drum* writers abrogating the English language to carry a worldview other than that of its native speakers. However, for Nathaniel's wife to be described as "an amnesia case" (p.16), is an indication that Nathaniel exemplifies social hybridity among blacks of the 1950s. Westernisation, seen in blacks adapting to urban life where they seek employment and African consciousness associated with preservation of identity attached to rural homes, intersect in the psyche of the black characters of *Drum* fiction.

Such hybridity surfaces when a rejoicing Nathaniel, in Modisane's story, sees the piano he had given up at his rural home and feels "like dancing the Zulu war and going savage" (p.16). The impulse to leap in

traditional Zulu mock war dance is evidence that African cultural consciousness remains intact despite western influence from urban Johannesburg. The author's equation of such positive cultural identity with being "savage" points to an imperfect abrogation of English that allows the substitution of yet another English term that exudes an Africanist self-description with as lame a word as "savage".

Sentso in his story "Under the Blue-gum Trees" published in *Drum*, 1954, using Gert Genade and his black servants, testifies to the fact that blacks did not own farms (p.48). Gert's wife cautions him against socialising with blacks as equals: "You could dance, too ... but remember, you are white!"(p.49). The black protagonist is an exploited and dehumanised "farm captain" (p.50). He and his fellow farmhands lead a life of sauntering landlessness in which they continually bid farewell to the graves of their kinsmen. (p.54). When they are dismissed from work and vassal residence, they always yearn to "apply for a stand in the location" (p.55). Apartheid order still puts the white man in charge, to control such 'ownership' of township or location stands. The masterhood of whites bolstered by segregationist apartheid laws of the 1950s and servitude of blacks under this system were encoded in social conduct.

Though Modisane succeeds in harnessing the English language to assert African identity, Sentso does not even attempt such abrogation, except for using appropriate imagery forged in conventional English to reveal the social ills of apartheid in the 1950s. But even in such apparently inane stories as Sentso's, the use of African names for characters suggests that the dialogue is actually in African languages and the thinking is in keeping with African identity. Sentso's style points to a more implicit mediation of English discourse seen in the style of other *Drum* writers, including Ngubane.

In the 1956 *Drum* story, "Man of Africa", Ngubane uses historical incidents like the battle of Ncome between the Zulus and the Boers to reveal the linguistic and cultural identity of the former who were attacking Indians around the city of Durban. The technique is enhanced by a revelation of the Zulu notion of honour, in the statements that "he was beneath contempt who could ask mercy on his enemy" (p.126) and "he was beneath contempt who could regard his fellow man as his inferior" (p.129). Although the prose is in English, this approach sustains awareness that the actors are Zulus with an African worldview. The revelation of the Zulu worldview also serves as a reminder that the actors speak in isiZulu and the record of their ideas and dialogue in English is actually a linguistic-cultural translation. That is why the Zulu man stumbling upon a

writhing Indian woman during the burning down of Indian homes addresses her thus: "What do you want me to do, Makoti?"

Reference to the woman as his *makoti*, rather than the English *my daughter-in-law*, implies that the man is speaking in isiZulu, and not English and that the English language in which the story is written is a convenient translation of isiZulu. This is further demonstrated after the Zulu man rescues the Indian woman's children from the flames, when she beckons to the rescuer who is trapped fatally in the burning house and addresses him "in broken Zulu" (p.131). The woman uses the same language as the man to ensure effective communication and as he dies in the flames, he addresses his fellow Zulu warriors as "sons of Zulu" (p.131). Such refrains describing the actors as Zulu show that the dialogue is in isiZulu, anchored in Zulu identity. The result is that the English language is divested of western discourse and hegemonic self-assertion.

A similar technique of interspersing English narration with African terms is evident in Rive's short story, "African Song" (p.114). Muti's mind rambles about the black protest gathering which is about to be dismissed by the police. The English narration, describing Muti's thoughts, is interspersed with the struggle song, *Nkosi Sikelele' iAfrika*. In this way, the English language is subverted as a mere narrative veneer strewn over dialogue in vernacular and over African thought that negates the imperialism associated with a western colonising language.

Rive's device for domesticating English in fiction is even subtler in his other story, "Black and Brown Song" (p.87) where he interrupts his narration of the ironic maltreatment of blacks by supremacist coloureds with a song castigating this folly. The lyrics of the song capture the liberatory vision of the 1950s in which Indians, coloureds and blacks saw themselves as fellow Africans suffering under white rule. This time, the lyrics of the song are not in an African language. However, the very texture of English prose accommodating African songs should be understood as an Africanisation of the short story genre of western origins. By using English in this way, the *Drum* writer promotes African artistry and ways of thinking found in the oral tradition. This technique debunks the deep-lying, African consciousness streamlining the identity of the coloureds and blacks, thus heightening the satire on the skewed attitudes of the coloured.

A disregard for the transliterated African meanings in literature written in a western language weakens understanding of such writers' narratives. As oral literary features pervade such writings, reading the works of *Drum* writers such as Rive as if they represent cultures other than African deprives them of what Conolly and Sienaert (2006: 1) perceive as

indigenous knowledge contained in oral literature. Oral literature, according to them, is “by nature composed in performance, recorded in the socio-cultural archive of human memory and expressed in a number of mnemonic forms including dance, song, chant and in a variety of material forms, almost all of which are non-scribal.” The expression of the African worldview by means of oral literature devices is one major constituent of African identity in *Drum* stories.

Motsisi, another *Drum* writer, in his own unique way, uses subtler means to purge the English language of dominant western discourse. In both stories, “If Bugs Were Men” (p.171) and “Johburg Jailbugs” (p.173), Motsisi satirises the black intelligentsia of the 1950s using the metaphor of bugs. The dialogue of the bugs entails incisive social analysis. The similarity of the technique used in these stories with fables is unmistakable, although the black culture they are premised on is a westernised one and references to African customs is even castigated in the satiric tone of his narratives in statements like, “we’ll bug him so good he’ll learn to leave the white man’s liquor alone and develop along his own lines” (p.174). Motsisi’s allusions to the oral aspect of the fable is a revelation of the hybrid state of his consciousness in which the African customs where he grew up contest with his aspiration to be moulded into a westernised urban African of the 1950s. Fables, as an aspect of the oral tradition and the short stories that evoke them, affirm African thought which is an African way of looking at reality as exemplified in theories of African identity (see Mphahlele’s concept of Afrikan Humanism described, inter alia, in his essay reproduced in 2002). By tempering English narration with forms of oral literature, consciously or inadvertently, Motsisi downgrades the otherwise hegemonic English to assert the worth of the Africans whose identity would otherwise be undermined.

Motsisi’s cultural ambivalence and more capitulating inclination towards westernisation is best captured by Chapman’s (1989: 217) observation that his shebeen characters “suggest, simultaneously, the resilience and fragility of the black urban culture.” Chapman further illustrates the less radical assertion of Africanism by *Drum* writers such as Motsisi in his observation that in their literature, black urban culture of the fifties seemed “to be symbolically battered into the ground by the bulldozing of Sophiatown”. The metaphor of a bulldozer points to the apparent victory of westernisation at the expense of a consolidated African identity.

## Conclusion

Interrogation of fiction produced in South Africa by *Drum* writers in the fifties reveals superficial ideological cleavages. At the level of creative writing, the writers respond in a culturally assertive manner to the identity crossroads spawned among urban Africans by a lifestyle imposed by the apartheid trope of colonisation. This is the case despite the fact that these writers employ English as their medium of writing. The situation these African writers faced in the fifties forced them to domesticate the English language to support and represent a resilient African identity. The absence of sound cultural anchor to the *Drum* writers' stylistic use of English would otherwise be complicit in the view of Eurocentric critics that whatever African identity obtains among urban Africans of the fifties would be erased by westernisation and its discourse of the imperial "centre".

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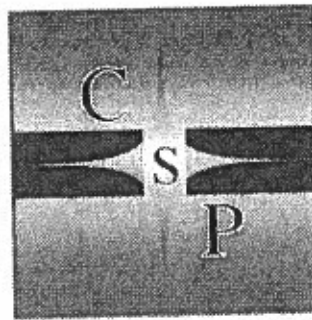


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