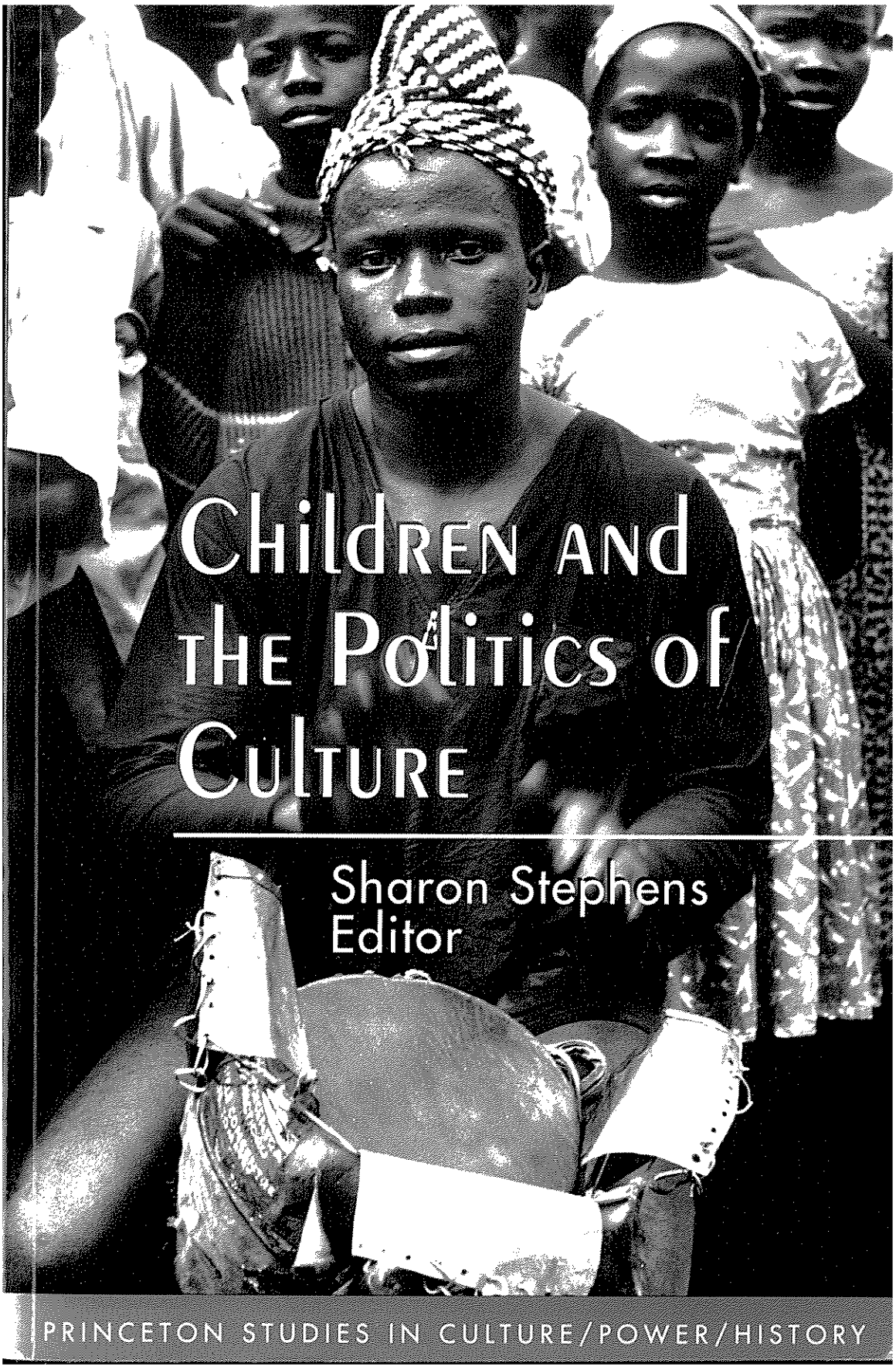

Children and the Politics of Culture

Sharon Stephens
Editor

PRINCETON STUDIES IN CULTURE/POWER/HISTORY

CHAPTER 12

Recovering Childhood: Children in South African National Reconstruction

NJABULO NDEBELE

EARLY THIS CENTURY, Thomas Mofolo, Lesotho's most famous writer, published a book about the life of one of the central figures in Southern African history: *Chaka: The King of the Zulus* (1981). What fascinated me as a young reader of this book, something that has also fascinated many other readers with whom I have spoken, is how Chaka, an illegitimate child cruelly treated in his early years, flees with his mother to seek refuge under a sympathetic chief. Years later he returns with vengeance to claim his right to the throne. I felt that there was something satisfyingly just about his triumphant return. It was marvelous how Chaka proceeded to build one of the most powerful kingdoms in Africa.

Unfortunately, it was not long before the justice of his return was tragically undercut by his excessive ruthlessness, which negates the earlier sense of moral triumph. At the end of the novel, one is left disturbed by how something potentially glorious, in which there was the real possibility that the kind of cruelty shown toward Chaka as a child would be a thing of the past, finally degenerated into physical and moral ruin. One closes the book feeling deep disappointment over the failure of potential.

Stories of this kind, I believe, are many the world over. Taking many various permutations, they all reveal one major strand: how the hero or heroine, highly vulnerable as a child, is ill treated, subjected to all kinds of indignities, and is finally spurned by a society that should have known better. The child protagonist has no means of physical or intellectual self-defense, but depends on the protection of society through its laws and its conscience.

Underscoring the moral thrust of these stories are the many deprivations visited upon the children. The children are denied human contact and become lonely. They are starved; they are spoken to harshly, with never a kind word; they are exposed to illness and disease; they are made to work under extremely dangerous and sometimes slave conditions; they are deprived of education; and they may even be turned away from the gates of churches and hospitals. What we see are the workings and the effects of the invisible hand of an unjust and insensitive society. The

travails of children are presented as reminders, prodding the slumbering conscience of society as an indication of some pervasive disorder. The moral logic behind such stories is that should the victims grow up to wreak vengeance upon us, we should understand that we shall certainly be receiving our just rewards. The images of the travails of children are powerful metaphors of indictment, calling for the urgent redemption of society.

However, no matter how compelling the metaphors, there tends to be a threshold that is seldom crossed. We are generally spared the ultimate horror: the sight of the blood of children. Seldom are we shown the dashing of little heads against a wall, or their splitting with *pangas* that are withdrawn dripping with the gore of blood and brains. Seldom, if ever, are little children thrown into burning furnaces. Such images involving children are "too ghastly to contemplate," as the South African prime minister John Voster once said.

But should they appear, they would most likely indicate the ultimate degeneration of society. They would indicate that there were few horrors left in society, for horror that has become the norm profoundly ceases to be horror. If such a point is ever reached, it would surely demand the most far-reaching efforts for a society to rediscover its conscience.

South African literature has generally handled the images of childhood as social criticism in the conventional manner indicated above. Two images in particular became archetypal. The first one is an image of an infant abandoned by its mother. In the February 1955 issue of *Drum* magazine, Ezekiel Mphahlele published a story entitled "The Suitcase," in which a man claims a suitcase left in a bus by a female fellow passenger. As he carries the suitcase away, hoping that it contains things of value, he is stopped by the police and is forced to open the suitcase. Hidden under a cover of clothes is a dead infant. Through a horrible twist of fate, the man had picked up the corpse of an infant apparently abandoned by its mother. At least the story spares us the details of how the death actually occurred. By the time we see the infant, it is already dead. We are left only with the shock of its discovery.

The second image concerns the tragedy of racism. In the late 1950s, Arthur Maimane published a story called "Just Another Tsotsi," in which two boys, one white and the other black, grow up together on a farm, far out in the remote rural areas of South Africa. They become so close that they enter into an oath, committing themselves to lifelong brotherhood. Ritualistically cutting themselves, they join their wounds and mingle their blood in a clasp of brotherhood.

Unfortunately, when they grow up, they part, going their own separate ways, only to be thrown together by fate many years later. One day, the white boy, now a grown man in the police force, chases away a sus-

pected black criminal and shoots him dead, only to notice the ritual mark of his connection to the one he has just killed. The death of a young adult may not be so horrifying: it is common enough. What is horrifying in the context of the story is the tragic breach of a bond made in the innocence of childhood.

The adult world has made it impossible for this bond of friendship to persist. It has denied permanence to a friendship. The adult world breaks up a friendship in a manner that gives one friend rights over the life of the other.

In 1971, sixteen years after Mphahlele published his story, Oswald Mtshali, in a collection entitled *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, published the following poem:

An Abandoned Bundle

The morning mist
and chimney smoke
of White City Jabavu
flowed thick yellow
as pus oozing
from a gigantic sore.
It smothered our little houses
like a fish caught in a net.

Scavenging dogs
draped in red bandanas of blood
fought fiercely
for a squirming bundle.

I threw a brick;
they bared fangs
flicked velvet tongues of scarlet
and scurried away,
leaving a mutilated corpse—
an infant dumped on a rubbish heap—
"Oh! Baby in the Manger
sleep well
on human dung."

Its mother
had melted into the rays of the rising sun,
her face glittering with innocence
her heart as pure as untrampled dew.

Here we are shown "a squirming bundle," an infant dumped on a rubbish heap, being set upon by the hungry dogs of the ghetto. The environment in which this takes place is bleak. People are trapped in it,

with no avenue of escape. It is hell on earth. In this hell, and in a tremendous daring of the imagination, Mtshali actually shows us the sacrificial blood of a child. However, we are still spared the ultimate horror. It is, after all, dogs that tear apart the child, and not the hand of a human being. Nevertheless, this poet was like a seer, foreseeing the oncoming tragedy of a nation that would soon begin to slaughter its children. The killing began in earnest in June 1976. It is still with us.

On the morning of June 16, 1976, the schoolchildren of Soweto in their school uniforms took to the streets to protest against the imposition of the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction in black schools. This development, the children reasoned, was the final act in the attempt of the racist government to complete the subjugation of black people. But what the children had not bargained for was a state so determined to have its way that it would not allow even children to take refuge in their childhood. For the first time, the government purposefully pointed its guns at children and opened fire. Many children were killed that day, and from that moment onward, no one, no matter what age, would be spared the wrath of the government: men, women, and children.

And so we began to hear of the arrest, detention, torture, and disappearance of those even as young as eight years old. The military occupation of the black townships became a regular feature of the times. One irony in this occupation is that the soldiers were young white conscripts, sent in to kill their black peers. Of course, you will immediately notice in this drama the replay of one of the archetypal images seen above. These events have found their way into our literature. Mbulelo Mzamane published a book called *The Children of Soweto,* based on those incredible years. And so, the children of South Africa effectively entered national politics as active participants.

This dramatic entrance of young people into national politics should be seen in perspective. When the major political organizations (Nelson Mandela's African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress) were banned in 1961, the entire political leadership of these organizations was either imprisoned or in exile, leaving a political void bound to be filled sooner or later. This void was indeed filled toward the end of the 1960s by the advent of the Black Consciousness Movement that organized mainly university students. It was this movement that drew its inspiration from Steve Biko. The average age of the participants was between twenty-four and twenty-six years.

In 1976, with the banning of all major organizations of the Black Consciousness Movement, the average age of the participants went down to approximately sixteen to eighteen. As many of the student activists in this age group fled into exile, even younger ones filled the vac-

uum created. And if the targets of the government could be eight years old, then the phenomenon of childhood in my country was dangerously close to an end.

Nowhere was the impact of the entrance of the young into national politics more visible than in education. The children involved in the upheavals of 1976 were products of a system of education designed especially for black people. The system was introduced in 1953 following the passing of the Bantu Education Act. The rationale for a separate system of education for Africans was summed up by the then Minister of Native Affairs, Dr. H. Verwoerd (statement to Senate, June 7, 1954):

> There is no place for him (the African) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. Within his community, however, all the doors are open. For that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community, where he cannot be absorbed. Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze.

This legislation legalized and institutionalized inequality in the provision of educational services for blacks and whites. For blacks, this meant systematic deprivation in education: overcrowding and poor educational facilities in available schools; a restricted syllabus and career options; inferior teacher training; authoritarian school discipline where corporal punishment was rife and principals ran schools like army barracks; and a host of other deprivations. This was the situation against which the youth rebelled.

In the determination of the white, racist government to lower the ambition of the black children, and, consequently, to limit the aspirations of the entire black population, the government spawned universal bitterness, which took the form of a generalized struggle for liberation. For the children, particularly after June 1976, this struggle meant targeting the education system for attack. The current crisis in South African education is a culmination of that resistance.

In the heat of that resistance a new slogan was proclaimed by schoolchildren: "Liberation now, education later." This slogan expressed the children's perception that it was impossible to have normal schooling in an abnormal society, that a repressive education system was the product of a repressive politics. They were calling for postponement of the education process. Perhaps an unwise, suicidal demand. Nevertheless, it was not long after the youth entered the political arena that an already discredited education system was finally reduced to dust.

If this is what has happened to education, what is it that will bring

about the vital socialization of the young? What is it that will prepare them for creative and responsible citizenship? The decline of educational values and the educational system itself should be seen in perspective. Then perhaps these questions can be answered.

The social well-being of the black community was targeted by the European colonizers for destruction as soon as the conquest was achieved. The indigenous economic system was undermined in the colonial days when men in particular were compelled to abandon their normal social tasks and go to work in the mines and other new industries in order to be able to pay a variety of taxes. The social fabric began to tear apart. A labor force was created that would relieve workers of the responsibilities of making economic decisions for themselves. Henceforth, the official ideal would be workers producing with minimum demands on their thinking capacities.

The African family was further undermined when single-sex living compounds were established, with regulations preventing men from bringing their families along to live with them. Many families broke up as a result. New communities were established in the growing urban areas. It was there that one of the earliest working-class communities in Africa was created.

There developed in our literature a tendency to compare rural and urban life as metaphors for, respectively, good and evil. Life in the cities represented moral degeneration of the worst kind, whereas the rural areas were romantic places of refuge for spiritual and moral regeneration. This easy dichotomy, of course, simplified a very complex phenomenon. In fact, the rural areas progressively ceased to be viable as communities, whereas the new urban communities represented new opportunities for many that could find their way there.

The overall picture that emerges is one of many African communities gradually experiencing a diminishing integrity as organic communities. The members of those communities, politically welded together by their color, became politically marginalized in phenomenally large numbers, being virtual observers in an unfolding historical drama in which they were instruments used to produce the continent's most advanced economy.

It is in the context of this general dislocation that after many decades of the horror of apartheid, South Africa is finally settling down to try to become a nation of people who, at this most challenging moment in our history, find that they know very little about one another. The divisions, purposefully cultivated, have taken their toll. However, the removal of much of the repressive legislation has only made it possible for previously repressed tensions to emerge more fully. Having relatively little experience in managing these tensions without recourse to force and re-

pression, we are only just discovering the full force of the depth and range of human issues with which a new democratic order will have to contend.

At the root of the problem is the near total devastation of the social fabric of the vast majority of the South African population. As we face the reality of the implications of this understanding, we simultaneously also face another problem, further undermining our capability to heal our wounds. I am referring to the current rampant violence in many parts of the country in which even children are not spared. The threshold of tolerable violence against children has been decisively passed. Violence against children as a metaphor for measuring societal degeneration has lost its shock effect. If children are butchered in real life, is there any effect in depicting such butchery in literature as metaphor?

Let me share with you a recent report in the *Weekly Mail*. The report has a general headline: "Children in the War Zone." But specific reference is made to an article entitled "Playing Games among the Ruins." It is about children in a squatter community that was attacked by an unidentified group of people. Such attacks are now common all over the country.

> All that's left alongside the flattened shacks of families wiped out in an attack on Crossroads, a predominantly Zulu squatter camp next to Katlehong in the East Rand are the trampled remnants of once-thriving vegetable gardens. Now, children who survived the onslaught and are on holiday from school, play among the ruins.
>
> At first sight, they appear unaffected by the brutality of the attack—which was an example of children joining their parents as specific targets of township violence. . . .
>
> After the early morning attack last Friday, mothers, fathers and children were left for dead in the smouldering ruins of their corrugated iron shacks. One mother, identified only as "Khampane" by a neighbour, was asleep with her husband and two children when, shortly after 1:00 A.M., a group of men armed with knives, knobkieries and pangas barged into their shack demanding money.
>
> In the confusion they said they had none, hoping the attackers would leave, but the men rained blows on them, mercilessly beating them, the neighbour told "The Weekly Mail."
>
> While trying to ward off the blows, Khampane tried to protect her one-month-old daughter, holding the child close to her body. But she could not defend it from the blows, and the baby was struck on the head by a panga, leaving a gaping hack wound across her tiny forehead. She was lucky: she survived.
>
> All the while her terrified four-year-old stood hugging his father around

the legs, crying hysterically as he watched him being hacked to death. His "interference" by holding on to his father so angered the attackers that they hit him repeatedly, slashing the forearms and wrists before killing his father.

The boy is also in hospital, fighting for his life.

This family was the first to be attacked, but they were not the last.

Thus ends the first segment of the report. The next segment follows:

Vera Ndlela (19) was asleep when the men barged into her shack. They immediately began beating her, and demanded money from her. She said she was a student, and had no money. On hearing this, they told her that they wanted her 18 month-old baby to remove parts of his body. She tried to hold on to the boy, but repeated blows from knives and knobkieries forced her to let go. As the men took the boy, she broke away and ran. They flung him into the ruins and chased Vera among the dense reeds of a nearby stream.

For three days Vera lay in the smelly, marshy stream running alongside the squatter camp.

Unable to move after her severe beating, she remained stuck on the stream bank until she heard people nearby and let out a weak scream. Residents found her and took her to the Natalspruit Hospital. Her son is missing, and police do not know whether he is one of the injured in hospital, or a body in a morgue.

By Wednesday, five days after the attack, the police could not confirm the names or number of children injured or killed. The only incidents they were able to give details of were the cases of two children, both believed to be younger than one year, whose bodies are at Germiston mortuary. Both suffered "excessive burn wounds" and are thought to have died as a result of their burns.

More examples can be provided, altogether suggesting a rampant state of violence and an increasing inability of the public to be shocked. The recent events of Boipatong, in which the residents of the township were brutally attacked at random by unidentified people, is the measure of the prevalence and persistence of this kind of violence. Its history includes random killings of commuter train passengers; random shootings of mourners at funeral wakes; desecration of funeral rites by the police; ruthless taxi wars among rival taxi organizations; the bombing and burning of schools and churches; mass shootings of blacks by crazed whites puzzled by their sudden loss of power.

There has been much speculation about who is behind all of these events. Theories abound of a malevolent force consisting of special units

of the apartheid army skilled in state-sponsored covert activities aimed at the liquidation of anti-apartheid activists. Are we seeing orchestrated attempts to create an atmosphere of terror, fear, suspicion, and despair in the general population in this time of transition? Is it all meant to engender a lack of confidence in the ongoing process of negotiation toward a new society? It is difficult to tell, but more revelations have been made in the press about government death squads, which seem to still be in operation. Some top cabinet ministers have been implicated.

It may be in order to ponder briefly on the above newspaper report itself. Its impact partly results from the implicit suggestion that the violence presently being exposed and confirmed is endemic in the country at the moment. That picture is correct.

There are some social facts referred to that have become integral to the political knowledge of South African society. These facts become reference points crucial to the forming of understanding. For example, in the piece as a whole, there is the almost casual reference to Zulus and Xhosas. The average South African is very likely to conclude that there is an underlying ethnic conflict. There is the suggestion that for some reason, as long as there are different peoples, speaking different languages, with different customs, such interethnic violence will follow. It is a sociological law that governs interethnic relations. There may be no possibility of probing further beyond this basic understanding, no suggestion that there could be other causes. This grammar of political understanding is the legacy of our immediate past, bedeviling every effort to think in new ways about the South African predicament.

In a slightly different category are some other graphic details of the incident. They underscore the irrationality and unspeakable horror of the events. They are described to ilicit horror and outrage, showing us how brute male strength is pitted against the vulnerability of women and children. They can enable us to ask some important questions about children and society. Beyond the horror and the outrage, what is there to be salvaged? What ought to be salvaged? How can such violence be prevented? On what basis can agreement be reached on such prevention? What value system can be brought into being to prevent such a tragedy? In a society constructed on the principle of difference, what chances are there to find common ground?

But these questions are soon rendered impotent when we notice how easy it is for the perpetrators of the violence to simply melt away undiscovered to continue elsewhere with their carnage. We wait, wondering where they will strike next. And then we will read yet another report.

From the report above we can gain an insight into how the reporting of violence has itself become part of the problem. The newspaper article,

seeking to shed some light on a difficult and newsworthy phenomenon, reports it in a manner that reinforces the simplifications of popular South African political discourse already alluded to above. Produced by a newspaper that sees itself as being in opposition to apartheid, the report is unable to transcend the limits of social information and the interpretations of it as generated by the terrible drama of apartheid. It itself becomes another social feature of the violence: the reporting of violence. From this report, all of us and the children can conclude: things are the way they are because that is how they are.

I recall the horrible stories above not with the intention of shocking the reader, but rather with the wish to use them as an occasion for some painful reflections on the state of affairs in my country, South Africa. That children are at the center of these events—sometimes as victims, sometimes as perpetrators—is at the root of the problem, for our goal is nation building. What can we expect of children who have witnessed the death of parents; who have seen people being stoned, hacked with pangas and burnt to death; who have themselves been the direct targets and victims of this violence; and who have sometimes participated in these gruesome events?

I look at my country caught in this grip of violence and see nothing less than a breakdown of culture. Notwithstanding the impressive infrastructure of roads, railways, and harbors; the punctuality of airline schedules; the ups and downs of the stock exchange; the flurry of diplomatic initiatives and the opening of new embassies; trade agreements and investments; the technical sophistication of assembly line production; the abundance of electronic goods and commodities, the fact is that we have an industrial infrastructure, anchored on an overprivileged minority that, in spite of a presence of more than three hundred years, has never shed the mentality of being visitors. Consequently, the fruits of their achievements have no organic connection with the realities of the larger human environment in which they have occurred. We have a culture of technical achievement that is merely drifting forward by sheer momentum, without being informed by an overriding and creative sense of an inclusive nationhood. We are left with no other alternative but to strive to establish a more humane context for national reconstruction. We have to strive urgently to rediscover what it means to be a national community.

Where can we locate the metaphors of hope? No longer in children, for not only do we kill them, but they themselves have also killed. To return to education, let us look at what has happened in some of the schools. The young have taken over, hiring and firing teachers and principals. But how long can they do this meaningfully? Ultimately, they

cannot run the schools or the educational system; they cannot run banks, businesses, or even churches. They cannot run nations. Yet, they have attempted to do so when, being on the firing line, they began to feel responsible for bringing the future into being. It is not for lack of ability or talent that they cannot perform such formidable tasks; rather, it is the limits of their experience. By assuming complex, adult responsibilities, they have striven after wisdom without the foundation of growth. They shed their childhood without having the pains and joys of learning from it. Effectively, we have witnessed the end of a childhood.

In a society without children, can there be a concept of innocence? The question implies that innocence has, over the thousands of years of human society, established a strong philosophical presence. For adults, confronted with all kinds of pressures, childhood innocence offers the possibility of refuge and redemption. Because childhood is vulnerable, we can be healed by offering it protection; in nurturing it, we confirm the need for culture, recreation, and creativity. That is why innocence has been such a powerful metaphor for social criticism. The loss of childhood signals the end of the metaphor. What is left is a world of instant adults with no experience of having lost something. If there is no sense of loss, there can be no sense of a paradise to be regained. To regain that philosophical paradise, in fulfillment of the yearning for a perfect society, we have to do no less than rediscover the child and childhood.

It may not be that easy for children, heroically transformed into adults overnight, to be their own redemptive metaphor, because the experience of compassion and the nurturing of conscience has not been a consistently informing aspect of their growth in recent times. Can they succeed in effecting a strategic distance from themselves for the purpose of moral reflection?

That we need their energy is beyond dispute. And so do we need their fearlessness and questioning attitude, which, under the circumstances, are welcome gifts of these terrible times. But where will the visionary authority come from that might harness that energy and assign a proper role to it in a new and infinitely challenging society?

Nor is childhood the only thing we need to rediscover. Adulthood itself has been threatened with destruction. The progressive loss of parental authority in the wake of the 1976 student uprisings was a significant sociological phenomenon. Hemmed in between children, on the one hand, and a hostile state on the other, black parents suffered an ontological crisis. Dismissed by children for having failed to protect them as well as having failed to bring about liberation, relentlessly bludgeoned into submission through the state repressive laws and other

forms of state terrorism, the confidence of the black adult was seriously shaken. How can adults reestablish their roles in society?

Beginning with the recovery of childhood and innocence, there are so many other things to be recovered and even redefined: the family; the sense of autonomous and secure neighborhood engaged in purposeful collective action; the sense of interconnectedness of different aspects of society: politics, education, the economy; the sense of being part of a larger world in so many functional ways. It is a task of enormous proportions. But we have to locate the process of discovery in the child and genuinely believe in the newness that will come from that direction.

I have posed the issue of the recovery of childhood and innocence as a metaphor for the restoration of freedom and the range of human values that should go with it. Many of these have been eroded by apartheid. Those values will partly embody the meaning of the struggle against apartheid. Since apartheid largely succeeded in breaking up what held African society together, any attempt at rebuilding that society was by definition against the interests of the state. In this situation, the idea of reconstituting society becomes a principle of resistance. Consequently, the liberation movement, led by Nelson Mandela's African National Congress, has a responsibility to define a social order that will replace the repressive one.

The seeds of that alternative society are already there in social bonds developed within the broad liberation movement: the trade union movement; civic associations; self-help community groupings, such as burial and savings societies; and cultural, religious, educational, sporting, and taxi organizations. All these may be regarded as future organs of civil society. Political rallies organized in defiance of the state have served as bonding glue for the most liberating sense of solidarity. Democracy, nonracism, and nonsexism have been espoused as the framing principles of reconstruction informing the activities of all these social groupings.

From this entire context, it can be seen, then, that the recovery of childhood is something inextricably bound with the reconstruction of society. It will be the result of that reconstruction, rather than the cause of it.

Perhaps the way to end, since our way into this difficult subject was literature, is to ask whether South African writers will truly recognize their luck. How will they reflect a people struggling with the pains and joys of building a new society? A new society? The question suggests something that will itself have to be born, experience childhood, the rites of passage, and work toward wisdom. South African literature may itself be reborn and then grow the society of its preoccupation.

REFERENCES

Mofolo, Thomas, *Chaka: The King of the Zulus,* London, Heinemann.
Mphahlele, Ezekiel, 1955, "The Suitcase," *Drum,* February.
Mtshali, Oswald, 1971, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum,* Johannesburg, Donker.
Mzamane, Mbulelo, 1982, *The Children of Soweto,* Harlow, Longman.