

Turkish Tales, And Some Thoughts Review by Njabulo S Ndebele

Yashar Kemal, *Anatolian Tales*, (London: Writers and Readers, 1983)

As I was preparing this review of Yashar Kemal's *Anatolian Tales*, I realised that I was going to have to go beyond the conventional review. The subject matter of Kemal's stories and the forcefulness of his storytelling, left me thinking long and hard about his art. It dawned on me that I had before me, a collection of compelling artistic statements which, at the same time, presented themselves, with an intriguing sense of inevitability, as fruitful occasions for a serious examination of key social issues affecting some rural and semi-rural communities in one 'Third World' country, Turkey. There seemed to be something disturbingly familiar about these stories; something the echoes of which edged the focus of my mind towards the South African literary situation, where it seemed there was something missing. Was there, in contemporary South African fiction, a tradition of such compelling an imaginative recreation of rural life as in Kemal's stories? I could not come up with many examples. On the other hand, instead of showing any serious interest in rural life, our writers seemed decidedly preoccupied with urban culture. Granted that such preoccupation may be justified and valid, what, nevertheless, was the state of the resulting urban fiction itself as art? Before I address myself to the questions posed, let me describe what triggered them off in the first place.

I

Kemal's *Anatolian Tales* is a collection of stories in which we are treated to a detailed, imaginative recreation of rural life in the Anatolian plains of Turkey. It consists of four fairly long, and three very short, stories. I will summarise the long stories first.

'A Dirty Story', which opens the collection, is the story of Hollow Osman, a somewhat mentally retarded peasant who has been living with and working for Huru, a woman who has brought him up since he was a child. Osman's friends succeed in convincing him to persuade Huru to buy him a wife. After all, hasn't Osman been 'slaving' for Huru all these years, and 'living alone and sleeping in barns like a dog?' But it is not long after Osman has had a wife purchased for him that a rich landowner's son seduces her. Soon, the young men of the village are 'lining up at her door all through the night'.

on S.A. Fiction

Osman is powerless to deal with the humiliation. Things come to a head when even vital economic activity, such as ploughing, stops, threatening the village with virtual starvation. The young men return from Osman's house in the morning to sleep, too tired to do any work. The village faces a crisis. In a plot involving the Agha (landlord) and some other people, Osman's wife is driven out of the village. But the young men pursue her to her place of refuge, where they continue to ravish her mercilessly. In the end, Osman picks her up, all but lifeless, and runs away with her.

'Drumming Out' is about Fikret Imraklı Bey, a young man recently graduated from the university, and whose first appointment is as District Commissioner in Anatolia. Learning of his appointment, all the rich farmers of the district prepare to give the new Commissioner a glorious welcome, and they provide him with the best accommodation available. The aim is to lull the young, inexperienced Commissioner into a stupor of comfort and complacency, so that he could easily issue permits for rice planting against the Rice Commission's regulations which are meant to protect public health. Bey falls into the trap, and planting permits are issued liberally. Matters come to a head when powerless villagers are flooded out of their houses. As a result, a conscience-stricken deputy Commissioner, who has been working in the district for a long time, brings the attention of the new Commissioner to the regulations. The Commissioner, to his horror, realises too late that he has been fooled. From that moment, he begins his fight against the Aghas, and goes out of his way to protect and defend the interests of the peasants. The rest of the story is about the determined efforts of the Aghas to get rid of the Commissioner, who is no longer their 'friend'. They succeed. The final ejection ceremony is the 'drumming out' by an 'army of small boys, each one holding a tin can and drumming on it with all his might'. 'It's a send off,' it is explained to the departing Commissioner. 'The Aghas always do that for Government officials forced to go like you . . .'. Thus, the Commissioner

leaves, but he has won the gratitude of the peasants.

In 'The Baby', Kemal tells the story of Ismail, whose wife has just died, leaving her husband with a newly born baby. Ismail's problem is how to bring the child up in so desolate a place as his village. He also has to deal with unfounded recriminations that he contributed directly to the death of his wife. Ismail goes around trying to get the help of breast-feeding women. But only one person is willing to help: a blind woman who 'sees' more clearly than others. But her help is of no avail. There is no relief from hunger and suffering. The rest of the story is a piling up of details of Ismail's suffering.

In 'The Shopkeeper', the last of the long stories, Mehmet is a village storekeeper whose store is also some kind of village social centre. Men gather there for a chat. But always there with them is Queer Sully, a boy who always sits, absolutely silent, a few paces away from the men. Part of Mehmet's business is to obtain grain clandestinely from village women who, without the knowledge of their husbands, want to buy a few luxury items from the store. This way, Mehmet accumulates a lot of grain which will seemingly bring in a lot of money when household stocks run out. An unscrupulous businessman, Mehmet deals underhandedly with his competitors. He also arranges abductions of village girls for men in the cities. But Mehmet has to reckon with Queer Sully who has a quiet disdain for injustice. He has a history of dealing firmly with local wrong-doers: such as setting their fields on fire. Mehmet tries to ward off possible retribution by attempting to bribe Queer Sully with the bounty of the store. At the end of the story, Sully almost clears the store of goods, and then spits at Mehmet in the face, for Mehmet had just arranged for the hearing up of a competitor.

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The next three stories are the short ones. 'White Trousers' is the story of a young apprentice who dreams of owning a pair of white trousers. He lives with his widowed mother and already shoulders the heavy responsibility of helping her in the hard task of surviving. The boy's resolve to prove himself as a worthy and deserving worker is severely tested when he is hired out to work continuously for three days at a kiln. He barely passes the test, and a fine relationship develops between him and his employer. In the manner of a rite of passage story, the boy is well on the way to being an economic asset to himself and his mother.

'On the Road' is the story of a man who returns home from the market where he has just sold six sacks of farm produce. He is riding home on his donkey cart, and is counting his money, when he comes across a woman walking alone in the scorching sun, along the empty country road. He offers her a ride. It turns out that she is returning home after a divorce. Two lonely people meet on a lonely road. Fate brings them together for a lifelong companionship.

In 'Green Onions', Mahmud is returning home to his village after being away to make money in the cities for five years, so that he could set himself up in livestock farming. His return home by train is also his second train ride. In the compartment, he finds a young man with a sleeping, sickly woman resting her head on the young man's shoulder. She has a 'wasting disease which, according to one doctor, can be cured by the breathing of fresh air full of the smell of pine trees'. The smell of fresh onions in the compartment so reminds Mahmud of his own village that he buys fresh green onions at the next station. The green onions become a symbol of all that is wonderful in the world. Once he learns

of the young woman's problem, Mahmud wants to share with the engaged couple the healing powers of the pines of his village, and its health-giving springs. There, they will find life, and the girl will be cured, and they will be married. Mahmud invites the couple to come and live with him, and will take care of them with the money he has just made, and shower them with the hospitality of his village. As the story ends, Mahmud, the train moving, and the couple having got off at their village station, is yelling at them from the window of the moving train, the name of his village for in his excitement, he had forgotten to give it to them.

II

A remarkable feature of Kemal as a writer in this collection, something I found refreshing, is that he emerges as a writer who is rooted firmly in the timeless tradition of storytelling. A chief characteristic of this tradition is that a story is allowed to unfold by itself with a minimum of authorial intervention through which a storyteller might directly suggest how readers or listeners should understand his story. Two key effects result from the lack of such intervention. Firstly, the entertainment value of the story is enhanced, and the emotional involvement of the reader is thus assured. Secondly, such involvement does not necessarily lead to a huling of the reader's critical consciousness, as Brecht, the German poet and dramatist, would assert. On the contrary, the reader's emotional involvement in a well told story triggers off an imaginative participation in which the reader recreates the story in his own mind, and is thus led to draw conclusions about the meaning of the story from the engaging logic of events as they are acted out in the story.

Also, there is an impersonal ring to Kemal's stories, one which approximates the impersonal, communal quality of a traditional tale of unknown origins passed from mouth to mouth.¹ This quality in Kemal's stories surely blends well with the Anatolian setting in which the oral tradition must still be alive. In both 'A Dirty Story' and 'The Shopkeeper', people often come together to exchange stories, even if some of the stories are gossip. For Kemal then, an observation by Walter Benjamin is most appropriate. Benjamin comments that 'experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.'² Kemal, of course, does not appear, in these stories, to have written down known tales in the same way as A. C. Jordan did in his *Tales From Southern Africa*. But there is some evidence that Kemal is writing within a popular tradition he is doubtlessly conscious of. Andrew Mango observes that:

Turkish 'socialist realist' theatrical writing of today, with its stock types of wicked landowners, down-trodden peasants and progressive intellectuals, derives . . . from a local tradition of popular pantomimes (called *tuluat theatre*) . . . Turkey's most successful novel of recent years, Yashar Kemal's *Incce Mehmet* (translated as *Mehmet, My Hawk*) is, for all its progressive message, a *destan*, a tale of stirring deeds by a local hero as told by generations of bazaar story tellers. [My emphasis].³

Kemal's art, then, is rooted in the history of storytelling in Anatolia. Perhaps his remarkable achievement can, to a very large extent, be attributed to this fact. I would now like to highlight some features of Kemal's art in *Anatolian Tales*.

A distinctive feature of Kemal's art is the apparent ease with which he opens his stories. The opening to 'A Dirty Story' for example, is instructive in this regard:

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The three of them were sitting on the damp earth, their backs against the dung-daubed brush-wall and their knees drawn up to their chests, when another man walked up and crouched beside them.

'Have you heard?' said one of them excitedly. 'Broken-Nose Jabbar's done it again! You know Jabbar, the fellow who brings all those women from the mountain villages and sells them in the plain? Well, this time he's come down with a couple of real beauties. The lads of Misdik have got together and bought one of them on the spot, and now they're having fun and making her dance and all that. It's unbelievable! Where does the fellow find so many women? How does he get them to come with him? He's the devil's own son, he is . . .'

'Well, that's how he makes a living,' commented one of the men. 'Ever since I can remember, this Jabbar's been peddling women for the villages of the Chukurova plain. Allah provides for all and sundry . . .'

The ease of exposition coincides with the ironic ease with which a dehumanising abnormality, the turning of women into mere objects of commerce, has become normal. This creates an ambiguity within the reader, the kind of tense ambiguity which makes for reading enjoyment, in which the narrative style appears to validate an objective social condition which, at the same time, begs to be condemned. Kemal, therefore, invites us to 'enjoy' injustice as we condemn it. This is a critical tension that stays with us throughout the story. In other words, we accept, as readers, the human validity of the situation before us while asking, at the same time, what terrible social conditions can produce such human beings. The irresistible sense of story, together with the detailed social realism, immediately engage us on two levels: that of imaginative involvement and enjoyment on the one hand, and critical evaluation on the other.

One more passage from 'A Dirty Story' will help us understand other aspects of Kemal's narrative style: how he develops setting, character, dialogue, and suggestive symbols for narrative effects:

Down in the villages of the Chukurova plain a sure sign of oncoming spring is when the women are seen with their heads on one another's lap, picking the lice out of one another's hair. So it was, on one of the first warm days of the year. A balmy sun shone carelessly down on the fields and women were sitting before their huts on the dusty ground, busy with the lice and wagging their tongues for all they were worth. An acrid odour of sweat hung about the group. Seedy Donch was rummaging in the hair of a large woman who was stretched full length on the ground. She decided that she had been silent long enough.

'No,' she declared, 'it's not as you say, sister! He didn't force her or anything. She simply saw those shiny yellow boots. If you're going to believe them! . . . She's got to deny it, of course . . .'

The women are gossiping about the Agha's seduction of Hollow Osman's wife. Their dialogue complements their action: the gossip is as pleasurable as the 'picking of lice out of one another's hair'. In this way, the sense of community among the women is sealed, for better or for worse. This sisterhood breaks up sometimes, as when they fail to realise that the practice of wife buying undermines their own dignity. What is normal to the men, as we have seen, is normal to the women too. For example, the women's inability to sympathise with Osman's wife during her terrible ordeal makes them cruel witnesses. The sisterhood breaks up

again when in 'The Baby' the women fail to come to the aid of one of them who dies in childbirth, leaving the baby in the care of a helpless man who wanders all over the desolate plains in search of someone kind enough to breast-feed his child. But sometimes, as in 'Drumming-Out', the sisterhood can rise to heroic proportions in the fight against the injustice threatening their very lives.

Another feature of the above quote is how it depicts the human tendency to adjust social habits according to changing seasons. Indeed, in all of Kemal's stories we are made conscious of seasons, particularly summer. The hot sun becomes the summer's predominant image. So are the hot dry land and the dust. These conditions are an everpresent background to the people's consciousness. Nevertheless, they go about their business, and, as everywhere, are attempting to bring some semblance of meaning into their lives.

There is also the omnipresent wealth and power of the landowners, the Aghas, whose corruption is probably the most predominant political-economic concern in the plains of Anatolia. In a society that hovers precariously between feudal and capitalist social formations, the owner of land, that ultimate source of the means of survival, wields almost unlimited power. He can ruin land for profit ('Drumming-Out'), he can kill off competition ('Drumming-Out' and 'The Shopkeeper'); he can bribe government either with money or with high sounding patriotic phrases, and he can seduce women with impunity. Kemal, almost unobtrusively, dots here and there the symbols of the Aghas' wealth, shiny yellow boots, white trousers, and brand new cars. It is germane to point out that a lesser writer would probably have been tempted, in order to 'strike a blow' for justice, to dwell overtly on these symbols, thus getting out of us more indignation, and less understanding. Kemal is more interested in the actual social processes of injustice than in finished products. He dramatises these processes with much skill, allowing the nefarious activities of the Aghas to *condemn themselves through their dramatised effects*.

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Overall, *Anatolian Tales* is an unsentimental yet sympathetic portrayal of peasant life with all its jealousies, vindictiveness, cruelty, powerlessness in the face of the wealthy, and in the ease with which peasant subsistence can break up under stress. But all those foibles are brought out under the control of the writer's deep creative understanding of his subjects. The peasants are never seen as debased human ghosts inviting only condescending sympathy or pity. They are disturbingly too human for that. The realistic setting, moreover, enables us to understand that the peasant condition is not attributable to some mysterious forces of the 'human condition'. They are what they are largely as a result of a particular kind of life in a given set of physical conditions. Some triumph against these conditions; others are destroyed by them. The result of all this, for the reader, is a kind of understanding that is much deeper than any direct 'message' of 'instruction'. Deeper, because the stories are an occasion not for easy messages, but for asking further questions.

The endings of all Kemal's stories in this collection, leave us thinking. In the lengthy stories, the ending comes with defeat, and we leave the stories with an uncomfortable feeling of gloom. But this gloom is always accompanied by a kind of quiet, contemplative indignation. There is no resignation, only a quiet determination to find answers. The shorter stories on the other hand, share a rare kind of lyrical triumph. But the lyricism is never allowed to become

sentimental. It is always grounded in the actual needs of survival; the cart and the reeds in 'On the Road'; the onion, pine trees and springs in 'Green Onions'; the kilt in 'White Trousers'; and just retribution in 'The Shopkeeper'. In these stories, the peasants achieve some victory. But this is no false heroism, for Kemal seems to be aware that to imbue his peasants with undeserved heroism is to condescend towards them, to despise them, to reduce their humanity in an effort that would turn them into mere items in a moral or political debate. Kemal strenuously avoids the kind of heroism that scores points without being, at the same time, a celebration of *achieved* triumph. In the shorter stories, therefore, we are left with a hope that makes us contemplate the validity and worthiness of those moments in life that are joyful: that affirm it.

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I became aware, after I had read Kemal's stories, that I did not remember ever coming across as compelling a body of fiction about peasant life in South Africa. It then seemed to me that there existed a disturbing silence in South African literature as far as peasants, as subjects of artistic attention, were concerned. There have, of course, been stories here and there. A lot of fiction in the African languages, Zulu or Sesotho, for example, is set in the rural areas. But, almost invariably, the setting soon shifts to the towns; or, if not, the writers, armed with Christian zealotry, are merely concerned with eradicating 'superstition'. Seldom do we see peasants, *in their own right*, struggling to survive against the harsh conditions of nature or man-made injustice. What seems to be lacking then is an attempt at a sincere imaginative perception that sees South African peasant life as having a certain human validity, albeit a problematic one.

I became aware also, that much exciting and revealing research has been, and continues to be carried out on South African peasants by a recent crop of radical historians. Much of their work has been published by Ravan Press. But, with few exceptions, their research, and the discussions of it, appear to have been confined to the white liberal universities. Nevertheless, there has been no corresponding surge of interest in peasant subjects in our writers and artists: at least none that I am aware of. I cannot exactly make up my mind about the reasons for both the silence and for the lack of interest in response to the scholarly efforts; but I will tentatively suggest a few.

Firstly, as far as the possible response to scholarly research is concerned, we have here yet another glaring tragedy of South African life. For historical reasons, only the whites have some access to the best educational facilities. This means that any research of radical interest which, by definition, has to emanate from, and its evaluation be situated in, the very current of the African struggle as it evolves, has no organic relationship with that struggle. So it cannot enrich the struggle in the *immediate* instance. This is so from the perspective of information giving as well as the assimilation of that information. Michael Vaughan, in a recent issue of *English in Africa*, makes the following observation which is most pertinent to what I'm saying here:

In general, writers in the cities seem to be clear about one thing: that their writings should show of themselves and their writers, a commitment to political engagement.

As one white academic critic, I have certainly felt myself drawn more and more to the position that the most socially significant developments in literature in South Africa are taking place in black township literature. To engage with this developing literature in a social-critical spirit has come to represent an absolute critical priority. At the same time, this engagement raises the question of critical 'address'. Black township literature is written by and for the inhabitants of black townships: its concepts, and the criticism and self-criticism that sustain and correct it are derived largely from the ideological and political milieu of the township — a milieu I do not share, except in the form of certain texts, which, furthermore, come to me divorced from their normative contextual associations.⁵

He then states, in what could easily apply to historical research, that 'academic criticism of contemporary black literature must be extremely circumscribed in its practice so long as it is deprived of contact with the writers and public of this literature'.⁵ It would seem to follow then, that African fiction in South Africa would stand to benefit qualitatively if and when a radical intellectual tradition was to be effectively placed in and developed from the ranks of the mass struggle. There, the writers will also be found.

Secondly, the city appears to have held tyrannical hold on the imagination of the average African writer. The situation, no doubt, has historical roots. The South African industrial revolution occasioned a massive flow of labour from the rural areas into the towns and cities of the country. Once there, those Africans who managed to acquire an education did not have any material or compelling ideological incentives to return to their peasant origins, neither physically nor imaginatively. We are talking here not of individuals here and there who return, but of socially significant movements. So, peasant consciousness never seriously benefited from the now relatively sophisticated intellectual perspectives of its own original sons and daughters. The 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' theme was the only viable compromise. In time, Jim sank his roots firmly in Jo'burg and encouraged a tendency which validated only the city experience as worthy of artistic attention. The setting had to be Johannesburg, then Cape Town, then Durban, then . . . in descending order of importance. In effect, life outside of the major urban centres was all but obliterated. Only the miners would oftentimes be an irritating reminder, as Nat Nakasa observed.⁶

Thirdly, the perception appears to have consolidated within the ranks of the struggle that the decisive element in determining the course of the coming South African future, is the workers in the cities. That might be so, and is theoretically understandable. But what of the millions of Africans in the rural areas who, at that very decisive moment, might decide the fate of the hinterland? What of the deliberate peasantisation of urban Africans by the government through the Bantustans? The peasant position within the economic and political structures that govern the organic relationship between the urban and rural social formations might be theoretically understandable. But the peasant's *actual* aspirations, it seems, are a matter that ought not to be taken for granted.

Whatever the reasons, it does look as if, both from the political and the cultural perspectives, an important dimension has been left out of the total South African experience as that experience attempts to be conscious of

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Itself and to define itself. However, one can predict the coming, in the not too distant future, of an era of urban obsession with rural areas as genuine sources of an array of cultural symbols by which to define a future cultural dispensation in South Africa. In a sense, that era has already begun. When it is running full steam ahead, that era will come with declarations asserting the need for an awareness of tradition that goes back into a peasant past. The era will doubtlessly idealise that past, thus defeating its own intentions. Perhaps the time is now in which to make a calm and objective reassessment.

One thing is clear, though. We are in the cities, anyhow, so what is the state of writing there?

In general, writers in the cities seem to be clear about one thing: that their writings should show of themselves and their writers, a commitment to political engagement. According to this view, a poem or a work of fiction should most decidedly be written and be read as offering necessary political insights. It should 'strike a blow for freedom'. Now, while most writers can agree on this aim, they may not necessarily have the same thing in mind about what implications this agreement has for the actual relationship between art and society; or, more specifically, between art and politics. The central problem here appears to lie in the often confusing paradox that art is an autonomous entity which, at the same time, derives its objective validity from and within society. This latter condition would then, by definition, appear to deny artistic autonomy. Something there is, therefore, in art that determines its autonomy; and something there is that appears necessarily to undercut that autonomy. Writers might therefore fall into two camps: according to whether they emphasise what makes for artistic autonomy, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, according to whether they emphasise the undercutting elements. It is the latter camp that is often easily defined as 'managed' or 'committed' or 'relevant'.

What so readily seems to undercut the autonomy of art is its subject matter: the specificity of setting, the familiarity of character, recognisable events in either recent or distant history, and other similar factors that ground a work firmly in the time and space. In societies such as South Africa, where social, economic, and political oppression is most stark, such conditions tend to enforce, almost with the power of natural law, overt tendentiousness in the artist's choice of subject matter, and in the handling of that subject matter. It is such tendentiousness which, because it can most easily be interpreted as 'taking a position', earns a work of art, displaying it, the title of 'commitment' or 'engagement'. Clearly then, according to this attitude, artistic merit or relevance, is determined less by a work's internal coherence (a decisive principle for autonomy), than by the work's displaying a high level of explicit political preoccupation which may not necessarily be too critical of the demands of the artistic medium chosen.

If the average South African writer has chosen this kind of preoccupation, what effect has it had on his writing? One major effect is that the writing's probing into the South African experience has been largely superficial. This superficiality comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can easily be characterised as ones of either good or evil, or, even more accurately, symbols of evil on the one hand, and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand. Thus, as far as the former kind of symbols are concerned, we will find an array of 'sell outs', 'bases',

'madams', policemen, cruel farmers and their overseers, hantusians, farm labour, township superintendents and their subordinate functionaries. On the other hand, the victims will be isocais, convicts, buggars, washerwomen, road-gang diggers, nightwatchmen, priests, shebeen kings and queens, and various kinds of 'law-abiding' citizens. All these symbols appear in most of our writings as finished products, often without a personal history. As such they appear as mere ideas to be marshalled this way or that in a moral debate. Their *bassem* anonymity becomes the dialectical equivalent of the anonymity to which the oppressive system consigns millions of oppressed Africans. Thus, instead of clarifying the tragic human experience of oppression, such fiction becomes grounded in the very negation it seeks to transcend.

The problem is that this kind of fiction is almost certainly the product of an ideology whose analysis of society is based on moral premises. In this view, the problems of South Africa are premised on the moral evil of apartheid. The major commitment of such a moral ideology is the exposure of the existence of social evil with the aim of pricking the human conscience of those responsible for that evil. The result is not knowledge but indictment; and indictment, because it assumes an accusatory stance, evokes a defensive attitude which might compel the evil-doers not to re-evaluate their position, but to push their evil-producing programme fast in order that their 'utopian' aims might be realised sooner, thus proving the indictment against them false. All this is because moral ideology tends to ossify complex social problems into symbols which are perceived as finished forms of good or evil, instead of leading us towards important and necessary insights into social processes leading to those finished forms. Thus, showing no more than surfaces, writings influenced by such an ideology tend to *inform* without involving readers in a truly transforming experience.

Indeed, the problem of *information* in a modern capitalist society appears to be at the root of the matter. (It is not too long ago that South Africa had what was called the 'Information Scandal'. The issue is that indictment, by its very nature, requires *information* in order to be validated. And the more dramatic the information, and the more strikingly perfect it is in its finished form as a symbol of the devastating effects of *apartheid*, then the more desirable it is as a weapon of moral war. Thus, the writer of indictment soon gives himself up to dealing with the oppressive negation on its own terms. And these terms, at their starkest, are numbing sensationalism and its consequent smothering of creative thinking. What we have is a conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social information. It is at this point that a competition between creative writing and journalism ensues. Lewis Nkosi's criticism of this 'competition' is well known.⁷ In fact, it is not accurate to describe this relationship as a competitive one. Rather, what we have is creative writing's almost obsessive emulation of journalism. But Lewis Nkosi did not go far enough in his analysis of the problem.

The phenomenon of information in a capitalist society hinges on such issues as who produces the information, who interprets it, and who disseminates it. Now, to the average African writer in South Africa, naturally placed in opposition to the government by virtue of race, colour, economic, and political status, the production, interpretation, and dissemination of information by the South African government and its agencies renders such information suspect. On the other hand, information produced, interpreted and disseminated by a variety of liberal institutions is more

readily accepted because such institutions are perceived to be morally in opposition to established Government policy on matters of race relations. Such acceptance, in the evolution of African political resistance, has over the years, almost become dependence. This dependence was almost unavoidable. The liberal institutions of higher learning, liberal research agencies, and the liberal press have, by pouring out masses of information as examples of the inequities of *apartheid*, dominated the information giving activity for the general opposition.

Furthermore, the liberal institutions' essentially anthropological interest in African society gradually consolidated a picture of African society under South African oppression as a debased society. Studies and press reports on tsotsi violence, shebeens, convicts, sexual promiscuity, faction fighting, mine compound life, 'witchdoctors', 'strange' African customs and other instances of pathetic suffering have determined the public's (both black and white) perceptions of African suffering under *apartheid*. On the other hand, African medical doctors, teachers, township musicians, lawyers and others have been condescendingly promoted as symbols of African progress. But such promotional activity produced its opposite effect: the reinforcement of the image of debasement, because what was finally seen were caricatures of sophisticated white men. Needless to say, all these images were highly marketable ones, and the press did its duty consolidating stereotypes and prejudices. In African newspapers advertising promoted, corresponding commodities of debasement: liquor, skin lightening creams, high-tar tobacco on the one hand, and correspondence schools, etc on the other hand, playing on eager hopes.

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One can probably assert with some confidence then, that the average literate African's perception and conceptualisation of the African predicament in South Africa has been fashioned by a broad spectrum of the white liberal establishment. For example, the popularity of the *Daily Mail* and its influence in the townships over the years should always be understood within the context of the newspaper's link with Anglo-American, which in turn has more than casual links with such institutions of higher learning as the University of the Witwatersrand, and such liberal research agencies as the Institute of Race Relations, all of which belong to a specific ideological climate.

It can be surmised then, that in general the African resistance movement has not been in control of the information gathering, interpretation, and dissemination process. Under such conditions it is easy for sloganeering, defined as superficial thinking, to develop. The psychology of the slogan in these circumstances is the psychology of intellectual powerlessness. For example, the constant reference to the terrible South African Establishment as fascist, racist, imperialist, satanic, etc, while true, becomes mere verbal evocation acting as a facade for what might appear to be an empty and desperate intellectual centre lacking in firmly established traditions of intellectual rigour. The slogan is the substitution of the gut response for clarity of analysis based on systematically acquired information. Those who have not domesticated the information gathering process at the institutional level are doomed to receive information, even about themselves, second-hand. It will be argued, of course, that Africans *do* have information about themselves as the actual sufferers. That is so. But such information has only biological validity. Only institution-

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alised information is subject to ideological scrutiny. Unfortunately there has not been, among Africans, a consistently original intellectual and analytical base from which to domesticate information and turn it into a truly transforming tool of liberation.

Now, it is at the level of slogans that the resistance movement has traditionally turned away from the liberal establishment, in order to marshal the second-hand information against Afrikaner political power. The resulting conflict has a dimension to it that can most clearly be seen as a clash of slogans. It might be wondered why the Afrikaner resorts to slogans when he has his own information gathering, interpretation, and dissemination agencies. One possible answer is that the intellectual tradition of the Afrikaner must, with few exceptions, surely be based on one of the most profound traditions of rationalisations ever conceived, for surely they must see the evil of their own creation. It is at the point of this recognition that their own slogans begin. The purpose of Rhodde's Information agency was precisely to market oppression through attractive packages of slogans. In this situation, it is easy to see how the marketing of oppression through the various state agencies produces its dialectical opposite: the 'marketing' of resistance. In this conflict, the slogan of oppression qualitatively equals the slogan of resistance. Both are verbal claims making little attempt to genuinely involve the 'consumers' as equals in the quest for truth.

What implications has all this had for creative writing? It should be clear, I once met a writer who gleefully told me how honoured he felt that his book of poetry had been banned by the South African censors. What I found disturbing was the ease with which the writer ascribed some kind of heroism to himself, almost glorying in a negation. It did not occur to him, of course, that the censors may have banned his work precisely because they may have seen in it their own 'games', their own tactics, their own quality of propaganda, their own vindictiveness, their own debasement. The writer may have concentrated on those aspects of social reality and the methods of treating that reality which interest the censors to the extent that the censors cannot think beyond them. The censor may have seen not experience, but social information that simply conflicted with his own. The whole problem, of course, might be more complex than that. I was merely trying to challenge what seems to be a dangerously complacent attitude.

The point of the matter is that the average African writer, working under an information ethos which for him has not habituated a tradition of rigorous analysis and interpretation, produces an art of anticipated surfaces rather than one of processes—processes in character development or in social evolution, for example. He produces an art that is grounded in the negation of social debasement, where scenes of social violence and a host of examples of general social oppression become ends in themselves. As a result very little transformation in reader consciousness is to be expected since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition. Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms. Beyond that confirmation, it may even reinforce the frustration produced by the reader's now further consolidated perception of an overwhelmingly negative social reality.

For example, it will be recalled that it was the aesthetics

of recognition that was the basis of dissatisfaction with the early poetry of Oswald Mtshali. I have also found Mtshali Marshoba's depiction of social reality in his stories simply too overwhelming. His basic technique has been to accumulate fact after fact of oppression and suffering, so that we are in the end almost totally grounded in this reality without being offered, at the same time, an opportunity for aesthetic and critical estrangement. Recently, Mbulelo Mzamane has produced a novel, *The Children of Soweto*, grounded almost entirely in the events of June 16, 1976. I found no independent narrative line that permits any reader involvement beyond the act of recognition. On the contrary Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind* has an independent plot line. An African guerrilla fighter has sneaked back into South Africa on a mission to kill. His arrival coincides with the events of June 16, 1976. It is this existence of a plot line that makes Sepamla's novel more narratively engaging than Mzamane's. Sepamla constantly struggles to subject the objective events to the demands of his art. He does not entirely succeed, but he is moving in the right direction.

Where lies the possible remedy then?

Basically, the demands of the craft of fiction are that a writer has to have a more than casual view of the relationship between fiction and society, or between artistic information and social information. The world of fiction demands that the writer grapples with some of the following problems which are basic to his art: setting, conflict, credible characterisation, consistent narrative point of view, the complexities of fictional language and time. Beyond these essential technical issues, a serious writer must address himself to the ideological nature of fiction, since the handling of social information, whether within the narrative, or within ordinary discourse, is always ideologically determined. The moralistic ideology of liberalism for example, has forced our literature into a tradition of almost mechanistic surface representation. On the other hand, an ideological stance which stresses, as a condition for meaningful knowledge acquisition, social or historical process will more easily dispose writers towards a more explanatory approach to fiction. To work from the perspective of process is to attempt to situate individual events within an explainable totality of social meaning.

The example of character development may serve to shed some light on what I am trying to say. In a critical appreciation of Mtshali Marshoba's stories (*Staffrider*, Vol. 4, No. 3), Michael Vaughan observes that in Marshoba's work 'the whole liberal preoccupation with the individual interiority, and hence with subtle and elaborate characterisation is dispensed with. Characterisation establishes individual specificity and separateness, a function which is not relevant to Marshoba's project.' It seems clear that Vaughan's position with regard to liberal philosophy is critical. On this basis, although he does not say so explicitly, Vaughan implies that a writer's concern with subjectivity in character development may amount to a bourgeois or liberal escapism into an ethos of individualism. But is that necessarily so?

The point is not to avoid interiority, but to render it as concretely as possible within the unfolding logic of narrative.

Herbert Marcuse's views on the question of subjectivity in bourgeois culture are too persuasive to be easily dispensed with. He notes that:

even in bourgeois society, insistence on the truth and right of inwardness is not really a bourgeois value. With the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange

relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence. Indeed, this escape from reality led to an experience which could (and did) become a powerful force in invalidating the actually prevailing bourgeois values, namely by shifting the locus of the individual's realisation from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience. Moreover, withdrawal and retreat were not the last position. Subjectivity strove to break out of its inwardness into the material and intellectual culture. And today, in the totalitarian period, it has become a political value as a counterforce against aggressive and exploitative socialization.⁸

The point, therefore, is not to avoid interiority, but to render it as concretely as possible within the unfolding logic of narrative.

As I am writing this essay, I happen to be reading Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, and I have only just finished a chapter which begins in the following manner:

The mule suddenly sat down under the priest. It was not an unnatural thing to do, for they had been travelling through the forest for nearly twelve hours. They had been going west, but news of soldiers met them there and they had turned east; the Red Shirts were active in that direction, so they had tacked north, wading through swamps, diving into the mahogany darkness. Now they were both tired out and the mule simply sat down. The priest scrambled off and began to laugh. He was feeling happy. It is one of the strange discoveries a man can make that life, however you lead it, contains moments of exhilaration: there are always comparisons which can be made with worse times: even in danger and misery the pendulum swings.⁹

Here is a man during a moment of insightful intimacy with himself; a moment of transcendence. Most wonderful in this little piece of narrative is how it makes subtle shifts in narrative point of view: how it is now outside and objective ('the mule suddenly sat down under the priest'), and now it is inside and subjective ('it was not an unnatural thing to do'). The latter is an evaluative statement that can only spring from inner reflection. In a subtle manner, we are let into the subjective life of the priest through a deceptively objective narrative stance. The picture suggested of the priest is that of a sympathetic man, grateful that his mule has, apparently, led him out of danger. The priest is deeply relaxed that his keen sense of self-preservation has led him to safety. Seen in this perspective, the laughter of the priest is far from irrational. It represents a triumphant moment of inner realisation, triggered off by the sense of the priest's having momentarily overcome objective danger and finding himself in a moment of deserved celebration. Such moments are not an escape into bourgeois fantasy. On the contrary, they are moments of universal experience, and because we recognise them as such whenever we see them, we are, in this case, led into a sympathetic pact with the priest. Here is what I mean by interiority concretely rendered.

It seems clear therefore, that it is humanly unrealistic to show a revolutionary hero, for example, who has no inner doubts. All great revolutionaries from Lenin, through Nkrumah, to Che Guevara, among others, have had to grapple with inner fears, anxieties, and doubts. In appreciating this fact, one gains an insight into the human reality of their heroism. A reader, confronted with such heroism, experiences himself as potentially capable of it too, only if he could learn to find a method of dealing with his fears.

I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains in South Africa. The majority of them have woven masterpieces of entertainment and instruction. Others were so popular that commuters made sure they did not miss the storytellers' trains.

'The need for radical change,' asserts Marcuse, 'must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals.'¹⁰ The specific subjectivity of character is universalised through the reader's recognition of familiar emotion generated in a given event. Thus, a reader, confronted with a *dramatisation of process* in character development, grows with the story.

Perhaps more light can be thrown on this issue if one considers the problem of the villain in a story. This is particularly pertinent to the problem of portraying functionaries of the oppressive system in South Africa: the 'mayors', 'presidents' of 'independent states', policemen, informers, etc. Is it useful, in the quest for a transforming social understanding, for a writer to always portray such characters as finished products: unaccountably vicious, cruel, malicious, fawning and greedy? Obviously not. And here, the maturity of the writer is called for, since he is called upon to be narratively fair-minded even to those he socially abhors. The point is that attempting to understand the villain in all his complexity does not necessarily imply a political acceptance of him. On the contrary, it intensifies political opposition even more. Artistic compassion only situates the villain within the domain of tragic acceptance, which, in practice, translates itself into moral or political rejection. We cannot wish away evil, but genuine art makes us understand it. Only then can we purposefully deal with it.

Returning to Vaughan's discussion of Marshoba's characterisation, one would note that where the demand for a surface art emanates from within the radical intellectual movement, it becomes the dialectical opposite of the demonstrative liberal approach already seen above. It represents no qualitative improvement. On the contrary, it manages to become a liberalisation of the practice of radical dialectical thinking by appearing to give political morality an all too ready precedence over inclusive and liberating understanding.

Finally, I want to make reference to a very interesting interview of Miriam Tlali, Sipho Sepamla, and Mochobi Mutloah, by Jaki Seruke (*Staffrider*, Vol. 4, No. 3), in which at least two issues of interest to me are raised. Firstly, Mochobi Mutloah criticises the press for being 'so sweeping in its criticism of the new wave of black writing. They say it is too obviously political; it cannot offer anything else. We see the new writing as part of what is happening. It is a type of writing that is perfectly suited to the times. We need a writing that records exactly the situation we live in, and any writing which ignores the urgency of political events will be irrelevant.' [emphasis mine]. One might ask: in what way is writing 'perfectly suited to the times'? In what way does writing 'record exactly the situation we live in'? What kind of writing, emerging at the same time as the writing that fulfils Mutloah's conditions, is deemed to ignore 'the urgency of political events', thus rendering itself 'irrelevant', even possibly, irrespective of the seriousness of its intention? These questions raise serious critical questions the answers to which ought not to be self-complacently taken for granted. And in addressing those questions, we may need to make a distinction between the *journalistic*, informational ambience on the one hand, and the *storytelling*, narrative ambience on the other.

For example, Miriam Tlali complains that she has been

accused of speaking 'about the matters just as they are instead of building them into the emotions of the reader. As if it's just reporting.' But why is the parting scene at the end of Tlali's novel, *Amandla*, so effective? It's because the hero and his girl are in love. Any situation that forces lovers apart will invite our condemnation. Now, the vast majority of people, I think, enjoy reading about lovers. Almost all of us are, or were, or will be lovers. Thus we can feel with Tlali's lovers; we can identify with their problem. What Tlali has done is build into her characters 'the emotions of the reader'—the very thing which Tlali, in this interview, appears not to want her work to be associated with. Clearly, the artist in her, repudiates the critic in her. In any case, *Amandla* is, in my opinion, the best of the novels written on the events of June 16, 1976. It surpasses, in the quality of its art, Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, and Mutloah's *Children of Soweto*. Tlali was not 'just reporting'; she was telling a story.

When Sipho Sepamla in the interview agrees with Miriam Tlali that 'we have to go to the people', for 'it is the man in the street that I feel we must listen to', he is probably establishing the premise on which is based one fundamental assumption shared by all three writers: that the 'political' writers are writing what the African masses really want. Is that assumption a valid one? When Sepamla listens to 'the man in the street' what does he hear? I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven masterpieces of entertainment and instruction. Others were so popular that commuters made sure they did not miss the storytellers' trains. The vast majority of the stories were either tragedies or comedies about lovers, township jealousies, the worries of widows, about consulting medicine men for luck at horse racing, or luck for getting a job or for winning a football match, about fantastic ghost stories (her's remember here Bheki Maseko's *Mamlambo*), *Staffrider*, Vol. 5, No. 1; here is a writer who has listened to the man in the street, and heard); they have woven satires about the assassination of Verwoerd by Tsafendas (even the act of stabbing in the townships became, 'I will tsafenda you'); they have woven stories about helicopter weddings, about African soldiers seeing ships, the sea and Europe for the first time in World War II. And we have to face the truth here: there were proportionally fewer overtly political stories. When they talked politics, they talked politics; when they told stories, they told stories. If any political content crept into the stories, it was domesticated by a fundamental interest in the evocation of the general quality of African life in the township. Where is the concept of 'relevance' here?

When we turn to the lyrics of the vast majority of popular songs in 'soul' and mbuzanga music, we find a similar situation: lyrics about infidelity, about the relationships between women and their in-laws, about going to work early in the morning, about weddings, about the joys of music. As I am writing, a new hit is ringing in my mind. The lyrics tell school children to heed the school bell summoning them to go and learn how to read, write, count, and sing. Then I am reminded of Thamsanqa's story 'Have You Seen Sicks?' (*Staffrider*, Vol. 4, No. 3), and then the entire African experience of going to school in South Africa is laid bare before me, accompanied by an exhilaration emerging from my having been given the opportunity to recall, to reflect and to evaluate a communal experience in all the townships of South Africa; indeed, the world over.

All the writer needs to understand is that he can only be genuinely committed to politics through a commitment to the demands of his art.

In all these stories and songs, I am made conscious of Africans in South Africa as makers of culture in their own right. I am made conscious of them as philosophers, asking ultimate questions about life, moral values, and social being. And I am forced to conclude that if the conscious political will does not embrace this totality, it is bound to come out with a skewed vision of the future. I am aware too, that we do have novels which address themselves to this totality: Dikobe's *Marabi Dance*, Nyemheri's *Inkisiela Yase Mguqungulova*, Mufoni's *Coska*, Jordan's *Ingganaba Yeminyanya*, Boetie's *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost*, Mubahlele's *In Corner B*; and more recently, the stories of Matlou and Blacki Masoko in *Staffrider*. What is common to these writers is that they are storytellers, not just case makers. They give African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture. They make it possible for people to realise that in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are seen not to be explicitly resistance oriented, are valid. Indeed, the latter may upon reflection (crucial to the understanding of the ethos of the market place) be found to represent a much wider, and richer, because more inclusive, context of resistance. The matter is simple: there is a difference between art that 'sells' ideas to the people, and that whose ideas are embraced by the people, because they have been made to understand them through the evocation of lived experience in all its complexities. In the former case, the readers are anonymous buyers; in the latter, they are equals in the quest for truth. All the writer needs to understand is that he can only be genuinely committed to politics through a commitment to the demands of his art.

There is one other thing that emerges from the *Staffrider* interview. There appears to be a rather disturbing anti-intellectual attitude in Sepanla and Tlali with regard to the practice of literary criticism. We have just seen above how Tlali's artistic practice contradicts her own critical assertions. She continues later: 'Writing is an art like all the other art forms and it should not be pipelined or squeezed in a water-tight channel.' Isn't this what the critics are in fact saying? They wouldn't agree more, for they perceive the literary situation to be narrow-minded and 'pipelined or squeezed' in its artistic orientation. It seems to me that Miriam Tlali may not have fully and carefully thought out the implications of her own artistic practice, and all too readily dismisses the critic who, if he is serious and genuine, might legitimately raise issues that may clarify her own position.

About readers and critics, Miriam Tlali declares: 'It is the reader who must judge, not these masters of literature.' One might ask: are critics not readers too? Of course, what she means is that she prefers the judgement of the enthusiastically uncritical average reader (she is after all one up on them — she spent much thought in composing her novels), to the judgement of one who may painstakingly have spent much thought in trying to understand her work. I do not believe that is what she really desires, for she goes on to say: 'It is quite a task to write. In the first place you have to be fortunate enough to have an education which can enable you to express yourself.' Although Tlali accepts the importance of education, she does not go far enough. One result of education is heightened, critical awareness which will not shy away from applying that awareness to literature. Surely this is what she wants!

... Since the world and the people on it are the writer's business, he has to constantly enlarge his intellectual horizons regarding his key focus. There seems no escape from this necessity.

Furthermore, Tlali is surely correct in complaining that 'so-called critics labour under a misconception in that they

say that in order to write you have to be a literary scholar'. A writer does not have to be a literary scholar in the academic sense. But then, it is useful to note what Henry James, the United States writer, has to say on the issue. 'There is,' he says, 'one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together: that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth.'¹¹ At the root of this sentiment is the requirement that since the world and the people on it are the writer's business, he has to constantly enlarge his intellectual horizons regarding his key focus. There seems no escape from this necessity.

Sepanla echoes Tlali on the question of critics: 'Instead of encouraging a person who is making an attempt we try to destroy this person. What we hope to gain mystifies me. There is nothing that a so-called critic will gain by destroying this book. Instead he will prevent the black people from making progress.' Sepanla goes on to lament the fact that 'some of these critics are Black Consciousness adherents'. Firstly, there is a danger here that critics might be accused of being unpatriotic simply because we do not agree with what they say. Secondly, does it mean that 'Black Consciousness adherents' must uncritically rave enthusiastically about anything written? Nothing could be more dangerous to the struggle than the suppression of criticism. The two attitudes above are not only anti-intellectual, they are also essentially undemocratic. If we want to struggle towards a genuinely democratic future, then we must be prepared to subject everything to rigorous intellectual scrutiny followed by open and fearless discussion. Writers and critics can make their contribution too. The future is too demanding on us for us to feel sorry for ourselves.

We have come a long way from Turkish tales. The thoughts they have triggered no doubt need further discussion. I could not at this stage go beyond a preliminary identification and statement of key problems. The Turkish tales, I believe, contain the essence of what is universal in the art of narrative. My attention was then necessarily turned home, where I believe we should produce works that will not only inspire us through the enchanting powers of art, but will also be embraced well beyond our borders as a joyful lesson too.

NOTES

1. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations* (Harry Zohn (trans), (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).
2. Walter Benjamin, p 84.
3. Andrew Mango, *Turkey*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1983), pp 122-3.
4. Michael Vaughan, 'Ideological Directions in the Study of Southern African Literature,' *English in Africa*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1982, p 62.
5. Michael Vaughan, p 63.
6. Nat Nakasa, 'Johannesburg Johannesburg', *The Classic*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1966, p 19.
7. Lewis Nkosi, 'Fiction by Black South Africans', in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longmans, 1967), p 222.
8. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetic*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp 4-5.
9. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (UK: Penguin Books, 1962), p 59.
10. Herbert Marcuse, p 3.
11. Henry James, *The House of Fiction*, ed. L. Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), p 44.